



Skills survey

2025 The Future State of Sales Skills

Future-proofing sales teams: building key
competencies and confidence for tomorrow

Insights and trends from
591 sales professionals globally



MERCURI
international

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Introduction

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Business is evolving faster than ever. Fierce competition, shifting customer behavior, accelerated innovation, automation, new technological solutions, and changing values are among the key forces driving this transformation. From a workforce perspective, this means companies must adapt to these changes. Reskilling and upskilling will be essential for success in the coming years.

According to the World Economic Forum’s Future of Jobs Report 2023, nearly a quarter of all jobs globally are expected to undergo significant changes over the next five years. This includes 69 million new jobs being created and 83 million displaced, resulting in a net loss of 14 million jobs—or 2% of current employment levels.

This rapid transformation is also widening the global skills gap. The WEF predicts that 44% of workers’ skills will be disrupted between 2023 and 2028. The emergence of generative AI could push this figure even higher. A recent IBM Institute for Business Value survey revealed that 4 in 5 executives believe generative AI will redefine employee roles and skill requirements.¹

What do these statistics mean for sales organizations? To what extent will sales professionals need to develop their skills to remain relevant and competitive in the face of disruption?

In the first study of “The Future State of Sales Skills,” conducted in 2021 by Mercuri International, over 1,000 global business executives from a wide range of industries were surveyed. The results revealed that 9 in 10 respondents acknowledged

existing skills gaps in their sales and marketing functions, and 85% expected these gaps to widen in the coming three years.

These findings highlight that sales is also undergoing significant transformation, with an increasing need for reskilling and upskilling.

This report aims to provide deeper insights into the competencies and abilities that will grow in importance in the years ahead. It also seeks to assess the confidence of sales professionals in mastering these skills. The goal is to equip leaders with insights into the critical skills sales teams must develop to remain competitive in a rapidly changing marketplace.

The report is based on a comprehensive global quantitative survey, analyzing responses from over 591 sales professionals. To create the foundation for this quantitative analysis, extensive qualitative research on business trends was conducted. From this research, 65 individual sales skills were identified and categorized. Respondents were asked to rank these skills in terms of their current and future importance and their confidence in applying them. These 65 skills were then grouped into 15 overarching competencies.

The findings offer a unique glimpse into what sales professionals view as essential for success and their confidence in executing these abilities.

We hope this report will inspire and guide you in identifying the skills to prioritize when recruiting or developing your sales teams. While the pace of change and automation is accelerating, it is still the human element—and the skills we bring to the table—that remains the cornerstone of competitive advantage.

¹ <https://www.ibm.com/thought-leadership/institute-business-value/en-us/report/augmented-workforce>

Top 10 takeaways from this report

1 Urgent need for reskilling and upskilling

Sales professionals are facing significant skill disruption driven by rapid technological change, automation, evolving customer expectations, and the rise of AI. Despite these pressures, current training averages just 4 days per year, exposing a critical development gap.

2 Customer insight and analytical thinking

Recognized as the most critical competency (88%), yet confidence remains low (27%). Sales teams need tools and training to deliver actionable insights and anticipate client needs.

3 Strategic account development is crucial

With 78% highlighting its importance, there is a clear opportunity to improve long-term planning and account growth strategies.

4 Emerging skills lag behind

Confidence in AI-enhanced selling (11%), social selling (14%), and sustainability advisory (21%) remains low, signaling a need for targeted training.

5 Trust is a cornerstone for success

78% of respondents emphasize trust-building, but advanced trust-building skills, particularly in virtual settings, require further development.

6 Top performers excel in core skills

High-performing sales professionals consistently demonstrate superior confidence in trust-building, customer insights, and problem-solving, setting benchmarks for broader teams.

7 Adoption of AI tools is limited

AI offers opportunities for automation, customer insights, and lead generation, yet adoption remains low due to limited confidence and training.

8 Virtual selling skills need enhancement

While remote selling is widely used, confidence in virtual trust-building and managing the sales process online is moderate (30%).

9 Social influence selling is underutilized

With only 14% confidence, leveraging social media for personal branding, lead generation, and thought leadership is a major untapped opportunity.

10 Sustainability advisory grows in importance

While currently rated as less critical (21% confidence), sustainability-driven sales discussions are becoming increasingly essential for engaging modern buyers and aligning with their goals.

Methodology

The Future State of Sales 2024 was conducted by Mercuri Research in Nov-Dec 2024. The main results in this report are based on a web survey sent out to primarily B2B Sales Professionals. The total number of respondents was 591.

Region

Region	
Europe	67%
Middle East and Africa (MEA)	14%
Asia	14%
North America	2%
South America	2%
Australia and Oceania	5%

Industry

Manufacturing & Industrial	40%
Financial Services & Insurance	16%
Technology & IT Services	13%
Professional Services	6%
Transportation & Logistics	5%
Healthcare & Life Science	5%
Energy Utilities	2%
Education	1%
Other	12%

Company size

1-50	18%
50-249	22%
250-499	9%
More than 500 employees	49%
Don't know	1%

Demographics

Role	
Account Manager/Executive	16%
Key Account Manager (KAM)	14%
Business Development Rep (BDR)	9%
Sales Development Rep (SDR)	9%
Sales/Solution Engineer	6%
Strategic Account Manager (SAM)	5%
Inside Sales Representative	5%
Global Account Manager	3%
Enterprise Account Manager	2%
Other	31%

Age

<24 years	1%
25-29 years	2%
30-34 years	7%
40-44 years	11%
45-49 years	15%
50-54 years	17%
55-59 years	19%
60-64 years	18%
65 years or older	9%
Other	2%

Gender

Male	76%
Female	24%

Type of selling (sales logic)

Traditional Sales – Small-scale deals that require no more than 1-5 interactions with the customer.	41%
Partner Sales – Selling your products and services via resellers or distributors.	33%
Solution Sales – Complex deals involving multiple stakeholders in the buying process.	55%
Project Sales – Large-scale deals, where each sale constitutes a distinct project, involving a team of salespeople and specialists.	38%



Chapter 1

| Trends shaping the future of B2B sales

Trends shaping the future of B2B sales

Mercuri International consistently identifies and analyzes the key trends reshaping the B2B sales landscape. Today's market is defined by increasingly demanding buyers, intensified competition among suppliers, and rapid technological change. These shifts are further influenced by the rise of automation and AI, evolving customer expectations driven by digitalization, and an emphasis on sustainability and ethical business practices. For sales organizations aiming to remain competitive and relevant, adapting to these trends is no longer optional but essential.

1. The era of AI and automation

Automation and AI are fundamentally transforming the B2B sales environment by automating routine tasks like lead generation, information sharing, and customer support. Generative AI, powered by vast datasets, is reducing the need for salespeople to focus on product-specific details, pushing them to take on more strategic roles. The World Economic Forum's Future of Jobs Report 2023 indicates that 34% of job tasks are automated today, with this figure expected to rise to 42% by 2027.² As AI tools become more prevalent, sales professionals must leverage these technologies to analyze customer data, predict needs, and deliver solutions that align with the customer's strategic goals. This transformation requires a shift in focus from traditional selling to insight-driven, value-creating engagements.

2. Increasing sales processes complexity

B2B sales processes are becoming increasingly complex, with more decision-makers involved and longer sales cycles. Economic uncertainty has amplified the need for detailed risk and benefit analyses. Respondents in our study estimate an average of 4.5 decision-makers involved in a typical buying process and a sales cycle of 5 months (156 days), compared to 2.1 decision-makers and 2 months (65 days) in a 2007³ study. For complex deals, the average rises to 5.5 decision-makers⁴ and a sales cycle of 6.8 months. This can be compared to Gartner, which reports an average of 6–10 decision-makers, while Raconteur's 2022 data shows this number has grown to 11.4 stakeholders.⁵ These trends require sales teams to navigate intricate organizational structures, align diverse stakeholder interests, and manage extended sales cycles – all while maintaining trust and momentum throughout the process.

Average number of decision-makers

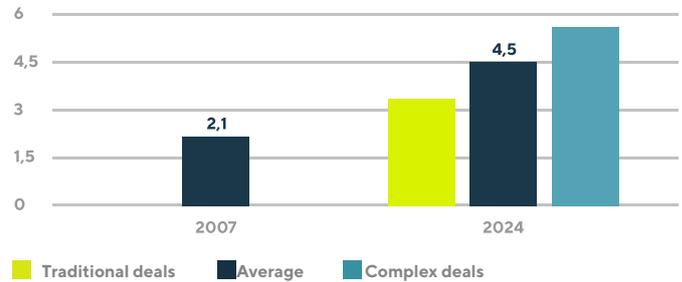


Figure 1: Average number of decision-makers and stakeholders involved in a B2B buying process, 2007 (n = 3,237) vs 2024 (n = 547).

Average length of sales cycle (months)

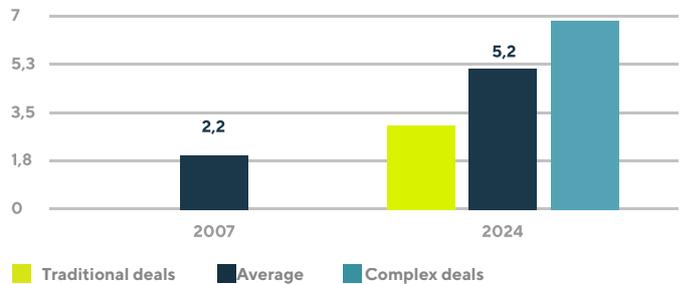


Figure 2: Average length of B2B sales cycles in months, 2007 (n = 3,237) vs 2024 (n = 547).

3. The empowered buyer

The balance of power in the sales process is shifting towards the buyer. Empowered by increased access to information and a wider range of choices, buyers are more discerning and demanding than ever before. They expect personalized experiences, transparent communication, and solutions that address their specific needs and contribute to their long-term success. This trend is fueled by factors such as the rise of digital channels, declining trust in corporations, and the increasing complexity of B2B buying processes, which often involve larger buying groups and longer sales cycles.

2 <https://www.weforum.org/publications/the-future-of-jobs-report-2023/>
3 ProSales Institute 2007 (Mercuri International Research), Sales Efficiency Study I. n=323
4 <https://www.gartner.com.au/en/sales/insights/b2b-buying-journey?>
5 <https://insights.raconteur.net/decision-making-2022>



4. The rise of the strategic seller

The modern sales landscape demands a shift from transactional selling to a more strategic and consultative approach. Sales professionals are increasingly expected to act as trusted advisors, providing valuable insights and building long-term partnerships with clients. This requires a deep understanding of customer needs, the ability to navigate complex business challenges, and a commitment to delivering measurable value. The rise of the strategic seller is driven by factors such as increasing customer expectations, a growing demand for customized solutions, and the need for sales professionals to differentiate themselves in a competitive marketplace.

5. The lifelong learning imperative

The rapid pace of technological and business change has made continuous learning essential for sales professionals. As the half-life of skills shortens, the ability to reskill and upskill has become a critical driver of success. The lifelong learning imperative is driven by shrinking skill relevance, the increasing importance of creativity and analytical thinking, and the need to stay ahead of evolving customer expectations. Sales professionals must cultivate curiosity, adaptability, and a proactive mindset to remain competitive in a world where innovation and complexity are constant.

6. Digitalization shaping customer expectations

The digital transformation has significantly influenced how B2B buyers seek information and make decisions. With tools like social media, AI, and data analytics, customers now expect personalized, digital-first sales experiences. LinkedIn reports that 84% of CEOs and VPs rely on social media to inform purchasing decisions, while Gartner highlights that 64% of technology buyers prefer a fully digital buying journey for familiar products or services.⁶ Sales professionals must respond by building strong digital presences, creating tailored and engaging content, and positioning themselves as thought leaders in their fields. This requires effectively balancing digital and human interactions to provide meaningful value at every touchpoint.

7. Sustainability-driven business models

Sustainability is no longer optional – it's a core expectation from both customers and regulators. Buyers are increasingly making decisions based on environmental and ethical considerations, favoring companies that align with their values. The shift to sustainability-driven business models is propelled by rising customer demand for eco-conscious practices, stricter regulatory requirements, and the competitive advantage of prioritizing environmental responsibility. Sales professionals must position sustainability as a key value proposition, showcasing their organization's commitment to responsible business practices while helping clients achieve their sustainability goals.

6 <https://www.gartner.com/en/sales/insights/b2b-buying-journey?>



Chapter 2

| Key findings

Key findings

The growing need for reskilling and upskilling

The demand for reskilling and upskilling has become increasingly urgent due to rapid technological advancements and the rise of generative AI, which are widening the existing skills gap. According to the World Economic Forum, an average employee in 2019 needed approximately 101 days of skills development by 2022 just to maintain their ability to perform their current job. This figure, which includes both daily learning and formal training, translates to around 25 days annually or 5 hours per week.

Today, the situation has become even more critical. There is a substantial gap between the time employees need for skills development and the actual time and resources being allocated. On average, the required learning time is estimated to be 5-10 times higher than what is currently provided.

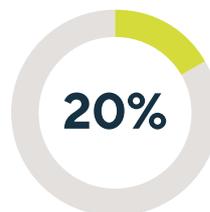
Looking ahead, the World Economic Forum predicted in 2020 that by 2025, more than half of all employees will require significant reskilling and upskilling.⁷ Similarly, a 2023 IBM study found that executives believe 40% of their workforce will need reskilling within the next three years due to the implementation of AI and automation.⁸

For sales professionals, this need is particularly pressing. Increasingly complex sales processes are driving the demand for upskilling, as highlighted in The Future State of Sales Skills Survey 2021 by Mercuri International.⁹

Sales training: a sector in need

So, how does this apply to sales professionals?

Our study found that, on average, salespeople received 4 days of sales training over the past year. This translates to approximately 37 minutes per week or 2 hours and 40 minutes per month. The findings also reveal some critical gaps:



20% of salespeople received no training at all in the past year.



Only 12% of salespeople received 10 days or more of training.

These numbers highlight a significant reskilling and upskilling gap within the sales profession, emphasizing the urgent need for further investment in training programs.

In the past year, how many days of sales training have you received from your company?

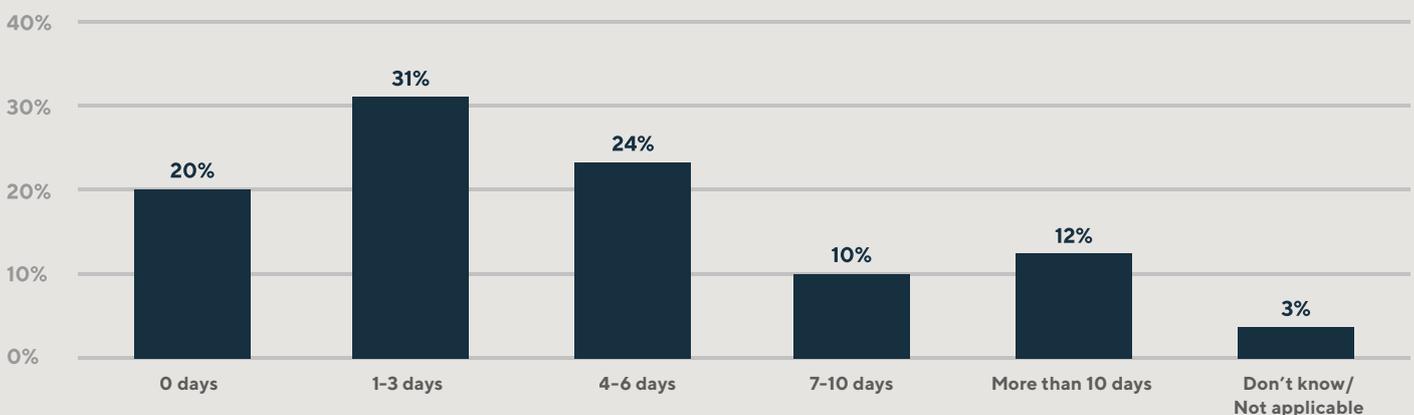


Figure 3: Percentage of salespeople by days of sales training received in the past year. n = 591.

