

The Chief Sales Officer Quarterly

First Quarter 2026

Pathways
to

Growth

in 2026

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Letter From the Editors

Whether you're entering 2026 feeling optimistic or embattled, know that you're in good company. While each CSO wrangles a unique combination of circumstances, the core of sales leadership is remarkably consistent.

With that in mind, we're kicking off this year with a focus on you and your ultimate goal: growth.

We're starting with the **CSO Leadership Vision for 2026**. Following thousands of client conversations, we predict that growth in 2026 hinges on pushing for a sales-centric AI roadmap, transforming go-to-market motions to keep buyers engaged, and maximizing your sales managers.

Next, we turn to **Capturing Growth From Your Existing Customers** — because, in turbulent times, deepening those relationships matters more than ever. This new research explores how sales leaders can look to the entire commercial engine — beyond just account managers — to unlock account growth.

Then, in the **Sales Leader Spotlight**, we interview Chris Saniga, chief B2B officer at Staples Canada. Saniga discusses his organization's paths to growth and how it is balancing digital innovation with deep, human expertise.

Finally, we look to new customer growth as we spotlight a case study on **Autodesk's Agile Hunter Pods** — agile teams designed to break into new markets and bring in fresh business. If you're looking to revitalize your new business efforts or try something different, this story offers real-world inspiration.

There are many paths to growth, and there are no greater leaders than our CSOs to pick a lane and drive.

Here's to another year of bold moves as you navigate the twists and turns of 2026.

Betsy Gregory-Hosler, Delainey Kirkwood, and Ethan Treadwell

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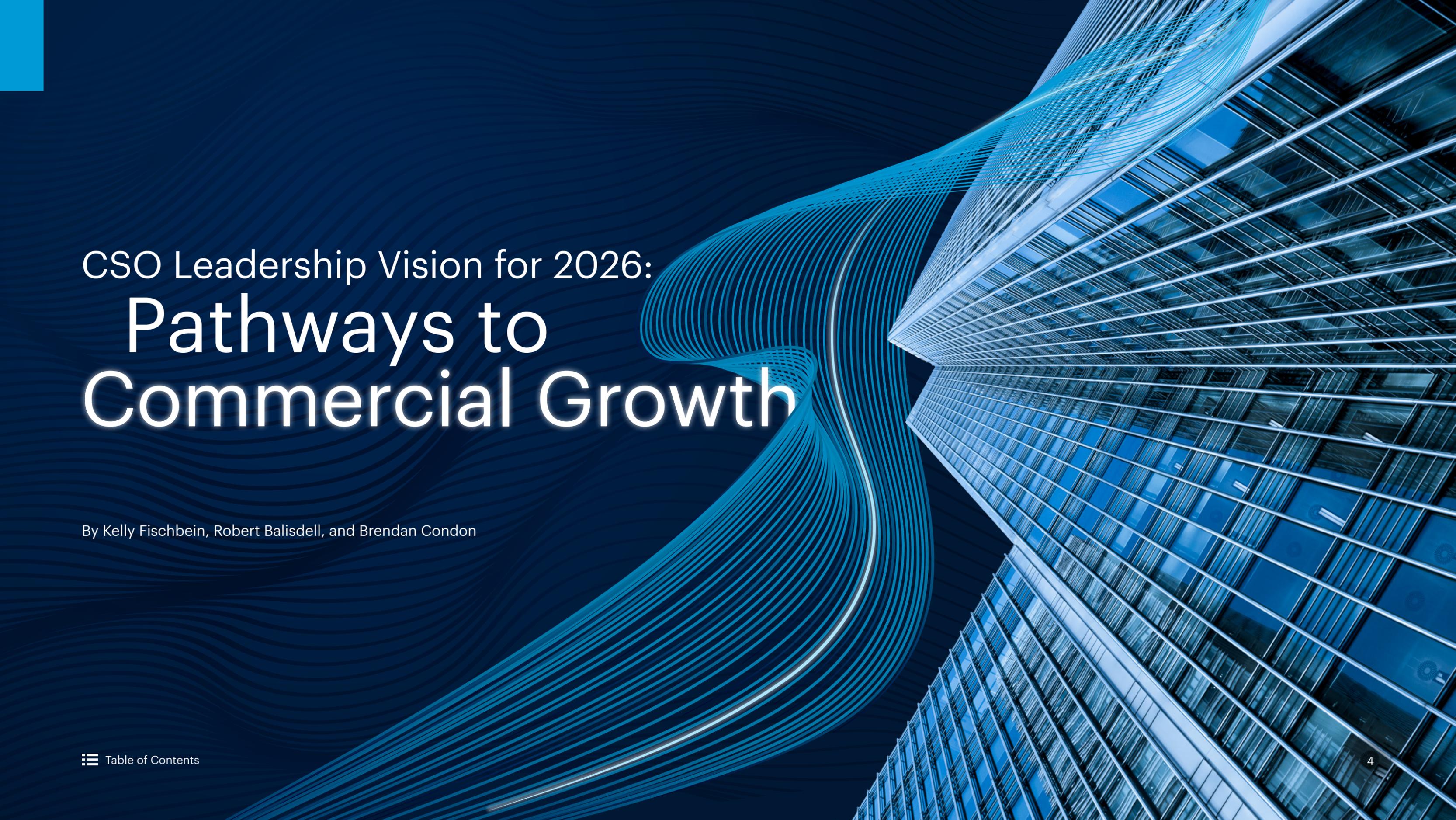
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CSO Leadership Vision for 2026: Pathways to Commercial Growth

By Kelly Fischbein, Robert Balisdell, and Brendan Condon

In 2026, the chief sales officer (CSO) faces unprecedented pressure. CSOs are tasked with achieving commercial growth while simultaneously managing internal headwinds.

These headwinds include demands for increased productivity, perpetual change initiatives, and the pressure to manage transformation quickly alongside the need to manage costs. This complex environment is further amplified by the rapid rise of AI, which injects uncertainty and confusion into sales leadership.

Only 11% of CSOs report successfully maintaining productivity while driving organizational transformation.¹ To navigate this era successfully, CSOs must establish a clear vision centered around three critical questions:

1. Where should I expect AI to deliver a genuine ROI?
2. How do I transform my go-to-market (GTM) motions to enhance both seller and buyer engagement?
3. Which specific lever must I pull to most improve seller performance?

