

# Technology Selling in the Age of Agility

Expect the unexpected.  
Prepare to adapt.

LinkedIn's 2021 B2B technology buying survey



# Introduction

The world has accelerated into a new era — one that embraces innovation, resilience and adaptability like never before.

Now, technology is poised to play an integral role in how companies, and the sellers who work for them, navigate the future. From remote work to increased dependency on cloud-based solutions and applications, the sheer volume of digital transformation projected to take place over the next several years will fundamentally shift how companies operate in the decade ahead.

At LinkedIn, we view technology as a catalyst for change, a powerful tool that can accelerate how businesses differentiate from competitors, adapt to customer needs, and remain resilient in the face of global disruption.

In our seventh year of conducting one of the world's largest surveys of B2B technology buying and decision-making, we seized the opportunity to make sense of today's dynamic landscape. After reviewing data from nearly 6,000 respondents, there are four key recommendations that stand out for technology sellers to succeed in the Age of Agility.

## 4 trends for technology sellers in the Age of Agility

1

Multi-thread  
beyond the IT  
function



2

Place Buyers First  
in a long customer  
journey



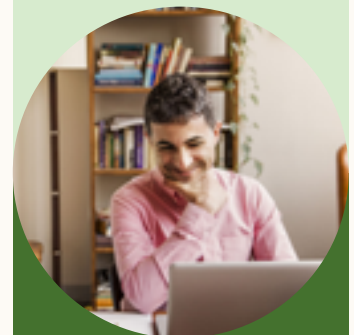
3

Address your  
buyers' paradox  
of needs



4

Seize the post-  
sale frontier





“Although this year has taught us that no business is 100 percent resilient, **those fortified by digital technology are more resilient and more capable of transforming when faced with sweeping changes** like those we are experiencing.”

Satya Nadella  
CEO, Microsoft

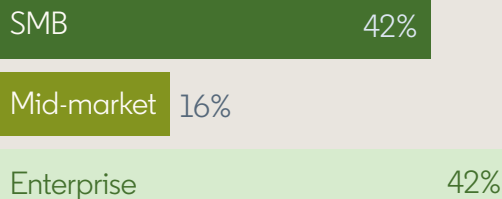
Microsoft Annual Report 2020

# Survey respondents and methodology

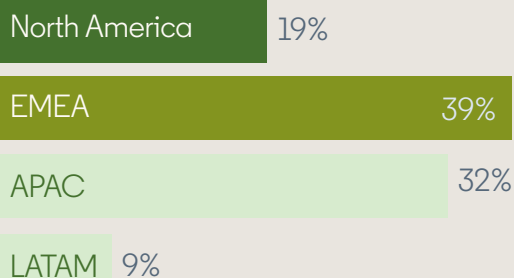
# 5,894

technology decision-makers  
from North America,  
Latin America, Europe,  
Middle East, Africa,  
and Asia Pacific

## Business size



## Region



To qualify for this survey, respondents must have researched, evaluated, bought, implemented or renewed a business technology solution in one or more of the following subcategories within the last six months:



Hardware for  
end users



Software for  
end users



Hardware for  
data centres



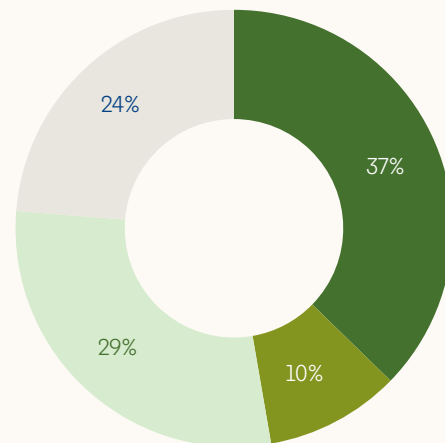
Software for  
data centres

Respondent base includes samples from small and medium-sized businesses (SMB), mid-market, and enterprise (ENT) companies.

Respondent base spans representation from the following business functions: finance, marketing, sales, business development, research, product, supply chain and logistics, legal and compliance, HR, procurement, IT, engineering, and communications.

Survey fielded July 2020.

Q: Which of the following best describes the type of business you work for?



- B2B only (offers products/services to other businesses only)
- B2C only (offers products/services to consumers only)
- Predominantly B2B with some B2C (offers products/services mostly to other businesses but some consumers as well)
- Predominantly B2C with some B2B (offers products/services mostly to consumers but some other businesses as well)

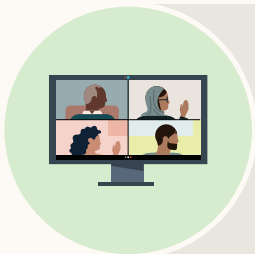
# COVID-19 impacted global B2B technology budgets

The pandemic catalysed shifts in both business and consumer spending patterns, prompting companies to reassess both short and long-term vehicles for driving growth. A key insight from our study was the noticeable decline in overall projected technology spend in the 12 months between July 2020 and July 2021 for 1 in 3 businesses — across all subcategories, company sizes, and regions. **We believe these shifts in spending reflect the outcome of evolving business models brought on as companies navigated three common recovery scenarios\*:**



## 1. Business disrupted

Companies in ‘disrupted’ mode faced severe revenue and profitability challenges due to decreasing customer demand. IT and technology costs were likely cut so that businesses can remain financially solvent and preserve cash flow.



