The LinkedIn State of Sales Report 2020

United States Edition

A Note on the Methodology for this Report

This United States edition of the State of Sales report is the first installment of the global State of Sales project, which includes nine other individual country reports: Australia, Brazil, Canada, France, Germany, India, Mexico, Singapore, and the United Kingdom.

For each country, we surveyed 500 buyers and 500 salespeople and sales managers. For the entire State of Sales project, we surveyed more than 10,000 people globally. The other individual country reports and a global report will roll out over the next few months.

For the United States 2020 survey, Market Cube, a research panel company, conducted two online surveys in November and December 2019.

Two sample groups were surveyed: sales professionals and decision makers. The first was a sample of 507 salespeople and sales managers from the United States who primarily work in B2B sales. The second was a sample of 502 business decision makers from the U.S. who have influence over purchasing decisions at B2B companies. Both samples include respondents over 21-years-old who are employed at companies of different sizes and industries. The report also references a group of "top sales professionals" who are defined as sales professionals who report that they exceeded their sales target by at least **25%**.

Additionally, LinkedIn conducted two other surveys of salespeople in March-April 2020.

One survey was fielded among LinkedIn's VisionCritical Advisor Community of sales professionals who are LinkedIn members from April 2–9, 2020. It surveyed 511 North American sales professionals about the impact coronavirus was having on their business.

Another survey was fielded among LinkedIn's VisionCritical Advisor Community of sales professionals and business leaders who are LinkedIn members from March 11–17, 2020. It surveyed 660 sales professionals and business leaders, querying them about how coronavirus has impacted their sales outlook.
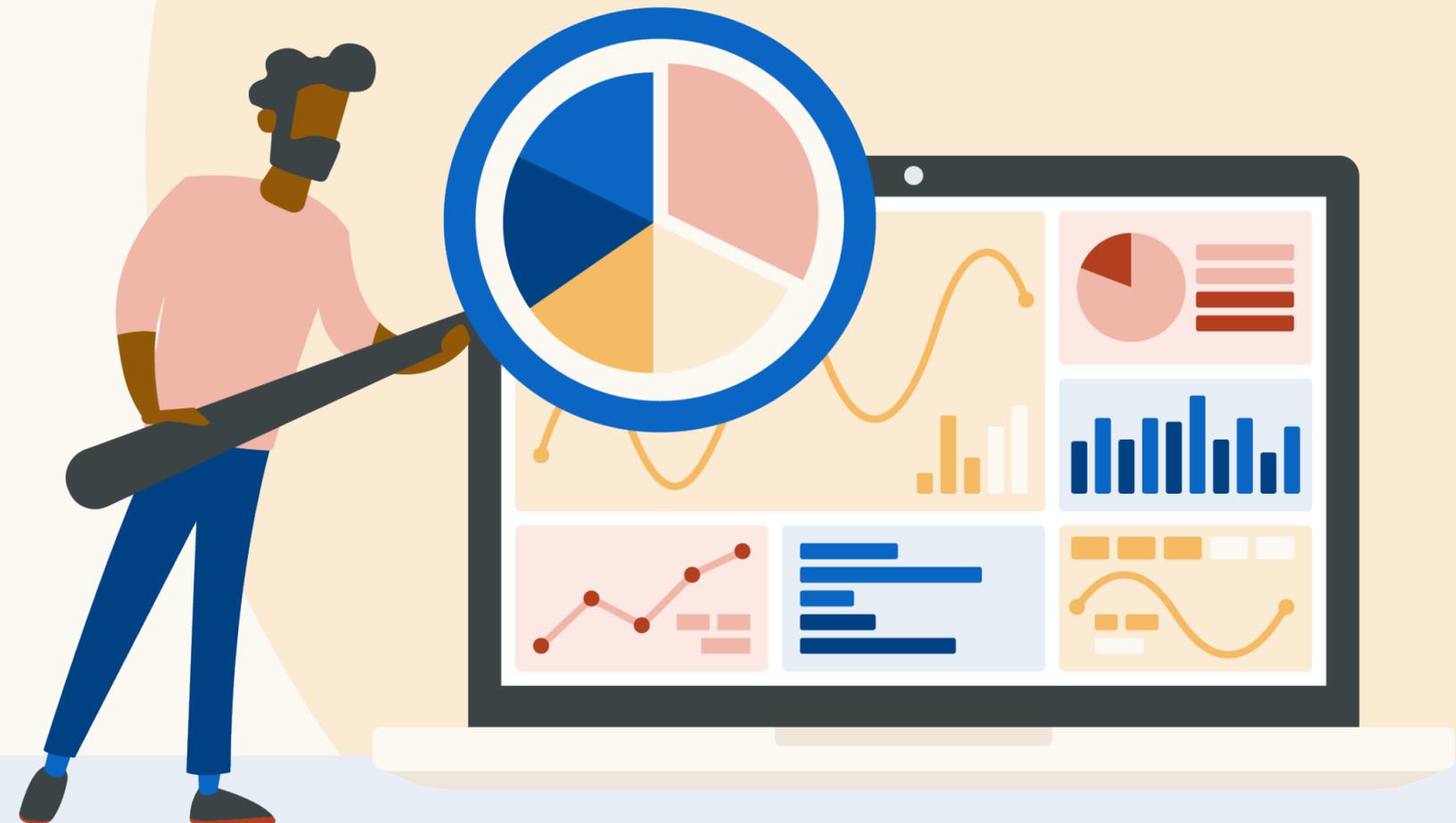
The State of Sales Has Clearly Changed

In sales right now, the only constant is change; everything else is in flux. Coronavirus has made sure of that.

LinkedIn's extensive research has identified **emerging trends** and also **enduring trends** that are impacting sales organizations. First, let's examine some of the emerging trends driven by coronavirus' immediate impact.

Key Emerging Trends

77%   **Virtual selling goes mainstream**: 77% of respondents are holding more virtual meetings

44%   **Less responsive buyers**: 44% of respondents anticipated a decrease in responsiveness to outreach

44%   **Longer sales cycles**: 44% of respondents said customers' sales cycle increased

It's true that COVID-19 is driving some changes in the short term. At the same time, many trends that were already in motion before this year are only gaining strength in the current environment.

Key Enduring Trends

Long term metrics are stepping to the forefront
Understanding data and analytics is increasingly important tool for survival, and sales organizations are embracing long-term metrics of sales success, such as customer satisfaction.

The data-driven sales org is on the rise
Sales organizations are putting data to work before the sale. Data is increasingly crucial for sales orgs, and sales executives must take greater control of how their sales organizations use it.

Sales technology is transforming the sales org
When face-to-face meetings are limited, sales technology has increasingly moved to the forefront of how sales professionals strengthen existing relationships and begin to build new ones.

Trust gets deals done
Our survey data indicates that buyers want trust in the sales process but find it in short supply. For sales professionals, achieving trust with buyers often the first step to getting deals done.

Building a sales team with the right skills is challenging
Active listening is the skill that buyers prize most in salespeople, but managers are not prioritizing this trait in their hiring.

Top performing salespeople do things differently
We'll show you some key ways that top performers differ from their peers and what these insights mean for your sales team.

LinkedIn plays an expanded role for both buyers and sellers
The survey results show that both buyers and sellers are increasingly relying on LinkedIn in their day-to-day jobs.

The State of Sales Has Clearly Changed

Even before the current economic challenges appeared sales managers understood that leading through change had become a required skill for their role.

70%

In responding to LinkedIn's fourth annual State of Sales survey, **70%** of sales managers in the United States agreed that a manager's capacity to navigate change is more important than it was five years ago. More than ever, transformation is an inescapable reality in the sales organization, and the pace of change is only accelerating.

