



The State of Sales Operations

Rising Above the Challenges

Introduction

As a Sales Operations professional, you're probably not surprised that the role of Sales Operations, which is increasingly important in helping sales teams succeed, is growing in many ways.

The number of Sales Operations professionals is growing

LinkedIn data shows that the number of Sales Operations professionals around the world increased by 38% between 2018 and 2020 — and increased 4.8x as fast as the sales function overall. Sales Operations is growing in a variety of industries. The top three industries displaying the largest percentage increases in Sales Operations professionals over the past two years are Public Safety, Software and IT Services, and Health Care.

The number of Sales Operations professionals around the world increased by

38%

between 2018 and 2020

Top 3 fastest-growing industries for Sales Operations:

1. Public Safety
2. Software and IT Services
3. Health Care



I think the growth stems from at least two areas. The first is the amount of readily available data for businesses coupled with the number of data providers in this space. Second, with the proliferation of data, you need Sales Operations to synthesize that information to enable salespeople. Historically, salespeople were responsible for their own book of business. When you have a team that can help set the target for sales to do what they best, the sky is the limit.



Bradley Gray

Director of Business Development at Enterprise Holdings

The role of Sales Operations is growing too

A new U.S. survey commissioned by LinkedIn and Nielsen reveals that Sales Operations professionals — like you — increasingly hold new responsibilities, such as managing sales tools and technology, overseeing strategic growth plans, and monitoring sales team performance.



Sales Operations has emerged as the strategic differentiator for the GTM organization. Having a well-run, best-in-class operations function allows the business to not only operate efficiently and effectively based upon data-driven decisions, but to see around corners, identify blind spots, and pivot early, where necessary. Although operations will always be responsible for the tactical execution, the real value of operations is being the strategic business partner to the rest of the leadership team.



Rosalyn Santa Elena
Head of Revenue Operations at Clari

As the workload grows, Sales Operations professionals are finding they're asked to balance both strategic and operational responsibilities. They must also, in many cases, do more with less.

And some Sales Operations professionals may be flying blind, because about one-third of respondents to our survey say their sales planning — which includes prospecting territory planning, and market segmentation — isn't primarily led by data-driven insights.

Many in the role are grappling with growing pains as Sales Operations professionals face several key challenges, among them:



A lack of adequate resources



More frequent planning cycles



Recruiting and retaining talent

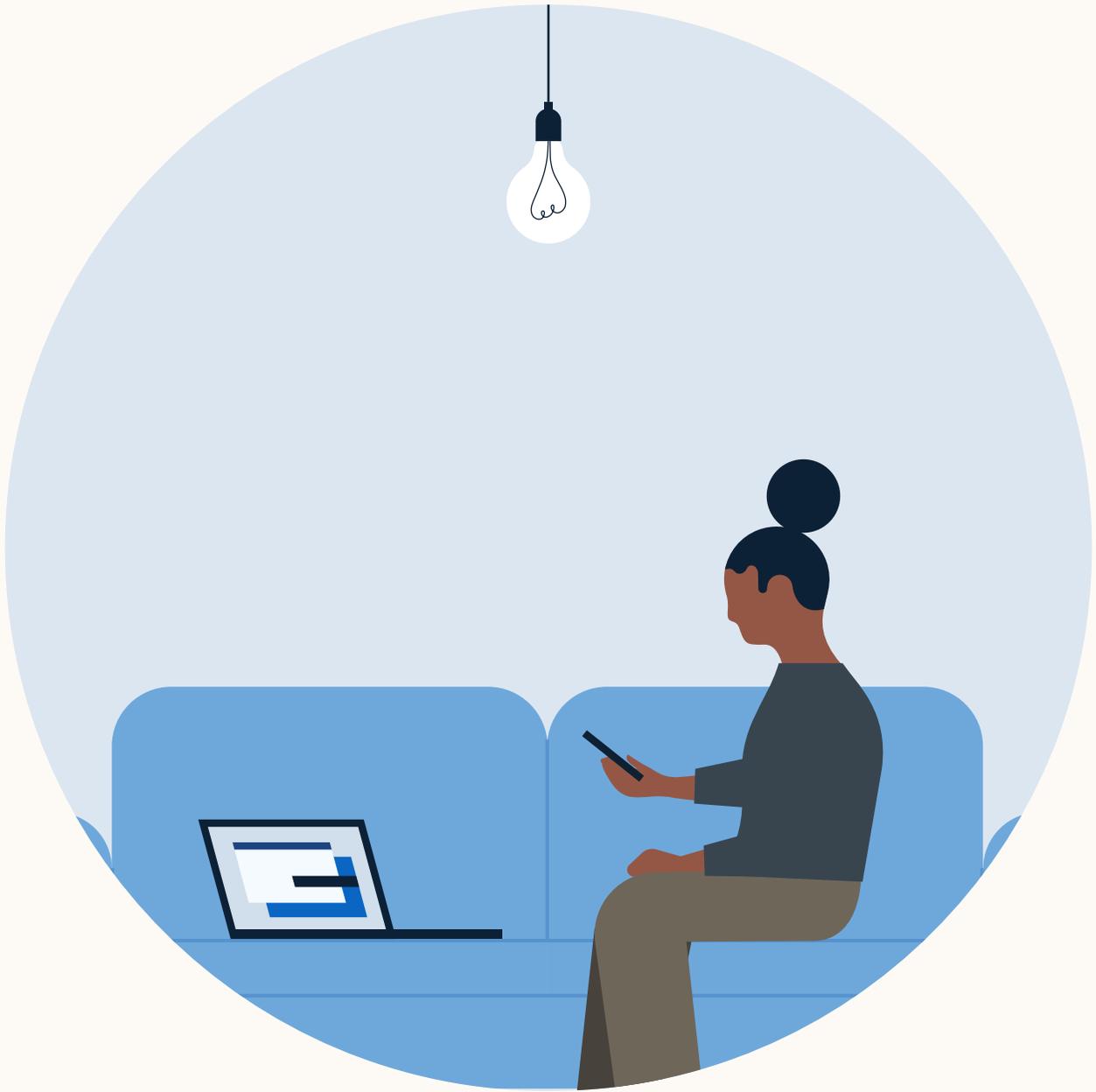


Finding accurate, easy-to-access data



Read on for unique insight into the challenges facing professionals like you and how the right analytical skill set and reliable, accurate data can help the Sales Operations profession overcome its growing pains — and take full advantage of the huge opportunity that lays ahead of it to build the sales org of the future.

[See methodology/survey participant demographics](#) →



Sales Operations'
growing responsibilities

As the role expands and evolves, Sales Operations professionals are increasingly valued for their nimbleness and their ability to serve as a versatile Swiss Army knife. By analyzing LinkedIn profiles in 2020, we find that Sales Operations continue to build skills in these 10 key areas:

- ✓ Sales Operations
- ✓ Digital Literacy
- ✓ Data Science
- ✓ Business Management
- ✓ Leadership
- ✓ Project Management
- ✓ Inside Sales
- ✓ Communication
- ✓ Advertising
- ✓ Digital Marketing



The average Sales Operations professional is responsible for 9 out of the 14 key responsibilities typically assigned to Sales Operations — spanning the entire sales and sales planning cycle.

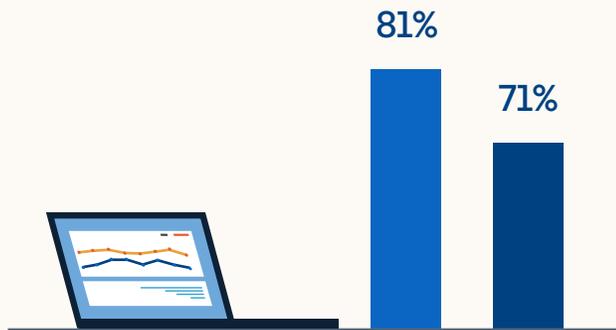
75%+ of Sales Operations professionals are responsible for managing their organization’s sales and business development tools. This responsibility suggests that the large majority of Sales Operations pros are asked to develop growth strategies and monitor the sales team’s performance, which are extremely time-consuming tasks.

Two-thirds of survey participants are responsible for equally time-consuming tasks, such as forecasting business performance, identifying the TAM and ideal customer profile, and prioritizing accounts and headcount planning.

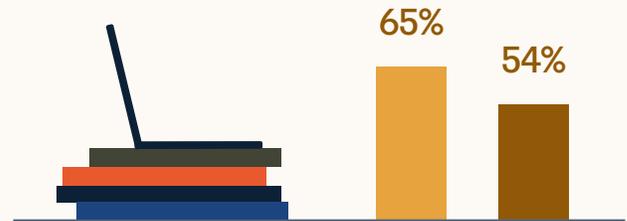
Today's Sales Operations professionals handle a wide array of responsibilities

Responsibility	% Personally responsible for
Managing my organization's sales/business development tools	76%
Suggesting growth strategies for the sales team (determining which accounts to focus on)	72%
Growth (building relationships with existing customers and upselling)	72%
Monitoring sales team performance (tracking progress in achieving plan goals)	72%
Forecasting business performance	69%
Identifying total addressable market and ideal customer profile	66%
Prospecting/Qualifying (finding leads / determining which leads are most likely to buy)	66%
Prioritizing accounts to go after	64%
Headcount planning for the sales organization	64%
Sales enablement activities (providing sales org w/ tools & content to help sell more effectively)	63%
Engaging/Closing (working with leads to move towards a sale/agreeing on terms of a sale)	63%
Determining compensation framework for sales professionals in my organization	62%
Formalizing inbound and outbound sales process	60%
Territory planning/territory design (book building, account list building, defining territories)	59%

For the most part, Sales Operations professionals in all industries and at larger or small companies have similar responsibilities — with some exceptions.

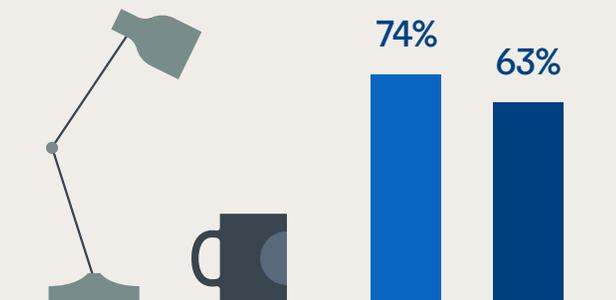


81% of Sales Operations professionals in the tech sector are responsible for managing their organization’s sales and business development tools, while just 71% of Sales Operations professionals in the non-tech sector have the same responsibility.



Similarly, 65% of Sales Operations pros in tech are responsible for territory planning, but just 54% of those in the non-tech sector are.

There are also some differences in the responsibilities of Sales Operations pros depending on the size of company they work for.



At larger companies (500-999 employees), 74% of Sales Operations pros are responsible for prospecting/qualifying, but just 63% of Sales Operations pros at smaller companies (<500 employees) have the same responsibility.



At smaller companies, Sales Operations pros are much more likely to be responsible for sales enablement (69%) compared with Sales Operations pros at larger companies (59%).

With an increasing amount of responsibilities on their plate, many Sales Operations professionals find it challenging to prioritize their duties.



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If you don't prioritize and focus as an operations team you will be overrun. And critical to this process is engaging your stakeholders in the tradeoffs you are making.



Andy Mowat
VP-Growth Marketing & GTM Operations at Culture Amp

For the most part, Sales Operations teams believe they are working with sales leadership on the right actions that are most impactful on the business. But there are aspects of the job that Sales Operations professionals would like to see emphasized more. For instance, they believe there's too much emphasis on Managing CRM data, because this task ranked no. 1 on the list of how the Sales Operations team currently works with Sales Leaders, but ranked no. 4 on the list of how the Sales Operations teams thinks it can be most impactful.