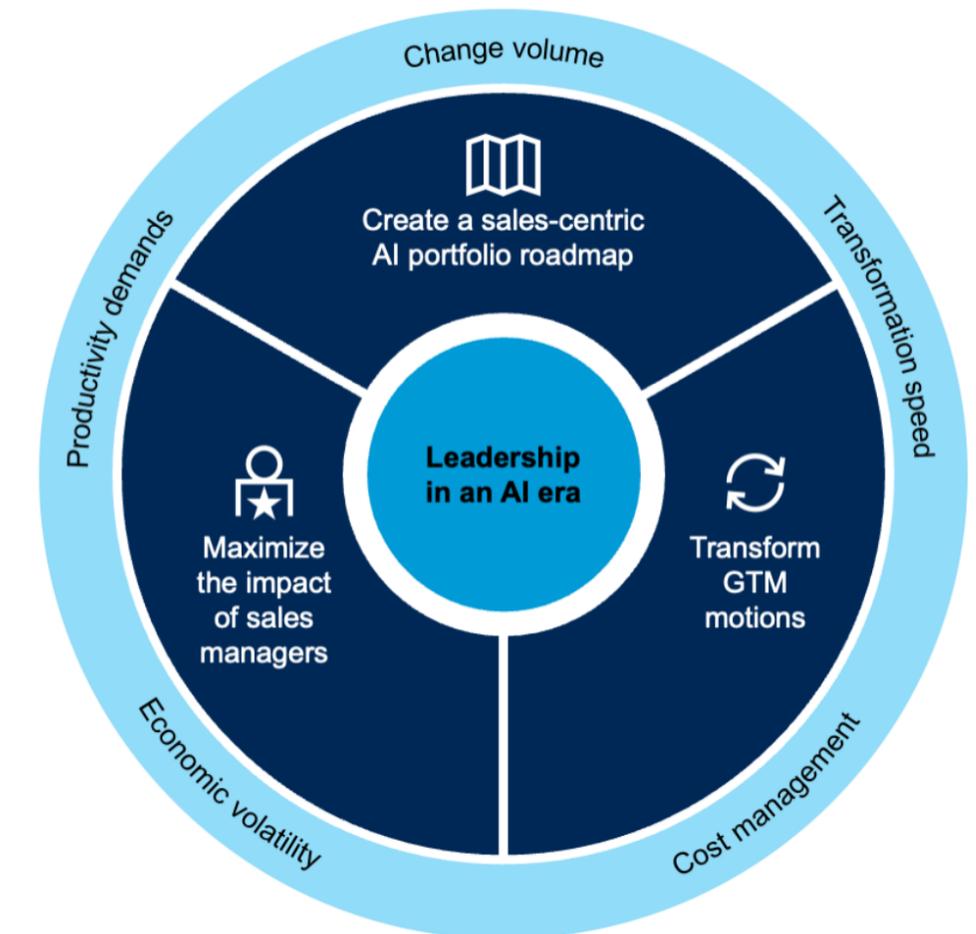
CSOs should adopt three core strategies to lead sales with clarity and confidence (see Figure 1): proactively lead AI change, align GTM motions with shifting buyer preferences, and invest in sales managers to multiply success.

The AI Imperative: Building a Sales-Centric AI Portfolio

Using AI to drive sales productivity is a very high priority for CSOs. CEOs and boards are heavily pushing for AI adoption, with 87% of sales leaders reporting that they feel pressured.² However, CSOs are struggling to implement a strategy that delivers the promised gains. While more than 60% of sales teams are already leveraging generative AI (GenAI), less than one-fourth of those teams have reported seeing high productivity gains from its use.³

However, most CSOs don't have a seat at the table when it comes to driving an AI strategy. After all, only 13% of CEOs believe their CSOs are truly AI-savvy, leaving many sales leaders without the influence needed to shape AI's effect on their sales organization.⁴

Figure 1. Top Trends and Priorities for CSOs in 2026



Source: Gartner
Note: GTM = go to market

CSOs must bring a sales-centric AI portfolio to their discussion with the C-suite. Start now by:

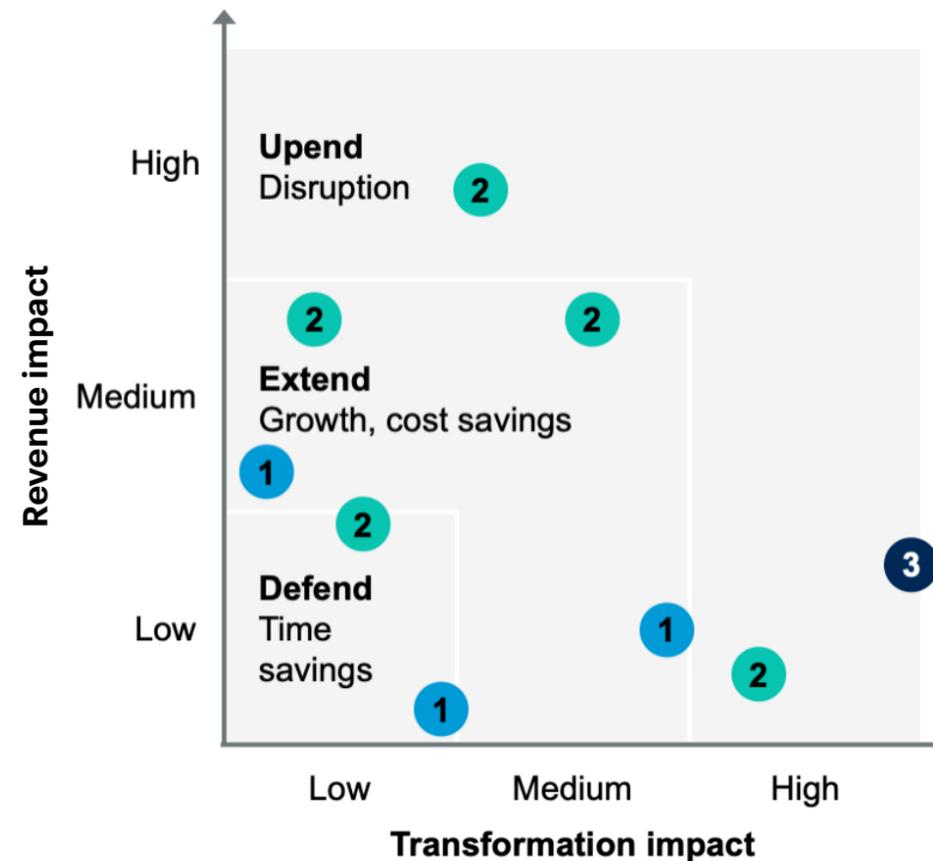
- 1. Identifying gaps** — Identify where you're missing revenue opportunities based on current tech and AI capability gaps.
- 2. Linking use cases to potential revenue** — Lay out AI use cases on a potential revenue-by-transformational impact map (see Figure 2).
- 3. Creating a strategic roadmap** — Build a roadmap and a proposed timeline that ensures AI is a productivity partner and not just another piece of technology.

Transforming GTM Motions: Earning Buyer Engagement

CSOs are battling stalled or delayed deals, a problem often rooted in buyer disengagement, which extends the sales cycle. Buyer preferences are clear: 61% favor rep-free experiences, especially during the discovery stage of the purchasing process.

When buyers do engage sellers, they arrive with more information than in the past, partly due to their growing use of GenAI for researching vendors and products. However, this abundance of information is often flawed, as 73% of B2B buyers report not trusting the information they know was created by GenAI.⁵

Figure 2. A Sales-Centric AI Portfolio Linked to the Sales Strategy
Revenue x Transformation (RxT) Matrix



Source: Gartner

- 1 Assess** current revenue goals and align with IT leadership on current tech and AI stack capabilities.
- 2 Define** current and future state transformation outcomes from AI adoption — defend, extend, and upend.
- 3 Create** a strategic roadmap and timeline to ensure AI integration is linked to the sales strategy.

In response to a slow pipeline, CSOs often demand increased outreach, yet this strategy can backfire. Too much outreach can lead to a decrease in business, with 60% of B2B buyers actively avoiding suppliers who send excessive messages. Plus, 76% of B2B buyers avoid suppliers who send irrelevant messages.⁵

To address this complex disconnect, CSOs must transform GTM motions to enhance seller effectiveness and buyer engagement by (see Table 1).

- **Find the critical moments** — Identify the specific steps in the buying journey where seller outreach will be most effective, leveraging AI to make sellers more efficient in those critical outreach decisions.
- **Prioritize efficiency** — Use AI to improve workflow efficiencies by automating mundane processes, alleviating the seller’s burden and eliminating “low-value, non-growth-oriented activities.”

- **Drive effectiveness** — Use AI to improve seller effectiveness by creating tailored content delivered at the most appropriate time.