7 World Economic Forum. (2020). The Future of Jobs Report 2020.
8 <https://www.ibm.com/downloads/documents/us-en/10a99803fd2fdd77>
9 https://mercuri.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/the_future_state_of_skills.pdf

The impact of sales training

Multiple studies highlight the significant role of sales training in driving business growth. According to McKinsey's Future of B2B sales report, sales training is a key factor that distinguishes fast-growing companies from slow-growing ones.¹⁰ The data reveals that:

 **48%** of fast-growing companies allocate substantial time and resources to sales training.

 In contrast, only **22%** of slow-growing companies make similar investments.

While the quality and relevance of training are critical, the results are clear: sales training delivers value. Our study supports this finding. Among respondents who participated in sales training during the past year:

 **56%** reported improved productivity or increased sales performance.

 Only **9%** said the training had little to no impact.

These results underscore the potential of well-structured training programs to elevate individual and organizational performance.

To what extent has the sales training helped you become more productive or increase your sales?

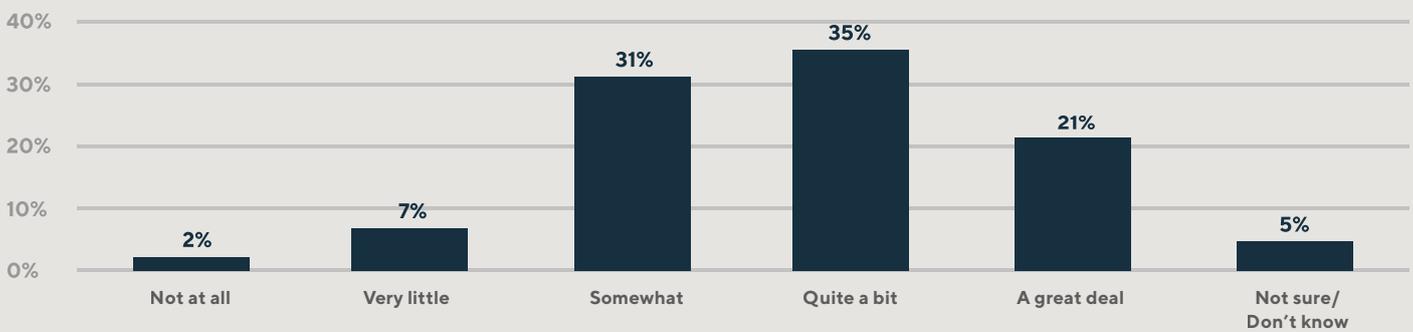


Figure 4: Extent to which sales training has helped salespeople become more productive or increase their sales. Salespeople who didn't receive any training in the past year are excluded. n = 458.

Types of sales training provided

Sales professionals who reported receiving training over the past year are most commonly trained in value-based selling and key account management, with 61% and 31% respectively participating in these areas. However, far fewer receive training in emerging digital competencies such as remote selling and AI tools, where only 16% have been trained. Similarly, training in

social selling remains low at just 14%. This highlights a significant gap in preparing salespeople for the increasing importance of digital skills and technology in modern sales processes. In "other" training, more traditional areas are included, such as negotiation, traditional selling skills, product training, and time management.

Have you received training in any of the following areas?

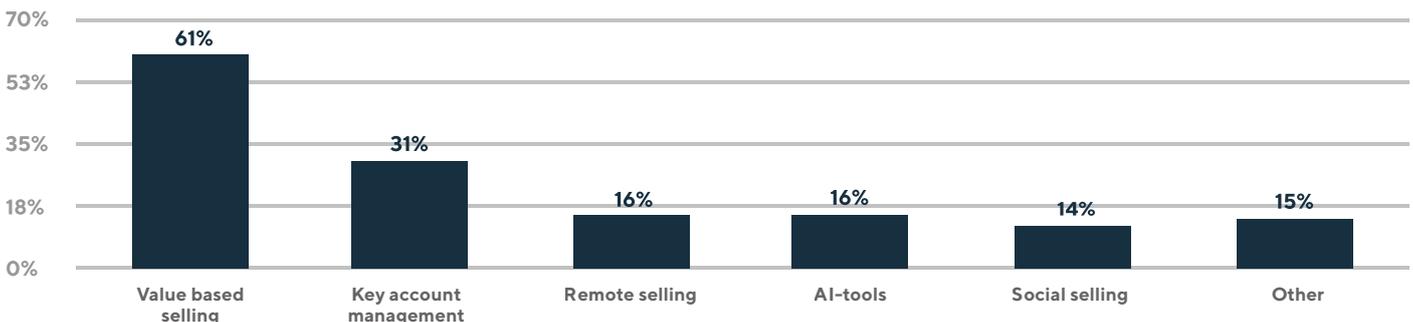


Figure 5: Share of salespeople who received training in specific areas. Salespeople who didn't receive any training in the past year are excluded. n = 458.

¹⁰ McKinsey (2018), What the future science of B2B sales growth looks like

The 15 core sales competencies on the rise

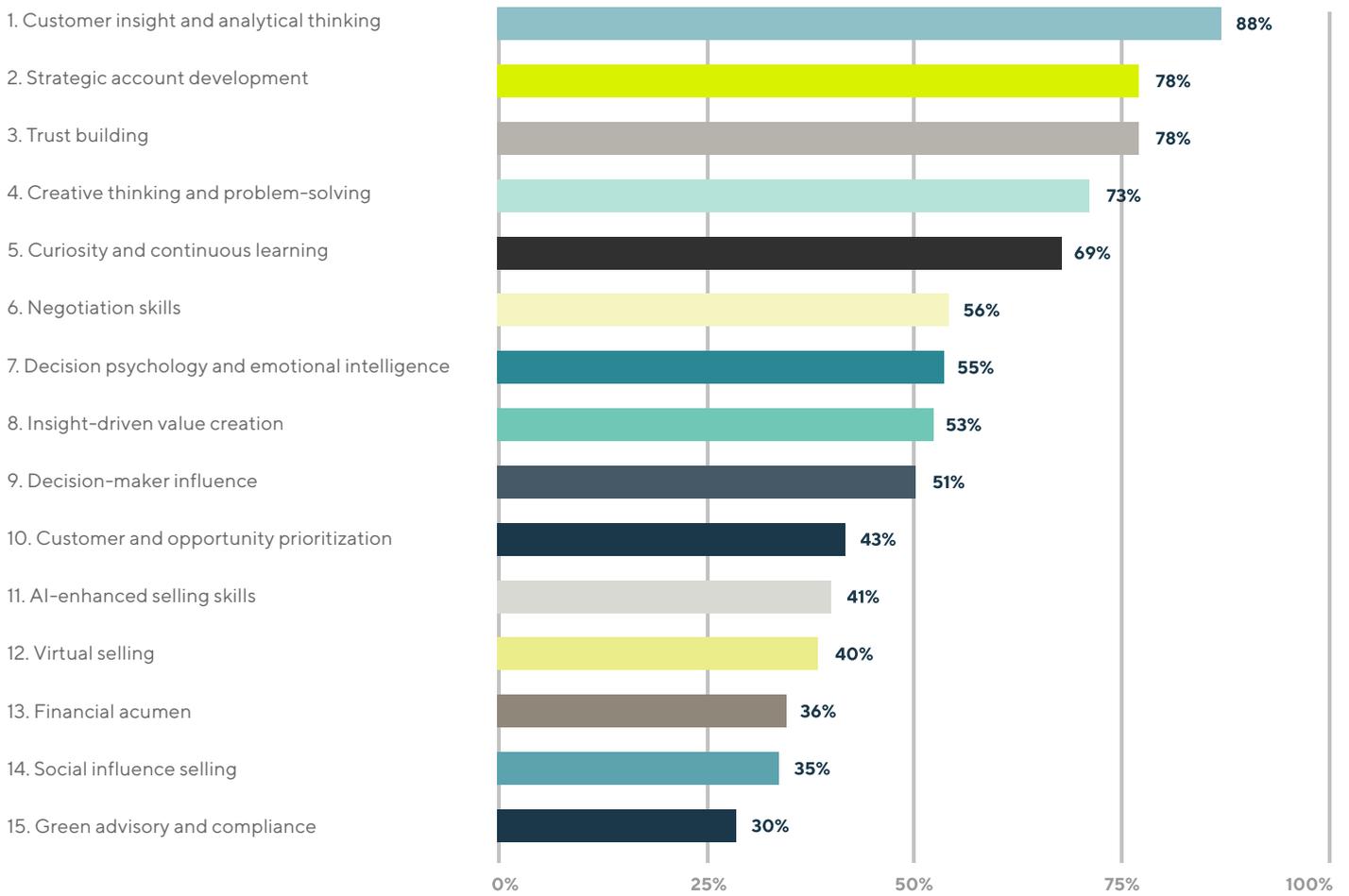
The macro trends discussed above, including the growing need for upskilling and reskilling, highlight the evolving demands on sales professionals and the core skills required to thrive in this dynamic environment. Building on these trends, our study identified 65 specific skills and behaviors that

respondents evaluated based on two key factors: their perceived importance and the respondents' confidence in performing them. These 65 skills were then distilled into 15 overarching core sales competencies, which are presented here in descending order of importance, reflecting what respondents believe is critical for success in their roles today and in the future:

- 1 Customer insight and analytical Thinking** – The ability to deeply understand customers, analyze challenges, and anticipate future opportunities.
- 2 Strategic account development** – Building long-term value through tailored plans and deep client relationships.
- 3 Trust building** – Establishing credibility through honesty, transparency, and empathy to foster strong relationships.
- 4 Creative thinking and problem-solving** – Developing innovative solutions that address client challenges and unlock opportunities.
- 5 Curiosity and continuous learning** – Adapting to change by actively exploring trends, acquiring new skills, and refining knowledge.
- 6 Negotiation skills** – Finding win-win solutions by managing objections, building rapport, and navigating complex discussions.
- 7 Decision psychology and emotional intelligence** – Understanding emotional drivers to adapt communication, build trust, and strengthen relationships.
- 8 Insight-driven value creation** – Providing strategic insights and data-driven value that guide customers toward better decisions.
- 9 Decision-maker influence** – Identifying and engaging key stakeholders to drive consensus and secure buy-in.
- 10 Customer and opportunity prioritization** – Focusing efforts on high-potential customers and opportunities to maximize ROI.
- 11 AI-powered selling proficiency** – Leveraging AI tools to analyze data, automate tasks, and personalize customer interactions.
- 12 Virtual selling** – Mastering remote tools to build trust, present effectively, and manage the sales process digitally.
- 13 Financial acumen** – Demonstrating business impact by connecting solutions to financial outcomes like ROI and cost savings.
- 14 Social Influence selling** – Using social media to build personal brands, engage audiences, and create sales opportunities.
- 15 Green advisory and compliance** – Aligning solutions with clients' sustainability goals and navigating environmental regulations.

While the importance of these competencies may vary depending on the sales role and the complexity of the buying process, they are all becoming increasingly significant. Sales professionals must develop these core competencies to stay competitive and succeed in the evolving sales landscape.

15 core sales competencies on the rise



The 15 core competencies explained, ranked by importance

1. Customer insight and analytical thinking

Customer Insight and Analytical Thinking was identified as the most critical competency for sales success, both now and in the future, with 88% of respondents in our study highlighting its importance.

Successful sales professionals understand their customers deeply—they know how buyers think when making decisions, what their goals and challenges are, and how they view risks and opportunities. Armed with a thorough understanding of their customers' industries, markets, and business priorities, sales professionals can adapt their offerings to meet specific needs, creating differentiation and building stronger business relationships.

By mastering these insights and analytical capabilities, salespeople position themselves as trusted advisors. They can anticipate future challenges, offer strategic guidance, and deliver tailored solutions. This skill is essential for achieving measurable outcomes and fostering long-term partnerships with clients.

In our research, customer understanding and analytical thinking encompass:

- **Understanding and analyzing challenges specific to your customers' industries.** Analytical thinking helps break down and comprehend complex customer issues.¹¹
- **Anticipating and advising on future challenges and key initiatives.** By analyzing data and identifying trends, sales professionals can provide insights into future opportunities.¹²
- **Providing insights into clients' long-term goals and strategies.** Leveraging data analysis to understand and support clients' long-term objectives.
- **Identifying the customer's key decision criteria when evaluating solutions.** Analytical thinking allows for the identification of critical decision points.
- **Identifying the customer's perceived risks, concerns, or efforts.** Analytical thinking helps map out risks and create tailored solutions to address them.

Why this competence is on the rise:

- **Rising customer expectations:** For example, research from Salesforce reveals that 73% of customers expect companies to deeply understand and address their unique needs.
- **Persistent skills gap:** Despite the increasing demand for customer-centric selling, many sales professionals still focus on product features rather than addressing clients' strategic needs. Forrester Research indicates that only 20% of sellers truly prioritize understanding buyer challenges and desired outcomes. Most sales professionals – 80% – continue to focus on pitching products rather than addressing clients' strategic needs.
- **Growing impact of automation:** The World Economic Forum's Future of Jobs Report 2023 highlights that 34% of sales tasks are currently automated, with this figure projected to rise to 42% by 2027.¹³ This shift necessitates that sales professionals leverage analytical skills to process complex data, identify key trends, and anticipate future challenges where automation falls short. According to the same report, analytical thinking, has been identified as the most critical global skill, with 85% of companies ranking it as a top workforce training priority through 2027.
- **Increasing need for analytical thinking:** In a McKinsey survey 80% of sales ranked analytical and quantitative skills among the top capabilities to develop for sales professionals.¹⁴

These factors collectively highlight why developing deeper customer insights and analytical capabilities is essential for success in today's and tomorrow's sales landscape.

11 Salesforce (2022), State of the AI Connected Customer
<https://www.mediafly.com/blog/forrester-advancing-beyond-powerpoints-to-value-selling/>
12 World Economic Forum (2023), Future of Jobs Report
14 McKinsey (2022), Future of B2B Sales: The Big Reframe



2. Strategic account development

Strategic account development is now a cornerstone of modern sales strategy. 78% of respondents consider this competence to be highly important for success in their role now and in the future.

As automation and AI increasingly handle routine, low-complexity transactions, sales professionals are tasked with managing high-value, strategic accounts where human expertise and tailored solutions are indispensable. These accounts demand a comprehensive understanding of the customer's business, the ability to align offerings with long-term goals, and the capacity to identify opportunities for sustainable growth.

By developing strategic account plans and fostering deep relationships, sales professionals can create value that surpasses what technology can achieve, ensuring customer loyalty and long-term profitability. This competence also enables salespeople to uncover opportunities within existing accounts, balance short-term revenue goals with long-term engagement, and position themselves as trusted advisors to their clients. Strategic account management not only drives measurable business outcomes but also ensures alignment with both the customer's and the company's strategic objectives.

In our research, strategic account development involves:

- **Developing strategic account plans:** Creating comprehensive plans for key accounts to guide engagement and growth.
- **Aligning with client goals:** Ensuring the sales approach is in sync with the client's long-term business objectives.
- **Identifying new opportunities:** Proactively seeking out new avenues for value creation within existing accounts.
- **Balancing short-term and long-term goals:** Managing immediate sales targets while nurturing long-term relationships for sustained growth.