Read on as LinkedIn and Joseph DiMisa, Korn Ferry's Sales Effectiveness and Rewards Leader, dive into the emerging and enduring trends that are transforming the state of sales now and into the future.
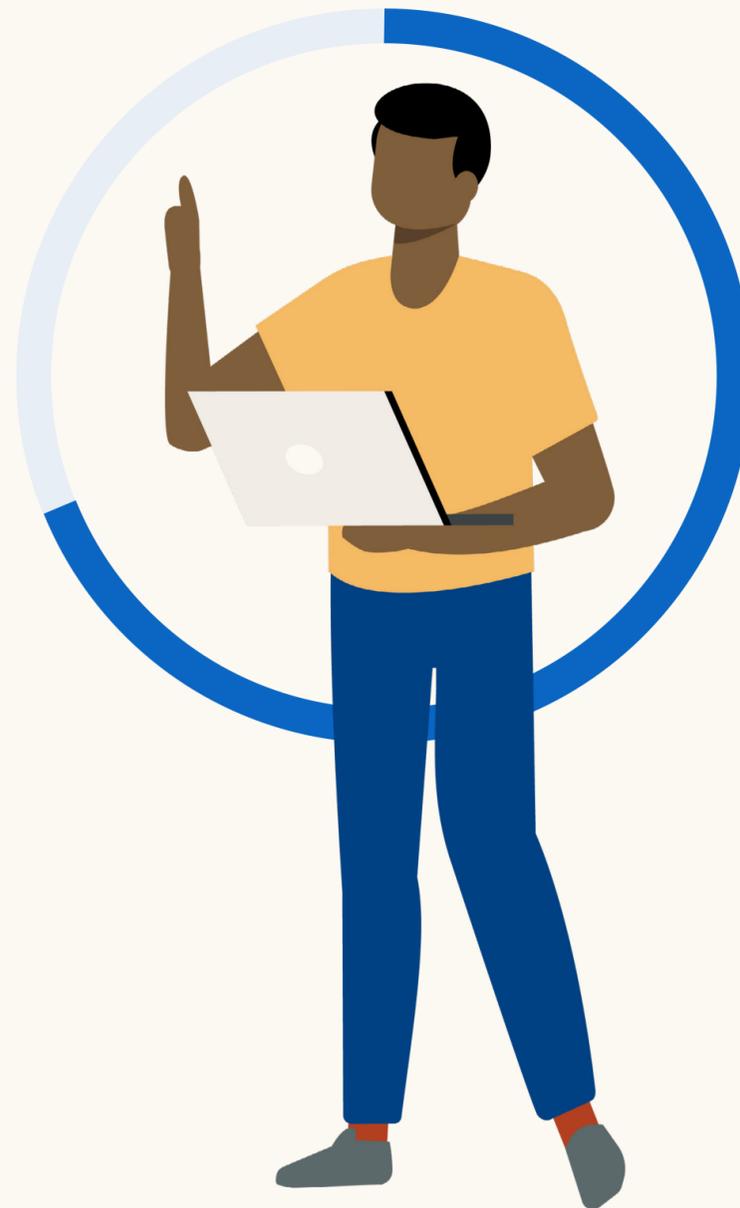
"Top sales organizations were already making a shift toward emphasizing trust, adopting sales technology, and prioritizing existing customers, but this crisis has accelerated the need tenfold. Trust is quickly moving from face-to-face meetings to a sales organization's ability to understand a client's pain points and quickly identify a solution. In today's evolving world, customers are also changing by becoming more skilled at researching a solution, finding the ballpark pricing, and quickly identifying most of the pros and cons of a product. A sales organization needs to differentiate themselves by creating better thought leadership and data-driven insights to help build trust and loyalty."

—**Joseph DiMisa**, Sales Effectiveness and Rewards Leader, Korn Ferry

The Immediate Impact of Coronavirus on the State of Sales

Many sales leaders in the United States quickly became curious about the potential impact of coronavirus. Between February and March, sales executives increased their engagement with coronavirus-oriented content on LinkedIn by **14x**.

The search for answers is apparent in how sales professionals were using LinkedIn Learning to explore new skills. Time spent on LinkedIn Learning courses about "social selling" and "inside sales" more than tripled between February and March 2020 in North America. Time spent on LinkedIn Learning courses about 'Sales Navigator' also increased by **39%** in the same period as sales professionals worked to position themselves for this new world.

This new reality poses challenges for sales professionals. A LinkedIn survey of more than 500 sales professionals found that:

51% of respondents said their customers were experiencing budget cuts.

45% of respondents said specific industries were at a standstill.

44% of respondents said their customers' sales cycles had increased.

42% of respondents said there was turnover or layoffs at their customers' companies.

Even in the earliest stages of COVID-19's presence, sales professionals anticipated its effects on their outlook.

Salespeople Anticipate Changes

55% of respondents anticipated a decrease in pipeline (with **14%** expecting a significant decrease).

44% of respondents anticipated a decrease in responsiveness to outreach (with **8%** expecting a significant decrease).

60% of respondents anticipated a decrease in hitting quota/closing deals (with **18%** expecting a significant decrease).

"We are seeing a few trends among sales organizations adjusting to the current climate. First, everything has shifted to virtual selling, using video conferencing, sending emails, creating webinars and info sessions. It is a big adjustment for many direct sellers. The most successful reps will adjust more quickly and learn to build relationships through different digital channels. Second, there's a realization that quota attainment and incentive payments are going to be affected, thus causing organizational enhancements to continue to drive productivity. Most organizations are making adjustments to motivate and reward reps to keep focused on the customer and their needs. Finally, we're seeing a rise in the use of data-driven selling. We are finding that sales organizations are placing more emphasis on using data to help a client make informed business decisions based upon quantifiable information and numbers."
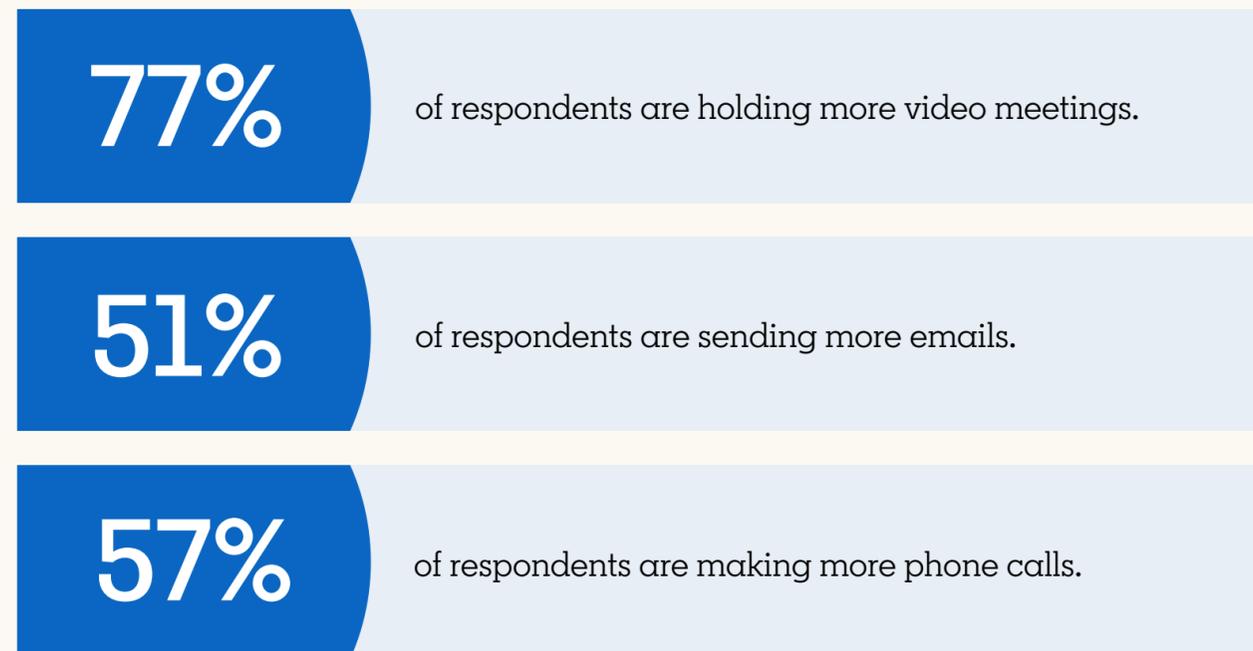
—**Joseph DiMisa**, Sales Effectiveness and Rewards Leader, Korn Ferry

## The Immediate Impact of Coronavirus on the State of Sales

Sales professionals are rising to meet the challenge of this new reality in a range of ways. For one thing, a majority of sales professionals surveyed are focusing on strengthening existing relationships. Seventy percent of respondents said they are making customer retention a higher priority. Additionally, 74% said they are making increasing agility a higher priority.

And with travel restricted, conferences canceled, and face-to-face meetings limited, sales professionals are embracing digital selling:

77% of respondents are holding more video meetings.

51% of respondents are sending more emails.

57% of respondents are making more phone calls.

LinkedIn research shows that sales professionals are also opting for warm outreach over cold outreach in the current environment.