## 2. Business unusual

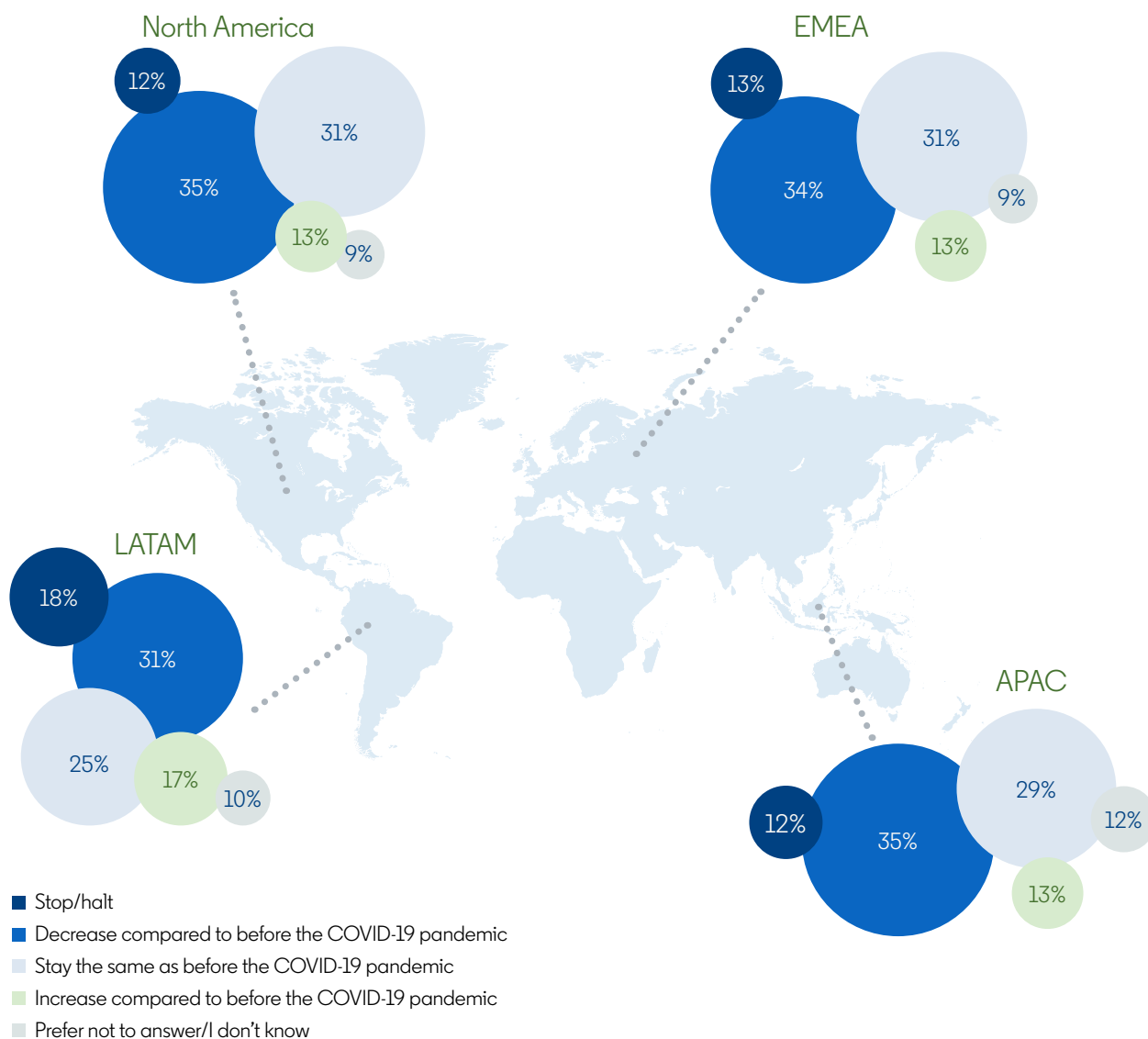
Companies in ‘unusual’ mode were developing creative solutions to overcome evolving customer needs. Technology budgets were likely to remain neutral or shift toward higher priority initiatives.



## 3. Business evolved

Companies in ‘evolve’ mode adapted quickly and offered differentiated services to unlock greater value with new and existing audiences. Technology budgets were likely to increase, fuelling future growth through innovation.

## Q: How, if at all, will the COVID-19 pandemic impact your company's spending on technology?



How, if at all, will the COVID-19 pandemic impact your company's spending on [PIPE FROM HS5] in the next 12 months? (N=5,894)

The trendline here indicates that while many businesses were cautious, growth in technology expenditure was still projected as technology is key to agility in our new normal.

At the same time, buyers had to justify spending and align investment opportunities to priorities and business outcomes that were most likely to generate value and ROI. We see this trend continuing in the foreseeable future.



# Multi-thread beyond the IT function

Leveraging technology effectively is a core competency for all business functions in today's evolving world of work. This means that the technology buying committee is not only growing larger, it's also getting more diverse.

Trend 1



# Revenue-driving functions are gaining seats at the table

Looking back at the 2010s, strategies based on customer centricity gained prominence for many B2B organisations aiming to stand out in a crowded market. This led to a proliferation of technology solutions designed to maximise customer acquisition and business efficiency. Our own data reinforces this pattern, with a wide range of functions now participating in one or more stages of the technology buying process.<sup>(2)</sup>