Why this competence is on the rise:

- **Evolving customer expectations:** Customers seek partners who can contribute to their long-term success, not just fulfill immediate needs.
- **Increased automation:** As AI takes over routine tasks, sales professionals have more time to focus on strategic account management and relationship building. McKinsey predicts that 20-30% of sales tasks will be automated by 2025.¹⁵
- **Rising customer acquisition costs:** Acquiring new customers is becoming increasingly expensive. A Paddle analysis reports that customer acquisition costs (CAC) increased by approximately 60% between 2015 and 2019.¹⁶ This emphasizes the importance of maximizing the value of existing customer relationships through strategic account development.

¹⁵ <https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/growth-marketing-and-sales/our-insights/sales-automation-the-key-to-boosting-revenue-and-reducing-costs?>
¹⁶ <https://www.paddle.com/blog/how-is-cac-changing-over-time>

3. Trust building

Trust building is crucial for sales success, both now and in the future. Our survey found that 78% of sales professionals rank trust as highly important in their roles, highlighting its central role in buyer-seller relationships. This finding aligns with Mercuri International's 2021 study, *The Future State of Trust*, where 99% of B2B decision-makers stated that trust was a decisive factor in choosing a supplier.¹⁷

Trust is built on key principles such as reliability, competence, integrity, honesty, transparency, and adherence to authentic values. These qualities not only help sales professionals establish credibility but also create the foundation for long-term client relationships, particularly when selling complex services or knowledge-based solutions, where trust is paramount.

In our research, trust building involves:

- **Establishing immediate trust:** Building rapport and demonstrating openness and honesty from the initial interaction.
- **Demonstrating honesty and transparency:** Maintaining integrity and transparency throughout the sales process.
- **Stand by authentic values:** Acting with consistency and providing truthful, unbiased information.
- **Showing empathy:** Understanding and responding to clients' needs and challenges with genuine concern.

Why this competence is on the rise:

- **Increasing complexity:** As the business environment becomes more complex, buyers increasingly rely on trusted advisors to navigate challenges and make informed decisions.
- **Increasing trust gap:** Gallup's longitudinal studies show a significant decline in trust in corporations over the past 50 years, with only 14% of Americans expressing trust in big businesses today.¹⁸ This trend is even more pronounced in the B2B landscape, where only 8% of buyers openly trust promises made by businesses.¹⁹ Additionally, Forrester's research indicates that salespeople are among the least trusted groups, with only 29% of buyers expressing trust in them.²⁰
- **Rise of digital interactions:** In a digital world with less face-to-face interaction, building trust virtually becomes even more critical.

4. Creative thinking and problem-solving

Creative thinking and problem-solving emerged as the fourth most important competence in our survey, with 73% of respondents highlighting its critical role. This skill reflects the ability to develop innovative ideas, solutions, and approaches to address business challenges and unlock opportunities. It involves thinking outside the box, connecting seemingly unrelated concepts, and applying originality to problem-solving. For sales professionals, creativity sets them apart in a competitive market by enabling them to craft unique, tailored solutions that add significant value to their clients.

In our survey, creative thinking includes:

- **Thinking outside the box:** Developing innovative and unconventional solutions that address customer needs in new ways.
- **Challenging assumptions:** Encouraging customers to rethink their current approaches and consider alternative perspectives.
- **Co-creating solutions:** Collaborating with clients to develop innovative solutions that align with their specific goals and challenges.
- **Solving critical problems:** Identifying and addressing clients' key business problems through creative problem-solving and solution design.

Why this competence is on the rise:

- **Automation and complexity:** As automation and AI take over routine tasks, the need for human creativity grows. Sales professionals must address complex problems and craft innovative solutions that technology cannot replicate.
- **Increasing relevance:** A global study by Harvard Business Review revealed that 96% of respondents agree creative ideas are crucial for an organization's long-term success and performance.²¹ Additionally, according to the World Economic Forum's *Future of Jobs Report 2023*, creative thinking is projected to experience the largest increase in importance between 2023 and 2027, highlighting its growing relevance in a world where automation cannot replace human originality.²²
- **Demand for differentiation:** Businesses increasingly seek competitive advantage through unique approaches. Creative thinking enables sales professionals to challenge established practices, co-create solutions, and align strategies with client goals.
- **Adaptation in sales:** With growing buyer expectations, creativity is no longer optional. It equips sales teams to solve pressing problems, build enduring partnerships, and thrive in a dynamic and competitive landscape.

17 <https://mercuri.net/the-future-state-of-trust-report/>

18 Gallup, *Confidence in Big Business*, Multiple Survey Data

19 Gartner (2019): *B2B Buying Study*

20 <https://www.forrester.com/blogs/who-do-b2b-buyers-trust/>

21 <https://www.forbes.com/sites/lucianapaulise/2024/07/25/is-creativity-important-for-business-growth-96-say-yes/>

22 World Economic Forum (2023), *Future of Jobs Report*

5. Curiosity and continuous learning

Curiosity and continuous learning rank as the fifth most important competency in our study, with 69% of salespeople surveyed recognizing its critical role in achieving success, both now and in the future. This competency involves more than just acquiring knowledge; it's about cultivating a mindset of continuous growth and development. It's about actively seeking new information, exploring emerging trends, and constantly refining skills to stay ahead of the curve. For sales professionals, this translates to asking insightful questions, challenging conventional thinking, and deeply understanding their clients and the market dynamics that shape their needs.

Curiosity fuels exploration, enabling individuals to uncover hidden opportunities and make connections that others might miss. It also fosters resilience, empowering professionals to embrace change and view challenges as learning experiences. This growth mindset transforms learning from a one-time event into an ongoing journey, allowing salespeople to adapt to evolving customer needs, master new technologies, and thrive in an ever-changing marketplace.

In our study, curiosity and continuous learning encompass:

- **Adapting to change:** Responding effectively to evolving customer needs and market conditions.
- **Staying relevant:** Continuously updating skills and knowledge to maintain a competitive edge.
- **Embracing new technologies:** Adopting and mastering new sales technologies, such as AI-powered tools and data analytics platforms.
- **Leveraging feedback:** Using feedback as a tool for continuous improvement and professional growth.

Why this competence is on the rise:

- **The accelerating pace of change:** The half-life of skills is shrinking rapidly. Some 40 years ago, developing a skill had a "half-life" of at least 10 years until it was time for a refresher. Today, that half-life has shrunk to about four years – and keeps shrinking.²³
- **The rise of new technologies:** Emerging technologies, like AI and data analytics, are transforming the sales landscape. Sales professionals need to be curious and adaptable to learn these new tools and integrate them into their workflows.
- **The demand for specialized skills:** As sales processes become more complex, the need for specialized skills and knowledge intensifies. Continuous learning enables sales professionals to acquire the expertise needed to navigate these complexities and deliver value to clients.
- **The value of learning agility:** Research shows that individuals with high learning agility are more likely to be high performers and successful leaders.²⁴ Curiosity fuels learning agility, enabling sales professionals to adapt quickly, learn from experiences, and apply new knowledge effectively.

23 <https://www.forbes.com/sites/joemckendrick/2024/04/30/ai-puts-the-squeeze-on-the-shrinking-half-life-of-skills/>
24 Korn Ferry. (2018). The Global Talent Crunch.

6. Negotiation skills

Negotiation skills are essential for sales success, with over half (56%) of respondents in our survey recognizing them as a fundamental competency. Effective negotiation involves much more than just haggling over price; it's about understanding the psychology of persuasion, building rapport, and finding mutually beneficial solutions that foster long-term relationships. Skilled negotiators can navigate complex discussions, address objections constructively, and secure agreements that satisfy both parties' needs.

In today's increasingly competitive and complex sales landscape, the ability to negotiate effectively is more critical than ever. Sales professionals need to be adept at managing various stakeholders, navigating diverse perspectives, and finding common ground to achieve win-win outcomes.

This involves:

- **Understanding the psychological aspects of negotiation:** Recognizing the motivations, biases, and communication styles of different individuals to build rapport and tailor their approach accordingly.
- **Applying creative negotiation techniques:** Moving beyond traditional bargaining tactics to explore innovative solutions that create value for both sides.
- **Managing conflicts and objections:** Addressing concerns and resolving disagreements constructively to maintain positive relationships and move towards agreement.
- **Navigating ethical considerations:** Upholding ethical standards and maintaining integrity throughout the negotiation process.
- **Negotiating effectively under pressure:** Remaining calm, focused, and strategic even in high-pressure situations to achieve favorable outcomes.

Why this competence is on the rise:

- **More informed buyers:** Buyers have access to more information than ever before, making them more discerning and demanding in negotiations. Sales professionals need to be prepared to address their concerns and demonstrate value effectively.
- **Complex sales cycles:** B2B sales often involve longer and more complex sales cycles with multiple stakeholders and decision-makers. Strong negotiation skills are crucial for navigating these complexities and securing buy-in from all parties.

- **Emphasis on collaboration:** Modern sales emphasize building long-term partnerships and creating mutually beneficial outcomes. Negotiation skills are essential for fostering collaboration and finding win-win solutions that strengthen relationships.
- **The rise of global business:** As businesses expand globally, sales professionals need to be adept at negotiating across cultures and navigating different communication styles and expectations.

7. Decision psychology and emotional intelligence

Decision psychology and emotional intelligence are critical for sales success, enabling professionals to connect deeply with clients, manage conflicts, and build trust. 55% of respondents in our study identified this competence as highly important for excelling in their roles today and in the future. Emotional intelligence (EI) equips salespeople to understand their clients' emotions and motivations, tailoring interactions and fostering long-term partnerships.

Top-performing sales professionals leverage EI to manage their own emotions, respond appropriately to others, and create meaningful, trust-based relationships. This ability to connect on a personal level, understand client pain points, and demonstrate genuine care often sets elite salespeople apart in competitive markets.

In our research, decision psychology and emotional intelligence involves:

- **Understanding psychological drivers:** Recognizing how psychological principles influence B2B decision-making.
- **Adapting communication styles:** Tailoring sales approaches based on clients' personalities and emotional signals.
- **Building rapport:** Using psychological insights to foster strong, long-term relationships.
- **Managing difficult situations:** Preserving relationships while handling challenges effectively.

Why this competence is on the rise:

- **Shifting buyer expectations:** Buyers today demand authenticity and empathy from sales professionals who understand their needs on a deeper level. 90% of top performers have high emotional intelligence, making it a key differentiator in sales.²⁵

25 <https://www.forbes.com/sites/travisbradberry/2014/01/09/emotional-intelligence/>

- **Impact on customer loyalty:** Research by Gartner reveals that emotional connection has twice the impact on customer loyalty compared to satisfaction alone, emphasizing the role of emotional intelligence in fostering long-term client relationships.²⁶
- **Role of behavioral psychology:** Harvard Business Review highlights that emotions influence up to 95% of decision-making in B2B contexts. Sales professionals who recognize and respond to these emotional drivers are more likely to close deals and maintain strong relationships.²⁷

8. Insight-driven value-creation

Insight-driven value creation is a critical competency for sales success in today's knowledge-driven economy. In our survey, 53% of salespeople recognized its importance for achieving success now and in the future. This competency goes beyond simply presenting product features and benefits; it's about positioning yourself as a trusted advisor who empowers customers with valuable insights to make informed decisions.

Insight-driven value creation involves:

- **Sharing data-driven insights:** Providing customers with relevant research, data, and trends to help them identify opportunities and challenges they may have overlooked.
- **Educating and challenging customers:** Encouraging customers to think differently and consider new approaches by challenging existing mindsets and offering alternative perspectives.
- **Providing evidence of value:** Using real-world examples, case studies, and data to demonstrate the tangible value and impact of your solution.
- **Differentiating your offerings:** Clearly articulating the unique benefits of your solution and how it stands out from the competition.

Why this competence is on the rise:

- **The value-oriented buyer:** Customers are increasingly focused on value and are more likely to engage with sales professionals who can offer unique insights and demonstrate a deep understanding of their needs. In fact, Mercuri International's Future State of Sales Survey 2021 found that 85% of surveyed executives ranked Customer Value Orientation as the most important trend for staying competitive.²⁸
- **The knowledge gap:** While the demand for value-based selling is high, many sales professionals lack the necessary skills. In the same Mercuri International study, 38% of executives reported that their salespeople lacked skills in value-based selling.
- **The rise of the insightful seller:** Buyers are more likely to trust sales professionals who act as consultants, share valuable insights, and create value beyond the product. Research from Mercuri International shows that 66% of B2B executives view salespeople who educate, inspire, and challenge customers as key to building trust.²⁹ Similarly, Forrester reports that 77% of B2B buyers appreciate receiving customized data and insights from sellers who can teach them something new.³⁰ LinkedIn's State of Sales report further highlights this trend, with 89% of buyers more likely to purchase from sales professionals who act as trusted advisors and provide valuable insights.³¹

²⁶ <https://hbr.org/2016/08/an-emotional-connection-matters-more-than-customer-satisfaction>

²⁷ <https://www.inc.com/logan-chierotti/harvard-professor-says-95-of-purchasing-decisions-are-subconscious.html>

²⁸ Mercuri International (2021); The Future State of Sales

²⁹ Mercuri International (2021); The Future State of Trust

³⁰ <https://www.mediafly.com/blog/forrester-advancing-beyond-powerpoints-to-value-selling/>

³¹ LinkedIn. (2022). State of Sales.

9. Decision-maker influence

Decision-maker influence is a critical competency for navigating the complexities of modern B2B sales. In our survey, 51% of sales professionals recognized its importance for achieving success in their roles. This competency involves identifying and engaging with key decision-makers within a customer's organization, understanding their individual needs and motivations, and ultimately influencing their decisions to secure buy-in and drive consensus.

Effectively influencing decision-makers involves:

- **Identifying key stakeholders:** Recognizing both formal and informal decision-makers within the customer's organization, including those who may hold significant influence even without official authority.
- **Connect with and influence these decision-makers:** Establishing rapport and building strong relationships with key decision-makers based on trust, credibility, and a genuine understanding of their needs.
- **Aligning interests:** Presenting solutions that address the specific concerns and priorities of each decision-maker, demonstrating how the proposed solution benefits both the individual and the organization as a whole.

Why this competence is on the rise:

- **More complex buying processes:** B2B purchasing decisions are becoming more complex, involving a greater number of stakeholders and more detailed evaluations. Gartner found that 77% of B2B customers rate their purchase experience as extremely complex or difficult.³²
- **Larger buying groups:** There's often a disconnect between the perceived and actual number of decision-makers involved in B2B purchases. While our survey found that sales professionals estimate an average of 4,5 decision-makers, research from Gartner³³ and Raconteur³⁴ suggests the real number is significantly higher, often exceeding 10. This discrepancy underscores the importance of thorough stakeholder mapping and the ability to navigate a complex web of relationships within the buying organization.
- **Longer sales cycles:** Forrester research reveals that 75% of respondents have experienced longer buying cycles in recent years.³⁵ This extended timeframe requires sales professionals to maintain momentum, nurture relationships, and consistently engage with decision-makers throughout the process.

10. Customer and opportunity prioritization

Customer and opportunity prioritization is a critical competency for navigating the complexities of modern B2B sales. In our survey, 43% of sales professionals recognized its importance for achieving success in their roles. This competency involves strategically allocating time and resources to focus on the most promising prospects and opportunities, maximizing efficiency and driving the greatest return on investment.

Effective customer and opportunity prioritization includes:

- **Prioritizing prospects and customers:** Identifying and focusing on the prospects and customers with the highest potential for conversion and long-term value. This involves analyzing factors such as their needs, budget, and strategic fit with your offerings.
- **Identifying high-potential opportunities:** Recognizing and prioritizing the sales opportunities that are most likely to result in successful outcomes. This requires a deep understanding of the customer's challenges, goals, and buying process.
- **Qualifying opportunities early:** Efficiently assessing the viability of sales opportunities early in the sales cycle. This allows sales professionals to disqualify low-potential leads and focus their efforts on more promising prospects.

