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B2B Tech Buying Teams Are Struggling: Here's How to Guide Them

Garrett Astler

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B2B Tech Buying Teams Are Struggling: Here's How to Guide Them

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By Analyst(s): Garrett Astler

Most enterprise business departments are inexperienced buyers of software who find themselves in long purchase cycles that end in regret. To guide buying behavior, product leaders need dynamic messaging and content strategies calibrated to the buying experience level of each prospect.

Overview

Key Findings

- The process of enterprise technology buying is prolonged and results in high dissatisfaction for most organizations. According to the 2022 Gartner Functional Business Buyers Survey of over 3,000 business leaders, the average tech buying cycle spans over 17 months and 81% of buyers go on to express purchase regret.
- Buying teams face a number of common challenges that are beyond the direct influence of sellers. For example, changes in scope causing additional research and the buying team discovering “surprise steps” needed to complete the purchase are observed to cause significant delays in 76% and 73% of purchases, respectively.
- When comparing practices of buying teams that report no purchase regret with those that report high regret, the no-regret buyers consume more content like implementation guides, checklists and product roadmaps.

Recommendations

Product leaders seeking to accelerate sales cycles and reduce the risk of purchase regret should:

- Encourage sellers to expand the discovery process by incorporating lines of inquiry designed to reveal the prospect's level of technology buying experience.
- Equip sellers with messaging and content strategies calibrated to the buying team's level of experience by using the Gartner Tech Buying Diagnostic Grid.

Introduction

For most enterprise business professionals, the experience of purchasing and adopting technology is quite poor. Despite tech providers using sophisticated tools and tactics to advertise and sell their technology, the 2022 Gartner Functional Business Buyers Survey indicates tech **buying cycles average over 17 months** and **four out of five buyers express regret** after their purchase. ¹

Product leaders need to acknowledge an uncomfortable truth to improve the B2B tech buying experience: even the most differentiated products with highly targeted messaging fail when prospects are unable to navigate their buying jobs to be done. As long as buying teams struggle to identify their business problems, perform solution exploration, build requirements and generate consensus along the way, we will continue to see long sales cycles frequently leading to regret. The product is less important than the buyer's ability to evaluate, purchase and adopt it. The product is a means to an end, a vehicle to an outcome. Prospective buying teams need guidance to understand the product's impact on the business outcome(s) they seek.

This research explains a method for product leaders to guide tech buying teams toward a faster purchase while limiting the risk of becoming a regretful customer. It advocates for an expansion of the sales discovery process to explore the prospect's buying experience. Then, it offers the Tech Buying Diagnostic Grid as a tool for discerning appropriate messaging and enablement strategy, no matter how inexperienced or advanced the prospective buying team may be.