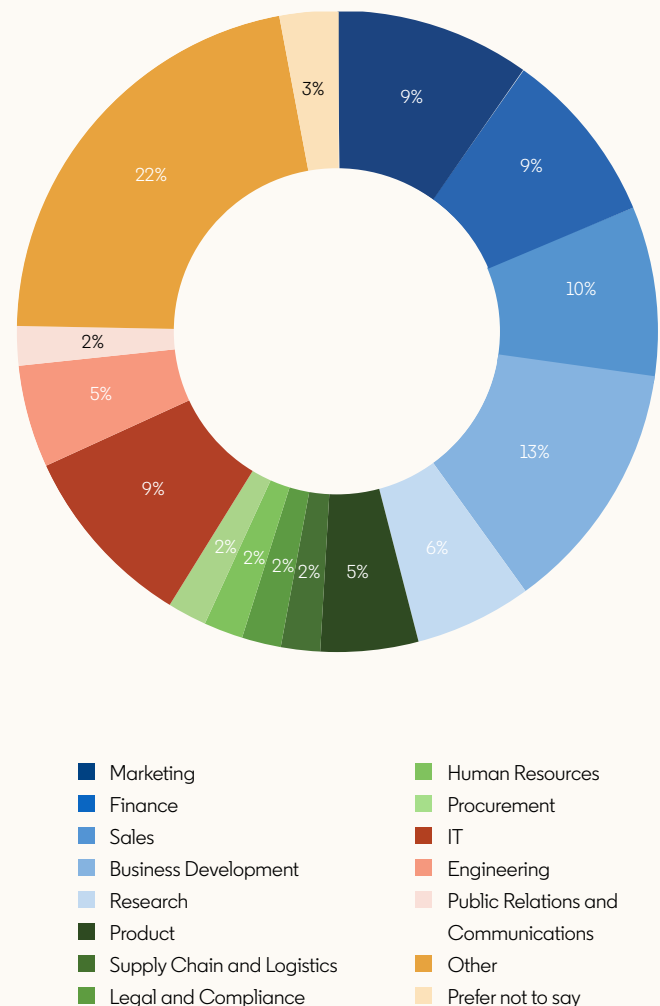
## Distributed stakeholders in the 2020s

Harnessing the power of technology to thrive in the Age of Agility is a true team effort. When examining which functional departments collaborate most often throughout the buying journey, we see that IT and other back-office functions such as finance, procurement, and business development lay the groundwork for front-office functions to input and share feedback during purchasing decisions.

For sellers, this clearly signals the **importance of multi-threading** to build relationships with diverse stakeholders who are working together to achieve shared goals.

Figure 1

Q: What functional department are you part of?



<sup>2</sup> What functional department are you part of? (N=5,894).



# As internal buying dynamics change, sellers must look beyond the IT function



Embracing change is one of the most challenging yet exciting aspects of utilising new technology. However, emerging use cases for technology can arise from anywhere in an organisation.

Take **LinkedIn Sales Navigator** for example. While it is an essential sales intelligence tool, it has recorded a notable 26% year-on-year increase in the number of marketers using it\*. It goes to show that as technology use transcends functional boundaries, so must technology selling.

Our survey data has revealed that 63% of influential business functions now sit outside the IT department.<sup>2b</sup> With the purchase decision increasingly owned by powerful non-IT stakeholders, sellers are taking an enormous risk if they continue focusing solely on one point of entry into an account.

Purchasing responsibility is almost **equally shared** <sup>(2a)</sup>

54% IT

46% non-IT

63%

of technology purchasing decisions are influenced by functions outside the IT department <sup>(2b)</sup>

\* Average monthly year-on-year increase in LinkedIn Sales Navigator licenses held by marketers. LinkedIn data, March to October 2019 and 2020.

<sup>2a</sup> Which function has the most influence on your company's technology purchases? [pipe: pQ3\_title]. (N=5,809)

<sup>2b</sup> Which functional departments do you work with when purchasing [PIPE FROM HS5].

Please include any business groups/functions, including your own. (N=5,894).

# Sellers who multi-thread through an account increase their chances of winning

For a long time, the Chief Information Officer (CIO) has been the ideal point of entry into an account. As a key decision-maker in a technology purchase, CIOs are likely to continue playing a consultative and leadership role in the process even as other functions bring their voices to the table. However, competition for CIOs' attention is nothing short of intense.

Globally, CIOs are the second most sought-after C-suites on LinkedIn in terms of the number of InMail received from sellers.\*

To pull ahead of the competition, we recommend that technology sellers spread their time and attention more broadly.

In an internal study by LinkedIn, we found that sellers who adopt a multi-threaded approach tend to be more successful than those who single-thread through an account. Multi-threading delivered higher win rates, faster deal cycles and more dollars impacted.

+34%

lift in win rate when multi-threaded vs single-threaded into an account\*\*

-10%

reduction in total deal length cycle\*\*



Discover the right people at target accounts using **LinkedIn Sales Navigator's Advanced Search and Lead Recommendation** features. Then, skip the cold call by getting a warm introduction, using TeamLink to connect with prospects through your company's combined network.



"Using the network effect that LinkedIn offers, PayPal has been able to book meetings where colleagues have already worked with prospects or even played hockey at the same club in the past, and that kind of background can provide us with a great icebreaker as well."

**Dan Horlor**  
Merchant Sales Manager, Paypal

\* Source: LinkedIn Internal Data, Jul 2016 – Jun 2019 (excluding sole proprietors) APAC countries included in analysis are Australia, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Brunei, Cambodia, China, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Laos, Macau, Malaysia, Mongolia, Myanmar, New Zealand, Philippines, Singapore, Taiwan, Thailand, Vietnam

\*\*Source: LinkedIn Internal Data. Sales opportunities analysed from 2015-2016. Multi-threading is defined as having 6 or more connections into an account to which you are selling.

# Key takeaways

- We are in an **era of decentralised technology purchasing decisions**, with non-IT functions playing a greater role in determining their company's usage of technology.



- Technology sellers need to adopt a **multi-threading approach** that extends beyond the IT function to reach and engage more members of today's large and diverse buying committee.