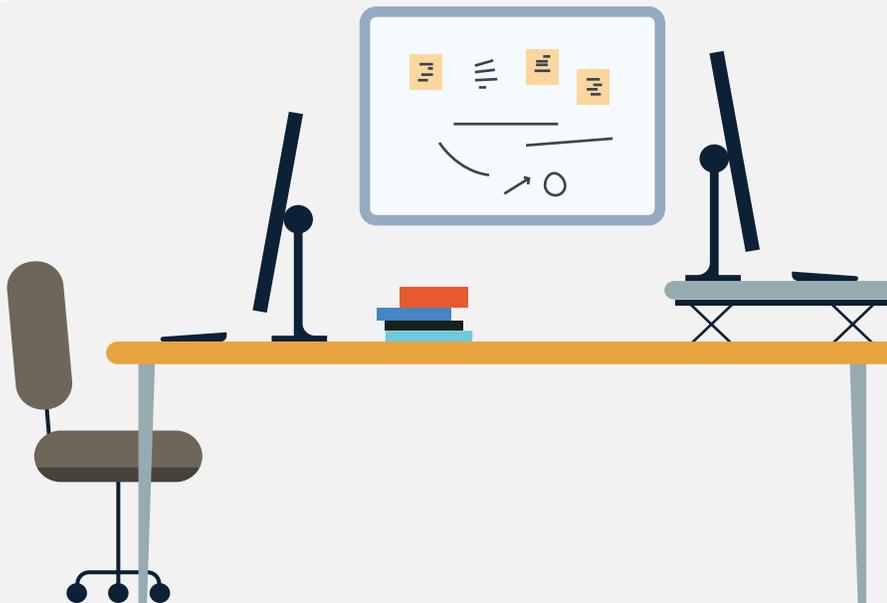
Sales Operations and sales leadership generally agree on priorities (with some exceptions)

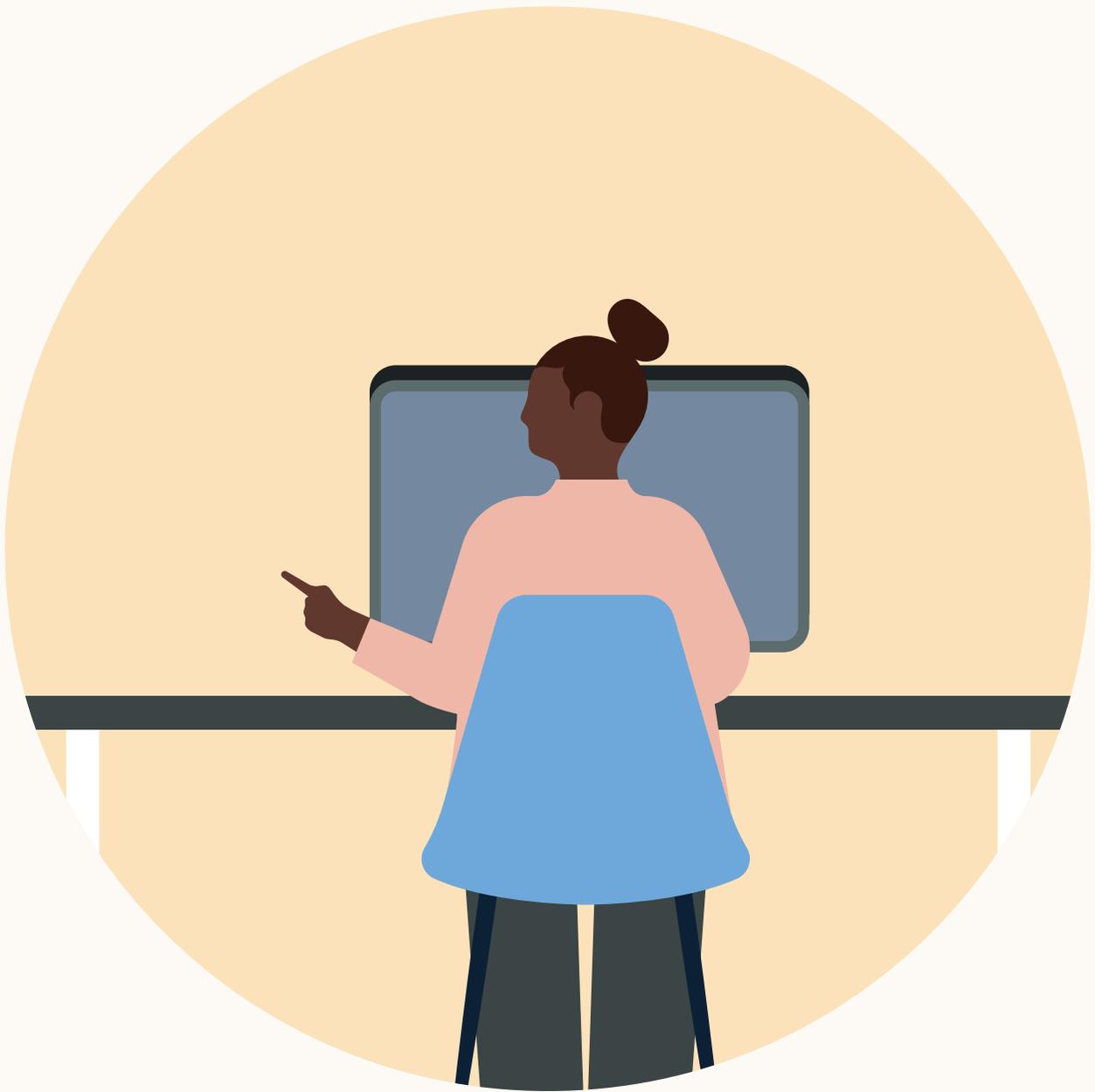
How Sales Operations team currently works with Sales Leadership

- Managing CRM data
- Executing on strategic projects for the sales team
- Reporting on sales team performance
- Driving adoption of tech (e.g., CRM)
- Providing dashboards and reporting
- Gaining buy-in for investments in sales tech
- Rolling out and driving adoption of new sales processes

How Sales Operations team thinks they can be most impactful in working with Sales Leadership

- Executing on strategic projects for the sales team
- Reporting on sales team performance
- Driving adoption of tech (e.g., CRM)
- Managing CRM data
- Rolling out and driving adoption of new sales processes

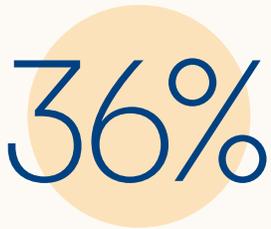




Sales Operations'
increasing challenges

Despite their general agreement with Sales Leadership on priorities, a significant portion of Sales Operations professionals laments that their workload can pose difficult choices. For instance, almost two in five respondents said they struggle to find the proper balance between strategic and operational responsibilities. Similarly, more than one in four respondents say they spend too much time “fighting fires,” i.e., they are more reactive than proactive.

Challenges faced by Sales Operations professionals can vary

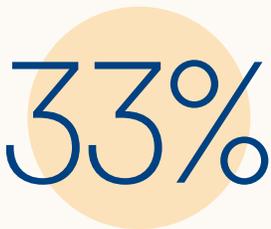


“Our team struggles to find the balance between strategic and operational work.”



“We spend too much time fighting fires / being reactive vs. proactive.”

% of Sales Operations professionals who spend too much time fighting fires and being reactive:



smaller companies



larger companies

“

Stakeholder alignment is probably the number one thing. In the best Sales Operations function, there’s really strong alignment between the operations leader and the sales leader on what the priorities are. And when there’s confusion, the sales leader is there to clarify.



Shirin Sharif
Head of Sales Operations and Strategy at
Amazon Web Services

Additionally, Sales Operations professionals in the tech sector are finding challenges with data quality more often than their peers in non-tech.

32%

of Sales Operations pros in tech lament inaccurate market data

23%

of non-tech Sales Operations pros lament inaccurate market data

31%

of Sales Operations pros in tech see poor CRM data as a challenge

20%

of Sales Operations professionals in the non-tech sector agree



“

Revenue leaders and CROs need their revenue operations teams to become more strategic. I think there are three levels of tasks for Sales Operations teams: descriptive, diagnostic and prescriptive. You become more valuable as you move through this chain. Descriptive is at least you know what's going on. When you get to diagnostic, you're actually saying why something is happening, right? You're not just reporting on the data. You're saying, why is this happening, is it a good thing or a bad thing? And then the next step is, once you understand why, you can actually say what next, right? So, that's the prescriptive piece.



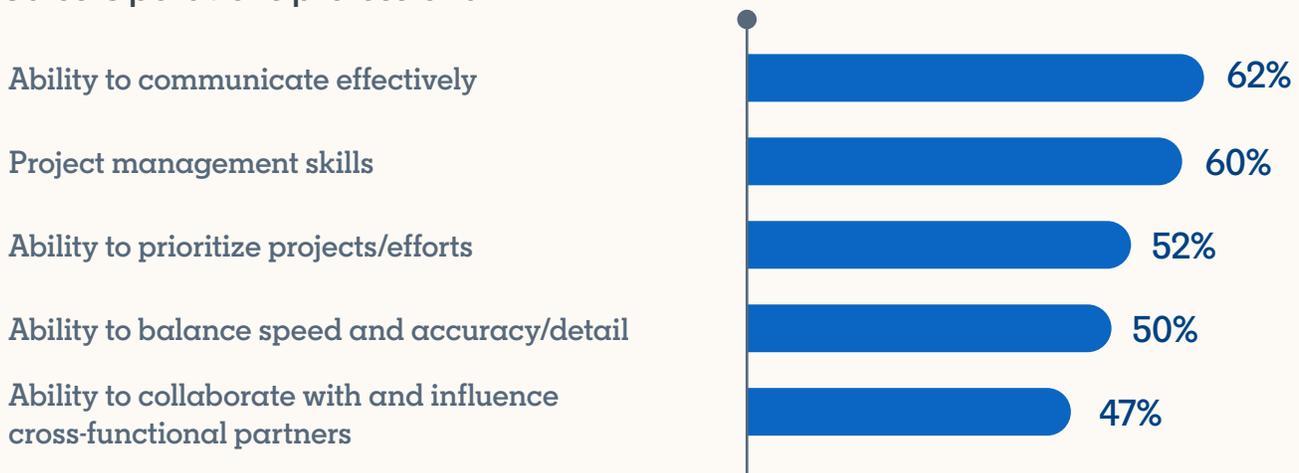
Jeremy Donovan
SVP Sales Strategy at SalesLoft

Sales Operations professionals are facing other challenges as their responsibilities increase. In our research, the majority of Sales Operations pros said it has become increasingly imperative to be able to communicate effectively with their cross-functional partners, manage projects balancing speed with accuracy, and properly prioritize their varied responsibilities. Given these demands, about two in five respondents said it is difficult “to recruit and retain good Sales Operations talent.” Among the most important skills Sales Operations professionals listed on their LinkedIn profiles in 2020 are data literacy, data science, and project management.

36%

of Sales Operations pros agree:
“It’s hard to recruit and retain
good Sales Operations talent.”

Skills that have become more important to being an effective Sales Operations professional



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I actually think most sales leaders want [more strategic work from Sales Operations]. They would love more strategic insight from their Sales Operations partners, but I think they sometimes don’t realize how long the operations take. It’s up to us to communicate proactively and say, ‘Listen, setting these quotas and putting them in this system and putting the territories in the system, it’s going to take me the next two weeks, and I’m not going to have time to do anything strategic for the next two weeks.’ It’s really all about those tradeoffs.



Shirin Sharif
Head of Sales Operations and Strategy at
Amazon Web Services

Overall, Sales Operations professionals appear to be comfortable in their role. Almost three in four say they feel “confident” as Sales Operations pros. Another 58% feel they are “in control,” and 54% say they feel their job is “strategic.”

But our survey also indicates that not every feeling is positive for Sales Operations professionals. Only about half of respondents say they feel “empowered,” “valued/appreciated,” or “well-resourced” in their role. Similarly, only 49% of Sales Operations professionals say they are valued “just as much as sales professionals in my company.”

This perception of being undervalued raises a red flag for how Sales Operations is integrated into the broader sales team. It’s also an indicator of why it can be difficult to recruit and retain good Sales Operations talent.