Maximizing the Sales Manager: The Force Multiplier

CSOs have numerous levers to pull to improve seller performance (e.g., tools, upskilling, information, and compensation), but the sales manager can act as a force multiplier across all factors that improve seller performance. Gartner research shows a great sales manager with tailored organizational support can have up to a 5.9 times impact on team performance.⁶

However, the current approach is broken, with only 55% of CSOs reporting that their frontline sales managers consistently meet performance expectations.⁷ This approach starts with manager selection, as three

Table 1. GTM Motions — Today’s Standard Vs. Tomorrow’s Transformation

Standard GTM motions challenges	Transformed GTM motions impact
Sellers waste a lot of time on low value non-growth oriented activities.	▶ Use AI to automate or eliminate low value no growth oriented activities.
Sellers conduct outreach with irrelevant information.	▶ Use AI to quickly create tailored messages specific to buyer needs and stage.
Sellers waste effort to engage buyers at inopportune moments.	▶ Reposition sellers to engage buyer at most opportune moments.
Sellers focus on providing more fact-based information.	▶ Empower sellers to address buyers’ emotion factors.
Seller, self service, digital, and AI channels are viewed as separate.	▶ Enable sellers to utilize self service tools with buyers.

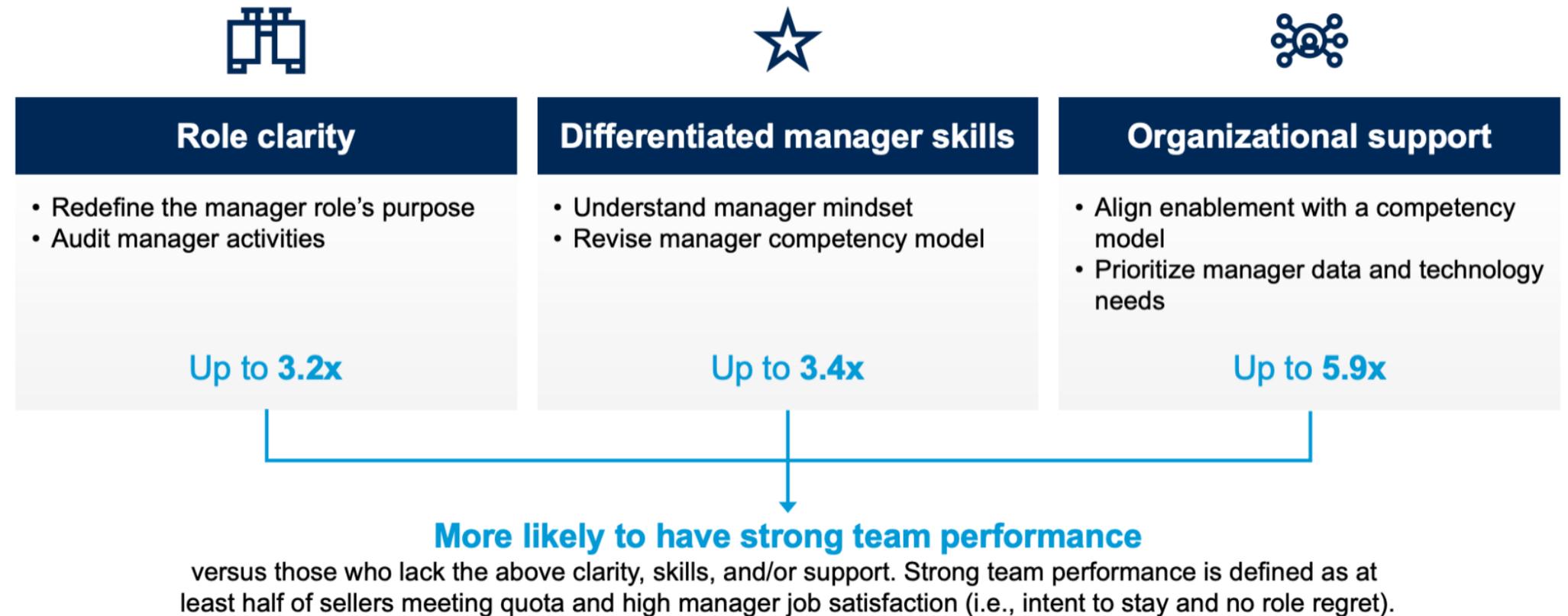
Source: Gartner

out of four CSOs consider high-performing sellers as the top candidates for promotion, overlooking the differing mindsets and competencies required for management. Then, once in-role, over half of sales managers report that their day-to-day responsibilities are completely different from their formal job descriptions. Beyond that, the role is rarely supported with dedicated tech or enablement.⁶

To improve seller performance and maximize the manager's impact, CSOs must take decisive action to provide role clarity and organizational support (see figure 3):

- **Redesign the role** — The sales manager role must be redesigned to act as an amplifier for overall seller effectiveness. This shift involves clearly defining the manager's purpose and auditing activities.
- **Screen and hire based on competencies** — Stop promoting your best sellers simply because they top the leaderboard. Instead, screen and hire sales manager candidates based on the specific leadership mindsets and competencies required for the role.
- **Provide personalized support** — Shift investment toward providing personalized role support, including tailored enablement programs and appropriate technologies specifically designed to empower sales managers.

Figure 3. Keys to Successful Frontline Sales Managers



Source: 2025 Gartner Sales Manager Effectiveness Survey

Sales organizations that ensure role clarity, cultivate differentiated manager skills, or provide tailored organizational support are at least 3.2 times more likely to achieve strong team performance (defined as high seller quota attainment and high manager job satisfaction).⁶

Successfully leading sales in the AI era requires that CSOs move beyond reacting to market forces and proactively shape the future of their commercial growth. By addressing these critical priorities, CSOs can overcome organizational hurdles, secure alignment, and ensure sustainable revenue growth.

¹ **2024 Gartner Sales Org DNA Survey.** This survey was conducted to identify productivity levers that are most effective for CSOs to elevate sales performance, including role design, sales leadership, sales culture and sales technology. The survey was completed from May 2024 through June 2024 with an online sample of 234 heads of sales and senior sales leaders across North America (n = 159), Western Europe (n = 48), and Asia/Pacific (n = 27). Qualifying respondents belonged to a sales function of an organization with enterprisewide annual revenue in 2023 of at least \$100 million or equivalent. Industry segments included manufacturing, information technology and high tech, banking and financial services, and pharmaceuticals. Disclaimer: Results of this survey do not represent global findings or the market as a whole, but reflect the sentiments of the respondents and companies surveyed. A “top sales organization” is defined in this survey as those respondents who reported that: (a) a recent transformation was easier to complete than expected and (b) exceeded at least three of the following: targeted revenue growth, profit growth, new customer acquisition and customer growth.

² **Gartner Generative AI 2024 Planning Survey.** This survey was conducted to examine generative AI’s use case implementation and impact by business function. The survey was conducted from September through November

2023. In total, 822 business executives who lead corporate functions outside IT and who indicated will begin or continue to implement GenAI across the next 12 months qualified and participated. The research was collected via online surveys in English. The sample was equally split across the following eight corporate functions: finance; HR; marketing; sales; customer service; supply chain; procurement; and legal, risk, and compliance. The sample mix by location was North America (n = 536), Europe (n = 176), and Asia/Pacific (n = 110). The sample mix by size was \$50 million to less than \$500 million (n = 119), \$500 million to less than \$1 billion (n = 129), \$1 billion to less than \$10 billion (n = 374) and \$10 billion or more (n = 200). 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 companies surveyed.