Why this competence is on the rise:

- **Increased performance and efficiency:** Research by Mercuri International demonstrates the direct impact of prioritization on sales performance. In a study where a sales district systematically implemented qualification and prioritization techniques, they achieved a remarkable 40% increase in sales performance. This improvement stemmed from a significant reduction in time spent on "non-deals," allowing sales representatives to focus their efforts on more promising opportunities.³⁶
- **Limited resources:** Sales teams often operate with limited time and resources. Effective prioritization ensures that these valuable resources are allocated strategically to maximize impact and generate the greatest return on investment. By focusing on high-potential customers and opportunities, sales professionals can optimize their efforts and achieve better results.
- **Navigating complex sales cycles:** B2B sales cycles are becoming increasingly complex, often involving multiple stakeholders and lengthy decision-making processes. Prioritization helps sales professionals navigate these

32 <https://www.gartner.com.au/en/sales/insights/b2b-buying-journey?>

33 <https://www.gartner.com.au/en/sales/insights/b2b-buying-journey?>

34 <https://insights.raconteur.net/decision-making-2022>

35 Forrester (2022), Generational Shifts Fundamentally Change B2B Buyer and Seller Dynamics

36 Mercuri International/ProSales Institute (2011), Sales Efficiency Study III

complexities by enabling them to identify and focus on the opportunities that are most likely to close successfully. This targeted approach streamlines the sales process and improves efficiency.

- **The rise of data-driven decision-making:** The availability of data and analytics is revolutionizing sales. By leveraging data insights, sales professionals can make more informed decisions about which customers and opportunities to prioritize. This data-driven approach helps them identify high-potential leads, predict deal outcomes, and optimize their sales strategies.

11. AI-powered selling proficiency

AI-powered selling proficiency represents the ability of sales professionals to effectively leverage artificial intelligence (AI) tools to enhance their sales processes. This competency empowers salespeople to optimize their workflows, improve decision-making, and create more personalized customer experiences, ultimately driving greater efficiency and effectiveness. While only 41% of sales professionals in our survey currently recognize the importance of this skill, its potential to revolutionize sales is undeniable. As more salespeople acquire the ability to harness the power of AI, we expect this number to rise significantly.

Sales representatives who excel in AI-powered selling can utilize these tools to:

- **Generate customer insights:** AI can analyze vast datasets to uncover valuable insights about customers, their industries, and market trends, enabling sales professionals to approach clients with relevant information and tailored solutions.
- **Analyze buyer behavior:** AI tools can help salespeople understand buyer personalities, preferences, and decision-making styles, allowing them to personalize their communication and tailor their approach for each interaction.

- **Automate routine tasks:** AI can automate time-consuming activities like scheduling meetings, sending follow-up emails, and updating CRM data, freeing up sales professionals to focus on building relationships and closing deals.
- **Identify high-potential leads:** AI-driven analytics can identify and prioritize leads based on their likelihood to convert, helping sales teams focus their efforts on the most promising opportunities.
- **Enhance communication:** AI tools like ChatGPT can assist in drafting and improving sales proposals, presentations, and other business documents, ensuring clear, concise, and professional communication.

Why this competence is on the rise:

- **The rise of AI in sales:** AI is transforming the sales landscape, with a growing number of tools and technologies available to enhance sales processes and improve decision-making. Sales professionals who can effectively utilize these tools will have a significant competitive advantage.
- **Increased efficiency and productivity:** AI can automate repetitive tasks, freeing up sales professionals' time to focus on higher-value activities like building relationships, understanding customer needs, and closing deals.
- **Improved customer experience:** AI enables more personalized customer interactions, leading to greater satisfaction and loyalty. By leveraging AI to understand customer preferences and tailor their approach, sales professionals can create more meaningful and impactful engagements.



12. Virtual selling

The COVID-19 pandemic dramatically accelerated the adoption of virtual selling, compelling businesses to adapt to remote work and social distancing restrictions. Virtual selling leverages technology to engage with customers remotely, build relationships, and manage all stages of the sales process through digital channels. This includes conducting online meetings, presentations, and product demonstrations, as well as nurturing relationships via email, social media, and other digital communication tools.

In our survey, respondents reported that approximately one-third (34%) of their customer meetings currently take place remotely, while a similar proportion (40%) consider virtual selling to be highly important for success in their role – both now and in the future. These figures highlight a notable shift back toward more face-to-face meetings. Only 6% of respondents reported working entirely virtually, whereas the largest share (39%) indicated that up to 20% of their meetings are virtual. This suggests that nearly all sales roles today have evolved into hybrid models, consisting of a mix of physical and virtual meetings, making virtual selling a core competency for sales professionals.

Approximately what percentage of your customer meetings take place remotely, via platforms like Teams or Zoom?

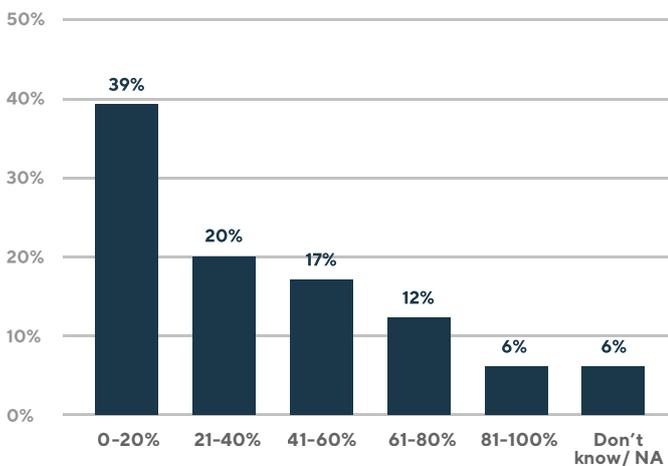


Figure 7: This chart illustrates the percentage of customer meetings that take place virtually, using platforms like Teams or Zoom. Average 34%. n=591

In our survey virtual selling includes:

- **Mastering virtual communication tools:** Utilizing video conferencing platforms like Teams and Zoom to conduct engaging and productive client meetings.
- **Building rapport remotely:** Establishing trust and strong relationships with customers through virtual interactions, compensating for the lack of face-to-face contact.
- **Presenting compellingly online:** Adapting presentation and communication styles to effectively showcase products or services in a virtual environment.
- **Managing the sales process virtually:** Successfully navigating all stages of the sales process, from initial contact to negotiation and closing, through remote channels.

Why this competence is on the rise:

While the proportion of virtual meetings may have decreased after the initial shift prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic, several factors continue to drive the widespread adoption of virtual selling:

- **Technological advancements:** The availability of sophisticated virtual communication and collaboration tools has made remote selling more accessible and effective.
- **Hybrid is the new normal:** B2B buyers are increasingly comfortable with remote interactions and often prefer the convenience and flexibility they offer. In 2021, a McKinsey survey found that 70–80% of B2B decision-makers preferred remote human interaction or digital self-service over in-person meetings, citing ease of scheduling, cost savings, and safety as their top reasons.³⁷
- **Cost-effectiveness:** Virtual selling can significantly reduce travel costs and increase efficiency for sales teams, allowing them to reach a wider audience and engage with customers more frequently.
- **Increased reach and flexibility:** Virtual selling allows sales professionals to connect with customers anywhere in the world, expanding their reach and enabling greater flexibility in scheduling meetings and managing their time.

13. Financial acumen

Financial acumen is a critical competency for modern sales professionals, enabling them to understand and articulate the financial value of their solutions. It involves more than just calculating costs and profits; it's about demonstrating a deep understanding of the customer's business objectives and how your offerings can contribute to their financial success. In our survey, 36% of sales professionals indicated that this competency is important in their role.

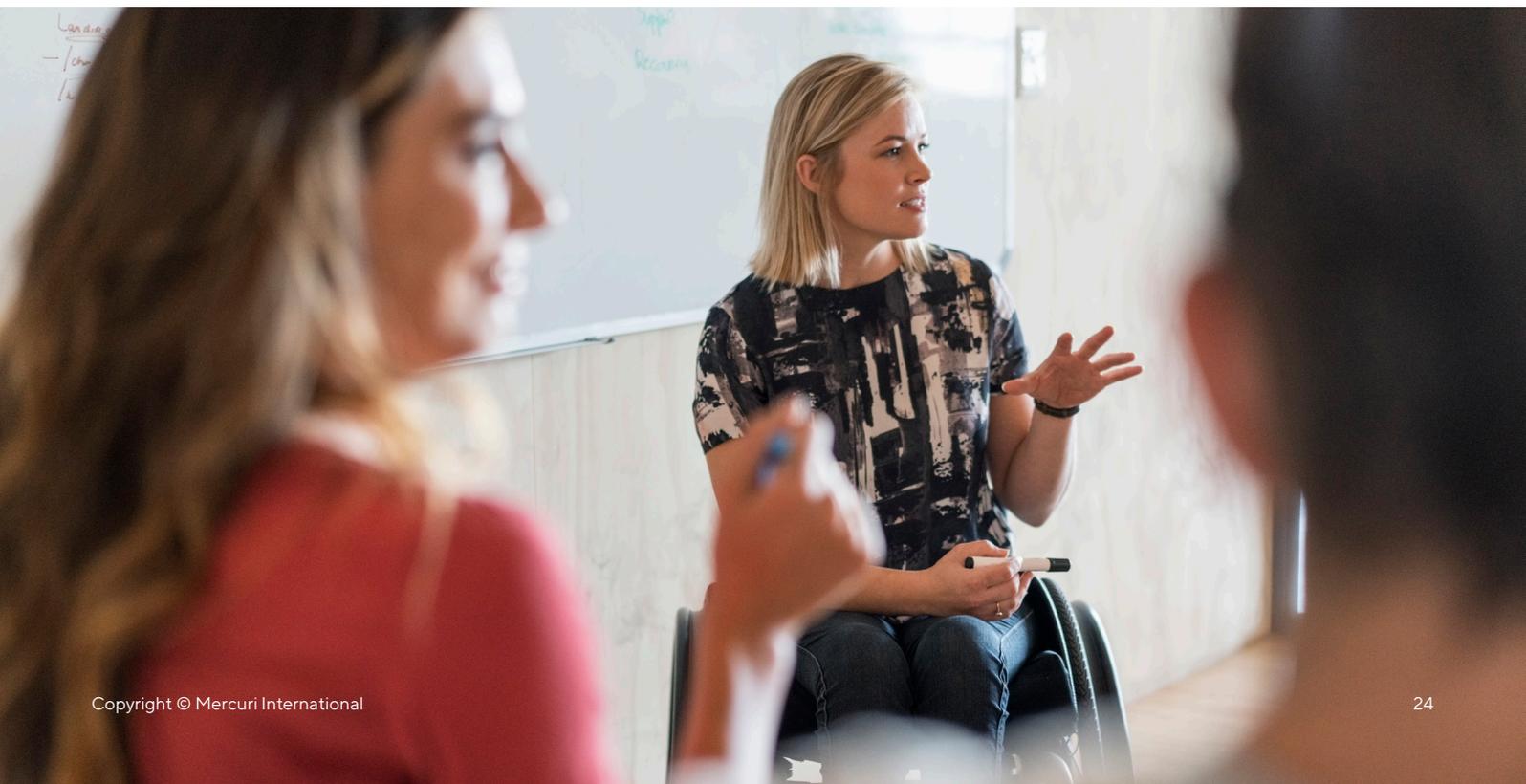
Key aspects of financial acumen in sales include:

- **Understanding key financial metrics:** Being familiar with key financial metrics such as ROI (return on investment), payback period, and total cost of ownership (TCO), and being able to discuss these concepts confidently with clients.
- **Calculating and communicating ROI:** Effectively calculating the ROI of your offering and communicating it in a clear and compelling way that resonates with the customer's financial goals.
- **Integrating legal and compliance considerations:** Understanding and addressing any legal or compliance considerations related to the financial aspects of the sale.
- **Connecting to business outcomes:** Clearly articulating how your products or services can help clients achieve their desired business outcomes, such as increased revenue, reduced costs, or improved efficiency.

Why this competence is on the rise:

- **Demand for measurable value:** Customers are increasingly demanding clear, measurable value from their investments. Financial acumen allows sales professionals to build stronger business cases for their solutions and demonstrate a tangible ROI.
- **Increased involvement of finance teams:** The role of finance teams in B2B purchasing decisions is expanding. A study found that 76% of buyers say their CFO/finance team has become more involved in provider evaluations over the past 24 months.³⁸ This highlights the need for sales professionals to be able to communicate effectively with finance stakeholders and address their financial concerns.
- **Focus on business value outcomes:** Buyers want to understand how your solutions will impact their bottom line. Forrester research shows that 75% of buyers want sellers to demonstrate how their products and services drive business value outcomes.³⁹ This emphasizes the importance of connecting your offerings to the customer's financial goals and demonstrating a clear return on investment.
- **Data-driven decision making:** The rise of data-driven decision-making in business means that sales professionals need to be able to use financial data and analytics to support their claims and build compelling business cases.

38 Forrester (2022): Generational Shifts Fundamentally Change B2B Buyer and Seller Dynamics
39 <https://www.mediafly.com/blog/forrester-advancing-beyond-powerpoints-to-value-selling/>



14. Social influence selling

Social influence selling involves leveraging social media and online platforms to build relationships, expand your network, and establish a strong personal brand. It's about engaging with potential customers in a meaningful way, providing valuable content, and positioning yourself as a trusted advisor in the digital space. In our survey, 35% of sales professionals indicated that this competency is important in their role.

In our survey it includes:

- **Building your personal brand:** Establishing a professional and engaging presence on platforms like LinkedIn, showcasing your expertise and building credibility.
- **Engaging with your audience:** Actively participating in online conversations, sharing valuable content, and connecting with potential customers on social media.
- **Creating relevant content:** Developing and sharing content that is relevant and valuable to your target audience, positioning yourself as a thought leader and building trust.
- **Generating leads:** Utilizing social media to identify and connect with potential customers, generating leads, and nurturing relationships that can lead to sales opportunities.

Why this competence is on the rise:

- **The importance of digital relationships:** Today, building relationships online is often a prerequisite for engaging with potential customers. Social media provides a platform for connecting with prospects, understanding their needs, and nurturing relationships before initiating direct sales conversations.
- **The rise of social selling:** Social selling has become an integral part of the modern sales process. LinkedIn, in particular, has emerged as a powerful tool for connecting with prospects, sharing insights, and building relationships. Research shows that 75% of B2B buyers use LinkedIn to research vendors.⁴⁰
- **Influencing decision-makers:** Social platforms play a significant role in shaping the opinions and decisions of key stakeholders. Studies have shown that 84% of CEOs and VPs use social media to inform their purchasing decisions. It also allows sales professionals to expand their reach and connect with a wider audience of potential customers. By actively engaging on social platforms, they can increase their visibility and establish themselves as thought leaders in their industry.

40 Source: IDC. Social Buying Meets Social Selling: How Trusted Networks Improve the Purchase Experience

41 <https://www.salesforce.com/news/stories/customer-engagement-research/>

15. Green advisory and compliance

While currently ranked as the least important competency by respondents in our study, with only 30% recognizing its significance, Green Advisory and Compliance is poised to become increasingly crucial in the future. This competency involves understanding and addressing clients' sustainability goals, integrating environmental considerations into sales discussions, and maintaining ethical and responsible practices throughout the sales process.