Sales professionals leveraging more warm outreach:

40%
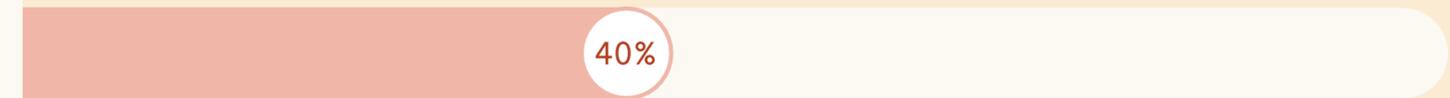
Sales professionals leveraging more cold outreach:

39%
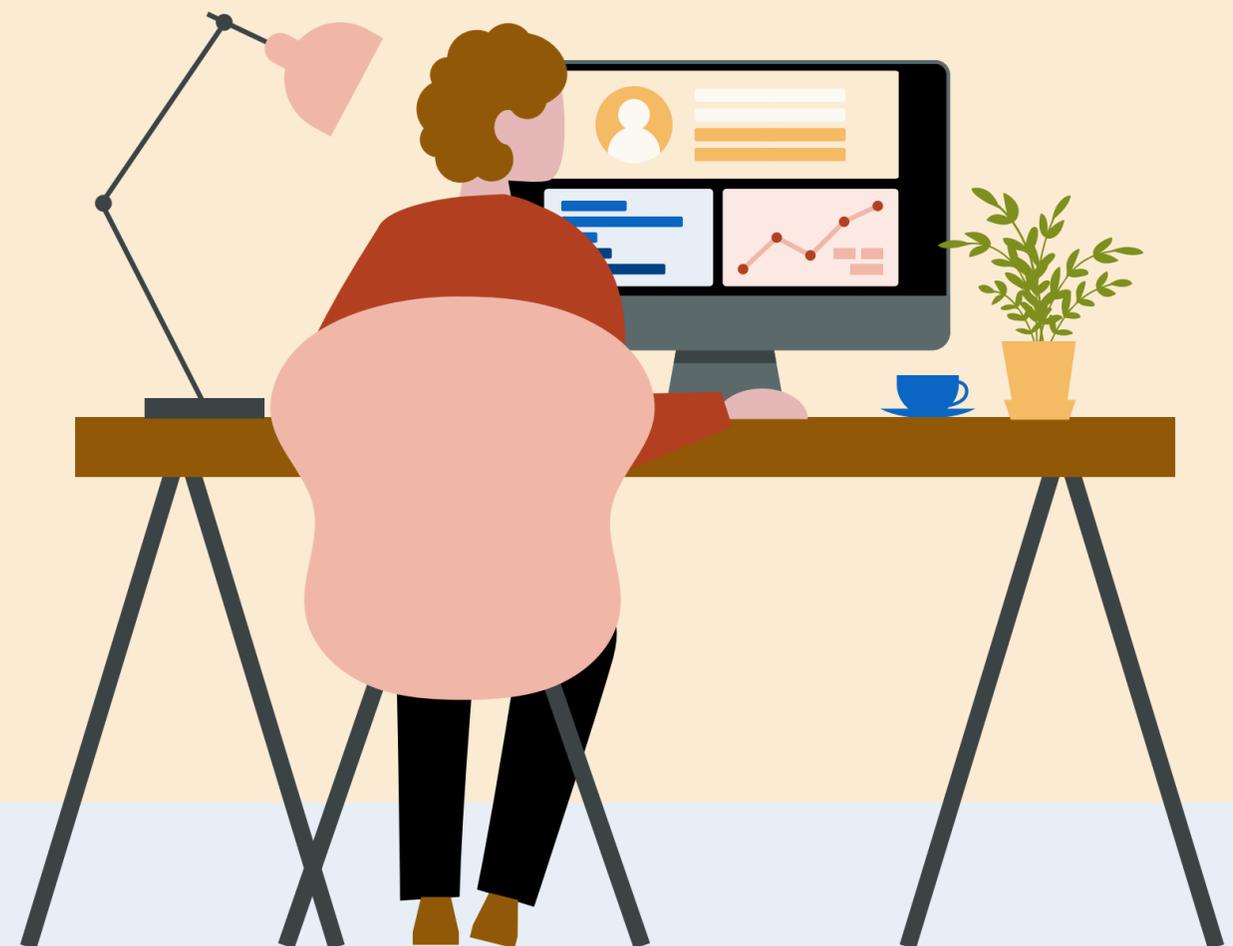
The Primacy of Customer Retention Metrics

The Survey Said:

Our survey data indicates that measurements of long-term value are moving to the forefront over traditional short-term metrics, such as quarterly quota. When asked to identify how sales reps should be measured, four metrics were selected by more than a third of respondents. The top two metrics looked past the quarterly horizon.

Forty-three percent selected customer satisfaction, the most popular metric, according to the survey. Another **40%** selected customer retention/attrition. Rounding out the top four metrics are two that focus more on the short-term: team quota met (**37%**) and individual quota met (**37%**).

Top Metrics for Measuring Sales Performance

Metric	
Customer satisfaction	43%
Customer retention	40%
Team quota met	37%
Individual quota met	37%
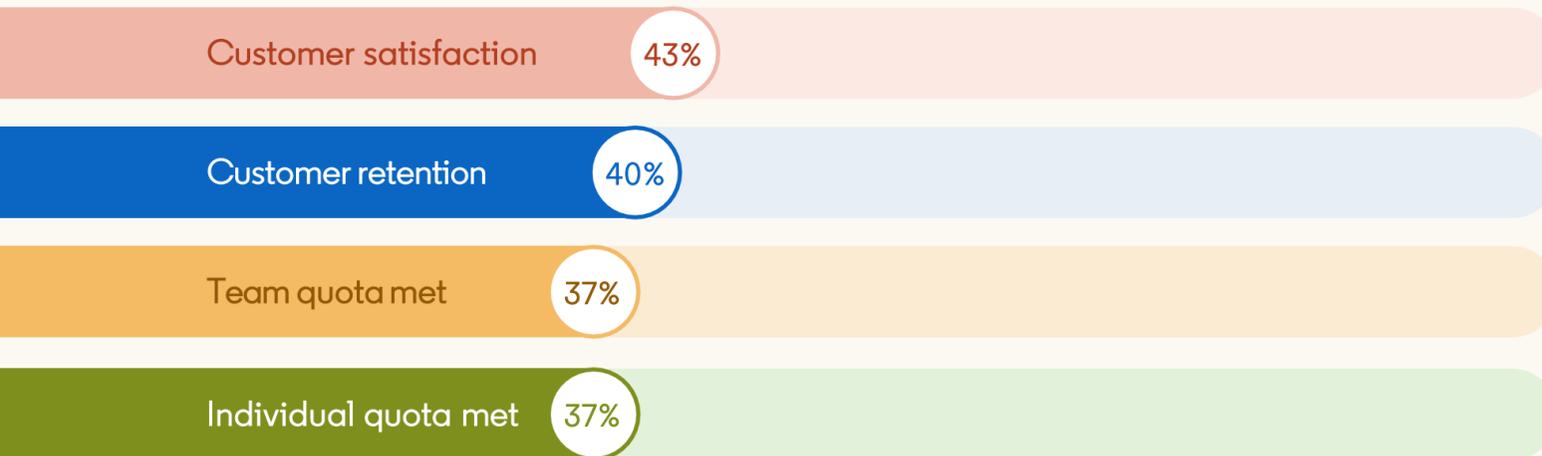
The Takeaway:

Even before coronavirus, sales organizations had shifted their emphasis in evaluating performance from quarterly quota to customer satisfaction and customer retention. Coronavirus has only accelerated this trend. Sales leaders are prioritizing customer retention more than ever and quickly reorganizing their organizations so that their salespeople are in position to help current customers.

The Rise of the Data-Driven Sales Org

The Survey Said:

Like virtually every other sector of business, sales organizations are embracing data. This increased use of data affects everything from how territories are assigned to how salespeople prospect for clients to how sales organizations measure success. In this period of uncertainty, sales organizations are charting a clear path forward by using data to identify and target the strongest industries, geographies, and accounts.

Sales organizations are using data to analyze and improve performance.

More than half of respondents (**51%**) say their companies are using data to assess the performance of salespeople. For instance, **48%** of respondents say they are evaluating patterns from closed-lost business—to apply these learnings to future deals.

Using Data to Assess Sales Performance

51%

Using Data to Evaluate Patterns in Closed-Lost Business

48%

Sales organizations are putting data to work before the sale.

Large percentages of salespeople say they are using data to prospect: **56%** say they are using data to select accounts to target, and **49%** are using data to select industries to target.

Additionally, salespeople see LinkedIn, in particular, as delivering unique data to help inform sales strategy. Sixty-three percent of sales professionals said LinkedIn provided unique data.