³ **2024 Gartner Worker Productivity Survey.** This survey investigated the impact of generative AI and other technologies, such as process/workflow automation, business intelligence and role-specific tech on worker productivity. It assessed the productivity gains by workers based on their technology utilization, generative AI adoption, role/function complexity and career experience (total career tenure), as assessed by their managers. It explores the timelines of generative AI implementation, overall quality of the generative AI effort, and barriers to implementation and adoption. It also examines the impact of technology on worker productivity, and the productivity culture in organizations. Qualified respondents were manager level or higher and had a team reporting to them. Qualifying organizations were from North America, Asia/Pacific, and EMEA, and reported enterprisewide revenue of at least \$50 million or the equivalent. 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 companies surveyed.

⁴ **2025 Gartner CEO and Senior Business Executive Survey.** This survey was conducted to examine CEO and senior business executive views on current business issues, as well as some areas of technology agenda impact. The survey was conducted from June 2024 through November 2024, with questions about the period from 2024 through 2026. One-quarter of the survey sample was collected from June through July 2024, and three-quarters was collected from October through November 2024. In total, 456 actively employed CEOs and other senior executive business leaders qualified and participated. The research was collected via 421 online surveys and 35 telephone interviews. The sample mix by role was CEOs (n = 303); CFOs

(n = 95); COOs or other C-level executives (n = 39); and chairs, presidents or board directors (n = 19). The sample mix by location was North America (n = 194), Europe (n = 118), Asia/Pacific (n = 91), Latin America (n = 35), the Middle East (n = 15), and South Africa (n = 2). The sample mix by size was \$50 million to less than \$250 million (n = 32), \$250 million to less than \$1 billion (n = 122), \$1 billion to less than \$10 billion (n = 200) and \$10 billion or more (n = 102). Disclaimer: Results of this survey do not represent global findings or the market as a whole, but reflect the sentiments of the respondents and companies surveyed.

⁵ **2024 Gartner B2B Buyer Survey.** This survey was conducted to explore how B2B buyers learned about potential suppliers, what factors influenced their decision to purchase from a specific supplier and their perceptions of personalization. The survey was administered online from August through September 2024 and includes data from 632 B2B buyers from North America (n = 502) and Europe (n = 130). Respondents who qualified for this survey were required to be employed full time at an organization with a total revenue of at least \$250 million (or equivalent) and have participated in a significant B2B purchase decision. A “significant B2B purchase decision” was defined as a decision that required deliberation with at least one other person and the evaluation of more than one potential supplier or vendor. Purchases included in this survey were made in a variety of categories, including manufacturing (n = 144), IT and high tech (n = 140), healthcare (n = 138), financial services (n = 115), non-IT business services (n = 57), and other (n = 35). 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 companies surveyed.

⁶ **2025 Gartner Sales Manager Effectiveness Survey.** This survey was conducted to understand the responsibilities, skills and behaviors of frontline sales managers that drive better commercial performance. The survey was completed from February through March 2025 with an online sample of 383 frontline sales managers across North America (n = 266), Western Europe (n = 46), and Asia/Pacific (n = 56). Qualifying respondents belonged to a sales function of an organization with enterprisewide annual revenue in 2024 of at least \$100 million or equivalent. Industry segments included manufacturing, information technology and high tech, banking and financial services, and pharmaceuticals. 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 companies surveyed.

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Capturing Growth

From Your Existing Customers

By Ethan Treadwell and Antra Sharma

Chief sales officers (CSOs) rely on account growth to meet their revenue goals; however, ineffective strategies, inconsistent execution, and overloaded account managers often result in missed opportunities. This article examines new research on how CSOs can create an environment that fosters profitable growth from existing customers.

Seventy percent of chief sales officers (CSOs) and sales leaders say their sales organization's account growth strategies lead to missed opportunities, and 61% say their account managers focus too little on growth.¹ The typical account manager is buried under competing demands, including driving retention efforts, juggling service issues, and navigating ambiguous paths to growth. Without organizational support, growth efforts remain inconsistent and inefficient. CSOs can close this gap by building an account growth ecosystem that equips teams to capture profitable growth at scale (see Figure 1).

Build a stable account growth ecosystem using three key actions:

- **Guide account manager execution** through a detailed roadmap on prescriptive growth strategies.
- **Team for growth** through role simplification that leverages role design and AI to streamline task redistribution.
- **Activate customer insights** by leveraging cross-functional indicators and an AI-driven feedback loop.

Figure 1. Account Growth Ecosystem



Source: Gartner

Guide Account Manager Execution

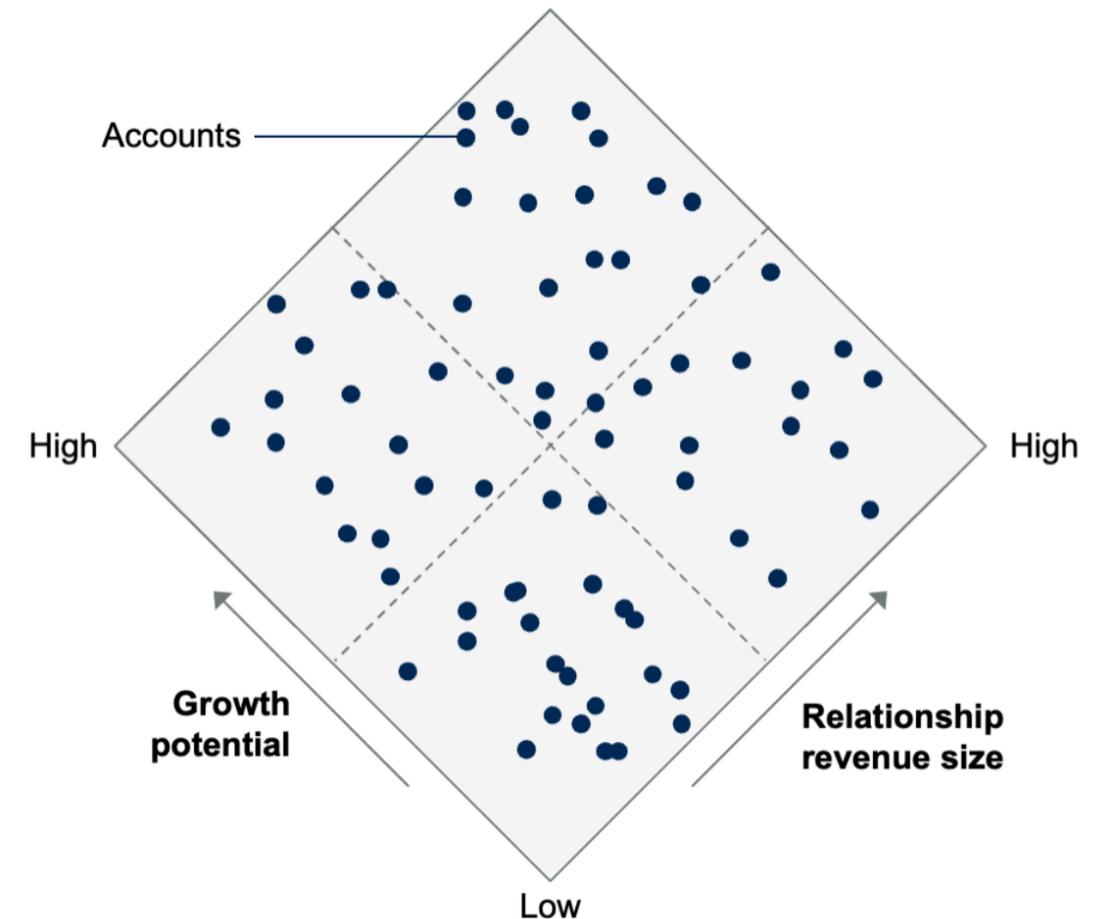
In many organizations, account managers are given the freedom to choose where and how to pursue growth. Without prescriptive guidance, account managers tend to default to lower-risk, retention-focused efforts. However, organizations that define segmented best-fit growth strategies and use formal playbooks are 1.8 times more likely to achieve profitable growth from existing customers.¹

To get account managers to focus on high-potential growth opportunities, follow a three-step growth roadmap: (1) identify and prioritize growth accounts, (2) specify appropriate growth strategies, (3) build adaptive playbooks to enable execution.