# Place Buyers First in a long customer journey

As the world reimagines what's possible through the use of technology, there is increased competition for buyer attention, with the average technology purchasing journey being longer than many realise. To pull ahead, technology sellers need to put their buyers first.

Trend 2

# Buyers are doing their homework; sellers should too

Insights from this survey show that technology buyers are most active in the earliest stages of a new technology purchase — stages that include problem identification, vendor research, and shortlisting.<sup>3a</sup>

In fact, 2 in 3 buyers have either already completed independent research or determined that a vendor could be relevant to them before ever making contact.<sup>3b</sup> If sellers are to make an impression, they need to meet this level of preparedness with their own.

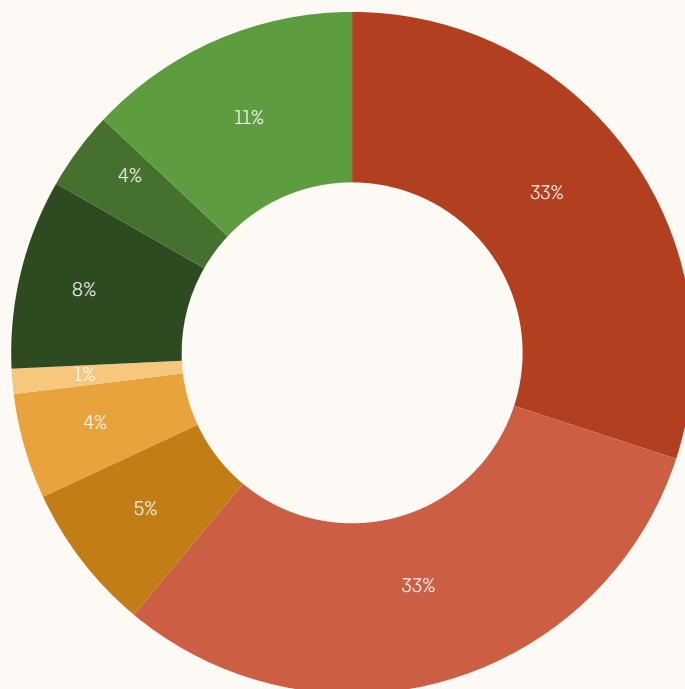
## 2 in 3

technology buyers have already conducted independent research or determined relevance before reaching out to a vendor<sup>3a</sup>

Figure 3a

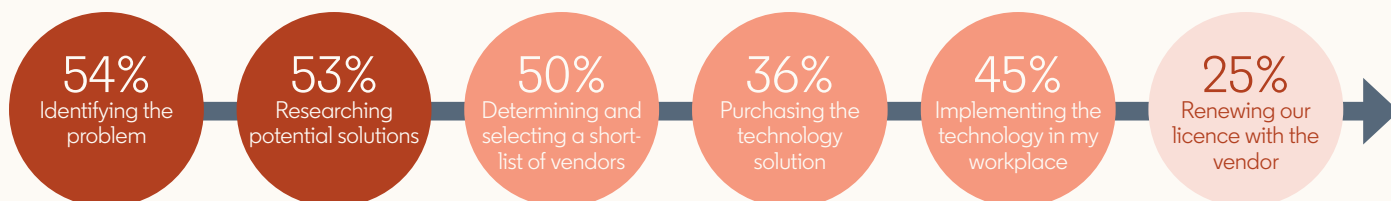
Q: When do you decide to connect with a vendor?

Figure 3b



- As soon as I determine the vendor could be relevant to me
- After I do my independent research on the vendor
- After the vendor engages with me via interesting content
- After the vendor engages with me through direct outreach
- After I see advertising from the vendor
- After someone recommends the vendor
- Other
- Prefer not to answer/don't know

Q: Which phase of the buying journey are you involved in?



<sup>3a</sup> Which phase in the buying journey are you involved in when purchasing [PIPE FROM HS5]? (N=5,894),

<sup>3b</sup> When do you decide to connect with a vendor for [PIPE from HS5]? (N= 5,894)

# To be Buyer First, share readily

Buyers value transparency. They also appreciate sellers who help them do their due diligence by readily sharing objective and balanced information. Take the time to personalise communications to your buyers: share trends, insights and learnings specific to the buyer's industry. These will go a long way in earning trust.

[Learn more about LinkedIn's Buyer First model.](#)

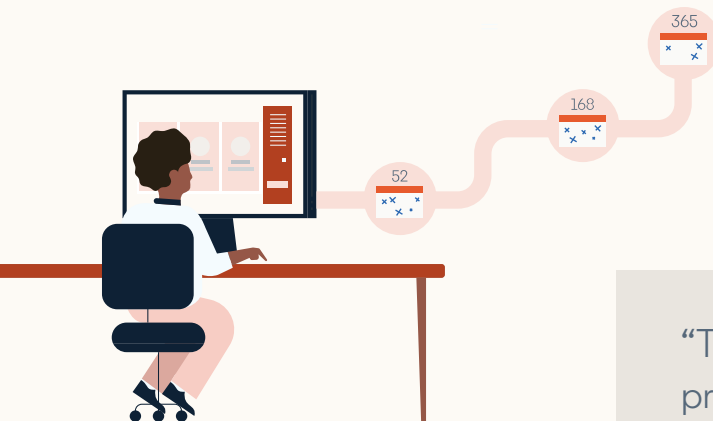
# 90%

of C-suite executives don't respond to impersonal B2B sales, choosing instead to engage more selectively with those they trust\*

over

# 71%

of buyers are more likely to buy if sellers personalise their communications\*\*



“The selling process has changed to the buying process is the best way I can put it.”