Using Data to Prospect

56%

Using Data to Select Industries to Target

49%

The Rise of the Data-Driven Sales Org

The Takeaway:

"Data is becoming more and more important for the sales organization. The key to this data will be how it is used during the selling process and the customer journey. The most effective organizations will be able to aggregate, govern and leverage this data to give insights to both past sales efforts and to future forecasts. They will be able to match their process and organizational strengths to that of the customer buying process and specific needs. Having access to timely and relevant data will be key to success. Sales organizations with a clear data strategy for their go-to-market efforts reported that **11%** more of their sellers made goal and they won forecasted deals **8%** more of the time."

—**Joseph DiMisa**, Sales Effectiveness and Rewards Leader, Korn Ferry

Gone are the days of relying only on intuition to guide decisions. Data is increasingly crucial for sales organizations, and leaders who take control of how they use this information are going to thrive. Sales reps should also increase their data literacy to improve their productivity.
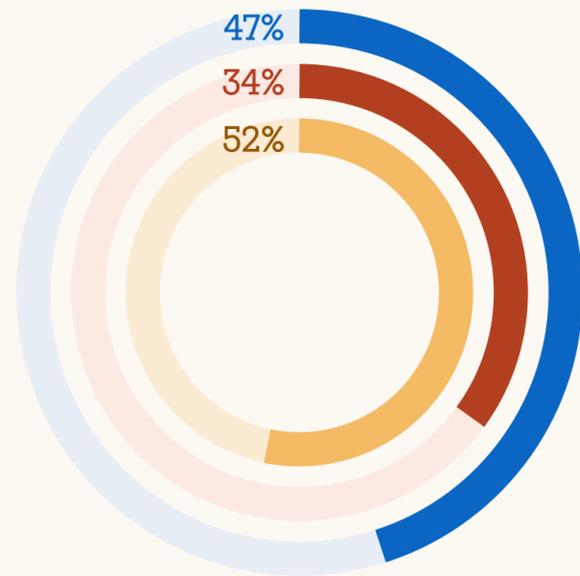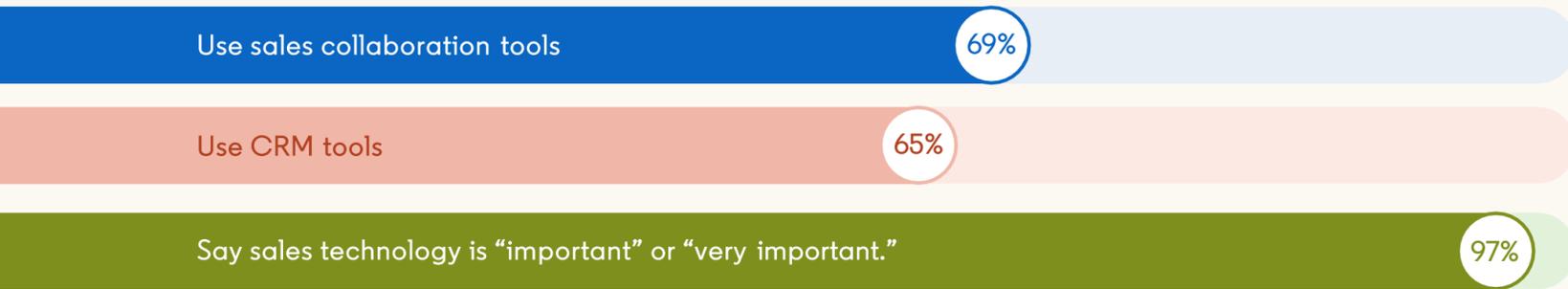
# Sales Technology is Transforming the Sales Org

The Survey Said:

With face-to-face meetings limited, sales technology will only become more central to the sales process. Even before the appearance of coronavirus, sales technology was clearly a key force reshaping the sales profession, as this cross-section of stats from our survey of sales professionals confirms:

Use sales collaboration tools — **69%**

Use CRM tools — **65%**

Say sales technology is "important" or "very important." — **97%**

47%
34%
52%

Sales technology is an essential part of the workflow for most salespeople.

Almost half (**47%**) indicate they use sales tech once a day, while an additional **34%** say they use it once a week or more. More than half of respondents (**52%**) say they plan to spend more time using sales technology in 2020.

Each of the seven kinds of sales technology covered in the survey—sales collaboration, CRM, networking platforms, sales intelligence tools, productivity tools, email tracking tools, and enterprise communications—increased in usage in 2020 compared to previous State of Sales reports.

28%
43%
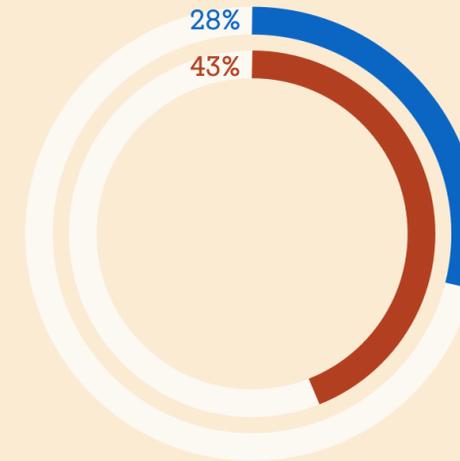
Sales intelligence tools specifically are viewed as invaluable.

Sales intelligence tools showed the largest increase in usage, jumping from **28%** in 2018 to **43%** in 2020. Among sales intelligence users, 74% described the tool as extremely critical or critical in closing deals.

49%
41%
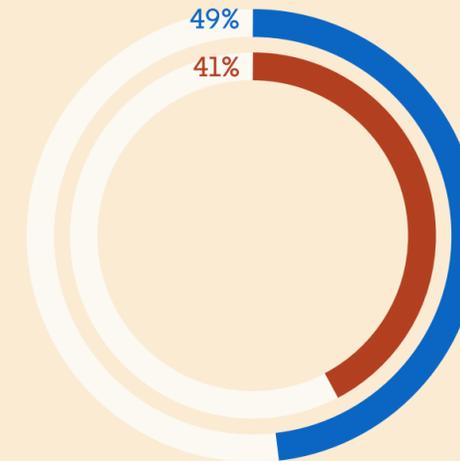
The survey revealed a gap in usage of sales intelligence tools when comparing top-performing salespeople (**49%**) versus the remainder of respondents (**41%**). Among respondents using sales intelligence tools, LinkedIn products topped the list, with 74% using either LinkedIn.com, LinkedIn Premium, or LinkedIn Sales Navigator.

Sales Technology is Transforming the Sales Org

But even with its growing presence, sales technology is not yet fully achieving these goals because it requires workflow integration and change management to truly achieve the benefits.

"Getting the most out of sales technology tools is more about effective utilization. Recent Korn Ferry studies have found that on average organizations were using 10 tools with an additional four planned over the next 12 months. The key will be to integrate all technologies together and to embed it within the sellers' workflow, something less than **30%** of sales organizations felt like they had mastered."

—**Joseph DiMisa**, Sales Effectiveness and Rewards Leader, Korn Ferry

Sales teams, particularly at large enterprises, are evolving their organizational structures to help better integrate sales technology into their workflows. Many are building expanded Sales Operations teams in part to master sales technology and reap its benefits. The number of people in Sales Operations roles has more than doubled in the last two years, and increased **2.7X as fast** as the sales function overall.

The Takeaway:

Sales technology is an arms race, but it's not just about purchasing technology: It's about integrating the tools effectively into the selling process. Companies want these solutions to boost the efficiency of their teams and enable their salespeople to spend more time selling—currently only at **37%**—and less time on repetitive and administrative tasks. In fact, the competition for salespeople's time is so high that they are turning to time management courses on LinkedIn Learning, ranking these courses among the most watched by salespeople.

Trust Gets Deals Done

The Survey Said:

Edelman's Trust Barometer shows a clear lack of trust in institutions with the majority of respondents seeing corporations, the media, and government as unethical. Only NGOs (charitable organizations, such as the Red Cross, Greenpeace, and Oxfam) were the exception. In times of uncertainty, trust only becomes more important.