Analysis

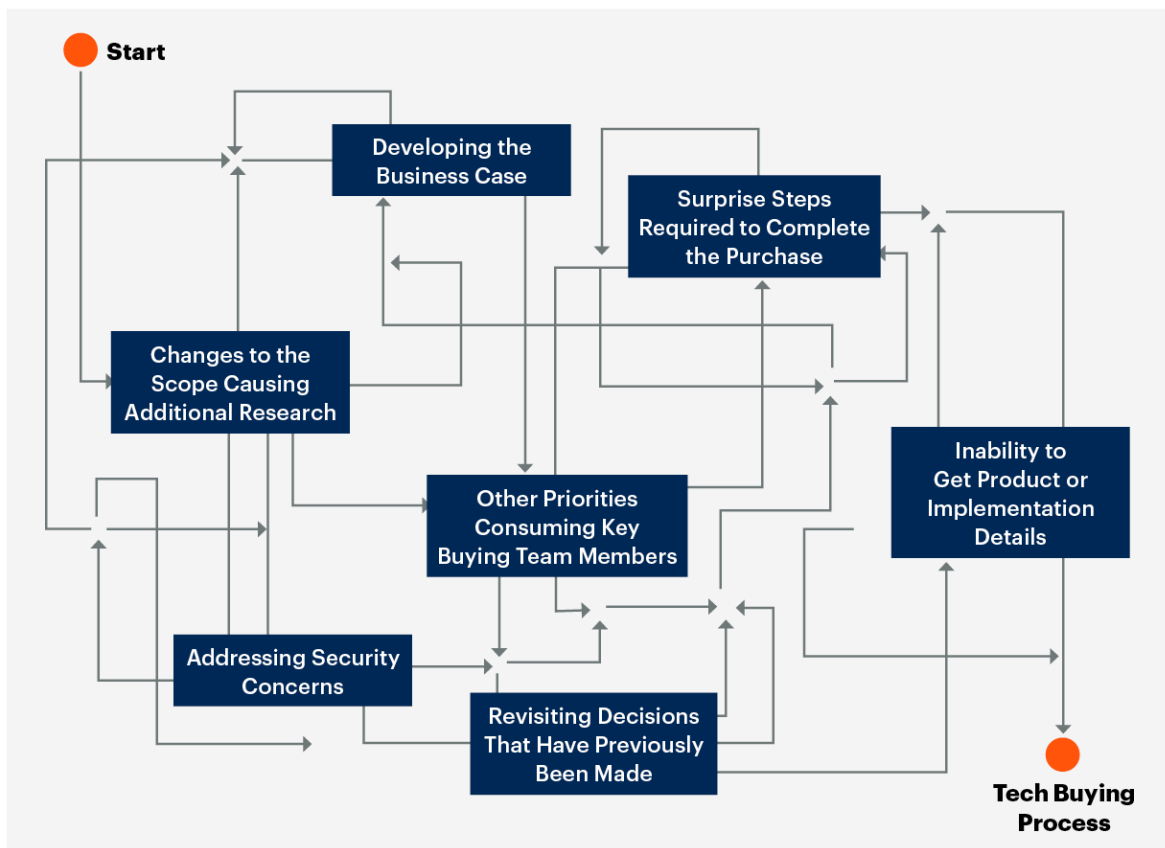
In today's democratized technology buying environment, departmental business leaders are empowered to chart their own course through digital transformation. They are expected to explore, evaluate and select tech solutions to achieve their departmental goals, while also demonstrating impact on the strategic priorities of the enterprise. Unfortunately, for many business leaders, being good at their regular jobs and being good at selecting tech solutions are not the same thing.

B2B Technology Buyers Need Guidance

Based on the Gartner survey of over 3,000 functional business leaders, seven buying activities were identified to cause moderate or significant delays in 70%+ of transactions (see Figure 1). The bad news for sellers is many of the common contributors of delays are difficult to influence directly. The good news is most can be anticipated and mitigated when sellers are trained and equipped with the right messaging and buyer enablement strategy.

Figure 1: Common Contributors of Delays in the Tech Buying Process

Common Contributors of Delays in the Tech Buying Process



Source: Gartner
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When we examine the contributors of delays in Figure 1, we are reminded that the B2B purchase experience is quite complex and often ill-defined. Buying activities are fragmented, performed in varying order, and many are repeated multiple times. This is why linear, funnel-based sales processes and buyer journey mapping are problematic. They don't reflect naturally chaotic buying behavior.

Having captured details from thousands of enterprise tech buyers about their experiences, we can identify certain tasks any organization must complete to be able to select a solution provider. Product leaders should conceptualize the buying process as a set of discontinuous, often parallel jobs to be done by the prospect:

- Problem Identification – “We need to do something about this.”
- Solution Exploration – “What’s out there to solve our problem?”
- Requirements Building – “What exactly do we need the solution to do?”
- Vendor Selection – “Does this vendor create the value we need them to?”
- Purchase – “Our contract/agreement is aligned with the outcome we expect.”

Buying jobs are considered complete when consensus among stakeholders is achieved and the enterprise is able to take an action (see Focus on Buying Jobs Rather Than the Chaos of Buying Journeys).