Step 1: Identify and Prioritize Growth Accounts for Account Managers

Most organizations employ traditional, linear strategies that stack rank accounts based on a single metric, such as transacted revenue or potential spend (e.g., “size of wallet”). These strategies often lack specificity, prescription, and nuance. Instead, CSOs should leverage nonlinear tiering using metrics, like growth potential and revenue size (see Figure 2). The nonlinear approach allows for more accuracy and nuance and aims to bring objectivity into account prioritization.

Figure 2. Mapping of All Accounts Across Size and Growth Potential
Illustrative

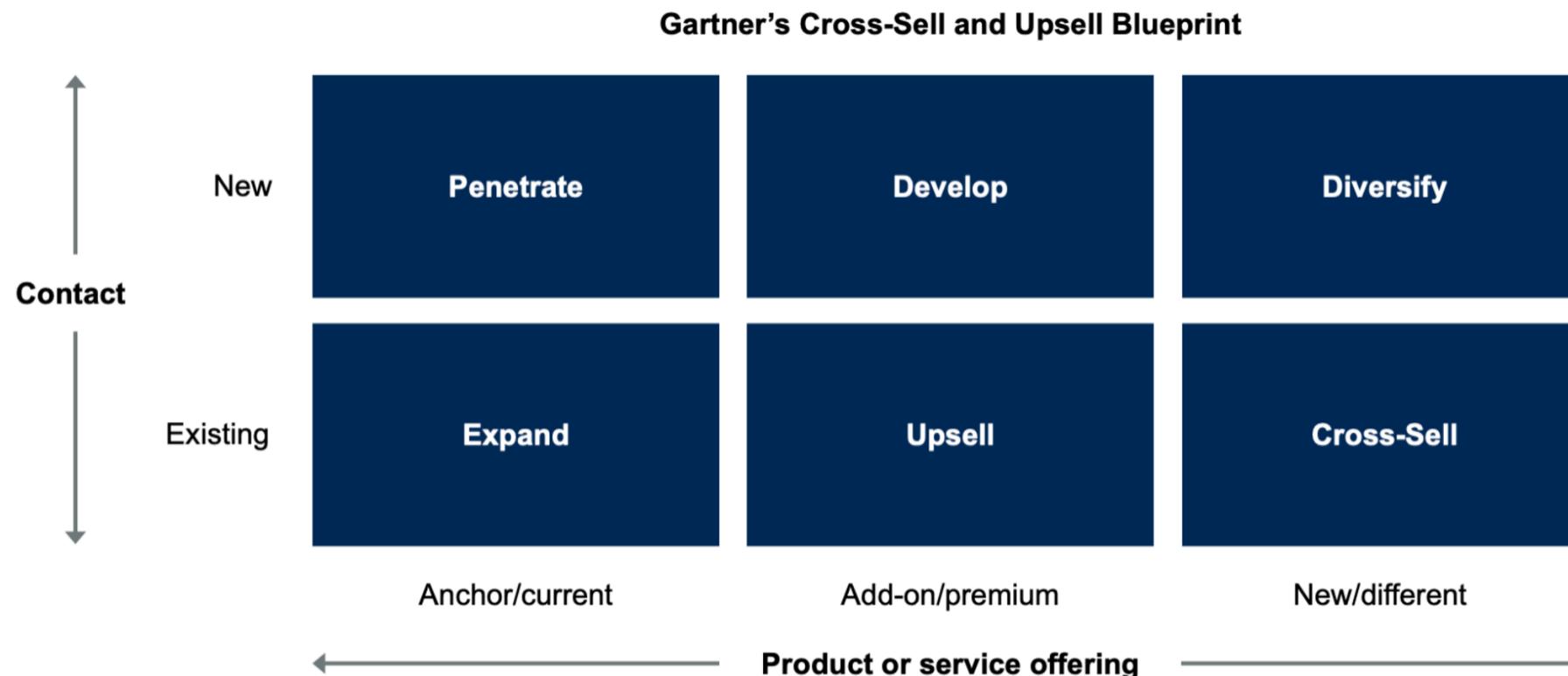


Source: Gartner

Step 2: Specify Appropriate Growth Strategies

Rather than using “growth” as a catchall, map the appropriate growth strategy to the opportunity. This practice generates actionable, directional guidance account managers can use to approach existing customers. The Gartner Cross-Sell and Upsell Blueprint uses two factors — the contact persona that represents the typical primary relationship (see the y-axis of Figure 3) and the product or service purchased (see the x-axis of Figure 3). These two factors reveal six paths to drive revenue growth within an existing customer. Sales organizations can apply this framework to one or many customers by choosing a product or service offering to target while also identifying the target audience or contact based on the relationship status (see [Grow Revenue in Existing Customers With the Gartner Cross-Sell and Upsell Blueprint](#)).

Figure 3. Identify Growth Strategy Using the Cross-Sell and Upsell Blueprint



Source: Gartner

Step 3: Build Adaptive Playbooks to Enable Execution

To ensure scalable execution and adherence to the process, incorporate this guidance into an account manager playbook. Set a tone of experimentation, allowing account managers to assess whether the tactics are delivering the desired customer outcomes. Combining qualitative feedback from sales teams and managers with quantitative data processed by AI can drive a cycle of equip-experiment-adapt, enabling the continuous refinement of tactics.

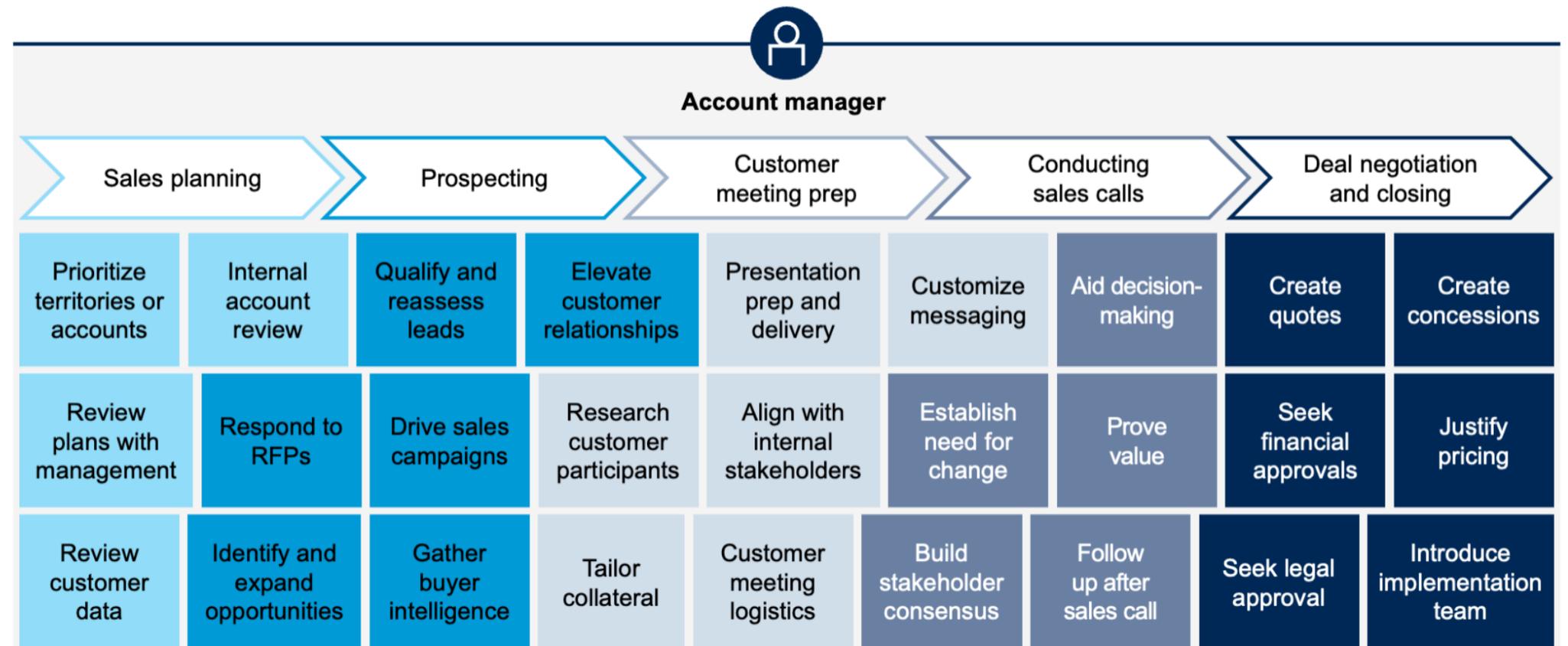
The addition of an AI element further improves the impact of these strategies. Specifically, organizations that guide account manager execution and use advanced analytics to assess account health are 2.3 times more likely to achieve profitable growth from existing customers.¹