In our survey it includes:

- **Leading sustainability discussions:** Initiating conversations with clients about their sustainability goals and the environmental impact of their operations.
- **Communicating environmental benefits:** Clearly articulating how your products or services contribute to sustainability, reduce environmental impact, or support clients in achieving their environmental goals.
- **Aligning with client priorities:** Understanding clients' sustainability objectives and tailoring your offerings and solutions to align with their specific needs and priorities.
- **Providing industry insights:** Offering insights on relevant environmental regulations, trends, and best practices that can inform client decisions and support their sustainability initiatives.

Why this competence is on the rise:

- **Growing customer demand:** Consumers and businesses are increasingly prioritizing sustainability and making purchasing decisions based on environmental and ethical considerations. Salesforce's research shows that 78% of customers say environmental practices influence their decision to buy from a company.⁴¹
- **Impact on the bottom line:** Failing to address sustainability can negatively impact a company's bottom line. Salesforce's research also found that two-thirds (66%) of customers have stopped buying from companies whose values don't align with their own.
- **Increased regulatory scrutiny:** Governments and regulatory bodies are increasingly imposing stricter environmental regulations and reporting requirements. Sales professionals need to be knowledgeable about these regulations to advise clients and ensure compliance.
- **Competitive advantage:** Companies that prioritize sustainability and demonstrate a commitment to environmental responsibility can gain a competitive advantage in the marketplace. Sales professionals who can effectively communicate their company's sustainability initiatives can attract and retain environmentally conscious customers.

Analysis of sales confidence data

Introduction

Understanding the confidence levels of sales professionals across key competencies provides valuable insight into areas of strength, gaps requiring development, and emerging priorities. This analysis evaluates confidence levels in the 15 core sales competencies identified in our study and highlights actionable recommendations to enhance sales performance.

Overview of confidence levels

Sales professionals reported varying levels of confidence across the 15 competencies, which have been grouped into three categories:

- **High confidence:** Competencies where more than 40% of sales professionals feel confident.
- **Moderate confidence:** Areas where 25–40% report confidence.
- **Low confidence:** Skills where fewer than 25% feel confident.

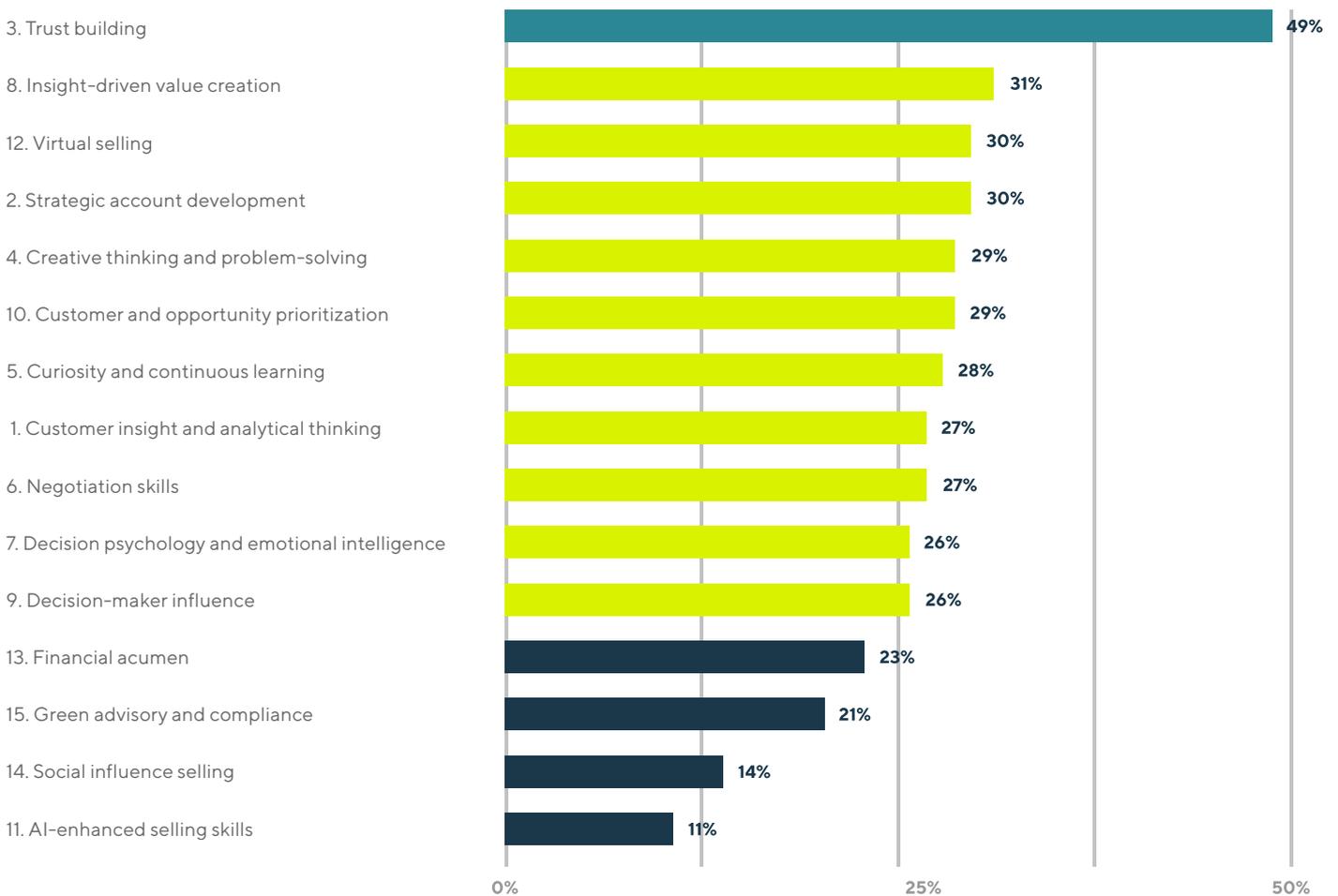


Figure 8: Percentage of salespeople who feel “highly confident” in their ability to perform specific skills. The chart highlights variations in confidence levels across 15 core competence areas. Light blue bar indicates “high confidence,” yellow bars represent “moderate confidence,” and blue bars show “low confidence.” N=591

High confidence areas

Trust and relationship-building (49% average confidence)

Sales professionals are most confident in their ability to build trust with clients. This includes demonstrating transparency, empathy, and aligning with authentic values to foster long-term relationships. These results highlight the strong emphasis on relationship-building and trust as central to B2B sales success.

Key insight: Trust-building skills are well integrated into sales routines, contributing to higher confidence levels.

Actionable recommendation: Reinforce trust-building as a core competency while integrating these skills into virtual and digital interactions to align with evolving buyer preferences.

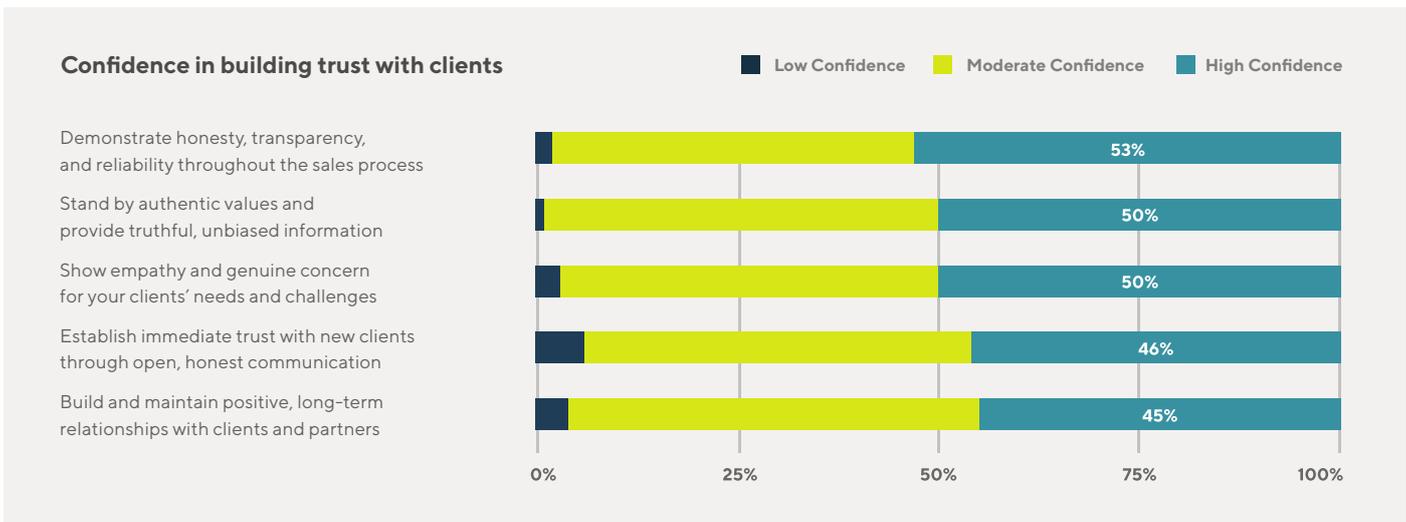


Figure 9: Percentage of salespeople reporting “low,” “moderate,” or “high” confidence in their ability to build trust with clients. The average confidence level across all categories is 31%. n=591.



Moderate confidence areas

Competencies in this category represent foundational but evolving skills that require further training to unlock their full potential.

Insight-Driven Value Creation (31%)

Sales professionals feel confident differentiating their offerings (39%) but struggle with educating and challenging customers (29%) and sharing insights based on research and trends (24%).

Key challenge: Translating insights into actionable customer value remains a development area.

Actionable recommendation: Invest in training programs that enhance the ability to use data and trends to educate customers and influence buying decisions.

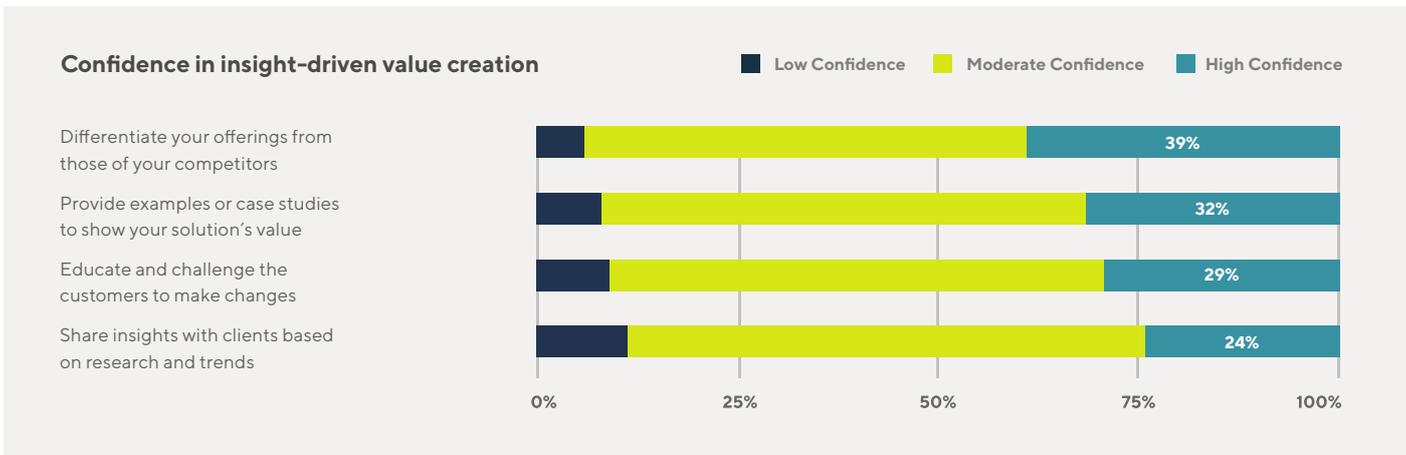


Figure 10: Percentage of salespeople reporting “low,” “moderate,” or “high” confidence in their ability to share insights and create value for the customer. The average confidence level across all categories is 31%. n=591.

Virtual selling (30%)

While 41% feel confident using tools like Zoom, confidence drops to 29% for building trust remotely and 25% for managing the sales process virtually.

Key challenge: Relationship-building and effective online engagement remain underdeveloped.

Actionable recommendation: Focus training on building rapport and presenting compellingly in virtual settings, including negotiation and navigating the sales process online.

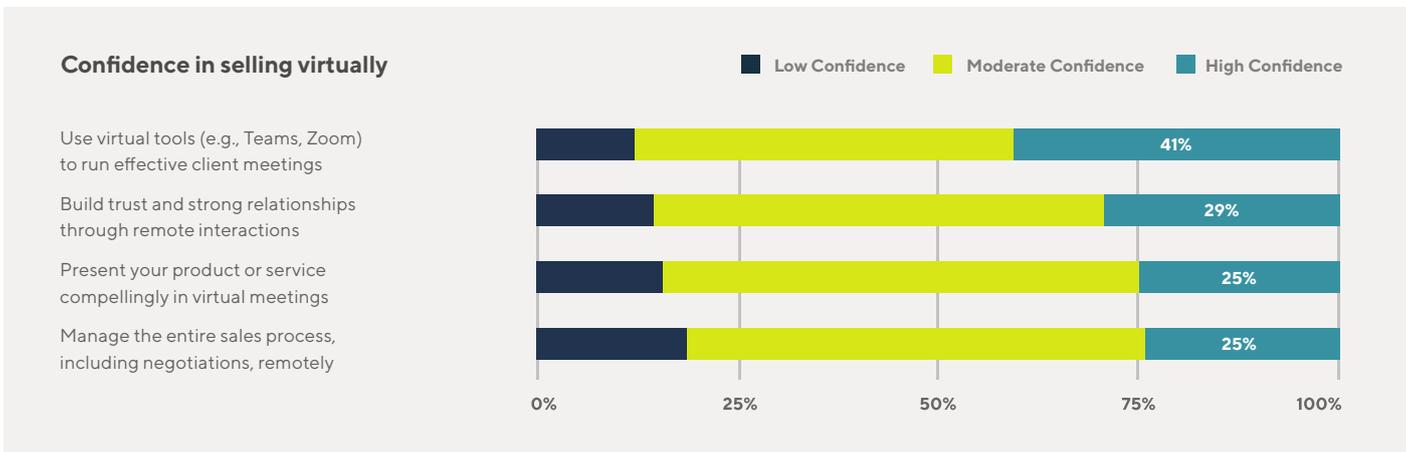


Figure 11: Percentage of salespeople reporting “low,” “moderate,” or “high” confidence in their ability to interact virtually with clients. The average confidence level across all categories is 30%. n=591.

Strategic account management (30%)

Confidence is highest in identifying new opportunities within accounts (35%) but falls to 26% for developing strategic plans.

Key challenge: Long-term planning and aligning with client goals require more focus.

Actionable recommendation: Provide tools and frameworks for strategic account planning and aligning sales approaches with customer objectives.