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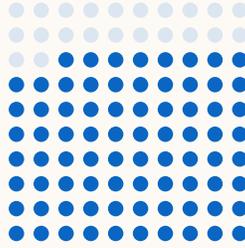
Integration of Sales Operations into the sales team, in my opinion, is necessary. Being a part of the sales team is how you get alignment. Finance, for instance, is not the right place for Sales Operations. Sales Operations should report into the sales team. Sales Operations’ job is not to audit the sales team. Sales Operations’ job is to help achieve the goals of the sales team.



Brian Frank
COO at Cameo

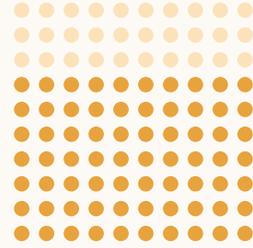
The attitudes that Sales Operations pros have toward their jobs can vary by industry and company size.

Sales Operations pros in tech are more confident in their roles



78%

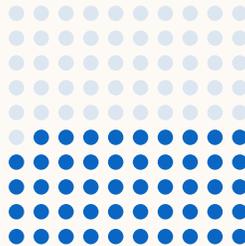
Tech Sales Operations pros who feel confident



70%

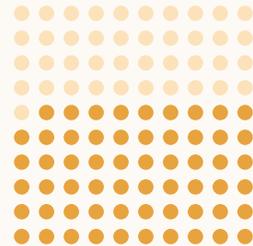
Non-tech Sales Operations pros who feel confident

Conversely, fewer Sales Operations pros in tech believe their role is strategic



49%

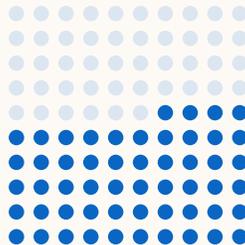
Tech Sales Operations pros who believe their role is “strategic”



59%

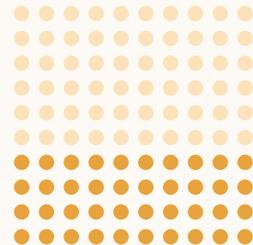
Non-tech Sales Operations pros who feel their role is “strategic”

Sales Operations pros at smaller companies tend to feel more empowered



54%

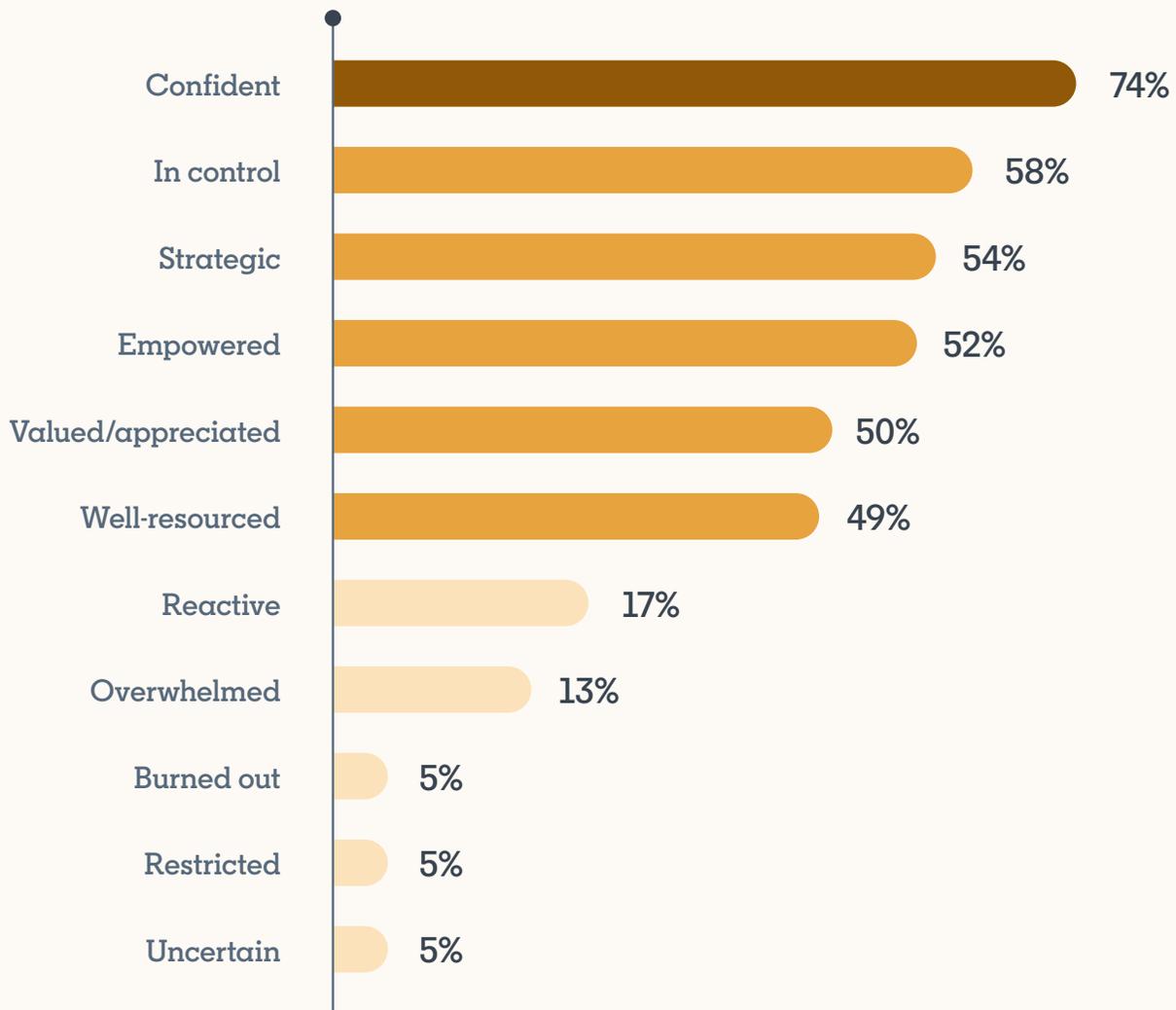
Sales Operations pros at smaller companies who feel empowered



40%

Sales Operations pros at larger companies who feel empowered

How Sales Operations professionals feel in their role



Attitudes toward role

	% Completely agree
I feel confident that I am making the right decisions in my role	65%
I feel that I have a good handle of my workload (i.e. am in control of what's on my plate)	62%
I feel empowered to make decisions on my own in my role	59%
Those in Sales Operations are valued just as much as sales professionals within my company	49%



Quality of data
is top of mind

For Sales Operations professionals, data is central to the role, especially in sales planning. According to Sales Operations pros, these are the top data points informing sales planning processes:

42%

revenue

41%

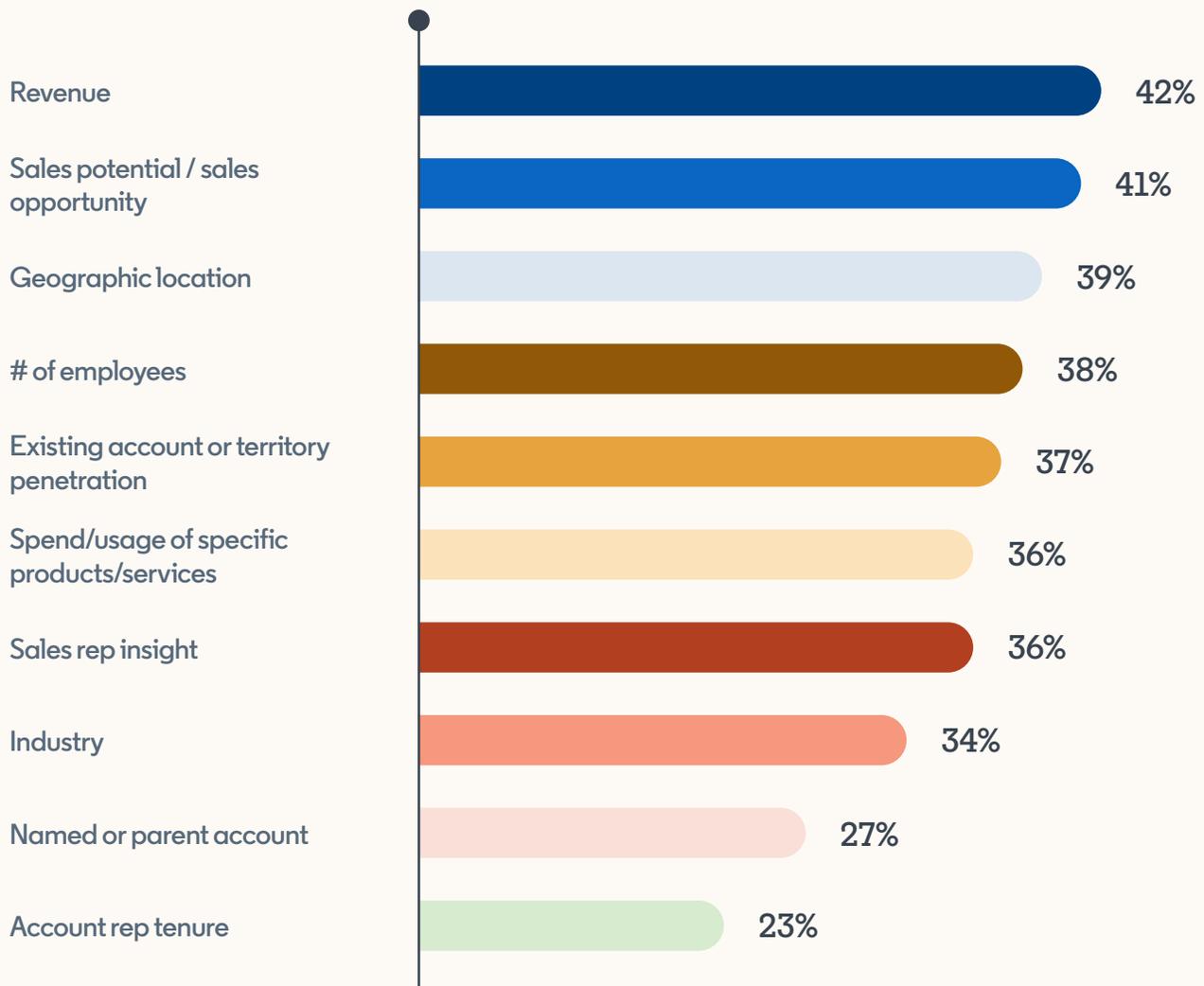
sales potential

39%

geographic location

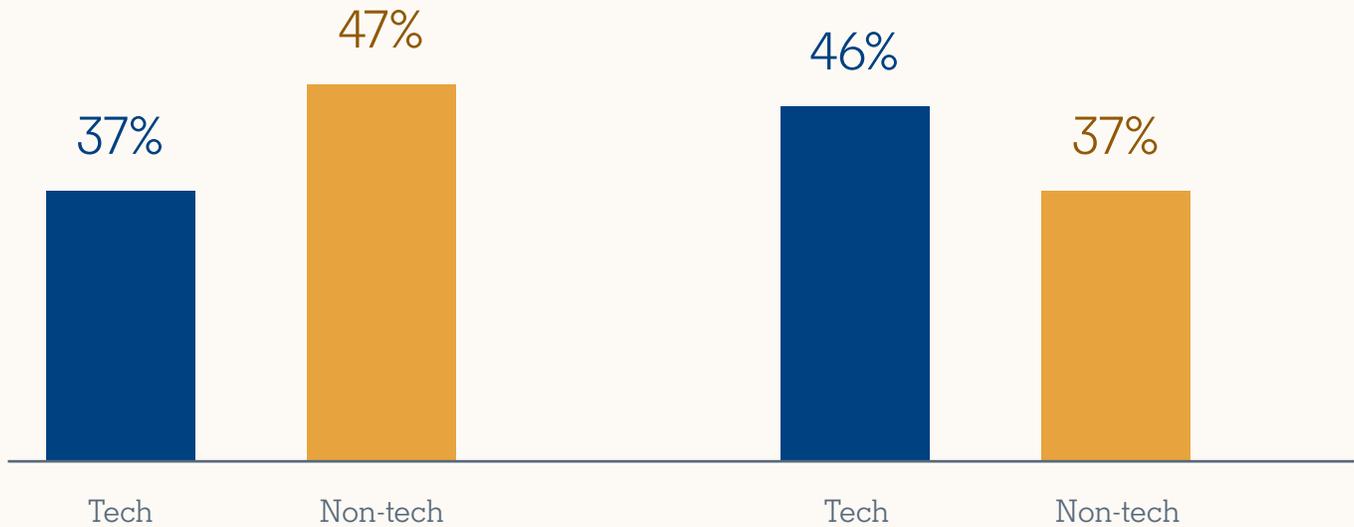
Criteria used to inform sales planning process