Team for Growth

Prescriptive growth strategies are essential, but ineffective, if account managers don't have the bandwidth to execute on them. Analyzing job descriptions, we found that the account manager is expected to serve an impractically large scope of responsibilities, ranging from relationship-building to service resolution and beyond (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. Account Growth Responsibilities

Illustrative growth-focused workflows and actions



Source: Gartner

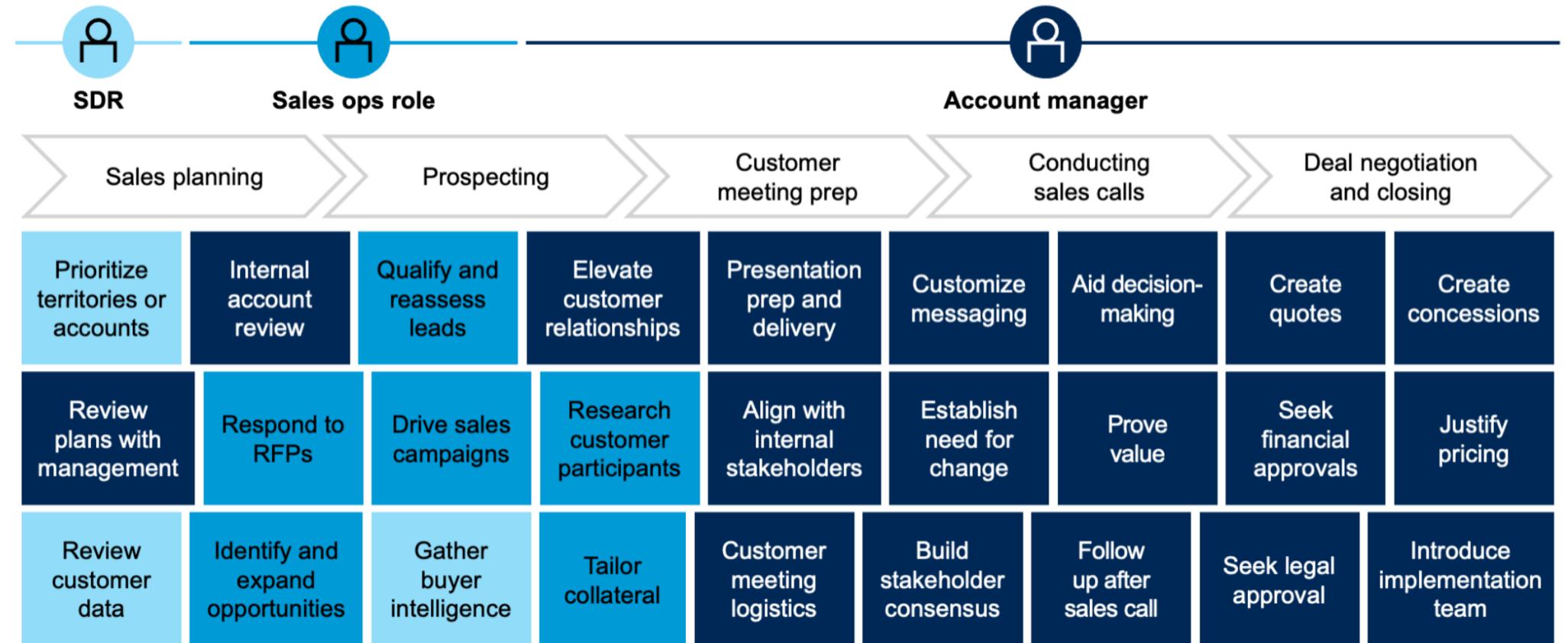
Organizations that team for growth (e.g., simplifying roles, supporting high-impact activities, and enabling account managers with an AI hunter tech-as-a-teammate) are 1.7 times more likely to achieve profitable growth from existing customers.¹

Simplifying the account manager role involves splitting growth workflows based on specialization. For example, hunter activities (e.g., prioritizing territories or accounts, reviewing customer data, and gathering buyer intelligence) are best suited for a sales development representative (SDR) (see Figure 5). These activities are better aligned with the SDR role focus and skills and can be unreasonably time-consuming for account managers, pulling them away from activities to which they're better suited.

This role simplification is possible without increasing the SDR workload by having AI handle time-intensive hunting activities. AI hunter tech as a teammate can autonomously conduct account research, allowing organizations to offset the time investment of SDRs in gathering buyer intelligence. To streamline such an execution, direct your

Figure 5. Account Growth Responsibilities — Simplified Roles

Illustrative growth-focused workflows and actions



Source: Gartner
 Note: SDR = sales development representative

sales operations teams to focus on aligning their tech stack with the sales workflows and needs of the growth teams. Ultimately, this approach ensures account managers retain the necessary focus and bandwidth for high-value, growth-focused activities, such as elevating customer relationships and aiding customer decision making.

Activate Customer Insights

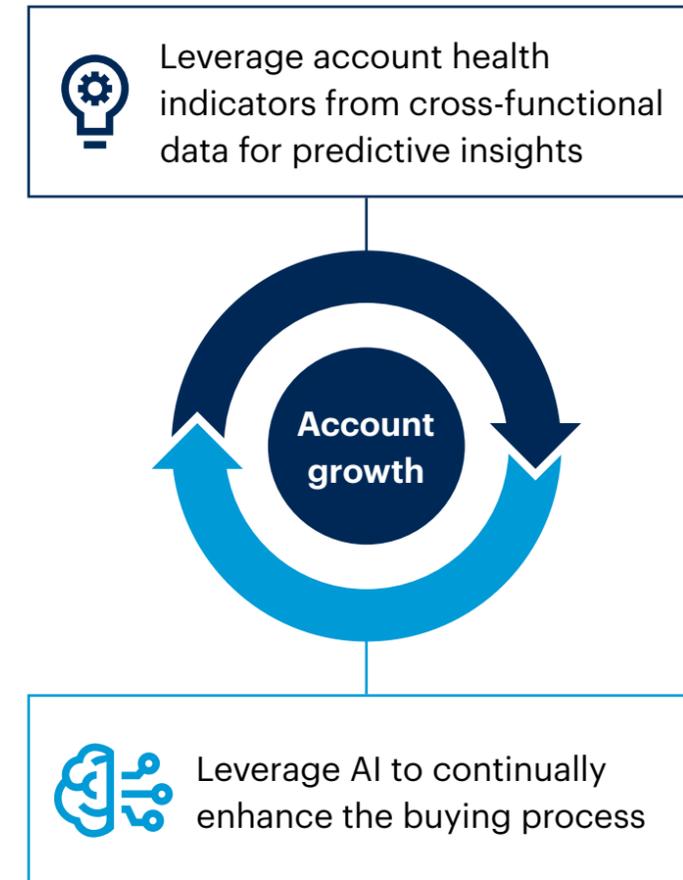
Although account managers may have access to copious data, they often face an insight gap because the information is stored in disconnected systems and is difficult to use for customer insight.