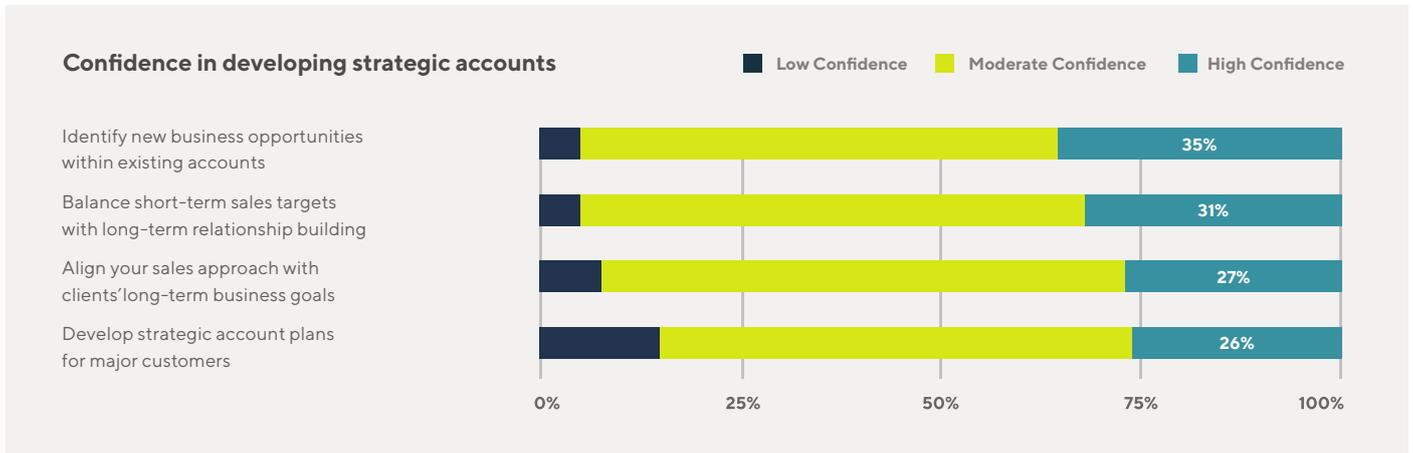


Figure 12: Percentage of sales professionals reporting “low,” “moderate,” or “high” confidence in their ability to develop strategic accounts. The average confidence level across all categories is 30%. n=591.

Creative thinking and problem-solving (29%)

While 33% feel confident in co-creating solutions, only 22% are confident in challenging customers’ current approaches.

Key challenge: Constructively challenging clients is critical for customer value-creation but is underutilized.

Actionable recommendation: Encourage training on delivering insight-driven challenges to elevate client conversations.

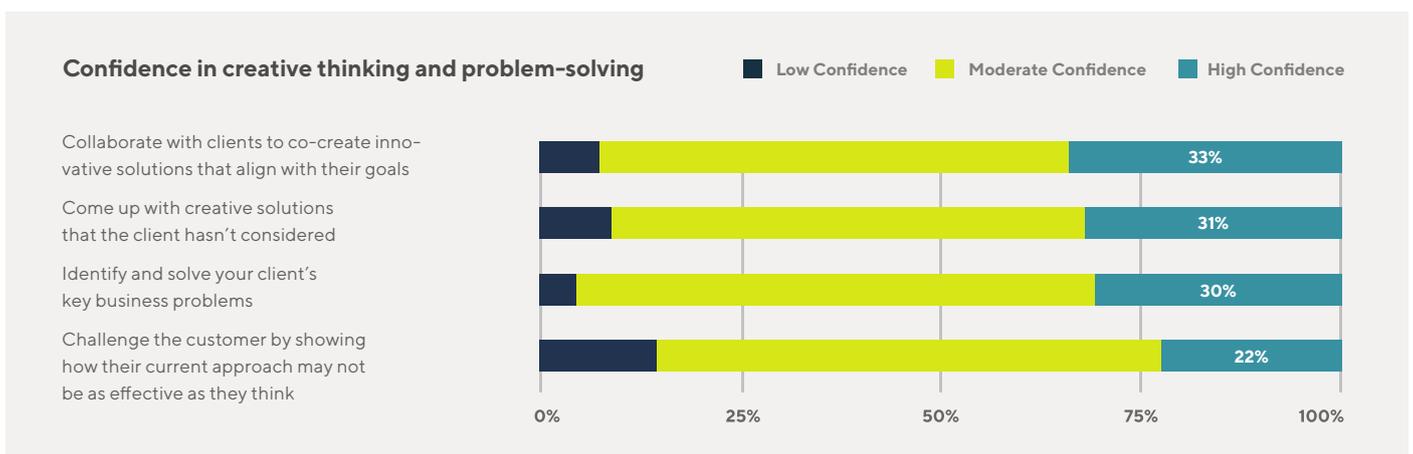


Figure 13: Percentage of sales professionals reporting “low,” “moderate,” or “high” confidence in their ability to think creatively and solve customer problems. The average confidence level across all categories is 29%. n=591.

Customer and opportunity prioritization (29%)

Confidence is moderate in identifying promising customers (33%) but drops to 24% in disqualifying low-potential opportunities.

Key challenge: Effectively qualifying and prioritizing leads is a key growth area.

Actionable recommendation: Enhance skills in early-stage qualification and focus on potential-driven prioritization techniques.

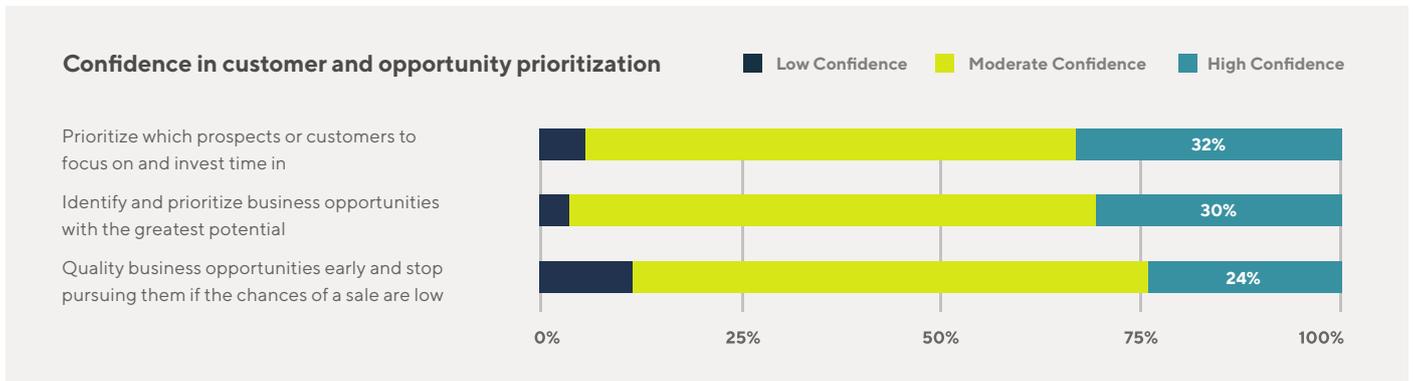


Figure 14: Percentage of sales professionals reporting “low,” “moderate,” or “high” confidence in their ability to prioritize which prospects and business opportunities to focus on. The average confidence level across all categories is 29%. n=591.

Curiosity and continuous learning (28%)

Confidence in curiosity and continuous learning varies significantly. While 34% of sales professionals feel confident in embracing feedback for continuous improvement, only 25% are confident in adopting new sales technologies, such as AI, and 24% in adapting to changing customer needs and market conditions.

Key challenge: Staying agile in dynamic markets and adopting emerging technologies remain key obstacles.

Actionable recommendation: Provide targeted training on technology adoption and market adaptability to enhance resilience and overall effectiveness.

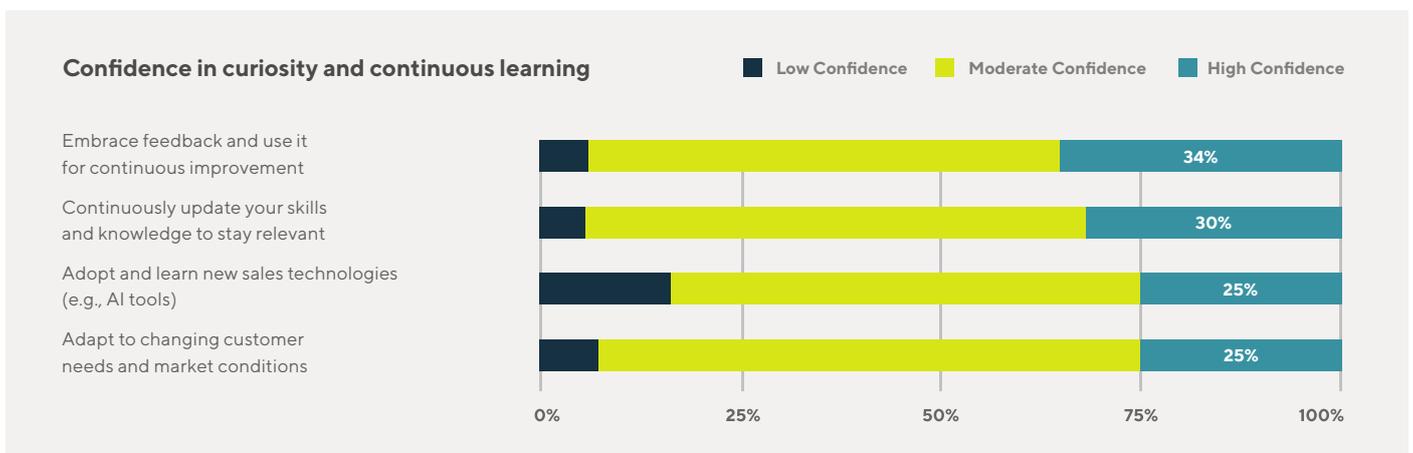


Figure 15: Percentage of sales professionals reporting “low,” “moderate,” or “high” confidence in curiosity and continuous learning. The average confidence level across all categories is 28%. n=591.

Customer insight and analytical thinking (27%)

Confidence in understanding customer challenges and delivering insights is moderate, with 34% feeling confident in analyzing customer-specific challenges. However, only 24% feel confident in providing insights into long-term goals, and 23% in anticipating future challenges and initiatives.

Key challenge: Long-term strategic insights and proactive advisory capabilities are underdeveloped.

Actionable recommendation: Invest in training programs to improve customer understanding and advisory skills, particularly in forward-looking analysis and long-term planning.

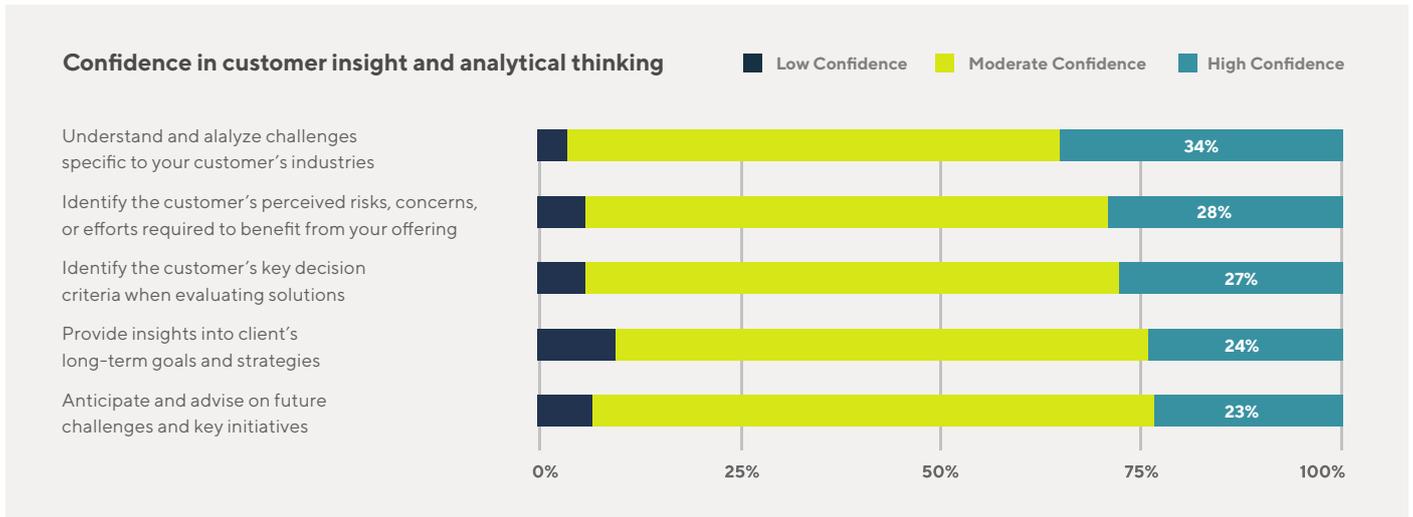


Figure 16: Percentage of sales professionals reporting "low," "moderate," or "high" confidence in their ability to think analytically and analyze customer challenges. The average confidence level across all categories is 28%. n=591.

Negotiation skills (27%)

Confidence in negotiation varies, with 30% feeling confident in addressing ethical considerations and 29% in managing conflicts. However, only 24% feel confident in applying creative negotiation techniques, and just 22% in leveraging psychological insights during negotiations.

Key challenge: Advanced skills like creativity and psychological understanding in negotiations are lacking.

Actionable recommendation: Focus on training for creative negotiation strategies and the application of psychological principles to improve negotiation outcomes.

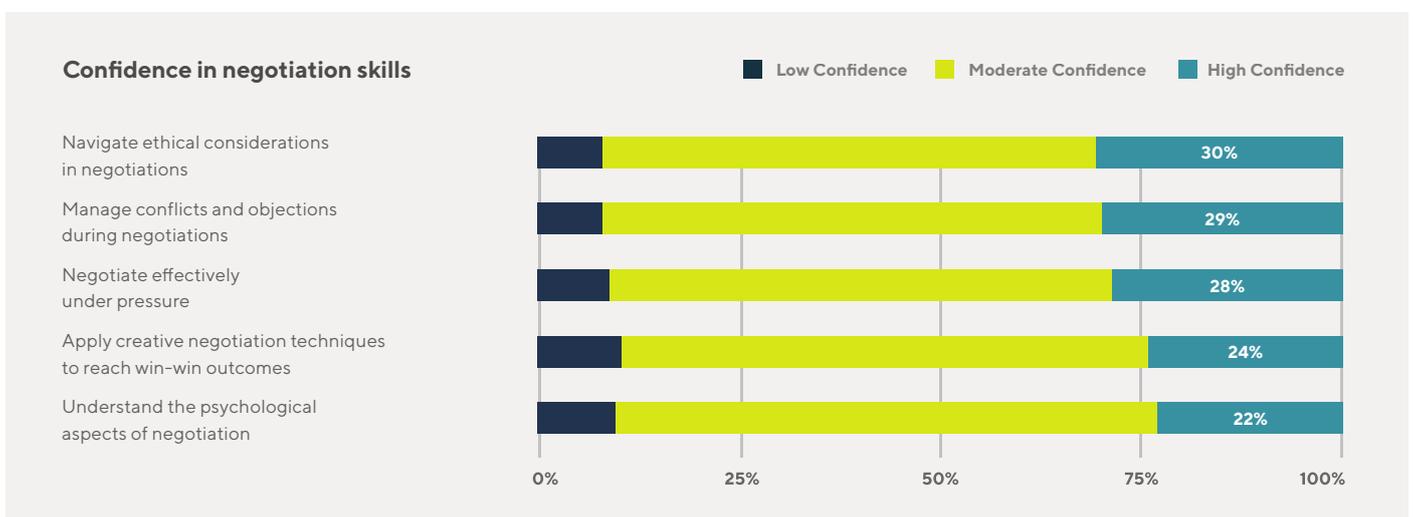


Figure 17: Percentage of sales professionals reporting "low," "moderate," or "high" confidence in their ability to negotiate with customers. The average confidence level across all categories is 28%. n=591.

Decision psychology and emotional intelligence (26%)

Confidence in emotional intelligence and decision psychology is limited, with 33% feeling confident in adapting communication styles to emotional cues. However, only 19% feel confident applying psychological insights in sales interactions or how psychological principles influence B2B decision-making.

Key challenge: Deeper psychological understanding and advanced trust-building techniques are underutilized.

Actionable recommendation: Provide training in advanced emotional intelligence and psychological insights to strengthen client relationships and drive better outcomes.