**Ed Calnan**

Chief Revenue Officer, Seismic

**LinkedIn Sales Navigator has a Smart Links feature** that allows you to easily package and share content, track viewing behaviour, and gain insights on what your buyers are most interested in. Smart Links shows you how many times a buyer clicked the link as well as when and how much time they spent on the content.



\*Buyer First: A New Era in Selling, LinkedIn

\*\*The Future Tech Buying Committee, LinkedIn

# An offering might be best-in-class, but buyers won't take your word for it

Humans have always relied on social proof to validate and make decisions. With social media and other knowledge-sharing platforms democratising the buying experience, trust and reputation is everything. Technology buyers today find it increasingly difficult to navigate vendors in a crowded market and are turning to the review economy for help.

Through our survey, we have uncovered that when it comes to increasing trust in a product, technology buyers turn to peer validation and endorsement, with more than half citing social proof as their top choice.<sup>4a</sup>

For technology sellers, this is an opportunity to proactively share social proof in the form of customer success stories and end-user feedback to support buyers in their decision-making process.

**1 in 2** technology buyers say peer validation is a primary vehicle to increase product trust<sup>4a</sup>

4a

Q: Which resources relate to 'increased trust of a new technology product'?



4b

Q: Which resources relate to 'increased knowledge of technology products'?



4a | 4b Above are some different resources related to purchasing a [PIPE FROM HS5].  
Which resources influence your company's purchase and how? (N=5,894)



# The customer journey is long and unpredictable

From research to renewal, the average technology purchasing journey is longer than many realise, with over 40% of sales cycles extending beyond one year.<sup>5</sup> Throughout the journey, there are many inflection points. Industry research has found that about 25% of buyers change roles every year and over 80% of sellers have reported losing or delaying at least one deal because a prospect or key client stakeholder had changed jobs.\*

The implication is clear: technology sellers need to stay close to buyers and stay on top of their changing needs, especially in today's evolving world of work. Sales intelligence tools like LinkedIn Sales Navigator can

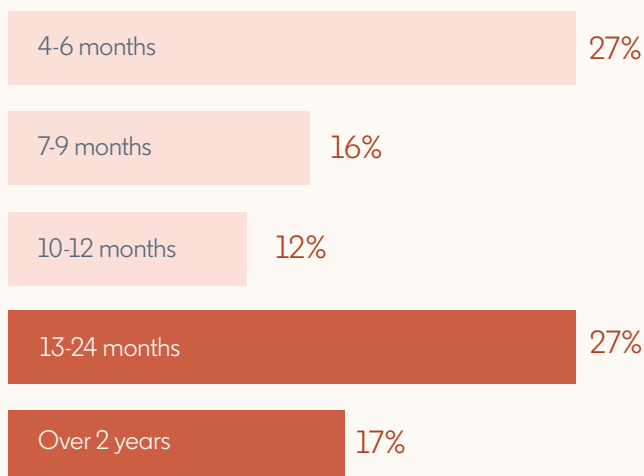
help sellers maintain an up-to-date picture of prospects, map out the technology buying committee, learn what is most important to them, and be notified of key account updates — all key insights that can pave the way for credible, ongoing engagement.

>44%

of technology buying journeys extend beyond one year<sup>5</sup>

Figure 5

Q: What is your total buying time on average?



“The buyer journey is getting longer and more complicated, but I see companies of all sizes benefiting when they focus on the shortest time-to-value for the client. Even if the processes are long and the sales cycles are long, how can you achieve the shortest time-to-value within that?”

**Hans Dekkers**

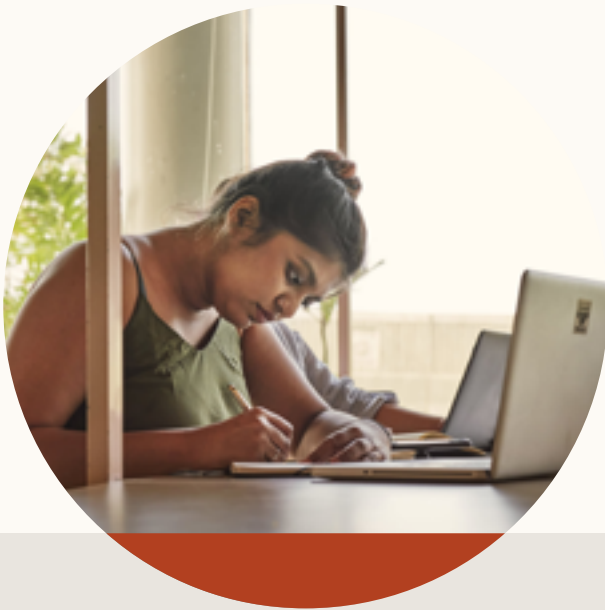
Chief Digital Officer and VP Digital Sales,  
IBM EMEA

<sup>5</sup>(The State of Sales 2021, LinkedIn)

\*Approximately how long does it take to complete each step in the buying journey for a [PIPE FROM HS5]? (N=5,894)

# Key takeaways

- In a digital world, technology buyers are leaning into earlier stages of the purchasing journey, especially when researching and shortlisting take place. They now reach out to sellers after determining relevance or conducting independent research, so it's important that **sellers are equally prepared to respond with relevant and personalised communications.**



- As buying journeys become longer, technology sellers can **leverage sales intelligence tools** to efficiently and effectively stay close to what's happening in key accounts.





# Address your buyers' paradox of needs

Innovation or stability? Affordability or support? Technology buyers are spoiled for choice, weighing options carefully against ever-evolving business priorities.