among those who know how company's sales planning is done

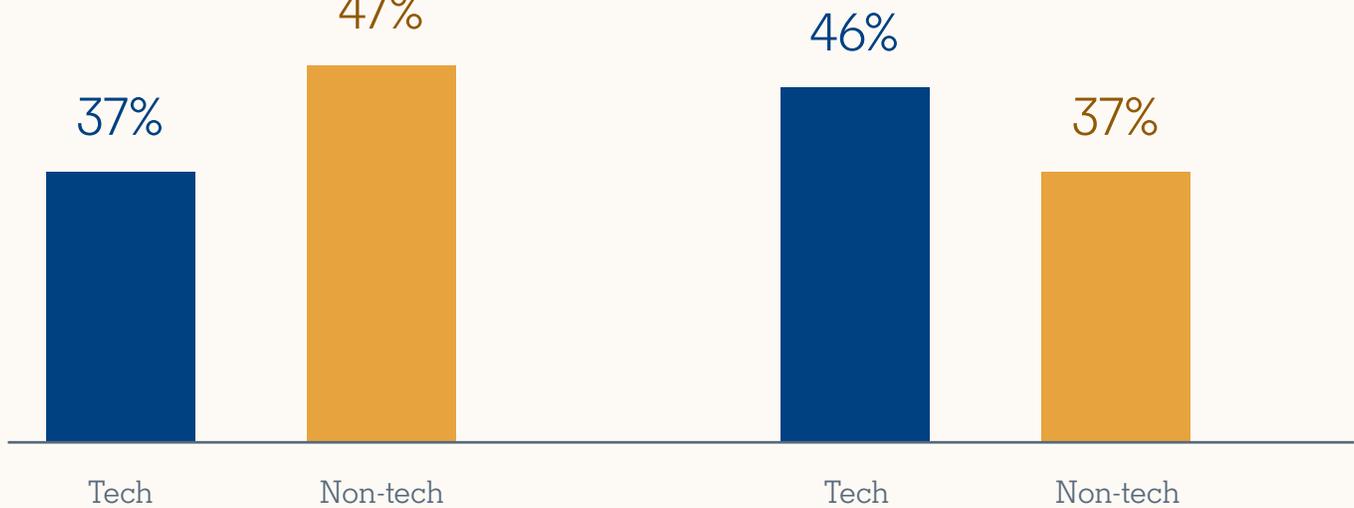


In some cases, tech and non-tech companies take different approaches to using data to identify potential customers.

Using prospect's overall revenue to identify potential customers



Using sales potential (a more sophisticated data point) to identify potential customers



In helping plan sales processes and its growing roster of responsibilities (data-driven or otherwise), it's evident that Sales Operations faces challenges and growing pains. Our research shows that less than half of Sales Operations professionals believe they are well resourced. 42% of respondents indicate they have questions about having the right tools to do their job effectively. 40% raise similar questions about having the right data to do their job effectively.

25%

And 25% of Sales Operations professionals say that poor CRM data quality makes it hard to do their core job. It seems clear that these issues can be addressed by investing in the right tools and data to help Sales Operations boost its impact on the business.

Sales Operations professionals at tech companies are more likely than those at non-tech companies to see issues with data. By a margin of 32% to 23% over their non-tech counterparts, Sales Operations pros at tech companies say poor CRM data makes it difficult to assess the potential of various prospects. Similarly, 31% of Sales Operations pros at tech companies say that poor CRM data quality makes it difficult for them to do their jobs, but just 20% of Sales Operations pros at non-tech companies agree.

25%

of Sales Operations professionals agree:
“Poor CRM data quality makes it hard to do our core job”

49%

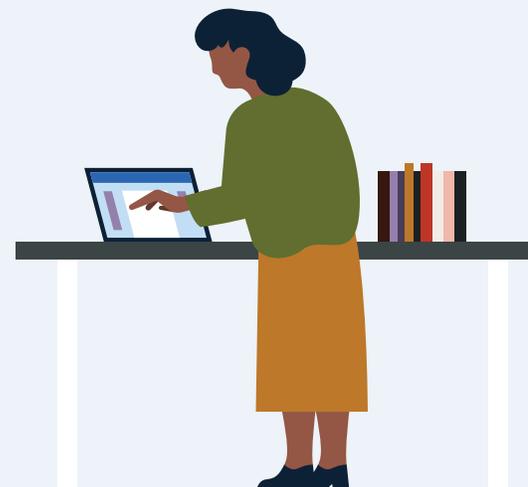
of Sales Operations professionals feel they’re “well-resourced” in their role

“

People change roles on average, every two to four years. So making sure you have good hygiene around email bounce — what do you do when an email bounces is probably one of the best things you can do for data hygiene. And the more LinkedIn can help us to identify these issues, and I think we even have a field in our CRM that feeds from LinkedIn that basically says whether this person has moved or not. Data hygiene is a continual effort. It’s not a thing that happens every so often in big bangs. Data hygiene is something that needs to happen a little bit every day.

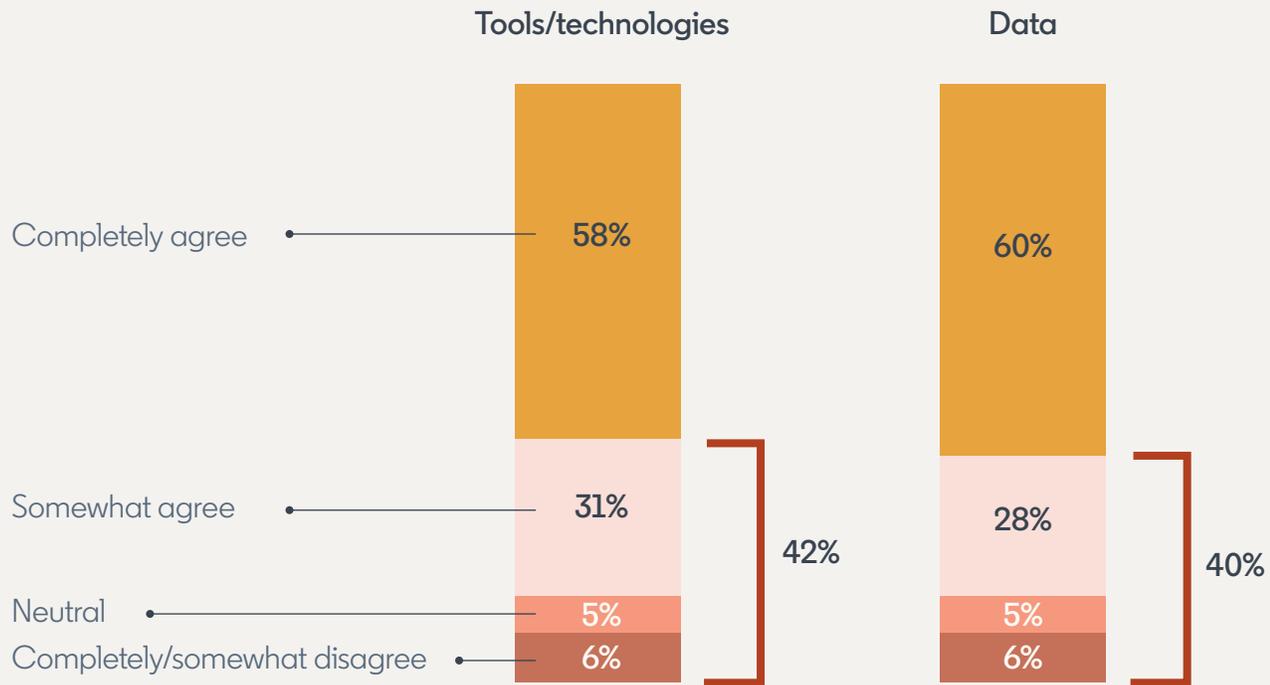


Jeremy Donovan
SVP Sales Strategy at SalesLoft



Attitudes toward current resources

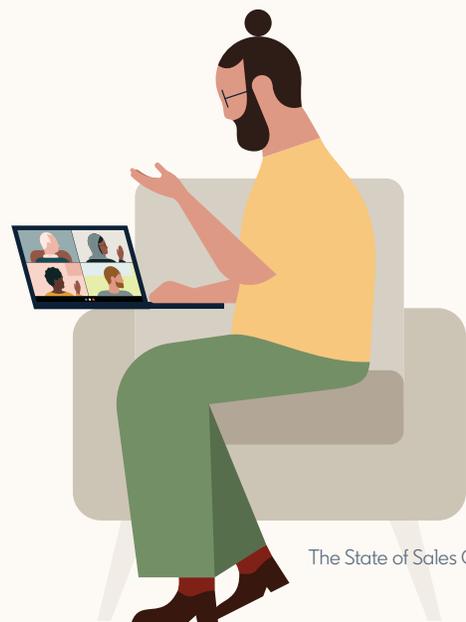
% of Sales Operations professionals who feel they're "well-resourced"



Increasingly, the world of business decision making is data-driven. Sales Operations is no exception. Our research found that 37% of respondents say the “ability to distill insights from complex data” has become more important to the Sales Operations role. However, our research also shows there is a troubling paucity of data usage in many sales organizations.

In our survey, about one in three Sales Operations professionals indicated that their sales planning processes — such as identifying high opportunity accounts, territory planning, lead validation/routing, and customer/market segmentation — aren’t primarily led by data-driven inputs.

It’s clear that there is a significant opportunity for investment in tools and data to support the Sales Operations function.





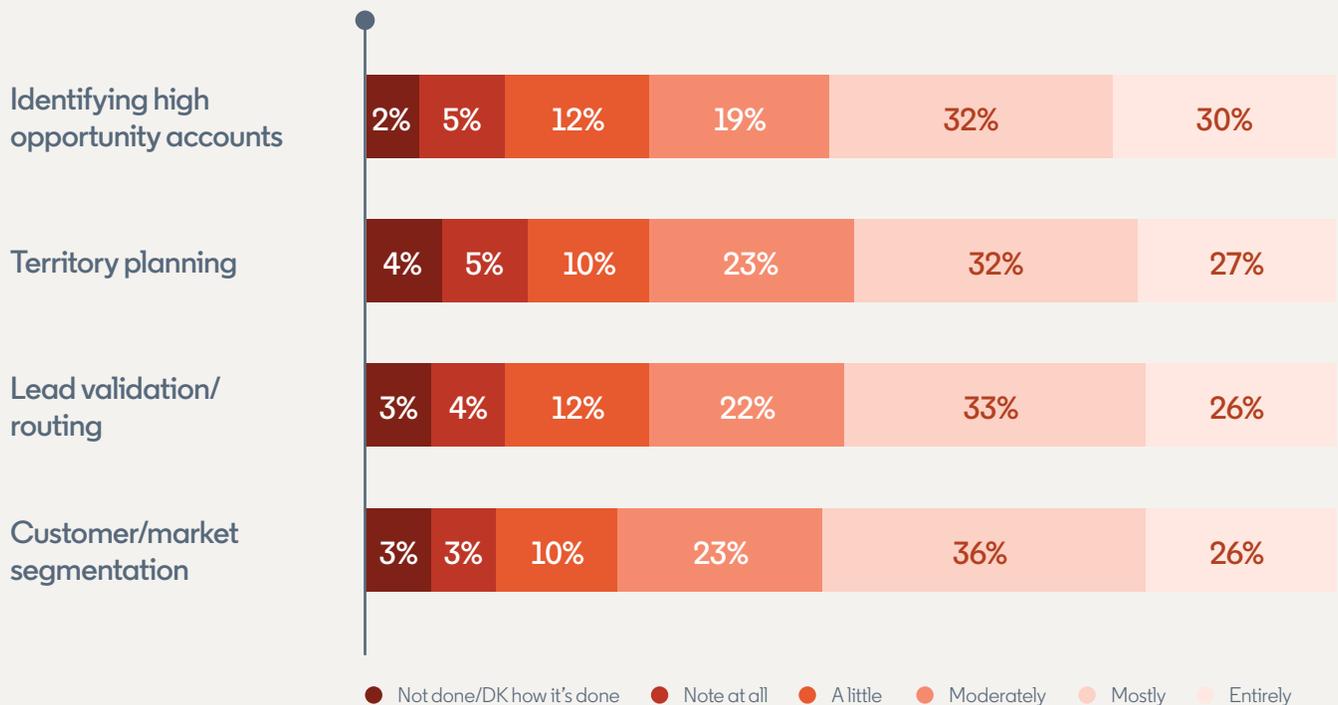
Definitely data and insights and your ability to work with Excel and SQL and various tools — that’s table stakes. I think communication is really important, because there’s so much upward and sideways communication to sales leaders who are generally more senior than you. I definitely look for that, and I look for hunger and willingness to just, like, try stuff. I think you should have what we call a bias for action at Amazon. You have to have that willingness to just jump in and get stuff done, because if you’re not operational in your mindset, you’re just going to be stuck. You’re going to be paralyzed by the data.