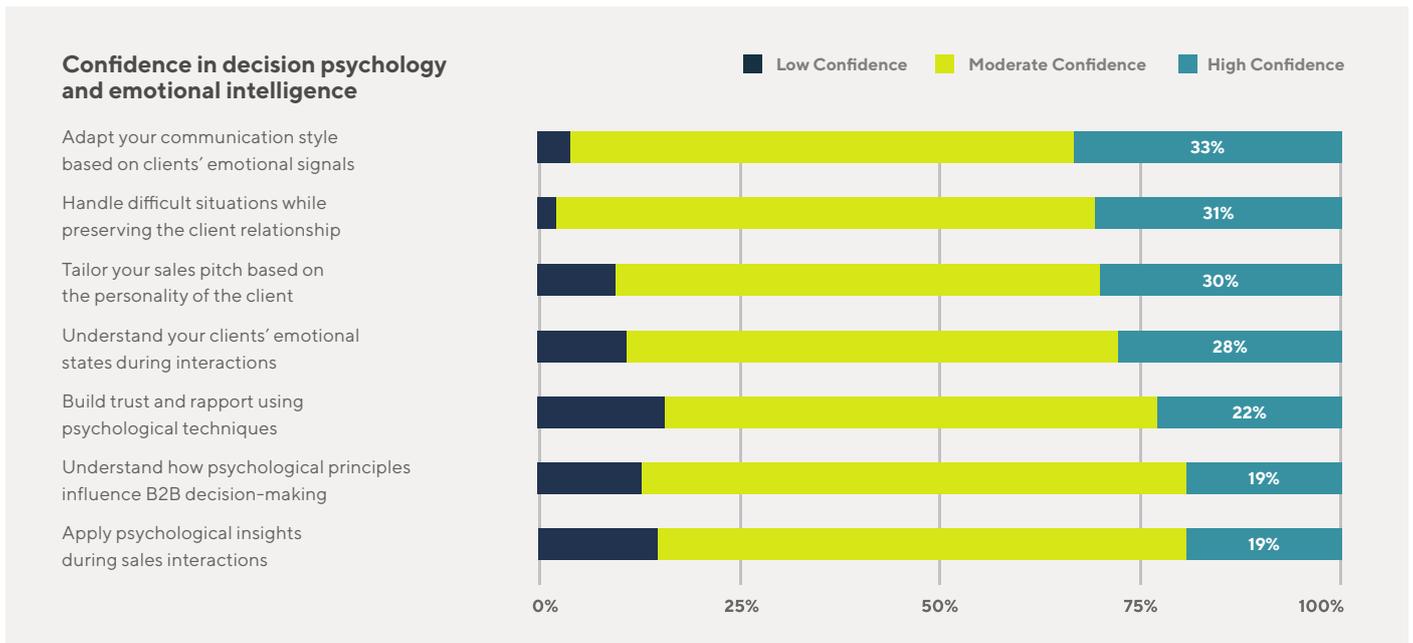


Figure 18: Percentage of sales professionals reporting "low," "moderate," or "high" confidence in their ability to understand and apply the psychological aspects of selling and decision-making. The average confidence level across all categories is 28%. n=591.

Decision-maker influence (26%)

Confidence in influencing decision-makers is low, with only 26% of sales professionals feeling confident in identifying key stakeholders and slightly fewer (25%) confident in effectively engaging and aligning them.

Key challenge: Navigating complex decision-making processes and aligning diverse stakeholders remain significant barriers.

Actionable recommendation: Offer frameworks and tools for stakeholder mapping, alignment strategies, and influence techniques to navigate organizational complexities effectively.

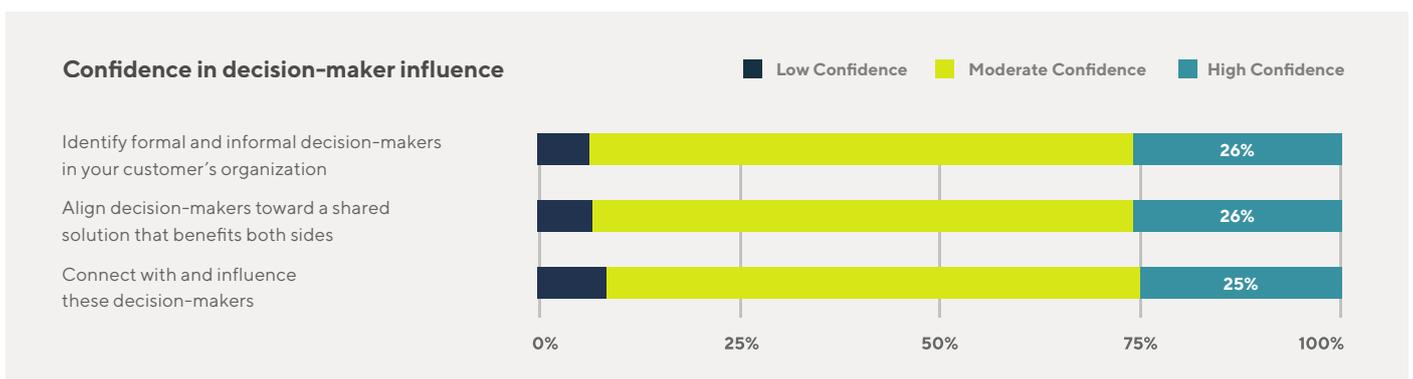


Figure 19: Percentage of sales professionals reporting "low," "moderate," or "high" confidence in their ability to identify, connect with, align, and influence decision-makers within customer organizations. The average confidence level across all categories is 26%.

Low confidence areas

The lowest scores, all under 25 percent, highlight areas where sales professionals feel the least confident. These areas reflect emerging demands in the sales profession:

Financial acumen (23%)

Confidence in financial acumen is low, with 32% of sales professionals feeling confident in linking products or services to clients’ desired business outcomes, such as increasing revenue or reducing costs. However, only 22% are confident in understanding and discussing key financial metrics, 21% in calculating and communicating ROI, and just 19% in addressing legal and compliance considerations during sales discussions.

Actionable recommendation: Provide targeted training on ROI calculation, financial metrics, and legal considerations to enhance sales professionals’ ability to engage clients on business-critical topics and demonstrate clear financial value.

Key challenge: Sales professionals lack the financial literacy needed to discuss ROI, financial metrics, and compliance effectively with clients.



Figure 22: Percentage of sales professionals reporting “low,” “moderate,” or “high” confidence in their ability to apply social influence selling skills. The average confidence level across all categories is 14%. n=591.

Green advisory and compliance (21%)

Only 24% feel confident discussing sustainability benefits, while 19% can advise on environmental regulations.

Actionable recommendation: Provide education on sustainability trends, regulatory frameworks, and how to align offerings with client environmental goals.

Key challenge: Sustainability discussions are becoming essential, yet skills remain underdeveloped.



Figure 23: Percentage of sales professionals reporting “low,” “moderate,” or “high” confidence in their ability to apply AI-enhanced selling skills. The average confidence level across all categories is 14%. n=591.

Social influence selling (14%)

Confidence in social influence selling is strikingly low across all evaluated areas. Only 15% of sales professionals report high confidence in building their personal brand on platforms like LinkedIn. Confidence further decreases to 14% in using social media to generate leads and new business opportunities. Even fewer (13%) feel confident in effectively engaging with their target audience on social media or creating relevant, engaging content for clients on LinkedIn.

Key challenge: Social selling is a critical skill gap in a digital-first sales environment.

Actionable recommendation: Train sales professionals on personal branding, social engagement, and content creation tailored to platforms like LinkedIn.

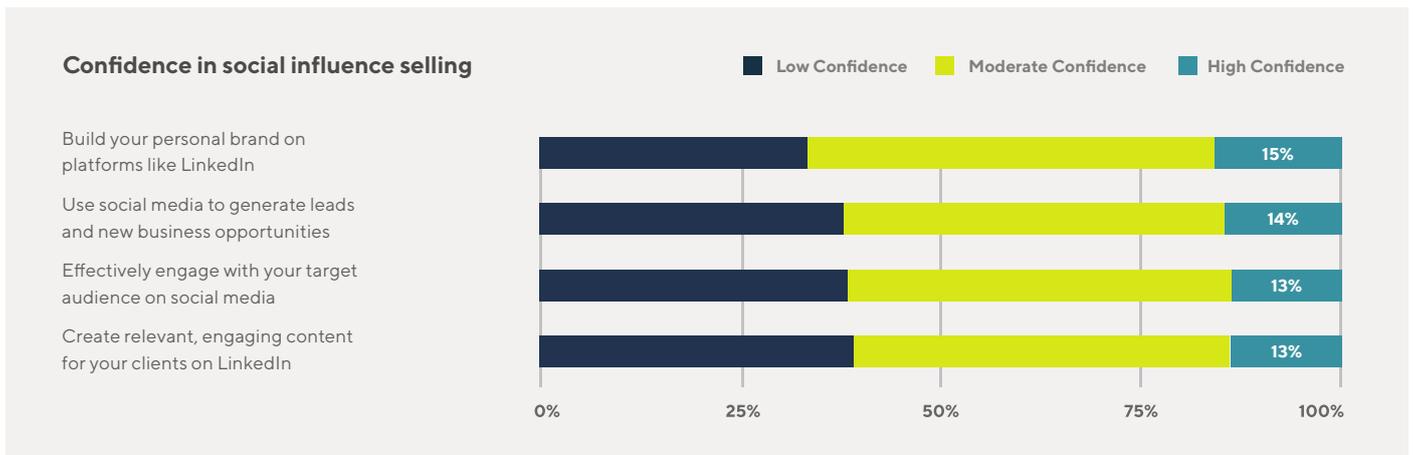


Figure 20: Percentage of sales professionals reporting “low,” “moderate,” or “high” confidence in their ability to apply financial acumen skills in client interactions. The average confidence level across all categories is 23%. n=591.

AI-enhanced selling skills (11%)

Confidence in AI-enhanced selling skills is notably low across all assessed areas. Only 15% feel confident using AI for document creation, while just 9% feel confident leveraging AI for lead analytics.

Key challenge: AI adoption in sales remains in its infancy.

Actionable recommendation: Introduce hands-on AI training to build familiarity with tools for data analysis, customer insights, and task automation.

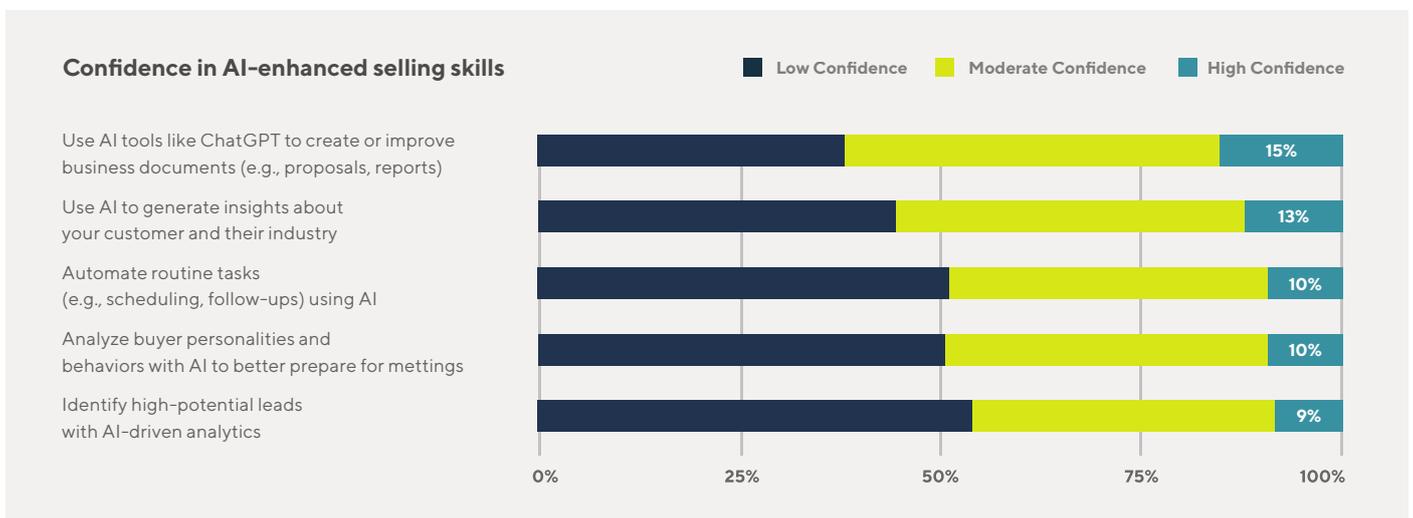


Figure 20: Percentage of sales professionals reporting “low,” “moderate,” or “high” confidence in their ability to apply financial acumen skills in client interactions. The average confidence level across all categories is 23%. n=591.

Top performers vs. underperformers

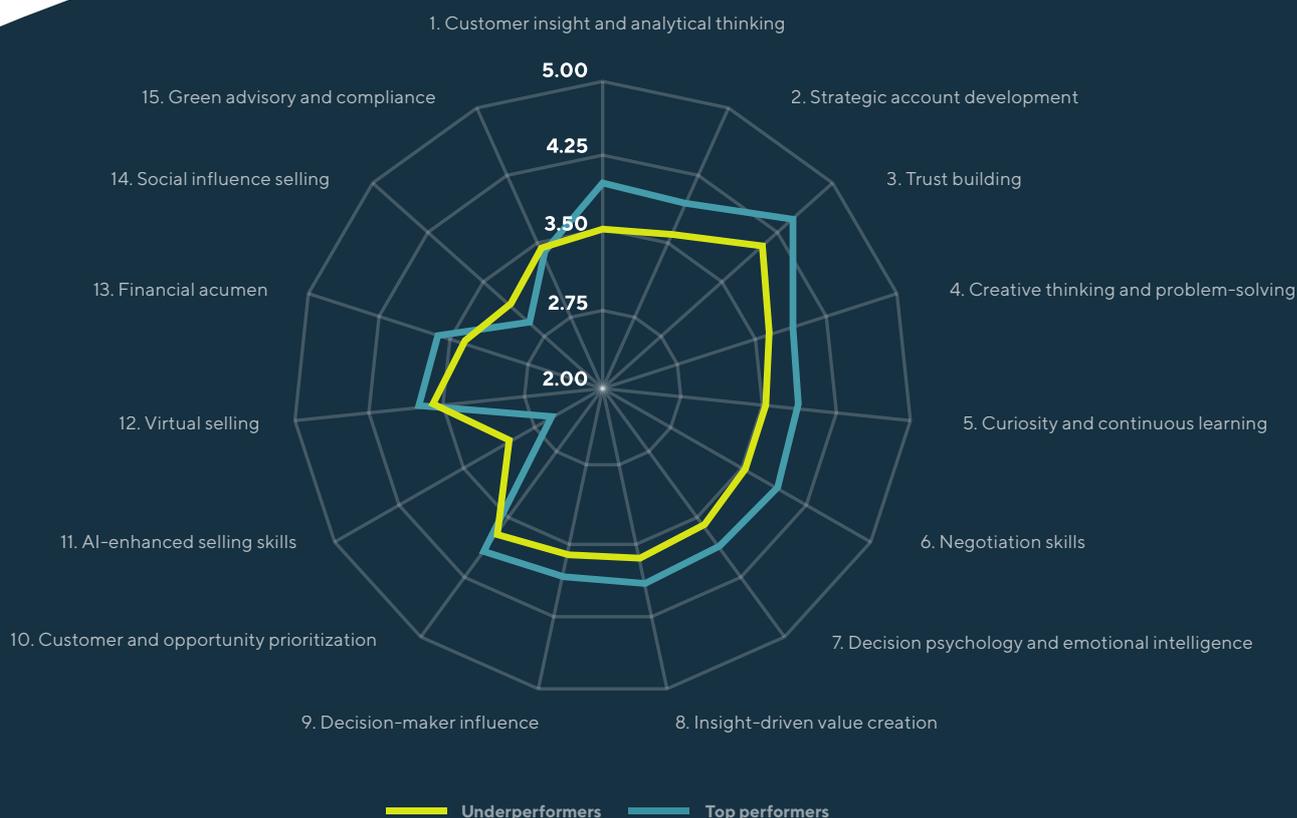
The radar chart illustrates the confidence levels of sales professionals across 15 key sales competencies, segmented into two groups: top performers and underperformers. These categories are based on self-assessments gathered through the survey question: “If your manager were to rate your performance, what do you think their assessment would be?”