However, our research found that when organizations address the insight gap and use AI to enhance the buying process, they are 1.8 times more likely to achieve strong profitable growth.¹

To close the insight gap, first compile data from throughout the commercial organization into account health indicators. Use these metrics or measures to reveal the current state of the customer (e.g., adoption rates, satisfaction levels) and to predict churn risks.

Turning relevant data from these sources into account health indicators makes for an ideal AI use case. However, organizations that drive profitable growth focus on a broader use of AI that captures customer insights and also identifies implications for the growth strategy. This strategy creates a feedback loop that continually enhances the buying process (see Figure 6).

Figure 6. AI-Driven Feedback Loop



Source: Gartner

¹ **2025 Gartner Account Growth Survey.** This survey was conducted to understand sales execution strategies and account management designs that drive retention and growth of existing customers. The survey was completed from May through June 2025 with an online sample of 136 CSOs and senior sales executives across North America (n = 79), Western Europe (n = 27), and Asia/Pacific (n = 30). Qualifying respondents belonged to a sales function of an organization with enterprisewide annual revenue in 2024 of at least \$100 million (or equivalent). Industry segments included manufacturing, information technology and high tech, banking and financial services, and healthcare. 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 companies surveyed.



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Sales Leader Spotlight

Digital Strategy and Human Connection on the Growth Journey

By Betsy Gregory-Hosler



Chris Saniga, chief B2B officer at Staples Canada, discusses his career path, B2B growth strategies, and how Staples Professional is integrating technology with personalized customer relationships.

With over 25 years of experience in sales and leadership across the digital, consulting, and software industries, Saniga joined Staples Canada as its chief B2B officer in 2023. Prior to that, he served as head of Canada at Meta, where he was responsible for leading the company's Canadian operations and oversaw the rapid growth in Canada's revenue. He has also held executive and sales leadership roles at Hootsuite, was a partner at Deloitte Consulting, and spent eight years at SAP, where he led both sales and delivery teams focused on ERP systems for some of Canada's largest companies.

Tell us about your path to sales leadership.

I've been with Staples Canada for just over two years. I have a history with large tech firms. Prior to this role, I led the Canadian business for Meta. I was the global head of customer success at Hootsuite Canada and a partner at Deloitte, where I worked on SAP and analytics projects for nearly 10 years.

This month, we're focusing on pathways to growth.

What are your biggest growth challenges?

Our challenges vary by customer segment. In our large customer space, we work with organizations such as hospitals and governments. We do very well with our existing customers, but acquiring new customers can be difficult. We're also well-known for office products, but that is only part of what we do. For example, we also provide janitorial products, breakroom supplies, furniture, and technology solutions. So, we're trying to win in office products and then expand those categories as well so we can offer the type of holistic partnership our customers are looking for.

In the small to midsize business (SMB) market, we're being pressured by our digital competitors. Buyers don't need a lot of help buying pens and paper. In those environments, we're competing on the digital front while also determining which customers can benefit from higher-level expertise from our salesforce so we can be there to support them.

How are you addressing these challenges?

In SMBs, we still believe that specialization is necessary. However, it's very difficult for us to build a specialization model for each individual channel. So, we've used technology to digitally map out all of our customers, regardless of what banner they buy under, so an expert can easily identify and call on them efficiently and in a way that best serves their needs.

What about the large market space?

In the large market, winning customers is a project, as we've devoted a lot of energy and resources in really understanding our customers so we can best support them when and how they need us. We lean heavily on our business development executives, who operate as a quarterback for these opportunities. This role is responsible for proposals, understanding stakeholders, and all of those traditional sales elements. But they're also quarterbacking who needs to be involved internally. Where do I fit in as the CSO? Where does our CFO fit into the picture? We've won a lot of business recently by being proactive in this space.

Once we secure a new customer on the office products front, we leverage a specialized sales force to expand into additional products to help serve them even better. For example, to sell facilities to a large school board, we have an expert who previously managed the janitorial staff for the Toronto District School Board. We send him out to engage

with the customer's facilities staff, and he's able to share his past experience and provide expert advice. The connection and credibility are immediate. We have this specialized model in facilities, breakroom, furniture, and tech.

I'll give you another interesting example — it's a requirement in Canada that all the garbage bags in a hospital must be clear. However, it's technically very challenging to create a clear recycling bag. Our facility specialists collaborated with one of our hospital customers and a product provider to innovate and develop a clear recycling bag, which has driven growth for that customer. That's the depth of conversation and partnership necessary to grow our large market customer base and revenue.

Our digital competitors struggle to meet these complex customer requirements. They won't accept the difficult terms. They won't work with customers on a one-off solution. We have an incredible asset in our people who have themselves worked in the jobs that our customers are doing and know how to partner with them on that level.

What B2B trends are you tracking right now?

Of course, AI is a big trend. We are very excited about it, but the value driver is not yet clear. So, we're looking for places where AI can help us scale. At the same time, this is a well-established business with deep roots. So, how do you guide a sales force from a proven, traditional approach to embracing AI? How do you do that while you're maintaining our people's great institutional knowledge?

On the systems front, we had three different CRM systems. We have embarked on a journey to consolidate all our B2B sales resources under a single instance of Salesforce. From there, we can start to deploy more AI capabilities and automate traditional functions in a more meaningful way to better serve our customers.

As a sales leader, how do you balance those growth initiatives that might be longer-term with the necessity of saying, “Hey, we’ve got to hit our numbers for this quarter”?

That’s a tough challenge. I would say balancing the short term and the long term really comes down to the trust that you have in your people. I’ve recently hired an excellent VP of sales. I trust this person to deliver the quarter. He has full empowerment.



I would say balancing the short term and the long term really comes down to the trust that you have in your people.

I try to focus on what’s three quarters out. This Salesforce initiative won’t provide any meaningful value until Q3 of next year, but it remains a solid part of my focus. I’m really trying to impact six months from now, or a year from now.

We’d love to hear about an initiative that you’re championing and if you could describe it.

The SMB market in Canada is the area under the most pressure for us. Other competitors in that space have migrated more upmarket to avoid the competition. We don’t have the luxury of doing that because we operate in a store environment. We welcome millions of visitors in our stores each year.

We believe that 30% to 40% of those visitors are potential SMB clients, however we’re treating them like an everyday consumer and potentially missing out on a more specialized approach. We are working on ways to better connect the dots between our B2B channel to the really strong, incredible Staples brand that shoppers experience in-person in our stores so that we can really deliver a world-class cross-channel experience for our customers.

Our goal is to enable an SMB business to engage with B2B expertise in Staples stores. For example, you could use the credit terms that you have as a business in the

store. If you’re a school janitor and would like to see how this new equipment works, could an environment be set up for you to engage with one of our experts? We’re on a journey to enable and unlock B2B in the retail channel. It’s one of our best competitive differentiators.