Not surprisingly, as organizational trust erodes, buyers seem to crave it even more. When asked what qualities they value in a salesperson, buyers ranked "trustworthy" (**47%**) at the top, followed by "responsive" (**44%**) and "expert in the field" (**40%**).

|	
Trustworthy	**47%**
Responsive	**44%**
Expert in the field	**40%**

In the survey, we asked buyers how sellers could put buyers first. Many cited "honesty" as a key component of this kind of approach:

- "Should be trustworthy and honest"
- "Being honest and creative"
- "Great product and honesty"
- "Honesty, sincerity, and complete understanding of my business"
- "Honesty is the most important thing"

Buyers, however, often find the trust they seek in short supply.
Only **40%** of buyers describe the sales profession in general as "trustworthy," while **25%** describe the profession as "morally and ethically challenged."
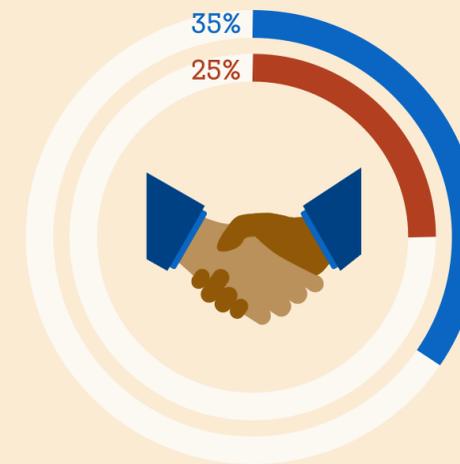
For their part, salespeople agree with their buyer counterparts about the crucial importance of trust. More than one-third of sales professionals (**35%**) ranked trust as the critical factor in closing deals and an additional **25%** ranked it second. They ranked it higher than factors such as price, ROI, and strategic counsel in getting deals done.

88%

With salespeople and buyers agreeing about the value of trust, it's comforting that our survey indicates that successful salespeople do win the trust of buyers—**88%** agree that the salespeople they ultimately buy from are "trusted advisors."

Trust Gets Deals Done

The Takeaway:

"In these times, customer trust of their business partner is becoming more critical. Unfortunately, sales organizations will have limits in terms of historical trust building activities due to the lack of access. To be successful, sales reps will need to develop new selling motions to build trust using both information and data. Then, reps will need to understand how to share these outputs during customer interactions. The result is a need to rethink what sellers do and the competencies they require to succeed in this new world."

—**Joseph DiMisa**, Sales Effectiveness and Rewards Leader, Korn Ferry

Our survey offers some hints about how sellers can meet these increased expectations and start to build deeper relationships over time that ultimately lead to trust. Buyers "strongly agree" that they're more likely to consider a brand when a sales rep:

"Demonstrates a clear understanding of our business needs"

56%

"Has a clear understanding of my role in the decision-making process"

51%

"Provides personalized communication"

47%

"Shares content applicable to my role in the decision-making process"

44%

"Targets appropriate people at my company for initial discussions"

43%

The bottom line:

Building trust begins even before a salesperson makes the first outreach to a buyer. By being prepared about who the buyers are, what they need, and what roles they play in the buying process, sellers can start developing trust from the first interaction.

The Challenge of Building a Sales Team with the Right Skills

The Survey Said:

The increasing usage of virtual selling is demanding new skills among salespeople. The demand for upskilling can be seen from the **2.4x** higher proportion of salespeople who spent time on LinkedIn Learning compared to other U.S. working professionals in 2019. That said, are sales managers hiring for the traits that buyers want?

The answer is Yes. And No.

In two critical areas—active listening and experience/expertise—sales managers aren't hiring for traits with the same mindset as their buyers.

Buyers rank "active listening" (42%) as the No. 1 skill or trait they want from salespeople, which is a disconnect with what sales managers seek in hiring.

Active listening ranks No. 7 by managers in hiring for new salespeople (**26%**). That's the largest gap of any skill between the desires of buyers and sellers. Additionally, an analysis of LinkedIn Learning courses taken by salespeople in 2019 reveals that **less than 1%** of learning time was dedicated to improving their listening skills.

|	
42%	Buyers Highly Valuing "Active Listening"
26%	Sales Managers Hiring for "Active Listening"

Buyers want experience and industry expertise. Sales managers aren't hiring for it with the same urgency.

Buyers want experience (**25%**) and expertise (**23%**), but sales managers are only prioritizing these skills at a rate of **19%** and **15%**.

Highly Valuing "Experience"

Buyers	25%
Sales Managers	19%
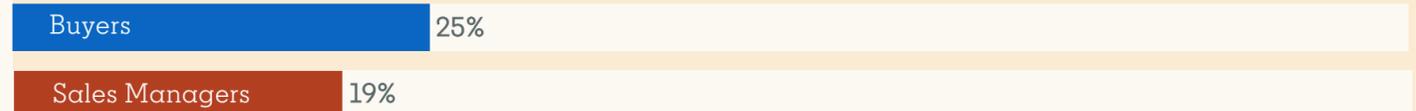
Hiring for "Industry Expertise"

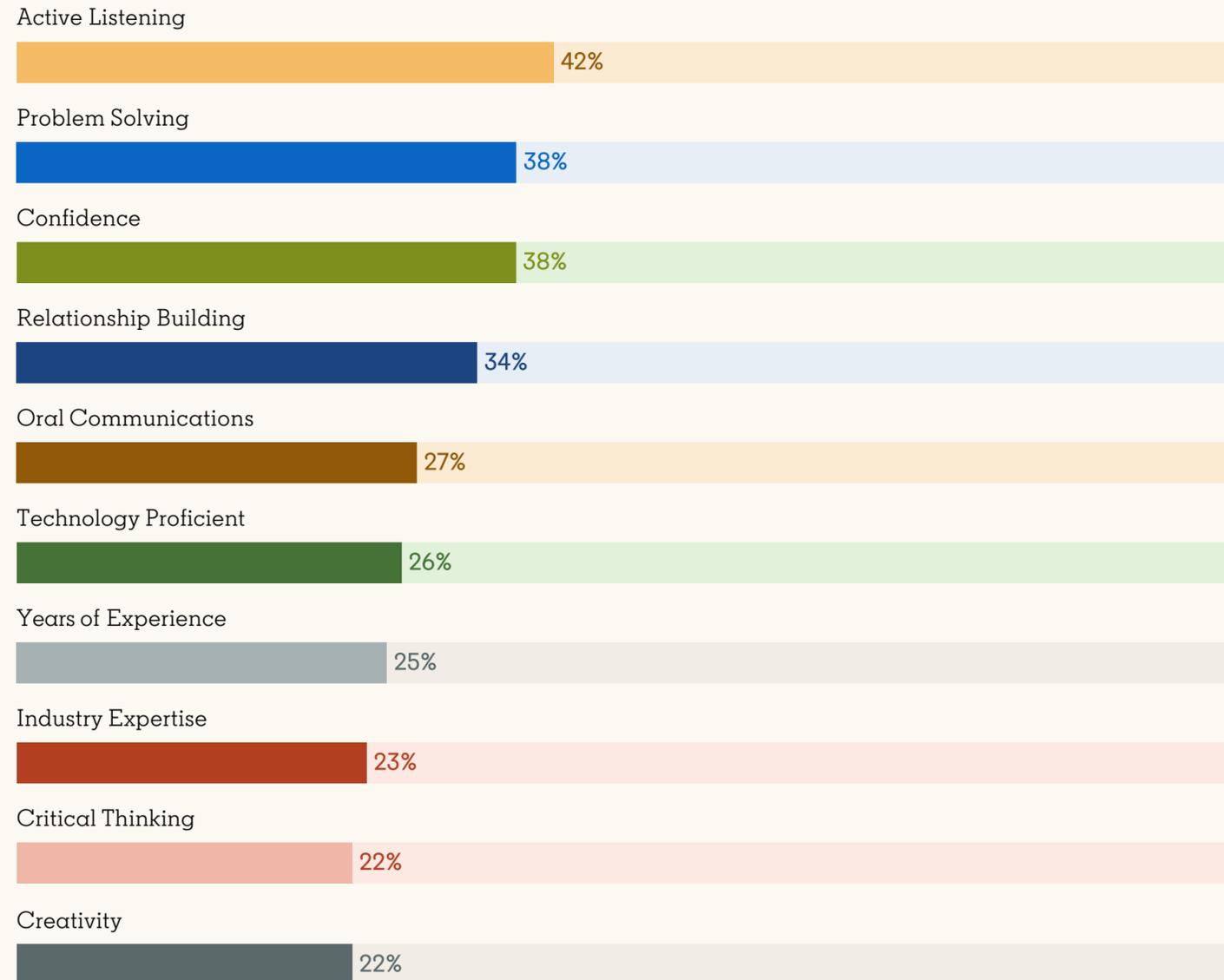|	
Buyers	23%
Sales Managers	15%
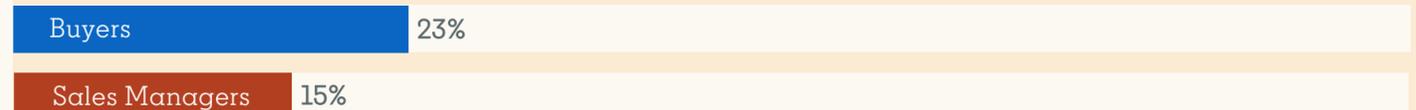
According to the survey, sales managers used to place experience and expertise in the top five traits for new hires five years ago. Now both characteristics have dropped out of the top 10.
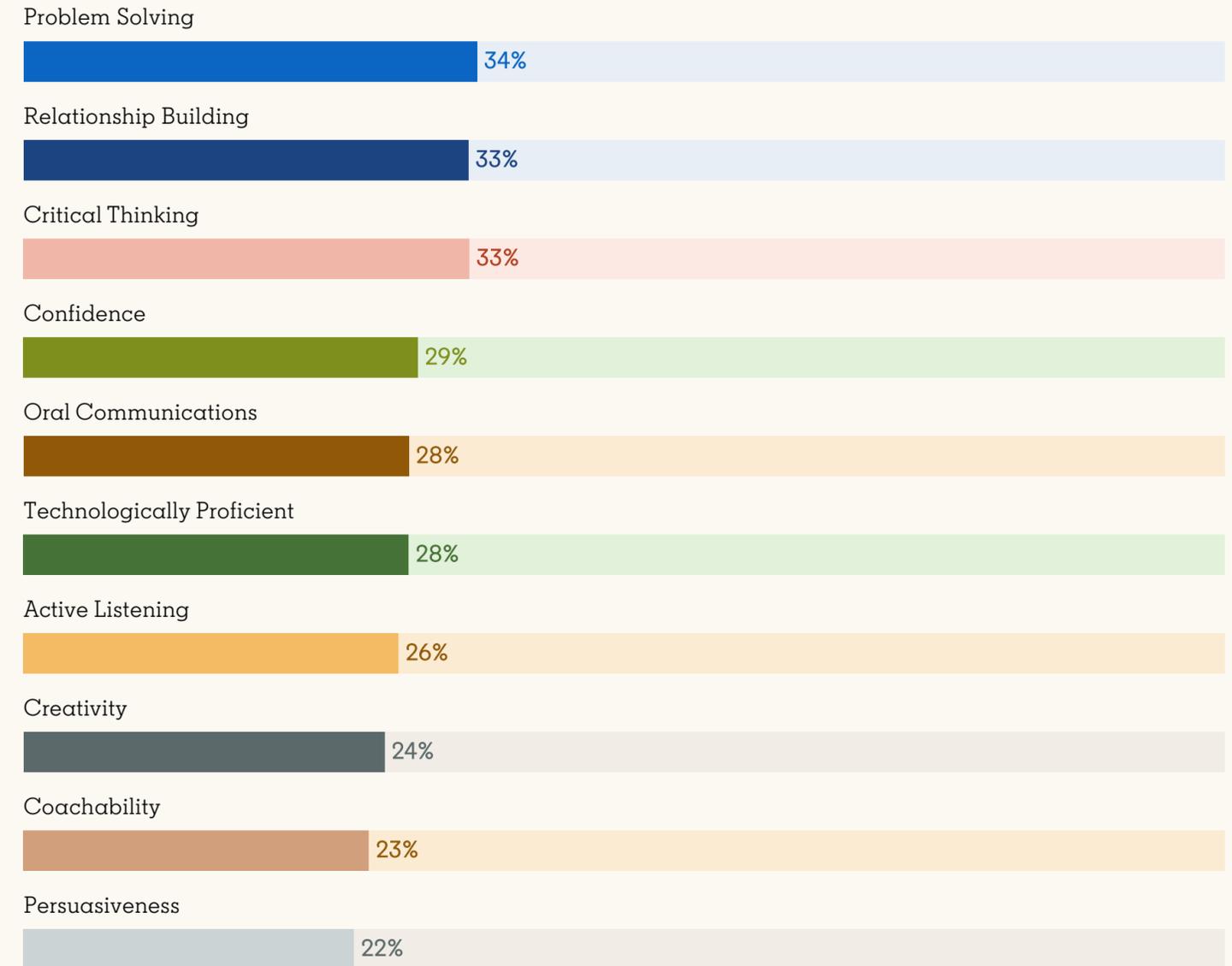
The Challenge of Building a Sales Team with the Right Skills