Shirin Sharif
Head of Sales Operations and Strategy at
Amazon Web Services



Extent to which sales planning processes are data-driven



One reason Sales Operations professionals may not be relying on data as much as expected is that they lack confidence in the data they're working with. To effectively leverage data in their roles, Sales Operations professionals must have more confidence in the data they're receiving from internal and external sources. Our research found that 58% of respondents said they currently face data-related challenges in their role. Among the challenges involving data:

- ✓ Poor CRM data quality
- ✓ Data is siloed
- ✓ No unified view across marketing, customer success, etc.
- ✓ Inaccurate market data

“

It seems there is always an endless supply of data in an organization but both the quality of the data and having the references to verify it are both important. The quality of the data starts with the point of origin. Streamlining sales processes and the interfaces sales teams use to input information is a critical component to good data from the start. With quality data, Sales Operations can readily enrich this information from internal and external data sources. Better data improves sales targeting and closures.



Bradley Gray
Director of Business Development at Enterprise Holdings

58% of Sales Operations professionals say they currently face data-related challenges.



For 37% of Sales Operations professionals, the “ability to distill insights from complex data” is an important skill.



Coupled with their data challenges, Sales Operations professionals also grapple with a lack of resources — particularly when it comes to sales planning.

89% of Sales Operations professionals agree that planning more frequently in a world that is in constant flux would be beneficial to the business in general and the sales organization in particular.



are planning less frequently than quarterly



Real-time planning where you have a cadence that is run regularly (vs. recreating a one-off planning process each time) is 100 times more powerful to drive the right performance for the business.

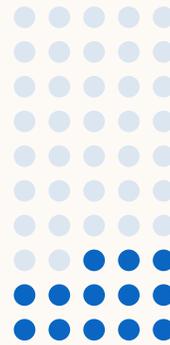


Andy Mowat

VP-Growth Marketing & GTM Operations at Culture Amp

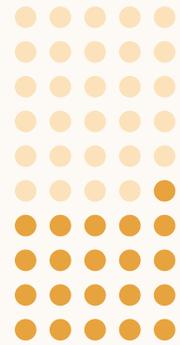
% of companies doing sales planning quarterly or less frequently

Even with this understanding, 35% of Sales Operations pros say they plan quarterly or even less frequently than that. Note that Sales Operations pros at tech companies plan more frequently than their counterparts at non-tech companies: Sales planning on a quarterly basis and even less frequently is less likely among Sales Operations professionals at tech companies (27%) than at non-tech companies (42%).



27%

tech companies



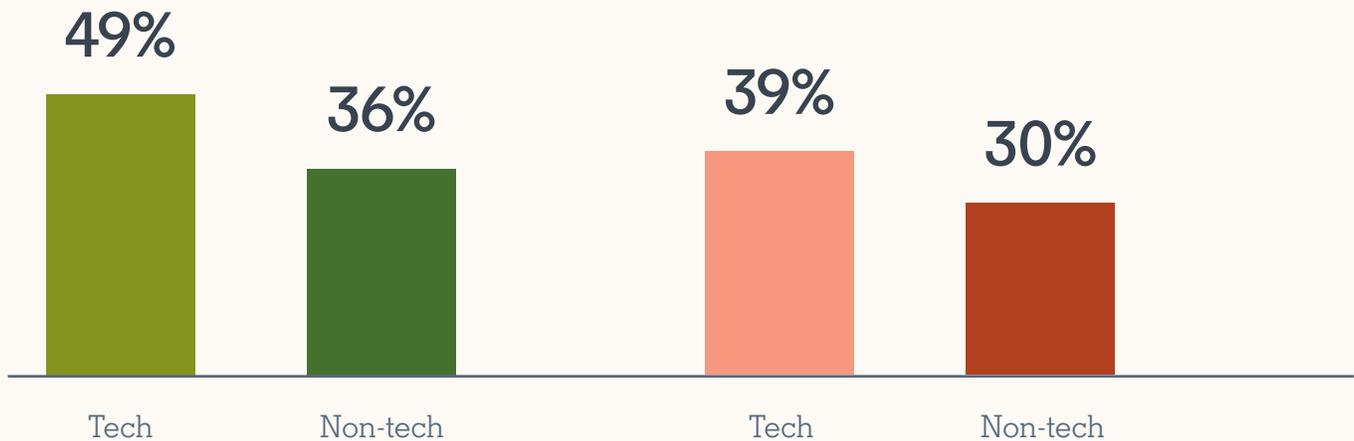
42%

non-tech companies

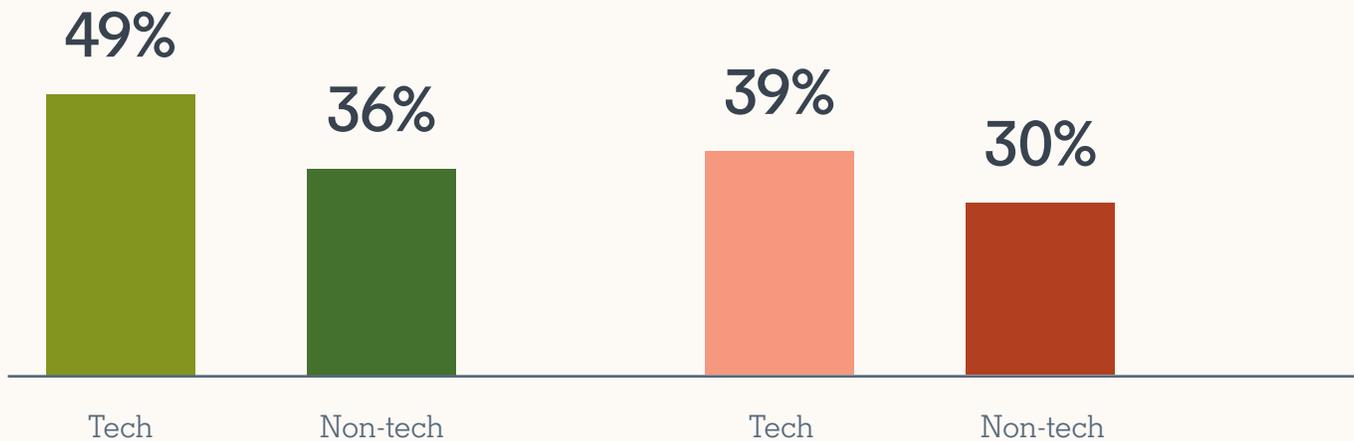
Half of Sales Operations professionals do not expect their organization to increase the frequency of its sales planning. Additional resources, particularly in the form of expanded headcount, more sales technology tools, and more accurate data, could help the planning process — but almost half of respondents to our survey say they don't have enough resources to boost the frequency of sales planning.

The survey found that there is some optimism for more investment in technology, with 42% believing that a “significant increase” in budget for tech tools is on the way. However, respondents were less optimistic for significant increases in headcount, with just 34% expecting that kind of hiring in the next fiscal year.

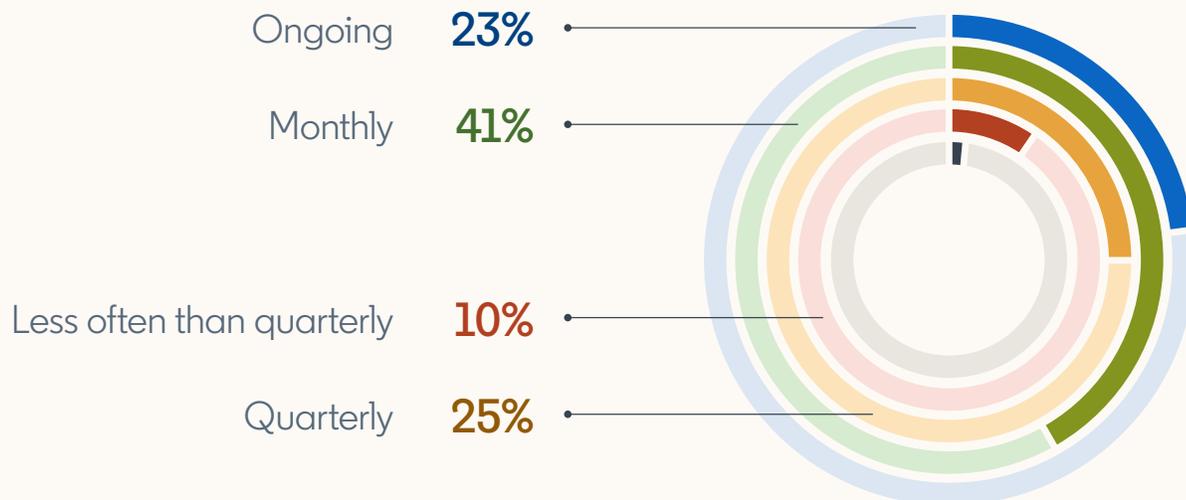
Expecting significant increase in spending on tech tools