Trend 3

# As the buying committee grows, so does its buying requirements

B2B technology buyers want the innovation and flexibility offered by newer players in the market but they also seek the reliability that comes from working with well-known and experienced vendors. To move from shortlist to sale, buying decisions must meet a vast set of requirements, which can result in a paradox of needs among buying committee members. For example, technology buyers take a broad range of brand, service, and product factors into consideration when assessing which solutions can best meet a desired business outcome or customer need.<sup>6</sup>



“Customer aspirations are changing every day and it is important that as a salesperson, one perceives this and adapts to this.”

**Girish Ramachandran**

President, Asia Pacific  
Tata Consultancy Services

Figure 6

Q: What are the most important factors when you select a vendor?



<sup>6</sup>What do you consider to be the most important factors when selecting a vendor for [PIPE FROM HS5]? (N=5,894)

# Moving the needle when buyers remain hesitant to consider new players

Despite spending time and effort exploring new vendors, most technology buyers err on the side of familiarity when it comes to making purchasing decisions. As many as 2 in 3 buyers remain hesitant to try a new product or entrant.<sup>7</sup> For sellers to move that needle, a Buyer First mindset is essential.

“What buyer first means is that the entirety of the sales organisation is focused on delivering value to the customer. ... Everybody thinks sales’ job is to take interest and turn it into revenue. It should not be. Sales’ job is to take interest and turn it into results. That is the job of the sales function. It is to say, ‘Hey, if you have a problem, you know, your shirt is dirty. Give it to me, I’ll wash it for you and return a clean shirt to you.’ That’s the job of sales. It’s a service-based department. We serve our clients. That’s what it means to be Buyer First.”

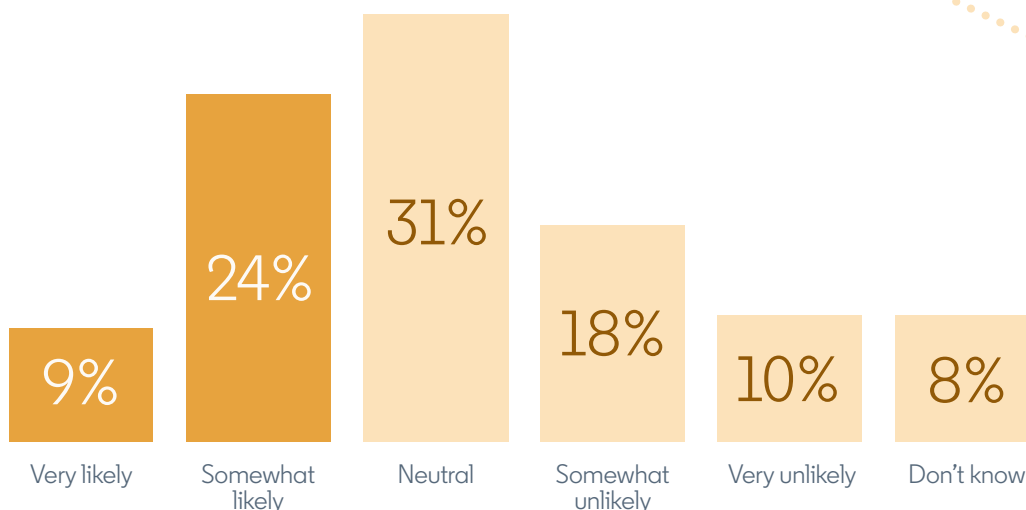
**Sahil Mansuri**  
CEO, Bravado

## 2 in 3

buyers remain  
**hesitant** to  
try a **new vendor**<sup>7</sup>

Q: How likely are you to try a new product or entrant?

Figure 7



<sup>7</sup>How willing are you to try a new product or new entrant into the market for [PIPE FROM HSS]? (N=5,894)

# To be Buyer First, learn then define

Reliability is – and always will be – an attractive quality to potential technology buyers. In fact, 76% of buyers seek vendors who can demonstrate deep knowledge and experience.<sup>8a</sup> But being dependable isn't enough on its own. Our survey found that nearly half of technology buyers will consider a new product if it's more innovative and can solve problems better than well-known brands.<sup>8b</sup> For sellers, this presents an opportunity — one that involves listening, learning and guiding.

As technology buyers continue to navigate through change and uncertainty, a seller's experience and expertise can add incredible value. A Buyer First seller listens, learns and guides. By taking the time to understand the diverse needs of the buying committee, speaking credibly and transparently about the trade-offs with competitor solutions, and guiding buyers onto a path towards their goals, sellers are demonstrating that they always act in their buyers' best interests. And buyers want nothing more than a trusted advisor.

## 76%

of buyers agree experience and knowledge is important when selecting a vendor<sup>8a</sup>

Do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

Figure 8a

It is important to me to buy from a vendor that has deep experience and knowledge.



We consider other vendors each time we renew a purchase.



We are always exploring alternatives even if we are not planning on purchasing at the moment.



I am open to buying from a vendor that is relatively new to the market.



■ Agree ■ Neutral ■ Disagree

<sup>8a</sup> Do you agree or disagree with the following statements? (N=5,894)

<sup>8b</sup> What would make you consider a new product or new entrant into the market for [PIPE FROM HS5]? (N=5,894)

## 1 in 2

buyers will consider a new technology product if it is more innovative or meets business needs better than well-known brands<sup>8b</sup>

Figure 8b

What would make you consider a new product/entrant?

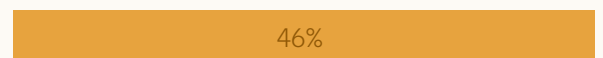
If the product/vendor is more affordable



If I have a business need that cannot be solved by well-known brands



If the product/vendor is more innovative



If the vendor understands my needs better



If the vendor is flexible to customise their offerings





# Key takeaways

- Disruptive global events have reinforced that **value and reliability** are key purchasing drivers, alongside trust.