Let's compare the 10 characteristics buyers desire from salespeople with characteristics sales managers look for in the sales reps they hire.

What Traits Buyers Value in Salespeople

Active Listening — 42%

Problem Solving — 38%

Confidence — 38%

Relationship Building — 34%

Oral Communications — 27%

Technology Proficient — 26%

Years of Experience — 25%

Industry Expertise — 23%

Critical Thinking — 22%

Creativity — 22%

What Traits Sales Managers Value in Salespeople

Problem Solving — 34%

Relationship Building — 33%

Critical Thinking — 33%

Confidence — 29%

Oral Communications — 28%

Technologically Proficient — 28%

Active Listening — 26%

Creativity — 24%

Coachability — 23%

Persuasiveness — 22%

The Challenge of Building a Sales Team with the Right Skills

The Takeaway:

Among the top six traits for both decision makers and sales managers, there is agreement on five: problem solving, confidence, relationship building, oral communications, and technologically proficient. That's strong evidence that sales managers are largely hiring for the skills that buyers want.

But that agreement falls short in one crucial area. The top trait desired by decision makers in the salespeople they interact with—active listening— isn't even in the top six for sales managers. This is a miss, and sales managers must boost their own awareness of active listening as a trait valued by their customers and raise their efforts to uncover this trait in the interview process. Additionally, sales managers should emphasize active listening in training and coaching. Prioritizing this skill is a pathway for your sales team to stand out in the marketplace.

What Top-Performing Salespeople Do Differently

Sales leaders have always looked for ways to discover what the top cohort of salespeople do differently to achieve their success.

LinkedIn's survey provides some insight into a handful of things that successful salespeople—in this case reps who reported they reached **125%** of their quota or above—do differently from their counterparts. **Here's what we learned:**

1. Sales Technology

Top-performing salespeople were more likely than other salespeople to use two sales technologies in particular: enterprise communication (**59% vs 43%**) and sales intelligence tools (**49% vs 41%**). Additionally, top performers were significantly more likely to use LinkedIn Sales Navigator (**43% to 29%**) and more likely to be "very active" on LinkedIn (**56% to 48%**).

2. CRM Data

Top-performing salespeople possess a higher confidence level in CRM data than their counterparts. Of the top group, **53%** are very confident, and of the non-top only **32%** are very confident. These figures may imply that the top-performing group puts in the time to keep their CRM data up to date, because they believe it's crucial to helping them exceed quota.

What Top-Performing Salespeople Do Differently

3. Training

All salespeople spend time with their managers. How they spend their time together differs. Top-performing salespeople are more likely (**33% to 26%**) to spend time with their managers in training. They are also more likely to receive training from outside sales experts by a margin of **46% to 38%**. The embrace of training makes sense in an effort to keep pace in a fast-changing world.

4. Data Usage

In three main cases, top-performing salespeople are more likely to consult data than their counterparts: evaluating patterns from closed-lost business (**56%–45%**), evaluating patterns from closed-won business (**49%–40%**), and selecting geolocations to target (**41%–33%**). This implies these reps are curious to learn what's working and what's not so they can optimize their approach.

5. Leads from Marketing

Top-performing salespeople believe they receive better leads from marketing.

49% Almost half (**49%**) of top-performers describe marketing's leads as "excellent," compared to just 27% of their counterparts.

94% Almost all (**94%**) of the top performers called marketing leads either "excellent" or "good."

81% Just **81%** of top-performers' counterparts called marketing leads "excellent" or "good."

The discrepancy raises a chicken or egg question: Is the top group's performance stronger, because it is getting better leads from marketing? Or is the top group simply better at turning leads into sales?

What Top-Performing Salespeople Do Differently

The Takeaway:

Top performers are not beating quota by chance. Rather, they demonstrate behaviors that lead to different actions and better outcomes—behaviors that can be taught. Sales organizations should apply these best practices by having managers coach reps on these behaviors and holding managers and reps accountable to them.

"World-class sales organizations study their top performers to gain insights on performance improvement opportunities. They understand what defines "good" within their salesforce — or more specifically their top 20% of performers. These sales organizations look at the sales process, where a rep spends his or her time, and the unique skills, traits, drivers and abilities that are being demonstrated on a consistent basis. Then they hope to replicate these attributes through building a success profile to assess and motivate the mid-level performers. We refer to this as "moving the middle" or getting the middle of the road reps, typically the largest percentage of a sales population, to shift their actions and activities to look more like the "A" players."

—**Joseph DiMisa**, Sales Effectiveness and Rewards Leader, Korn Ferry

The Expanding Role of LinkedIn

The Survey Said:

For both buyers and sellers, LinkedIn has become an intrinsic part of the buying and selling process. Our platform is likely to become even more central with conferences, travel, and face-to-face meetings limited.