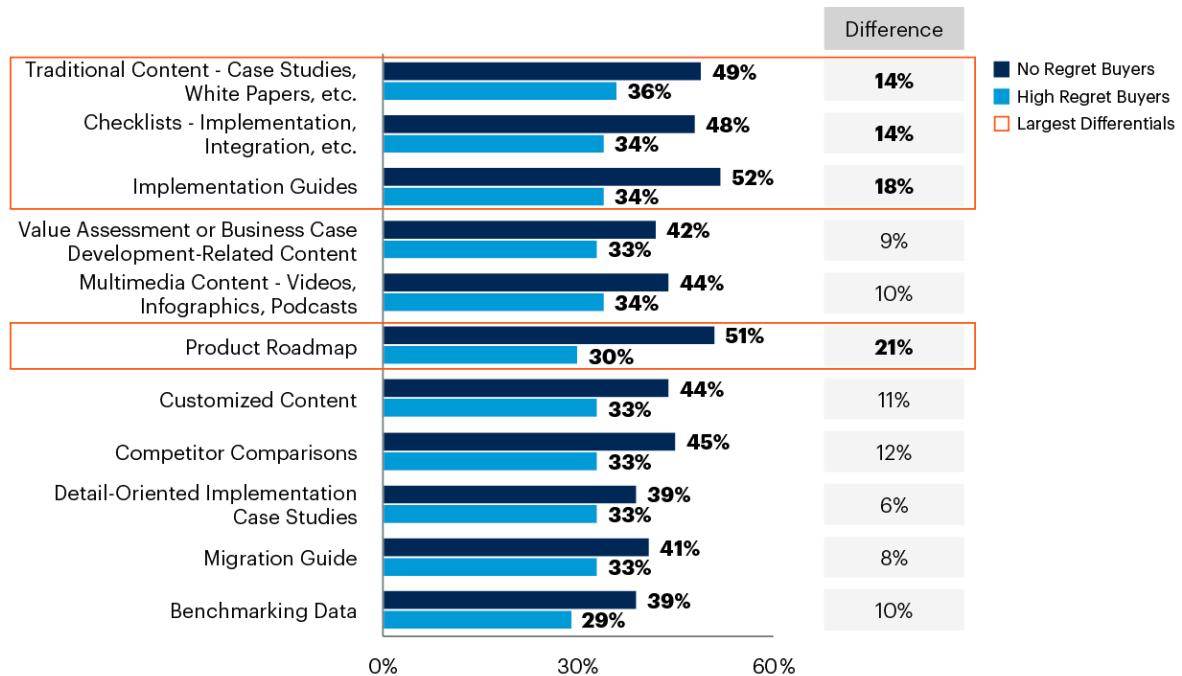
Challenges Completing Buying Jobs Lead to Purchase Regret

Inexperienced buyers struggle with understanding how to effectively complete buying jobs and it’s not always easy for experienced buyers either. Any buying team’s ability to validate ideas and build consensus is vital. Even in deal-winning scenarios, conflict among the buying team during the purchase process is a strong leading indicator of purchase regret to come (see Note 1 for the definition of “purchase regret”). Gartner research shows conflict on the buying team occurring in nearly 90% of high-regret cases (see The Key Drivers of High Regret Technology Purchase Decisions).

By examining the behavior of buyers who report no purchase regret, we can identify patterns that can lead us to help buyers who struggle with the buying jobs to be done. For example, Figure 2 compares types of buyer enablement content used by “no-regret” and “high-regret” buyers.

Figure 2: Differentials in Content Consumption Between No-Regret and High-Regret Tech Buyers

Differentials in Content Consumption Between No-Regret and High-Regret Tech Buyers
Percentage of Respondents



n = 3,048 functional business leaders

Q. Which of the following types of information did you receive from your chosen provider as well as the other providers you considered?
From chosen Provider (Multiple Responses Allowed)

Source: 2022 Gartner Functional Business Buyer Survey
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Content consumption patterns are a useful proxy for interpreting tech buying success. Looking at Figure 2, we can see no-regret buyers are prolific in their use of forms of content like implementation guides, checklists and competitor comparisons. Gartner’s buyer behavior data also indicates no-regret buyers complete their purchase, on average, seven to 10 months faster than buyers with high regret (see What ‘No-Regret’ Technology Buyers Do Differently).

Departmental business leaders who are inexperienced technology buyers need to be guided through their jobs to be done with tools and content designed to ease the purchase process. This is why it’s critical to discover the level of experience a prospective tech buying team may have. By profiling tech buying experience, product leaders can better prepare sellers with messaging and content strategies that advance qualified opportunities with maximum deal velocity and minimum risk of regret.