- To succeed in the Age of Agility, technology sellers can help buying committees navigate a paradox of needs by **adopting a Buyer First mindset** — listening, learning and guiding them to their desired outcome.







## Seize the post-sale frontier

Making a sale isn't the end of a buying cycle — it's the beginning of the next. In a world where businesses are challenged to extract maximum value from their technology investment, buyers are looking for technology sellers who will journey with them long after the deal is inked.

Trend 4

# Technology buyers are investing in an outcome, not a product

Sellers' ability to understand buyer needs is now a critical purchase driver for **46% of decision-makers**, signalling the type of support customers expect from a new provider.<sup>9</sup> As budgets become ever-more scrutinised, buyers appreciate all the support they can get to make sure that their technology investments are delivering maximum value.

This is good news for sellers because staying actively engaged after the sale can be an important 'greenspace' strategy — seeding new business growth opportunities within an existing account.

70%

of sellers have made customer retention a higher priority\*

"2020 has reinforced that the healthiest way to grow a business is by creating more value than ever for your best customers and translating that value into larger and more strategic relationships.

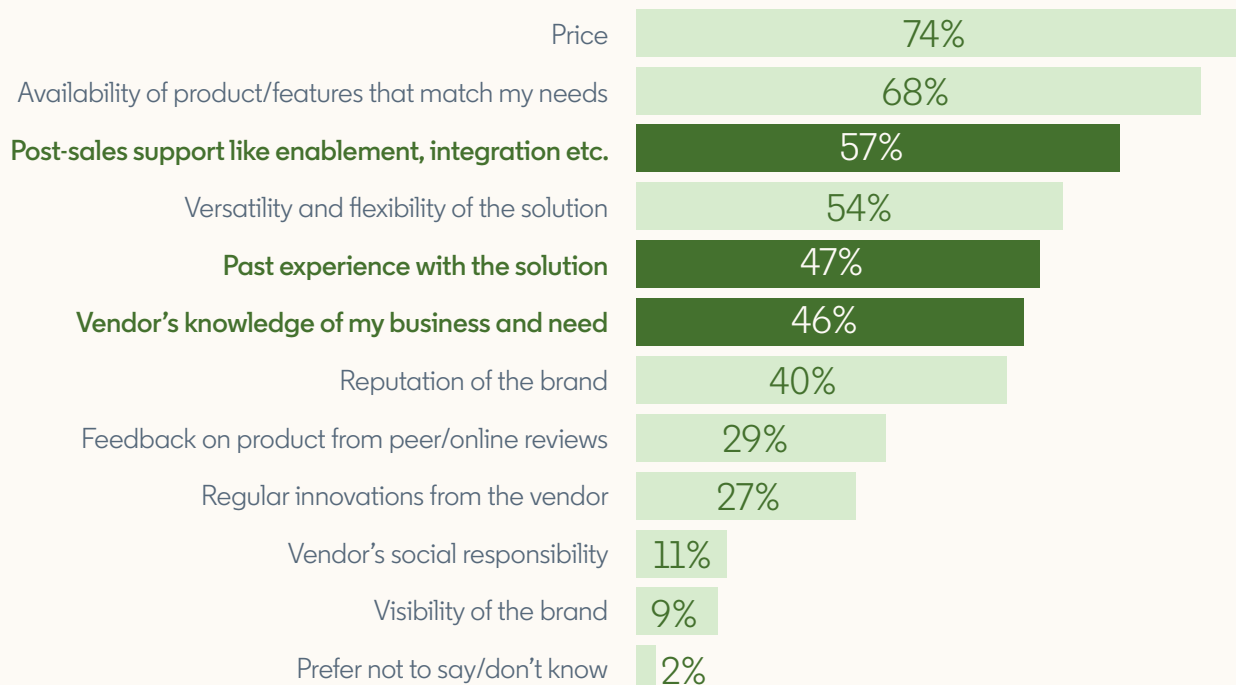
At LinkedIn, we call this "greenspace"...the opportunity to bring more value to our customers already succeeding with our products. Helping them to do more of what already works. Greenspace strategies have worked incredibly well this year despite a challenging environment."



**Dan Shapero**  
Chief Business Officer, LinkedIn

Figure 9

Q: What are the most important factors when selecting a vendor?



\*LinkedIn data, April 2020

<sup>9</sup>What do you consider to be the most important factors when selecting a vendor for [PIPE FROM HS5]? (N=5,894)

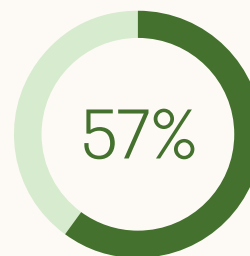
# Thinking beyond initial spend

Greater numbers of technology buyers are prioritising post-sale support and weighing past experiences with solutions when making purchase decisions.

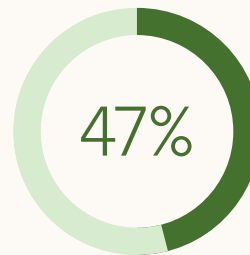
More than half of all technology buyers say that post-sale support is a major factor behind which vendor they choose.<sup>9</sup> In a crowded market, sellers who offer reliable and relevant customer support can build an edge.

Nearly half of all technology buyers also take into account past experience with a solution when choosing a vendor.<sup>9</sup> This means that delivering greater focus on retention and existing customers will lead to stronger relationships and generate increased business opportunities.