For buyers, three-quarters of respondents agree or or strongly agree that it's important for a seller to have an informative LinkedIn profile, and **60%** say that reaching out via LinkedIn impacts their thought process positively.

The percentage of buyers who "strongly agree" that an informative LinkedIn profile is important for salespeople has increased over the various editions of the State of Sales survey.
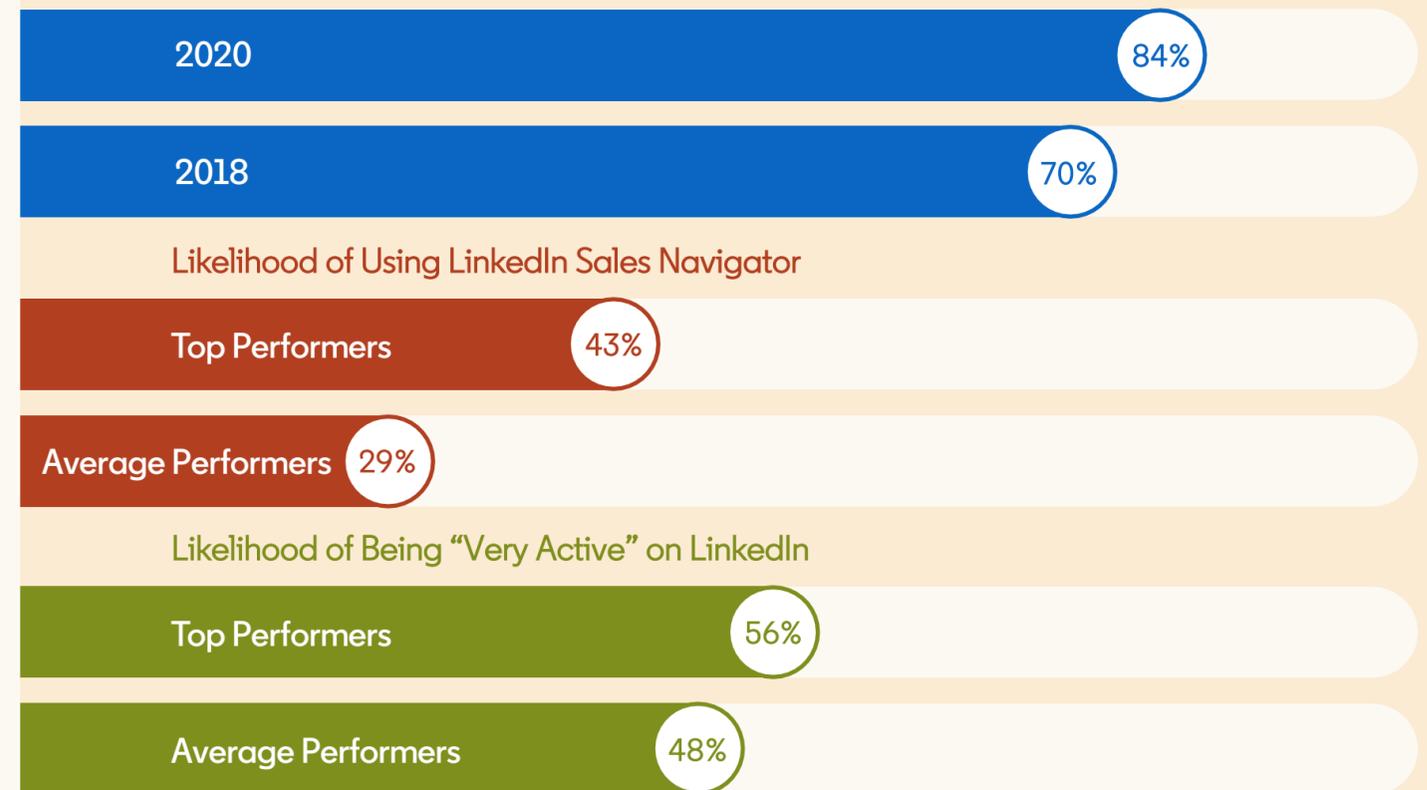
In 2016, **25%** of buyers said they 'strongly agree' with this need. In 2018 that figure jumped to **27%** and this year it's **36%**.

2016	25%
2018	27%
2020	36%
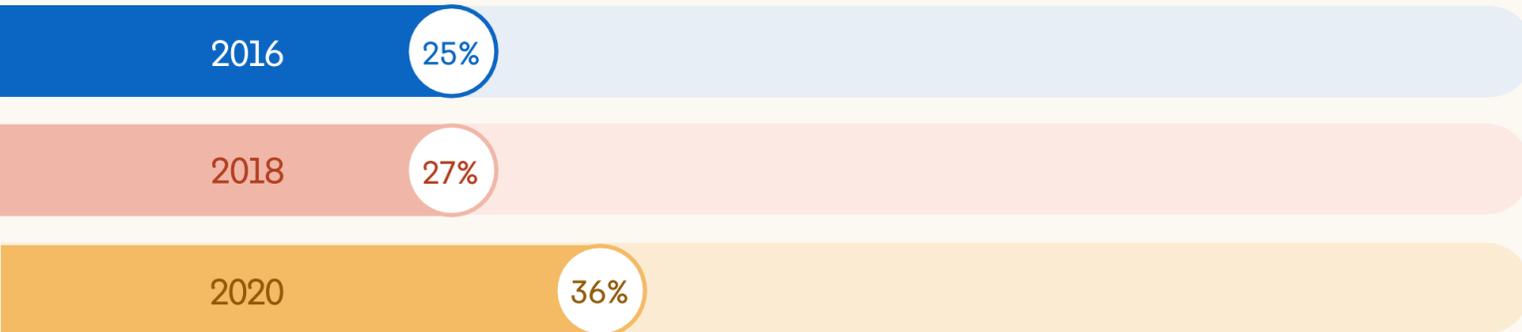
Like their buyer counterparts, salespeople are also perceiving that LinkedIn delivers significant advantages.

The survey found that LinkedIn is the platform where salespeople are most active with **84%** being active on it. That's up from **70%** just two years ago. Additionally, top performers are significantly more likely to use LinkedIn Sales Navigator (**43%** to **29%**) and more likely to be "very active" on LinkedIn (**56%** to **48%**).

Salespeople Active on LinkedIn

2020	84%
2018	70%

Likelihood of Using LinkedIn Sales Navigator

Top Performers	43%
Average Performers	29%

Likelihood of Being "Very Active" on LinkedIn

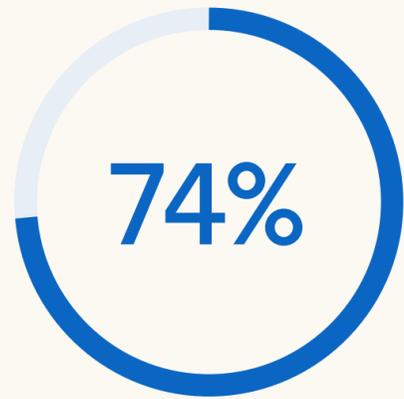|	
Top Performers	56%
Average Performers	48%

The Expanding Role of LinkedIn

Salespeople see LinkedIn as delivering unique data to help inform sales strategy.

Sixty-three percent of sales professionals said LinkedIn provides unique data.

74%

The survey also showed that, among respondents using sales intelligence tools, LinkedIn products topped the list, with **74%** using either LinkedIn.com, LinkedIn Premium, or LinkedIn Sales Navigator.

The Takeaway:

In the sales process, the use of LinkedIn goes both ways.

Buyers are visiting the LinkedIn profiles of sellers as one of the steps in the process of sizing up the salespeople calling on them.

For their part, sales professionals are using LinkedIn and LinkedIn Sales Navigator to gain a holistic understanding of their prospects, customers, and the complete buying committee.