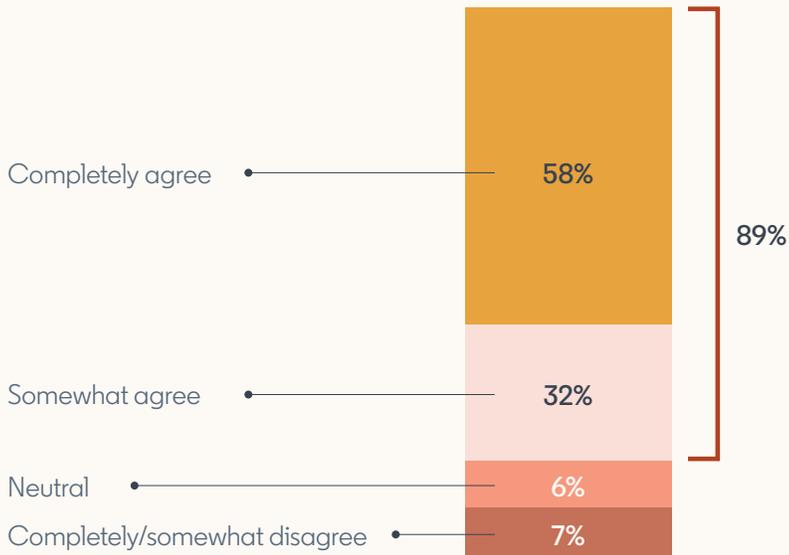


Optimistic about spending on headcount

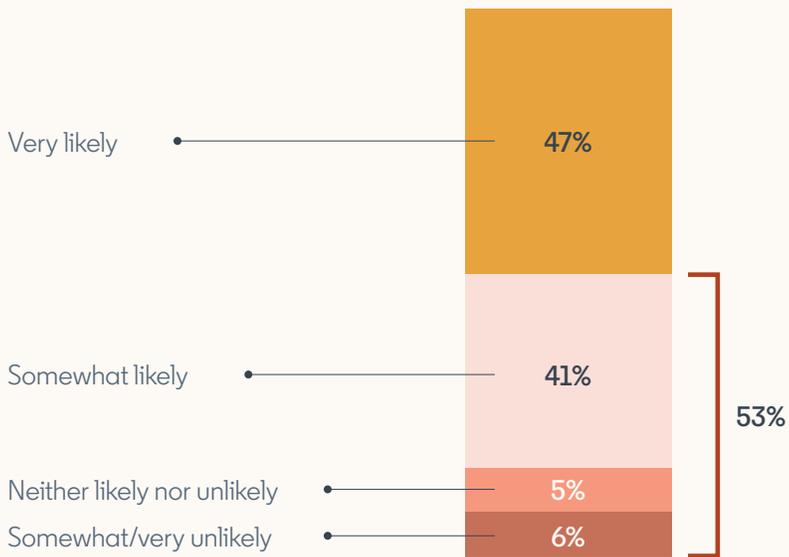


Current sales planning frequency

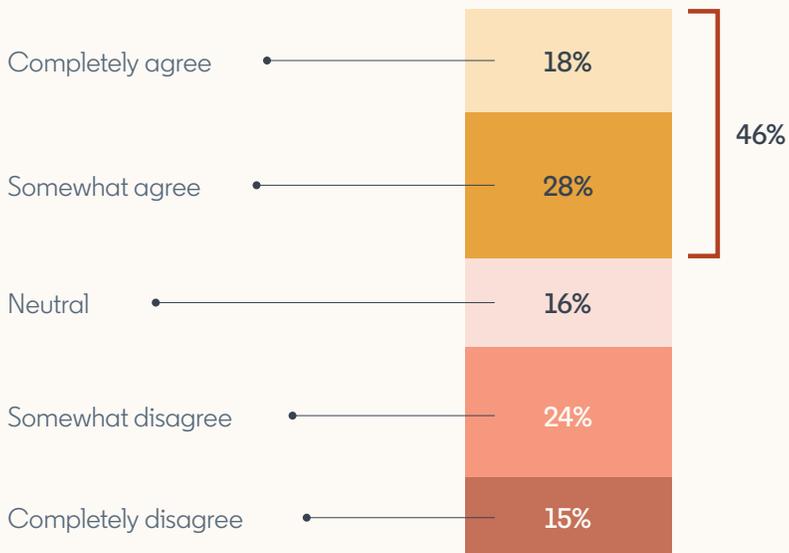




“Conducting sales planning more often would set up our sales team for greater success”



Likelihood to do sales planning more often in coming year
among those who do sales planning monthly or less often

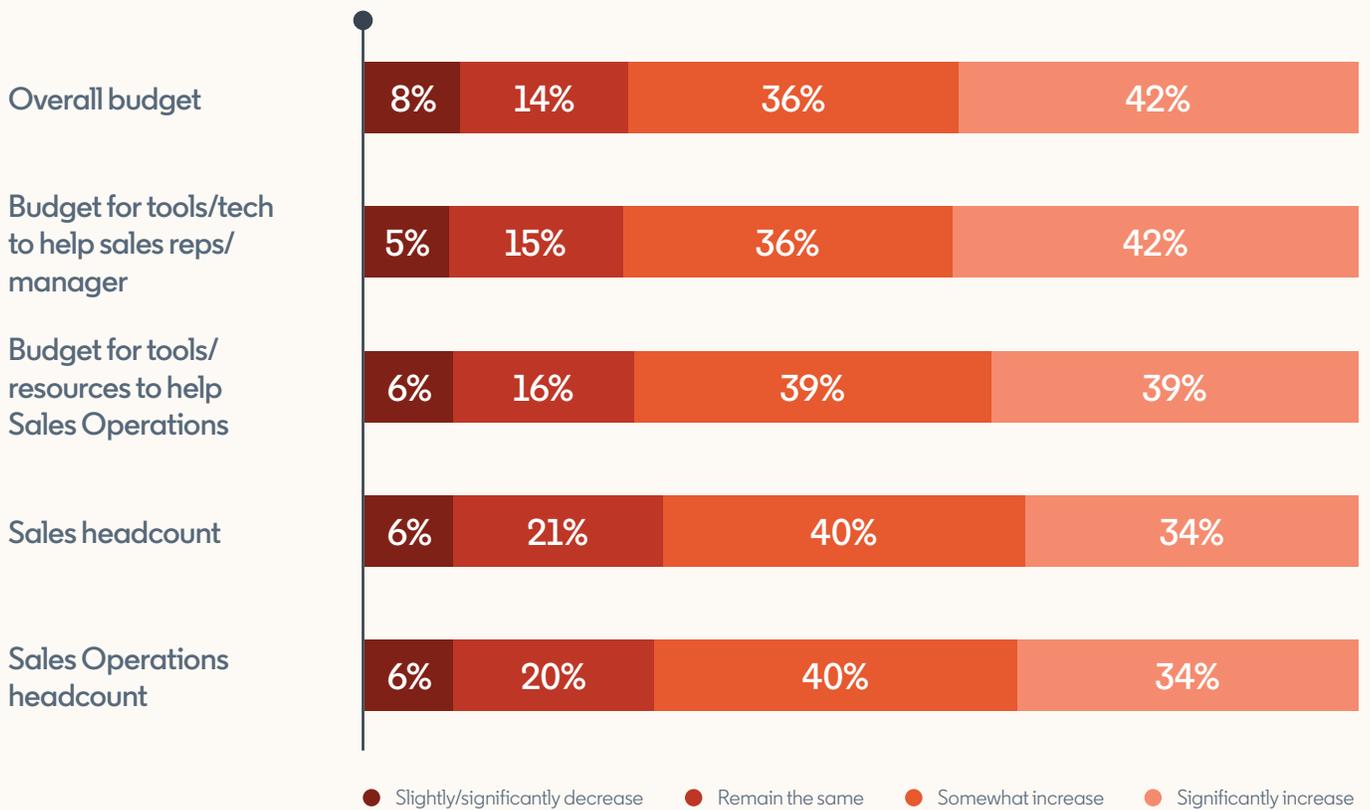


“There are not enough resources (e.g., headcount) to do sales planning more often”

Our research indicates that the largest tech investments in the coming fiscal year will be in CRM, planning/performance management/ERP, and business productivity tools.

The good news is that these investments are in line with the tools that a significant majority of Sales Operations professionals believe are the most important to be effective in their role.

Expected budget/investment changes in next fiscal year

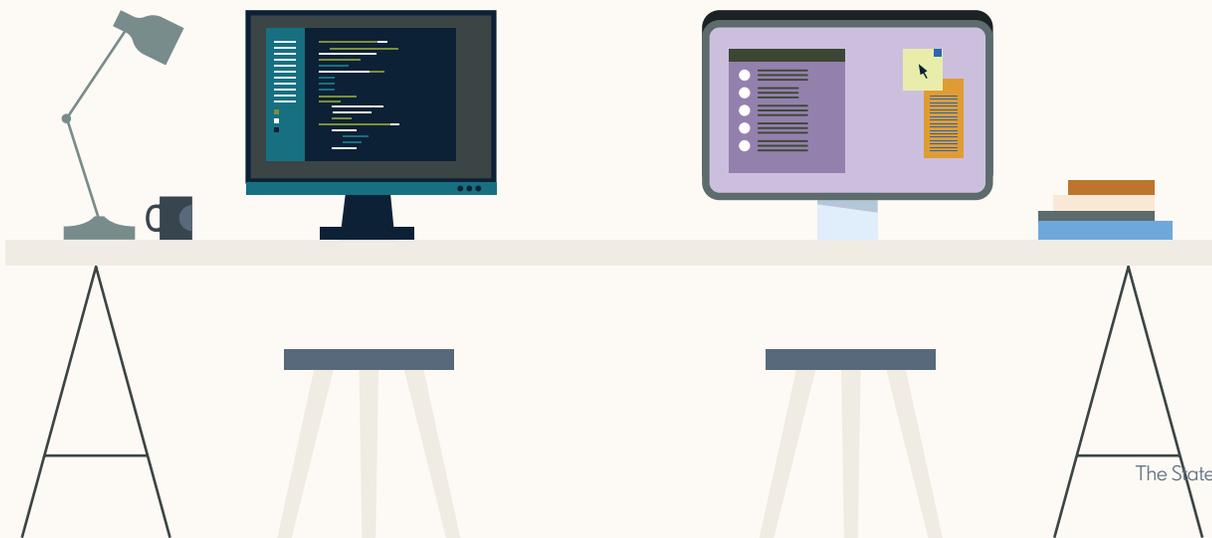
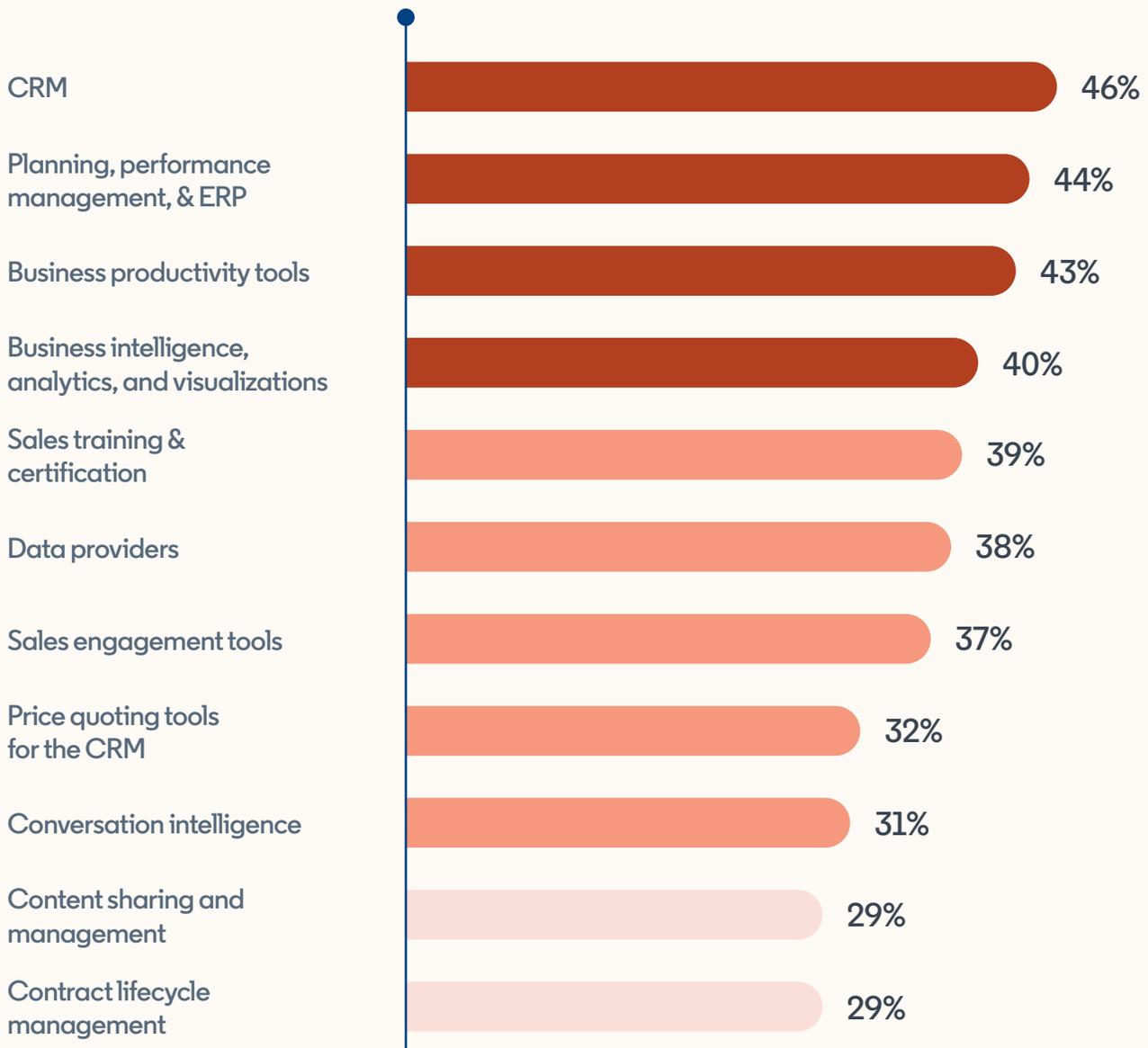


It's better to have specialists to help you with technology and other Sales Operations' responsibilities. How many sales leaders are able to ascertain the total addressable market in addition to doing their main job? You want to rely on someone else who has the technological and analytic skills to do those kinds of tasks and do them well. They'll end up doing a better job than you — and free you up to be more efficient and effective.