To seize the post-sale frontier, sellers must find out where existing customers feel they fall short. Then, take corrective action and create targeted messaging and action plans to revert that sentiment.



of all technology buyers say post-sales support is a major factor in which vendor they choose<sup>9</sup>



of all technology buyers say past experience with the solution is a major factor in which vendor they choose<sup>9</sup>

“Positioning around customers’ pain points and needs – as well as their end customers – will drive long-term value by creating deeper loyalty and trust among buyers. Demonstrating deep understanding of the customer and bringing our value proposition to life in the context of their business is key.”

**Girish Ramachandran**  
President, Asia Pacific  
Tata Consultancy Services



# Reducing adoption timeframes

Many technology solutions have lengthy adoption periods, exposing another critical area for sellers to address. Our research has found that technology implementation and renewals at Enterprise companies can take nearly a year once a new technology is onboarded.

Addressing what can be pain-points for both IT and end users is vital, particularly with metrics such as net-dollar retention under greater scrutiny with subscription-based solutions. To illustrate, consider **LinkedIn Sales Navigator's** advanced CRM integration capabilities.

For customers, being able to seamlessly sync their sales intelligence tool with their existing CRM system can significantly help reduce time-to-value. It also extends personalised customer engagements beyond the initial purchase cycle, creating greater value in a shorter time post-sale.

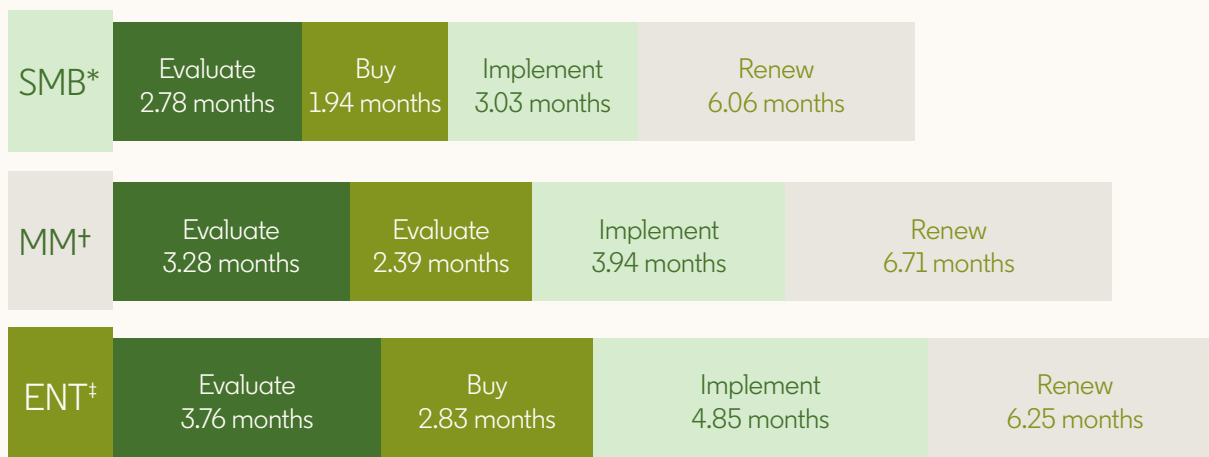
In a similar manner, technology sellers can focus on showcasing the value-generating outcomes that their solutions provide and work together with customers to plan ahead for successful implementation and adoption.

“[CRM integration] is one of the fantastic things with Sales Navigator. When a lead comes into us from Salesforce, we can bring up the LinkedIn company profile and have all the important information right in front of us. It saves hours of time, and it ensures we start from a better understanding of that business.”

**Kathleen Grace**  
EMEA ISO Manager, PGi

Investing in customer experience will be crucial to decreasing time-to-value in the 2020s

Figure 10



\* Small and medium size business. †Mid Market. ‡Enterprise

‡b Approximately how long does it take to complete each step in the buying journey for a [PIPE FROM HS5]?  
(By company size), Base (EMEA): SMB (n=980); Mid Market (n=366); ENT (n=936)

# Key takeaways

- Seize the post-sale frontier by working with marketing, CX, and other customer-facing functions to **continuously add customer value and boost retention rates.**



- Demonstrate a **commitment to successful customer outcomes** by strengthening existing customer relationships.



- Leverage **greenspace strategies** to upsell, cross-sell, and grow your solution's business impact among existing customers.





# Technology selling in the Age of Agility

Today's world of work has accelerated the role and importance of technology as a strategic catalyst for agile transformation. As the B2B landscape continues to evolve, technology sellers must embrace a Buyer First mindset, adopt a multi-threading approach, learn to address buyers' paradox of needs, and seize the post-sale frontier. Those who do will be in the strongest position to win the hearts, minds and wallet share of digitally-empowered buyers.

Conclusion

## Four key lessons for technology sellers to accelerate growth in the Age of Agility:



1

### Multi-thread beyond the IT function

Leveraging technology effectively is a core competency for all business functions in today's evolving world of work. This means that the buying committee is not only growing larger, it's also getting more diverse.



2

### Place Buyers First in a long customer journey

As the world reimagines what's possible through the use of technology, there is increased competition for buyer attention, with the average technology purchasing journey being longer than many realise. To pull ahead, technology sellers need to put their buyers first.



3

### Address your buyers' paradox of needs

Innovation or stability? Affordability or support? Technology buyers are spoiled for choice, weighing options carefully against ever-evolving business priorities.



4

### Seize the post-sale frontier

Making a sale isn't the end of a buying cycle — instead, it's the beginning of the next. In a world where businesses are challenged to extract maximum value from their technology investment, technology buyers are looking for sellers who will journey with them long after the deal is inked.

Expect the unexpected. Prepare to adapt.  
This is technology selling in the Age of Agility.