Steps to Improve Sales Cycles for Enhanced Buying Experience

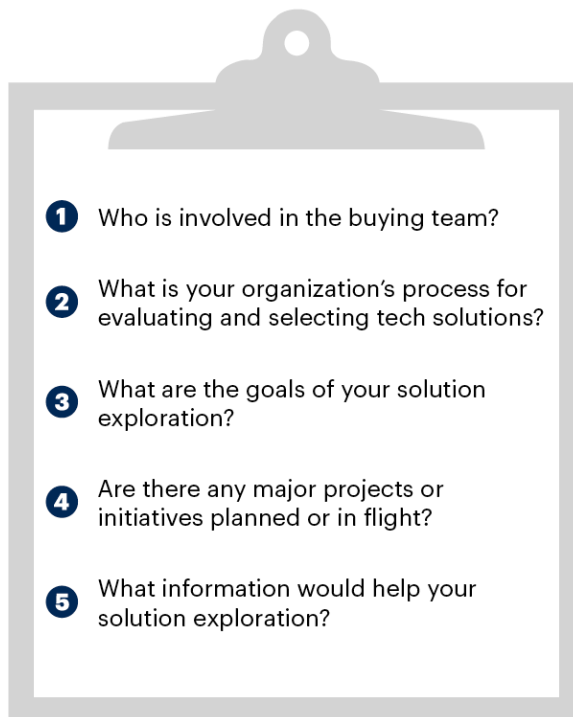
Seek to Discover the Buying Team's Experience Level

Traditional sales discovery and qualification is directed at validating a prospect's match to the ideal customer profile. It's time to build on this foundation to also capture information that will indicate how "good at buying" a prospective organization will likely be (see Figure 3).

Uncovering a prospect's tech buying experience requires a continuous approach to discovery. Information gathering should be pursued throughout the sales process and across multiple contacts, because the answers are not likely to come from a single member of the buying team all at once. Keep in mind that discovery is not an end in itself but a part of a continuous seller/buyer dialogue and is only to be performed in early points of engagement (see Improve Win Rates With the Sales Discovery Meeting Playbook).

Figure 3: Five Questions for Acquiring Information About the Prospect's Level of Buying Experience

Five Questions for Acquiring Information About the Prospect's Level of Buying Experience



Source: Gartner
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Based on the buying-jobs-to-be-done model and leading indicators of purchase regret, here are five lines of questioning that can help sellers understand the purchasing prowess of the prospect:

1. **Who is involved in the buying team?** Explore the composition and authority of the buying team. How clear is the contact on the roles and influence of buying team members?
2. **What is your organization's process for evaluating and selecting tech solutions?** Measure your contact's understanding of their organization's steps toward purchase. Is it clearly defined?
3. **What are the goals of your solution exploration?** Determine if requirements and success metrics have been established. What is the level of goal clarity?
4. **Are there any major projects or initiatives planned or in flight?** Identify the state of the prospect's digital progress and any competing priorities. What tech have they implemented, currently implementing or plan to implement? What was/is your contact's level of involvement?
5. **What information would help your solution exploration?** Gauge their willingness for guidance in the buying process. Do they know what they're looking for and do they seem ready to engage?

If this information can be captured from the prospect, we can locate their position along a spectrum of buying experience levels. The grid in Figure 4 was constructed from Gartner's tech buying behavior insights for the purpose of diagnosing the amount and type of guidance a prospective buying team is likely to need. It is a tool for profiling buying experience levels that can help inform sellers which messaging and content strategy should be deployed.

Figure 4: Tech Buying Diagnostic Grid

The Tech Buying Diagnostic Grid

		Buying Team Experience Level		
		Inexperienced	Intermediate	Advanced
1	 Buying Team Composition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Doesn't know who will be involved. Only one department represented 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> At least two departments involved Likely to have influential IT roles. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Multiple departments represented. IT role dedicated to the function
2	 Evaluation Process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No process Doesn't know Won't share information 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Framework process but lacks detail. High level goals but not clear how to reach. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Transparent and willing to share Goals are clear and tied to topline strategy
3	 Solution Goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No goal articulation or data-driven approach. No timeline. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Goals not KPI-centric. Vague timeline. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Detailed timeline. Quantified target outcomes.
4	 Digital Progress	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Low digital tech adoption No organized planning or digital transformation strategy. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Path to digital, but only in pockets so far. Strategy may not be organization-wide. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Digital strategy aligned to enterprise objectives. Time-based roadmap High adoption in other tech categories.
5	 Readiness to Engage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not sure where to start or what information is needed. Lack of openness for guidance. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Seeking specific content forms and information Openness to be guided 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Seeking detailed and technical info May not wish to be guided

Source: Gartner
791700_C



Calibrate Messaging and Content According to the Buying Team's Experience Level

Product leaders should prepare playbooks of messaging and enablement strategies to accommodate prospects at each experience level. The goal is to not take a one-size-fits-all approach, while also keeping complexity to a minimum. This will help maintain clarity and dexterity in scenarios when prospective buying teams appear to exhibit traits across multiple columns of the grid.