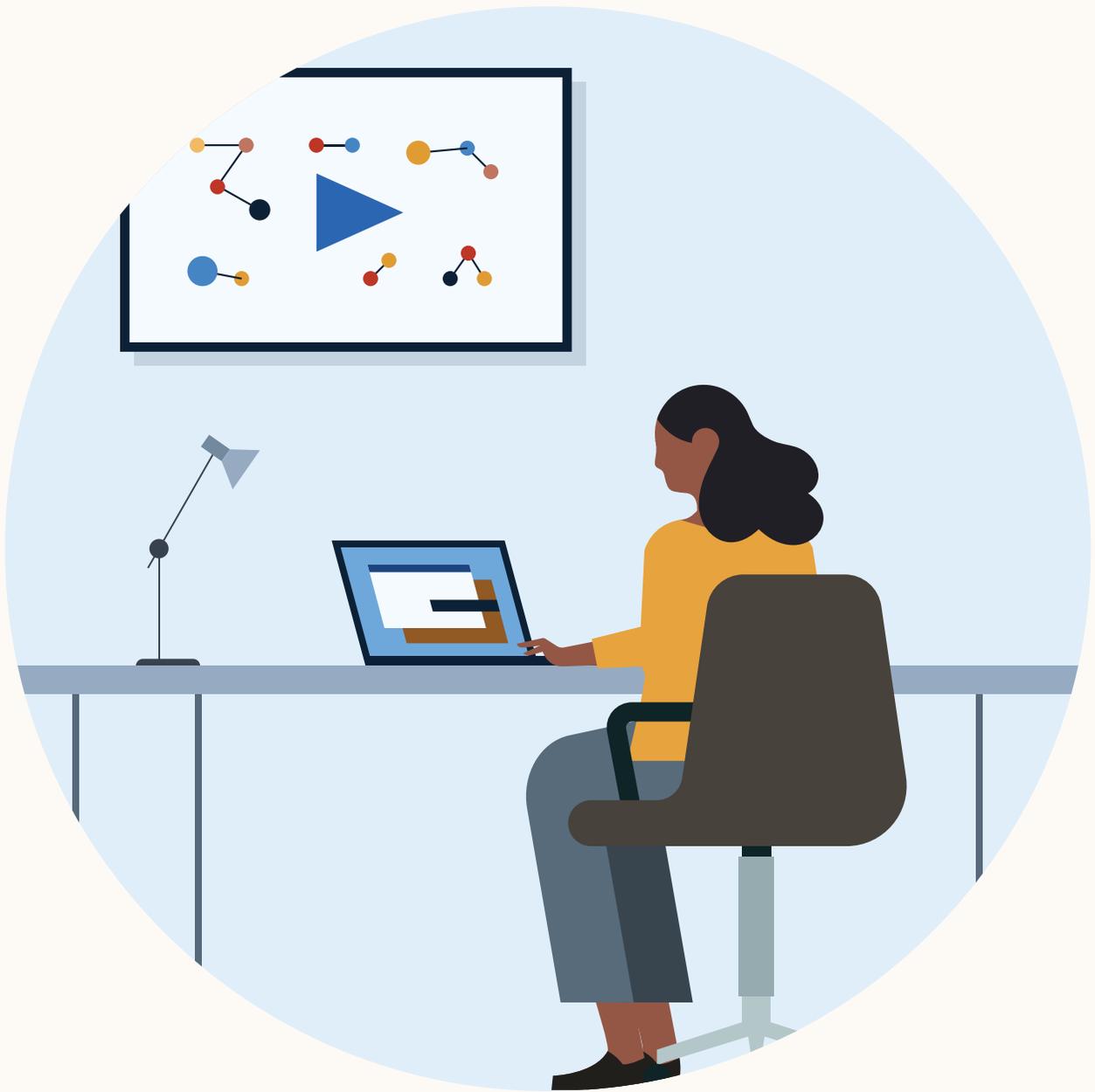
Brian Frank
COO at Cameo

Tools/tech expect company to invest in next year



Tools/systems important to Sales Operations team to do job most effectively





How to take advantage of
the opportunities ahead

5 ways Sales Operations pros can help their organizations become more efficient and more effective

This research commissioned by LinkedIn and conducted by Nielsen has revealed much about the Sales Operations function.

The numbers of Sales Operations professionals are increasing, and at the same time, so are the responsibilities of the Sales Operations team.

On both fronts, this growth provides many opportunities for Sales Operations professionals. This study also uncovered challenges, such as the fact that about one-third of Sales Operations professionals say they are not relying on data to do their planning.

Based on our research, here are five recommendations for Sales Operations pros to seize the day and take full advantage of the opportunities they have to help their sales organizations become more efficient and more effective.

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Hands down I am excited about the opportunities. While many might see challenges that came as a result of the pandemic, we're excited for what's ahead. While our sales teams are now selling virtual, now more than ever we're able to enable the sales teams with data and tools to help shape or influence their conversations.



Bradley Gray
Director of Business Development at Enterprise Holdings

1

Ensure you're working with the most accurate and up-to-date data



About one in three Sales Operations professionals acknowledge they aren't using data to make critical decisions. The other two-thirds, especially in the tech sector, find this stat baffling.

"I've never done sales planning, that's not data driven," Amazon Web Services's Sharif says. "I can't imagine doing sales planning without data."

Sales Operations pros must insist that the internal and external data they have access to is accurate and up-to-date. It's the only way to make informed decisions. Sales Operations pros must also ensure that CRM data is subject to rigorous hygiene and updated regularly. It's only with clean data that Sales Operations pros can make the best decisions for such crucial tasks as territory planning, quota assignments, accounts to target, and more.

2

Demonstrate your strategic value with a sense of urgency



Our survey indicates that a large percentage of Sales Operations pros believe their role isn't viewed as strategic by sales leaders and executives. To combat this misperception, Sales Operations pros should develop a "bias for action," according to Amazon Web Services's Sharif.

SalesLoft's Jeremy Donovan says that Sales Operations professionals shouldn't wait to be invited to the table. Instead, they should make themselves an indispensable part of the team making decisions for the sales organization. "If you want to prove your strategic worth, be more strategic," Donovan says. "Ride the descriptive-diagnostic-prescriptive wave and come in with a recommendation, a strong recommendation, to advance the business."

3

Prioritize recruiting and retaining Sales Operations talent

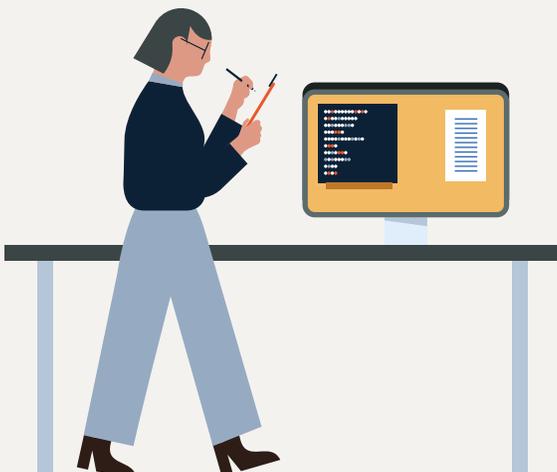


Sales Operations is a demanding profession. It requires exceptional analytics skills, a thick skin, and an ability to function without requiring excessive praise. The way to build an exceptional team that can propel a sales organization forward is with equally exceptional talent. This requires making talent a priority, convincing management that skilled Sales Operations professionals are worth paying for, and creating a culture designed to retain top talent so you're not constantly recruiting.

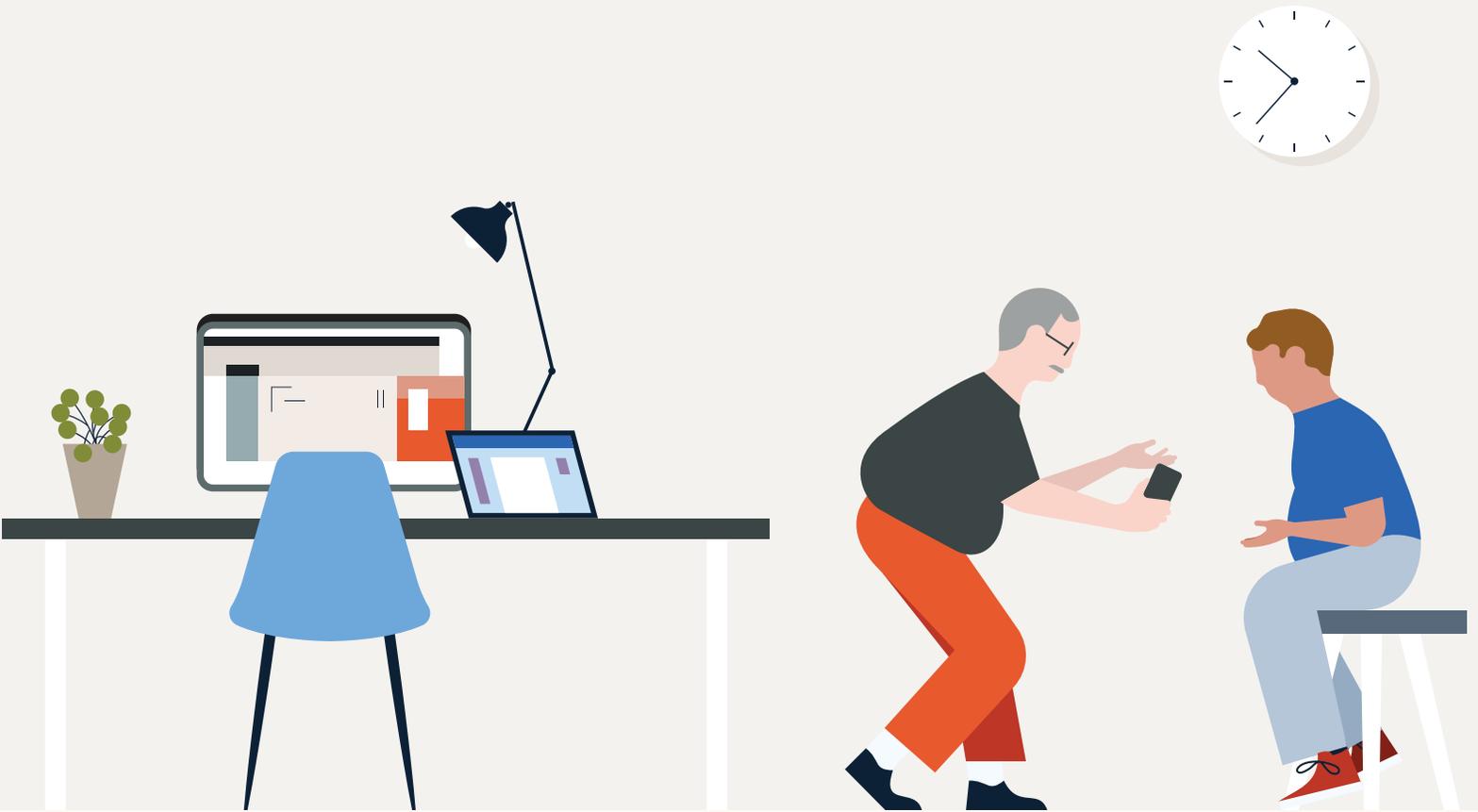
To ensure that management backs your hiring plan, SalesLoft's Donovan recommends negotiating with the CFO to agree upon a ratio of Sales Operations professionals to salespeople to ensure the Sales Operations team is adequately staffed to do its job right.