For many buyers and sellers, LinkedIn is becoming an indispensable part of the buying process. Expect its importance to continue to grow in the coming years as the Gen Z and Millennial generations, who grew up with social media, take over the business world.
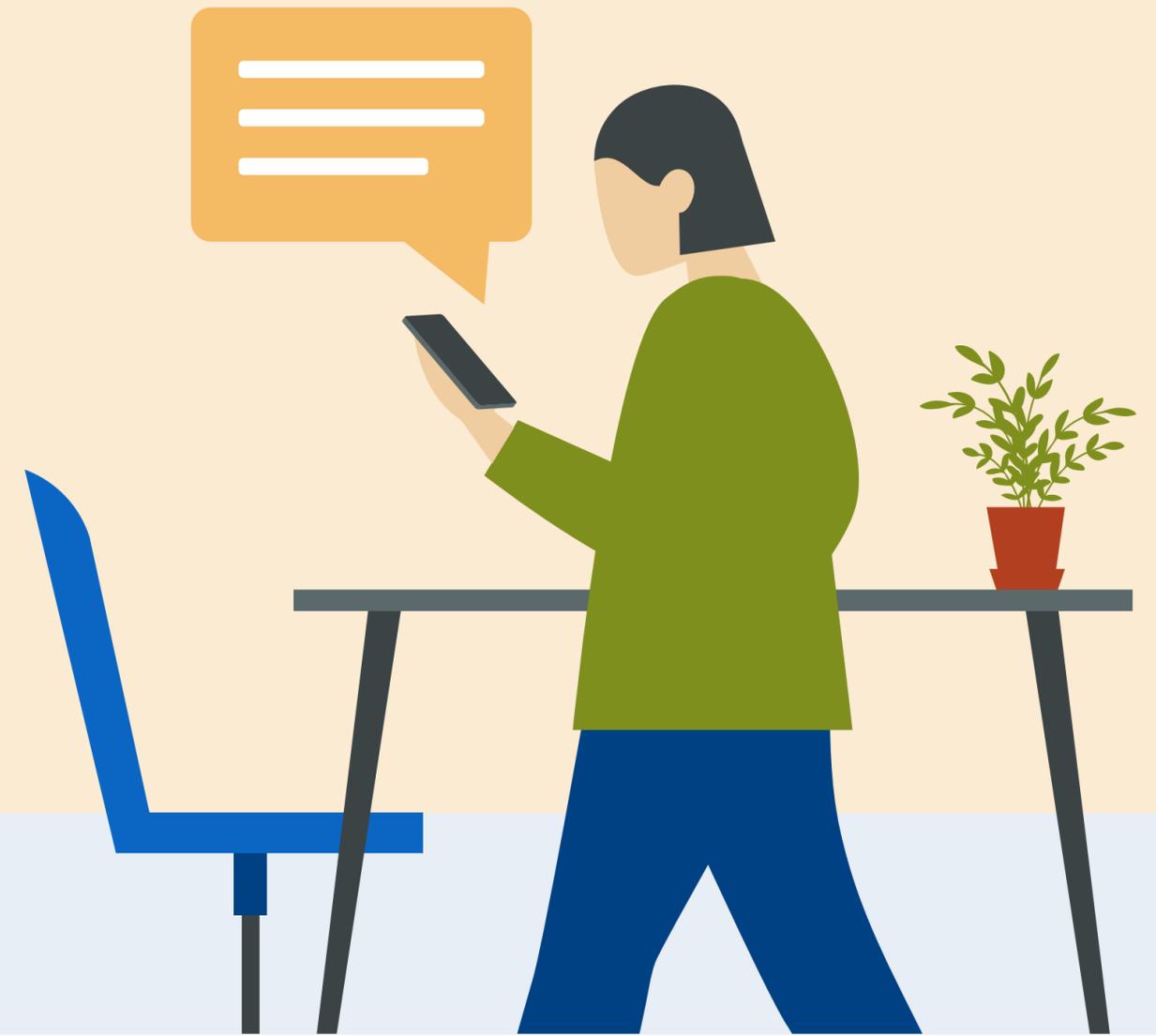
Conclusion

For sales organizations, change is here to stay. The impact of coronavirus has introduced new, emerging trends. It has also accelerated the rise of other, enduring trends.

In the world changed by coronavirus, sales managers understand that the organizations they lead are changing fast. To lead a sales org through this change and ensure it thrives in the future, sales managers and Sales Operations leaders must embrace and act on:

· Long-term metrics are stepping to the forefront

· The data-driven sales org is on the rise

· Sales technology is transforming the sales org

· Trust gets deals done

· Building a sales team with the right skills remains challenging

· Top-performing salespeople do things differently

· LinkedIn plays an expanded role for buyers and sellers

Incorporating these changes into your sales organization will prepare you for the future that is approaching faster every day.
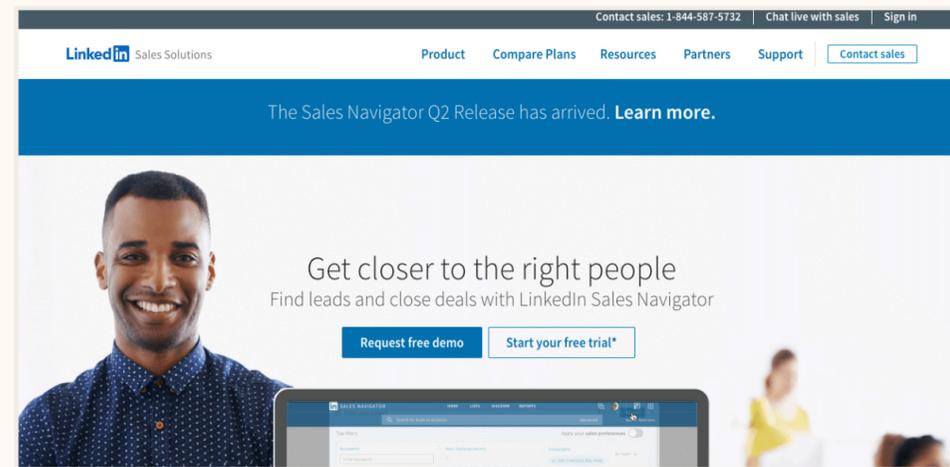
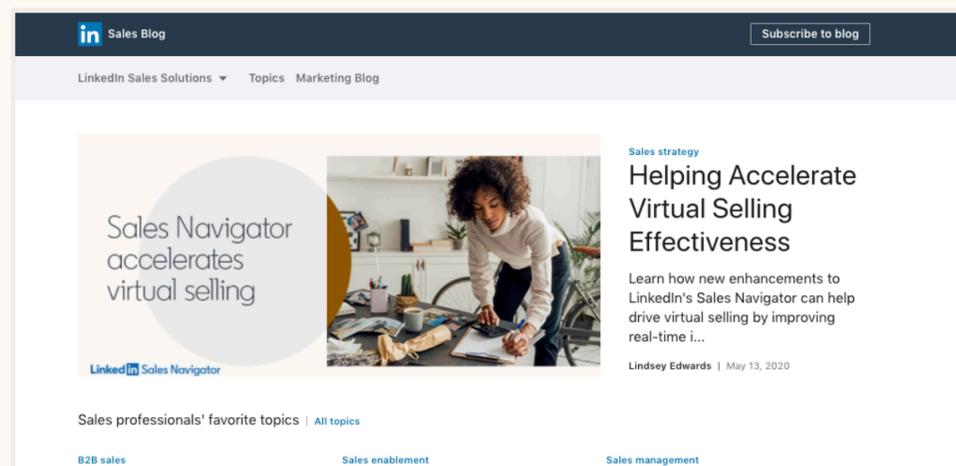# To learn more about the state of sales, LinkedIn recommends the following resources:

The Real Sales Resource Page
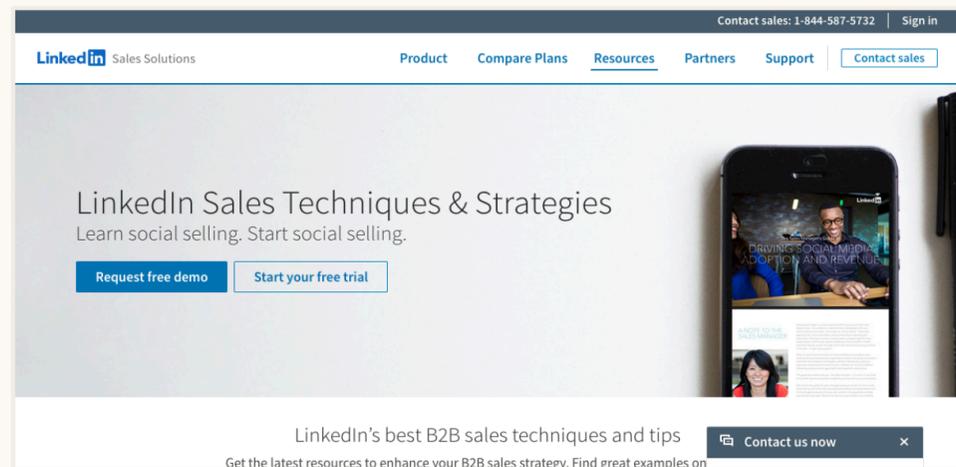
LinkedIn Sales Solutions Website

The LinkedIn Sales Blog

The LinkedIn Coronavirus Resource Hub