Table 1: High-Level Guidance on Messaging and Content Strategy for Different Tech Buying Experience Levels

(Enlarged table in Appendix)

	Inexperienced	Intermediate	Advanced
Estimated Market Share	62% to 75%	11% to 24%	11% to 16%
Preferred Messaging	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Do not use fear, uncertainty and doubt (FUD). ■ Make change feel manageable and small. ■ Build their confidence. ■ Demonstrate expert knowledge of the business problem. ■ Showcase industry expertise. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Reinforce their discipline and ability to make good choices. ■ Show proven paths to value with manageable risks. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Focus on their ability to disrupt and competitive advantage. ■ Emphasize their potential to “go even faster.”
Enablement Strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Use traditional content sparingly (ebooks, whitepapers, webinars, etc.). It can overwhelm them. ■ Prioritize tool-based, interactive content: benchmark assessments, checklists, implementation/migration guides, product simulators, value assessment calculators, etc. ■ Be as prescriptive as possible. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Use outcome-centric value scenarios. ■ Create resonance with industry and role-based success stories. ■ Product-led growth assets can be particularly effective with this group. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Preference for technical details and collaborative tools. ■ Less demand for case studies and rich content. ■ Discover new value scenarios together with them.

Source: Gartner (September 2023)

Recommendations in Table 1 are abstracted from Gartner’s Enterprise Technology Adoption Profile Framework for Supply Chain Technology Leaders. Enterprise Technology Adoption (ETA) profiles are incredibly powerful for those seeking to understand buyer behavior at a deep level (see Use ETA Profiles to Win Large Deals by Understanding Buyer Decision Dynamics).

There are nuances and refinements at the level of individual industries, markets and products that will need to be accounted for. To accommodate them here would dilute the primary message we introduced at the beginning; even the best tech solutions fail when buying teams struggle. For questions and more detailed information on how to apply these insights, please schedule an analyst inquiry with the Business Buyer Insights team.

Evidence

¹ **2022 Gartner Functional Business Buyers Survey:** The 2022 Gartner Functional Business Buyer Survey was conducted to understand how functional business units within organizations approach large-scale software purchases to support their business function. The research was conducted online from September through mid-December 2022 among 3,048 respondents representing six different business functions: customer service and support (n = 508), finance (n = 518), human resources (n = 509), marketing (n = 513), sales (n = 499), and supply chain management (n = 501). All surveyed organizations had at least 250 employees and at least \$50 million in annual revenue in FY21. All respondents resided in either North America (42%), Western Europe (37%) or Asia/Pacific (21%). The North American countries represented in the survey were the U.S. (30%) and Canada (12%). The European countries were France (11%), Germany (12%) and the U.K. (14%), and the Asia/Pacific countries were Australia (9%), Singapore (7%), India (3%) and New Zealand (2%). Respondents represented more than 15 Industries, including banking and investments, communication service providers, education, healthcare providers, insurance, manufacturing, media, natural resources, public sector, retail, services, technology service providers, transportation, utilities and energy, and wholesale. All but a handful of respondents were at the manager level or higher within their organizations and participated in the purchasing process for software specifically for their respective business function during the previous two years. Software purchases were either new, replacement or expansion purchases. At least 96% of the functional business unit software purchases reported by respondents had contract values of at least \$50,000, and 43% were in excess of \$1 million. Disclaimer: The results of this survey do not represent global findings or the market as a whole, but reflect the sentiments of the respondents and organizations surveyed.

Note 1: Gartner Definition of Technology Purchase Regret

In Gartner research, purchase regret is observed when survey respondents agree with one or both of the following statements:

- “The (...) offering we ultimately purchased is failing (or failed) to meet our expectations.”
- “We initially considered offerings that were much more ambitious than what we ultimately decided upon.”

Recommended by the Author

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- Be as prescriptive as possible.

Source: Gartner (September 2023)


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