4

Place building the tech stack at the center of your mission



Today, virtual selling is selling. With sellers working remotely and buyers not accepting visits, prospecting and communicating with buyers via tech tools has become more important than ever. Sales Operations pros can demonstrate their value by focusing on their sales organization's tech stack. At the very least, a tech stack, led by a CRM system, functions as an essential single source of truth for a sales organization. Additionally, by building an effective tech stack — from CRM to sales intelligence to sales enablement — Sales Operations pros help streamline their team's sales process and help generate a stronger pipeline and higher revenue.



5

Carefully assess the most effective planning horizons for your business

Sales Operations professionals employ a variety of planning cadences, with some teams embracing more frequent planning and others opting for intense annual planning. Both approaches have pros and cons. In a fast-changing world, quarterly planning ensures a Sales Operations team is adjusting regularly to shifting realities and new data. Annual planning, however, ensures that Sales Operations teams are not in constant planning mode and can focus on execution. Sales Operations pros should assess their industry, company, and sales team (as well as their own Sales Operations staff) to choose the right planning frequency for their organization.

Methodology/Survey participant demographics

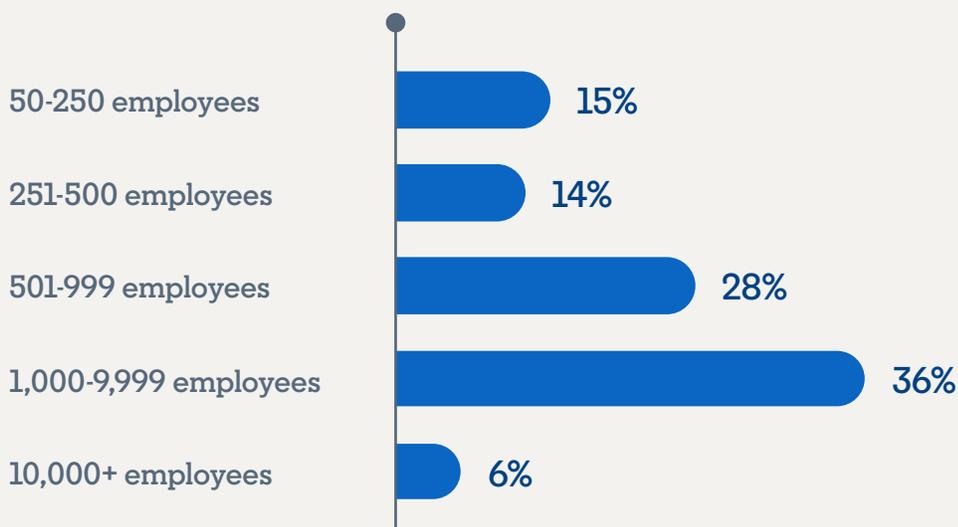
For this report, LinkedIn recently commissioned Nielsen to conduct a survey among 500 U.S. Sales Operations professionals in October 2020. We also supplemented survey data with LinkedIn's internal data on Sales Operations professionals. We identified Sales Operations professionals as those who sit on a Sales Operations/Marketing Operations team and are personally responsible for at least one Sales Operations task or as those who don't formally sit on a Sales Operations/Marketing Operations team, but are personally responsible for two or more Sales Operations tasks.

We defined the main Sales Operations tasks as the following:

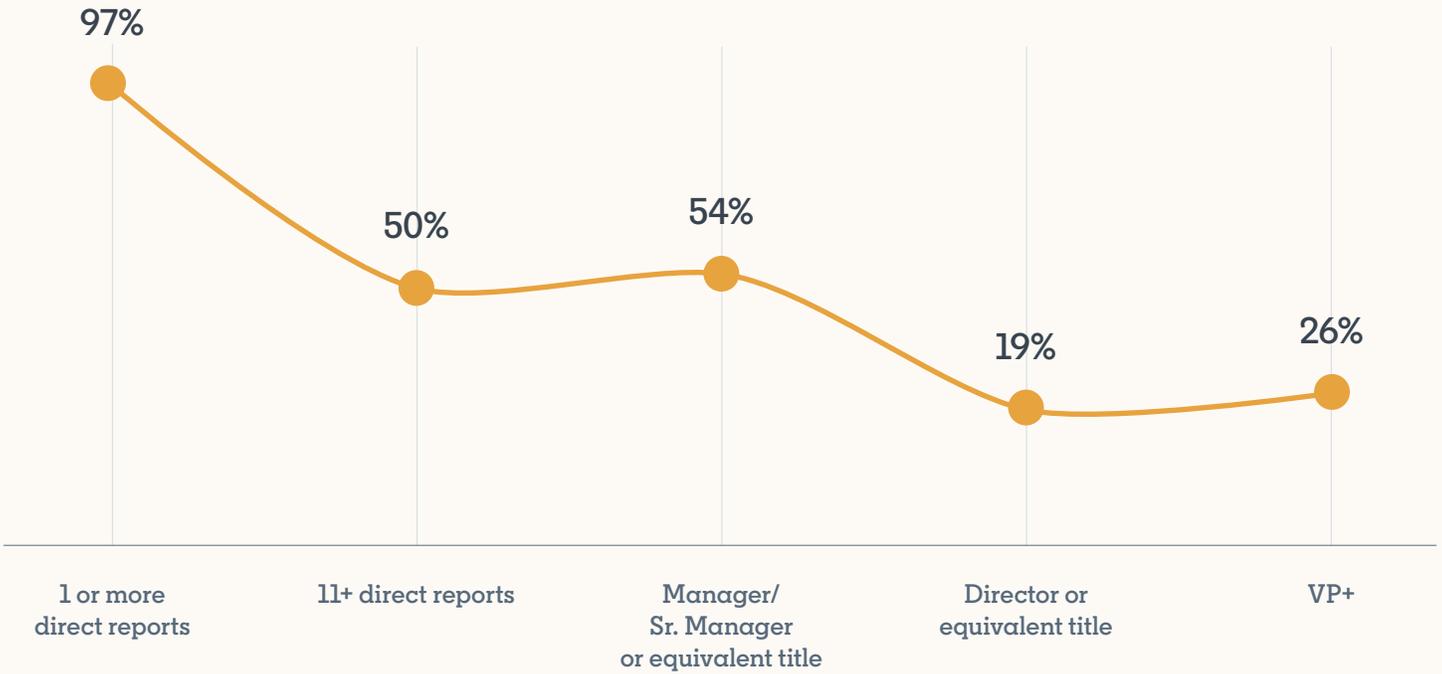
- ✓ Forecasting business performance
- ✓ Identifying total addressable market and ideal customer profile
- ✓ Territory planning/territory design
- ✓ Monitoring the sales team's performance
- ✓ Suggesting growth strategies for the sales team / prioritizing accounts to pursue

Survey participants by company size

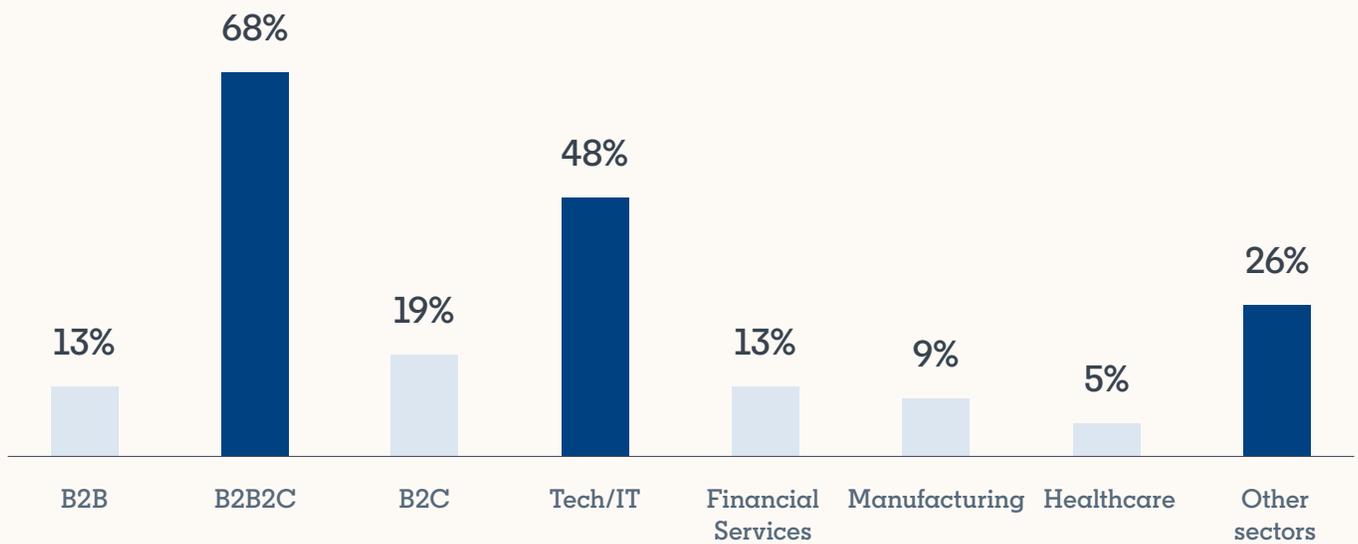
Professionals who completed the survey are full-time employees of companies with at least 50 employees.



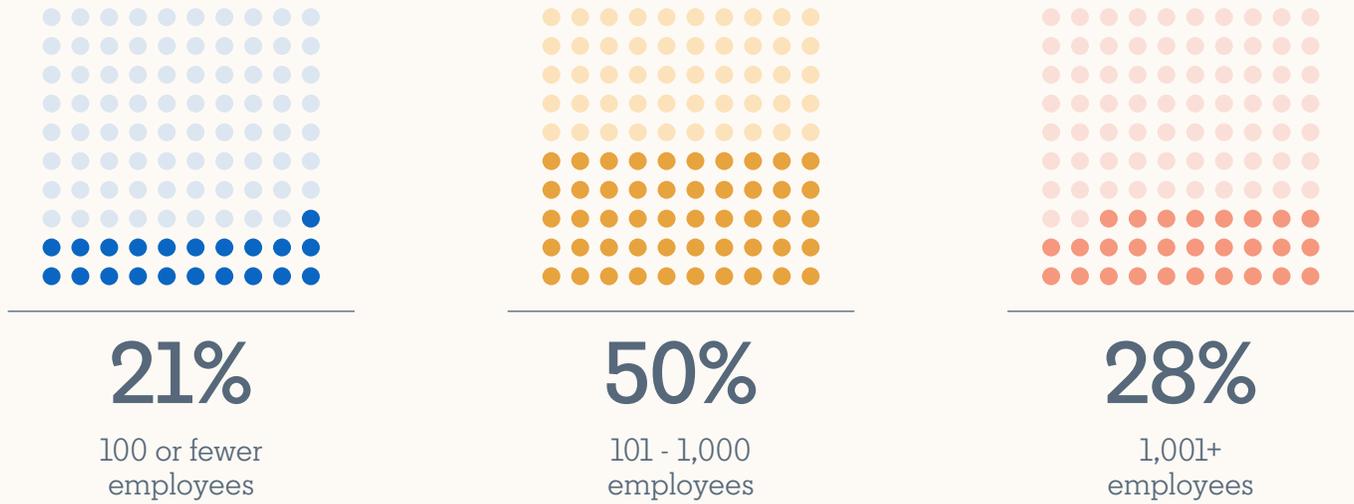
Survey participants' managerial responsibilities and job titles



Survey participants' business and industry



Survey participants' global sales team size



Qualitative data

In addition, the report features interviews with these Sales Operations industry leaders:



Jeremy Donovan, SVP Sales Strategy at SalesLoft



Brian Frank, COO at Cameo



Bradley Gray, Director of Business Development at Enterprise Holdings



Andy Mowat, VP-Growth Marketing & GTM Operations at Culture Amp



Rosalyn Santa Elena, Head of Revenue Operations at Clari



Shirin Sharif, Head of Sales Operations and Strategy at Amazon Web Services

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