- **Underperformers (yellow line):** This group represents sales professionals who rated themselves as either “low performer (frequently falls short of expectations; room for improvement)” or “needs improvement (occasionally falls short of expectations).”
- **Top performers (light blue line):** This group includes respondents who identified as either “strong performer (regularly meets and sometimes exceeds expectations)” or “top performer (consistently exceeds expectations).”

The chart ranks competencies based on their importance for sales success now and in the future. The outer edge represents higher confidence scores, and the inner area indicates lower confidence levels. Key competencies such as customer insight and analytical thinking and analytical thinking, strategic account development, and trust building are positioned as the highest critical competencies for sales success.

Top performers consistently report higher confidence levels

The comparison reveals a clear trend: top performers consistently report higher confidence levels across most sales competencies compared to underperformers. This result suggests that confidence in core areas such as customer insight, trust-building, and problem-solving correlates with higher performance ratings. However, there are notable exceptions where underperformers report slightly higher confidence, particularly in AI-enhanced skills, social influence selling, and green advisory and compliance. These anomalies provide valuable insights into potential differences in focus, priorities, and perceptions between the two groups.



Why underperformers score higher in specific areas

AI-enhanced skills

Underperformers report higher confidence in using AI tools and digital technologies. This could stem from a reliance on AI as a way to compensate for gaps in traditional sales skills. AI-driven tools may offer structure and guidance, making them appealing to less experienced sales professionals. On the other hand, top performers may rely more on their honed expertise and view AI as a supplementary resource rather than a central tool. This suggests a potential underutilization of AI among top performers that could be addressed through training.

Social influence selling

Higher confidence among underperformers in this area might reflect greater familiarity or comfort with social media platforms like LinkedIn. This could be due to demographic factors, with younger sales professionals potentially overrepresented in the underperformer category. Additionally, social influence selling often focuses on digital engagement and content creation, which may feel less complex than face-to-face relationship-building, an area where top performers excel.

Green advisory and compliance

The slightly higher confidence of underperformers in this area could indicate that they perceive sustainability discussions as more straightforward, often revolving around general knowledge or compliance checklists. In contrast, top performers might approach these conversations with greater depth, aligning sustainability initiatives with broader client strategies, which can be more complex and nuanced. This disparity suggests the need to standardize sustainability training to ensure it delivers value at all levels.





Chapter 3

| Analysis and recommendations

Analysis and recommendations

1. Invest in reskilling and upskilling

The data clearly highlights an urgent need for continuous learning and skill development within the sales profession. As technological advancements, particularly AI and automation, reshape the industry, 44% of workers' skills are expected to be disrupted within the next five years. Despite this, sales professionals reported receiving only 4 days of training annually, with 20% receiving none at all.

Recommendations:

- **Prioritize targeted training programs:** Invest in structured reskilling and upskilling initiatives focused on emerging competencies such as AI-enhanced selling, virtual engagement, and insight-driven value creation.
- **Integrate lifelong learning culture:** Introduce micro-learning opportunities (e.g., weekly 1-hour sessions) to align with the shrinking half-life of skills, ensuring consistent development without overwhelming schedules.
- **AI-specific training:** Bridge the confidence gap in AI adoption by providing practical workshops on tools for lead analytics, customer insights, and proposal creation.

2. Develop customer insight and analytical thinking

While recognized as the most critical competency (88%), only 27% of sales professionals report high confidence in this area. Salespeople excel in understanding customer challenges but struggle to anticipate long-term needs and deliver proactive insights.

Recommendations:

- **Data-driven sales enablement:** Equip sales teams with analytical tools and customer intelligence platforms to uncover trends and future challenges.
- **Customer-centric training:** Shift training focus toward consultative selling and analytical thinking to enable deeper customer engagement beyond surface-level interactions.
- **Scenario-based exercises:** Implement training modules where sales professionals practice interpreting customer data and advising on long-term strategies.



3. Strengthen strategic account development

With 78% of respondents emphasizing the importance of strategic account management, the findings reveal gaps in creating long-term plans and aligning with client goals.

Recommendations:

- **Account-based sales frameworks:** Implement structured processes for strategic account planning, including opportunity mapping, client goal alignment, and relationship development.
- **Collaborative account reviews:** Conduct regular joint planning sessions between sales teams and key clients to identify shared growth opportunities.
- **Balancing short and long-term goals:** Train sales teams to strategically manage immediate targets while fostering sustainable, long-term client relationships.

4. Close the trust gap

Trust remains a cornerstone of sales success, with 78% recognizing its importance. While confidence in basic trust-building is high, deeper psychological skills and virtual trust-building require attention.

Recommendations:

- **Enhance emotional intelligence (EI):** Introduce EI training to strengthen skills in adapting communication, managing conflicts, and understanding decision psychology.
- **Virtual trust workshops:** Provide tailored training for building rapport and maintaining trust in remote selling environments.
- **Case-based learning:** Incorporate real-world trust-building scenarios, including difficult client situations, to improve practical application.

5. Improve confidence in emerging competencies

The survey highlights low confidence in emerging skills such as social influence selling (14%), AI-enhanced selling (11%), and sustainability advisory (21%). These competencies will become increasingly vital as the B2B sales environment evolves.

Recommendations:

- **Digital selling mastery:** Upskill sales professionals in social selling techniques, including personal branding, lead generation via LinkedIn, and content creation.
- **AI integration programs:** Create dedicated training modules for using AI tools to automate tasks, analyze data, and generate insights. Position AI as a complement to human expertise, not a replacement.
- **Sustainability consulting:** Provide foundational sustainability training to prepare sales teams to engage in client discussions about green initiatives and compliance.

6. Enhance sales confidence through practical application

Sales professionals report moderate confidence (25-40%) in core areas like customer value creation, virtual selling, and negotiation skills. Bridging these gaps requires a focus on real-world application and reinforcement.

Recommendations:

- **Simulated sales scenarios:** Integrate role-playing exercises and simulations to improve confidence in key areas such as negotiation, creative problem-solving, and strategic planning.
- **Peer coaching and feedback:** Implement structured peer learning programs where high performers mentor underperformers to share best practices.
- **Performance measurement:** Track confidence and skill development through regular assessments and link results to real-world performance improvements.



7. Leverage top performer insights

The radar analysis highlights a clear correlation between confidence and performance. Top performers consistently excel in areas such as trust-building, customer insights, and problem-solving, while emerging skills like AI and social selling present opportunities for growth across all performance levels.

Recommendations:

- **Peer-to-peer learning:** Facilitate knowledge-sharing sessions where top performers mentor teams on core competencies, while creating opportunities for collective learning on emerging skills like AI and digital tools.
- **Identify success drivers:** Analyze the behaviors, strategies, and habits of top performers to develop scalable best practices that can be implemented across the team.
- **Customized development plans:** Address individual skill gaps with tailored training programs and targeted resources designed to elevate performance at all levels.

8. Embed a modern sales competency framework

The study's identification of 15 core competencies provides a strong foundation for driving sales success. However, the low confidence levels across many critical areas indicate that a structured framework is required.

Recommendations:

- **Sales competency playbook:** Develop a playbook that outlines behaviors, skills, and tools required for each competency. Provide clear guidelines for their application in daily sales activities.
- **Continuous skill assessments:** Implement regular self-assessments and manager evaluations to track progress and identify new development needs.
- **Holistic development strategy:** Combine formal training, on-the-job learning, and coaching to ensure well-rounded skill development aligned with evolving market demands.

9. Align sales teams with the right sales logics

Research from Mercuri International reveals that companies allowing their sales teams to operate across multiple sales logics – traditional, complex, and distributed – suffer from reduced profitability, lower effectiveness, more failed deals, and higher customer dissatisfaction.⁴² Achieving profitable sales growth requires organizing the sales force by assigning the right salesperson to the right customer, for the right deal, with the right offering, and the right organizational support.

Our study highlights that this is a significant challenge, as approximately 36% of sales professionals operate within two or more sales logics simultaneously. The result is that many companies today face a high proportion of semi-complex deals – transactions that are inefficient and unprofitable.

In the study, sales professionals were asked to classify the types of sales they are involved in (multiple options allowed):

- **Traditional sales** – Small-scale deals requiring no more than 1-5 interactions with the customer. The sales cycle is typically completed within days or weeks.
- **Solution sales** – Complex deals involving multiple stakeholders throughout the buying process. The sales cycle often spans several months.
- **Project sales** – Large-scale deals structured as distinct projects, requiring a team of salespeople and specialists. The sales cycle can extend to months or even years.

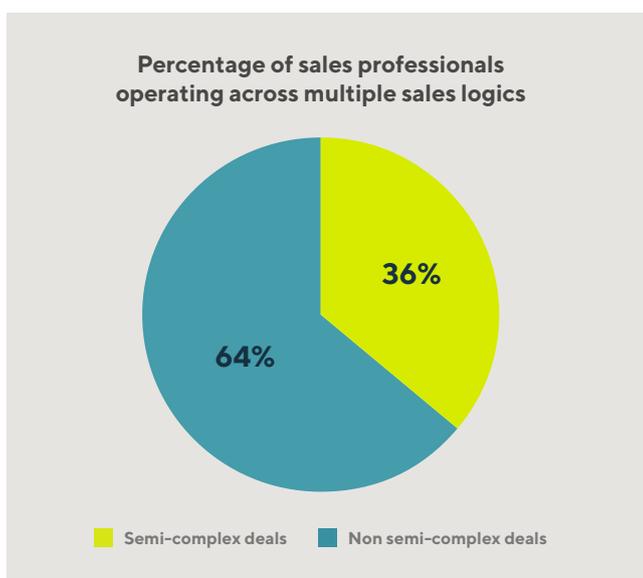


Figure 25: The pie chart illustrates the proportion of semi-complex deals, defined as sales professionals operating across two or more sales logics. The findings show that 36% of sales professionals fall into the semi-complex category, while 64% do not.

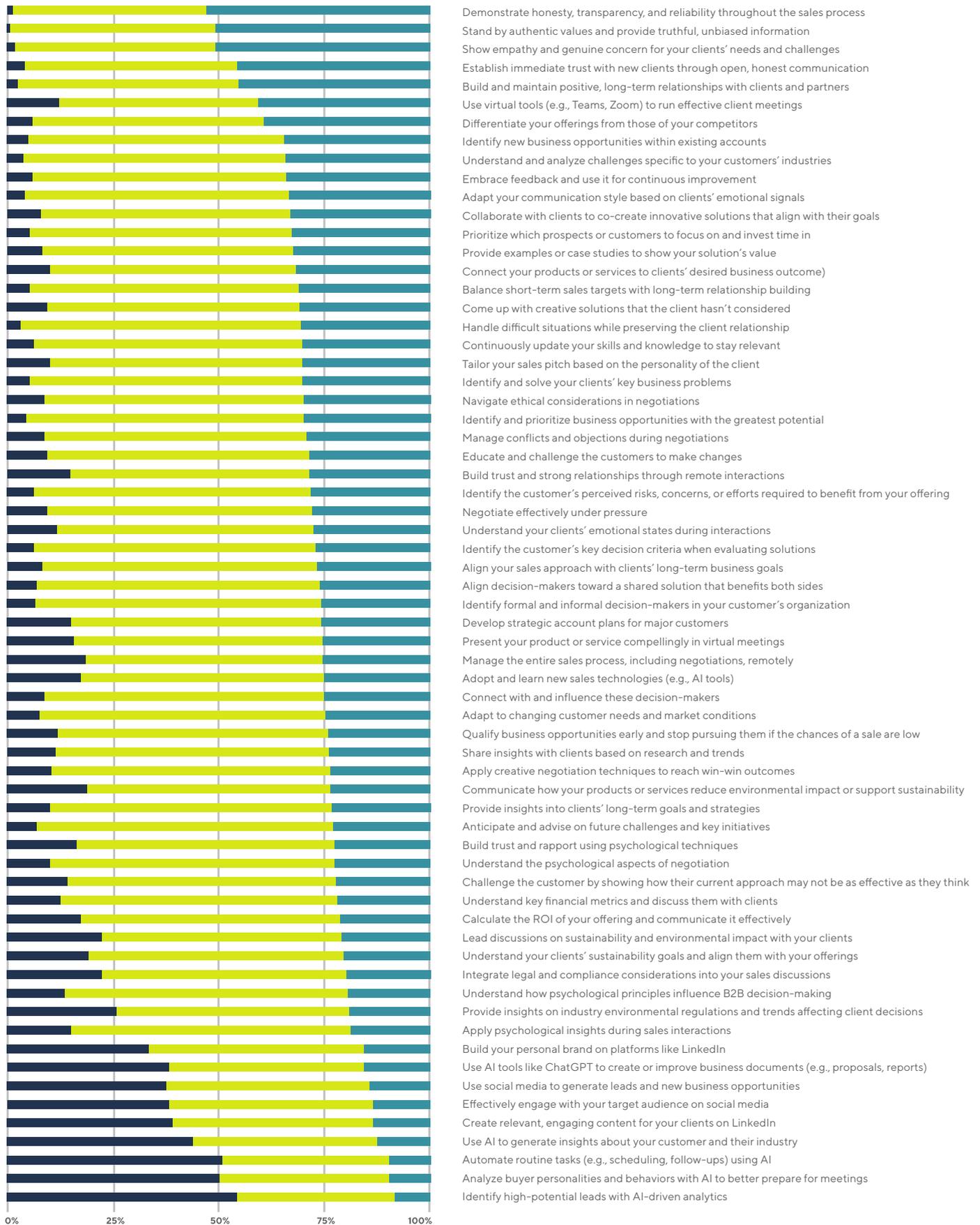
Recommendations:

- **Sales logic segmentation:** Organize sales teams according to the specific sales logic that aligns with their strengths and the complexity of customer buying behaviors.
- **Targeted role allocation:** Ensure the right salesperson, with the right skills and approach, is assigned to the right customer, deal, and offering to maximize effectiveness.
- **Strategic support systems:** Provide tailored tools, processes, and coaching to support each sales logic, enabling teams to optimize performance and profitability.
- **Streamlined focus:** Avoid spreading salespeople across multiple logics. By refining roles, companies can increase efficiency and drive sustainable growth.

This alignment will empower sales teams to deliver targeted solutions, enhance productivity, and achieve profitable sales growth.

Appendix

Total Ranking of Confidence in 64 Core Skills



About Mercuri International

Mercuri International are the sales training experts, empowering companies in over 50 countries. Our training is built around an organisation's specific needs, while our experts on the ground ensure that real-world skills are effectively implemented. We give your people the support and coaching they need to thrive - and ensure your company enjoys sustainable growth.

At Mercuri International Research, we conduct independent research to gain more facts and knowledge about profitable sales growth.

For more information visit our website:

www.mercuri.net



A photograph of a middle-aged man with grey hair and blue eyes, wearing a maroon sweater over a white collared shirt. He is looking towards a woman whose back is to the camera. The background is a bright, out-of-focus office or business setting.

Grow your people
Grow your business