I’ll give you one real-life example. Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, is a very small community. In Prince Albert, people see the store differently than they do in an urban center — it’s a community environment for them. If I’m trying to grow my business, I want to talk to people about the computer that I need. I want to sit in the chair. I want a relationship with the people in the store. I think that’s a need that customers have across the board.

As we move toward digital, that human element does get taken out of it. There will be a time when people think, “I don’t want to talk to an AI agent again. I’d like to talk to a person.” We have the opportunity at Staples to build that full spectrum within our infrastructure. We can leverage both.

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Autodesk's Agile Hunter Pods

By Delainey Kirkwood,
Michael Katz, and Greg Hessong

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Autodesk struggled to accelerate new customer acquisition. This case study reveals how Autodesk’s agile hunting pod strategy empowered teams to target and win new business, providing actionable insights for CSOs seeking scalable growth.

Autodesk, a global leader in design and engineering software, faced a critical challenge: to accelerate growth through new customer acquisition. While the company excelled at retaining and expanding existing accounts, the sales organization struggled to systematically attract net-new customers. This imbalance between expansion sales and new customer acquisition threatened Autodesk’s long-term growth.

At Autodesk, two major factors inhibited scaling new customer acquisition efforts:

- **Broad seller roles** — Sales roles encompassed both farming and hunting responsibilities without clear separation or targeted incentives. Sellers gravitated toward familiar renewal and expansion activities that were more likely to yield quota attainment, deprioritizing

new business development. Compensation structures reinforced this bias, rewarding retention and expansion over riskier prospecting efforts.

- **Inconsistent targeting** — Definitions of the Total Addressable Market (TAM) and targeting criteria varied across teams, resulting in siloed, redundant efforts and inconsistent outcomes.

These challenges are not unique to Autodesk.

Gartner research indicates that sales organizations underperforming on new customer acquisition are 5.1 times more likely to miss overall revenue growth targets.¹ For organizations with mature retention strategies, pivoting to scalable new business acquisition requires a fundamental rethinking of roles, incentives, and processes.

Precision Targeting for Growth

Recognizing the need for a structural overhaul, Autodesk devised a new customer acquisition strategy centered on specialized “hunting pods.” This approach was built on four critical pillars (see Figure 1): a unified growth and targeting strategy, an assembly-line approach, precision hiring, and feedback-driven evolution.

Unified Growth and Targeting Strategy

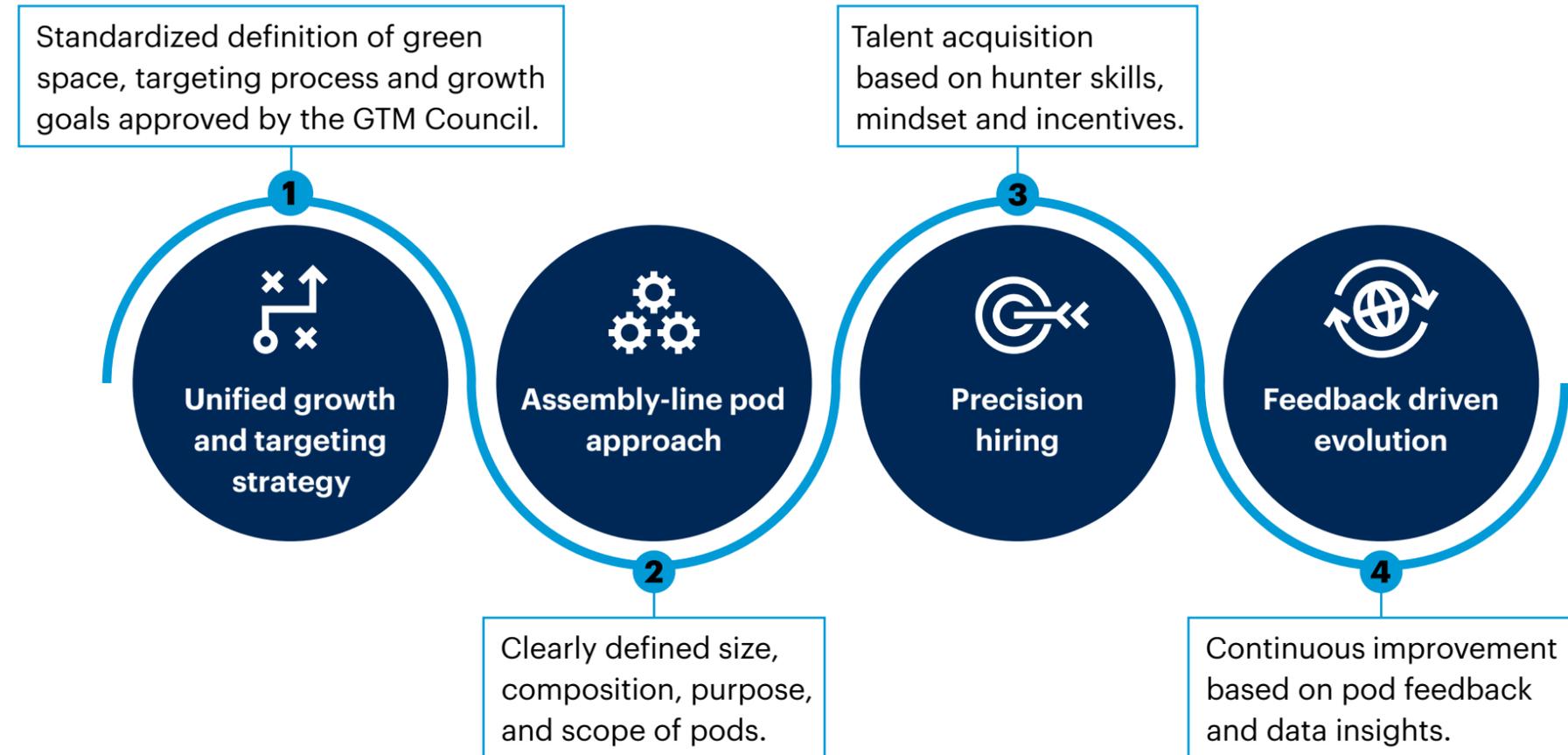
Autodesk convened a cross-functional go-to-market (GTM) council to align on definitions, goals, and targeting criteria for new customer acquisition. The council included leaders from sales, marketing, customer success, and IT, ensuring broad buy-in and consistent execution. The team

established clear parameters for what constituted a new customer, broadening the definition to include accounts with zero or minimal spend. Success metrics shifted from pure revenue to annual recurring revenue (ARR) across a larger volume of new accounts, with three key milestones:

- Account activation (\$1): Any new account that currently has zero spend with Autodesk.
- Meaningful biller acquisition (\$10K): When a low-spending account reaches a threshold of \$10K.
- Graduation (\$50K ARR): When an account reaches \$50K, it would “graduate” to existing expansion sales teams.

Targeting was refined using a mix of approaches that were top-down (predictive intelligence and ideal customer profile frameworks), bottom-up (analysis of successful “lighthouse” accounts), and inside-out (current users with growth potential or churned accounts). This intelligence-driven targeting enabled the precise allocation of accounts and resources.

Figure 1. New Business Growth Model



Source: Adapted from Autodesk
Note: GTM = go to market

Assembly-Line Pod Approach

To operationalize the strategy, Autodesk piloted autonomous, five-person hunting pods in high-potential regions. Each pod consisted of one field seller (account executive), three inside sellers, and one business development representative (BDR), all of whom reported to a regional director.

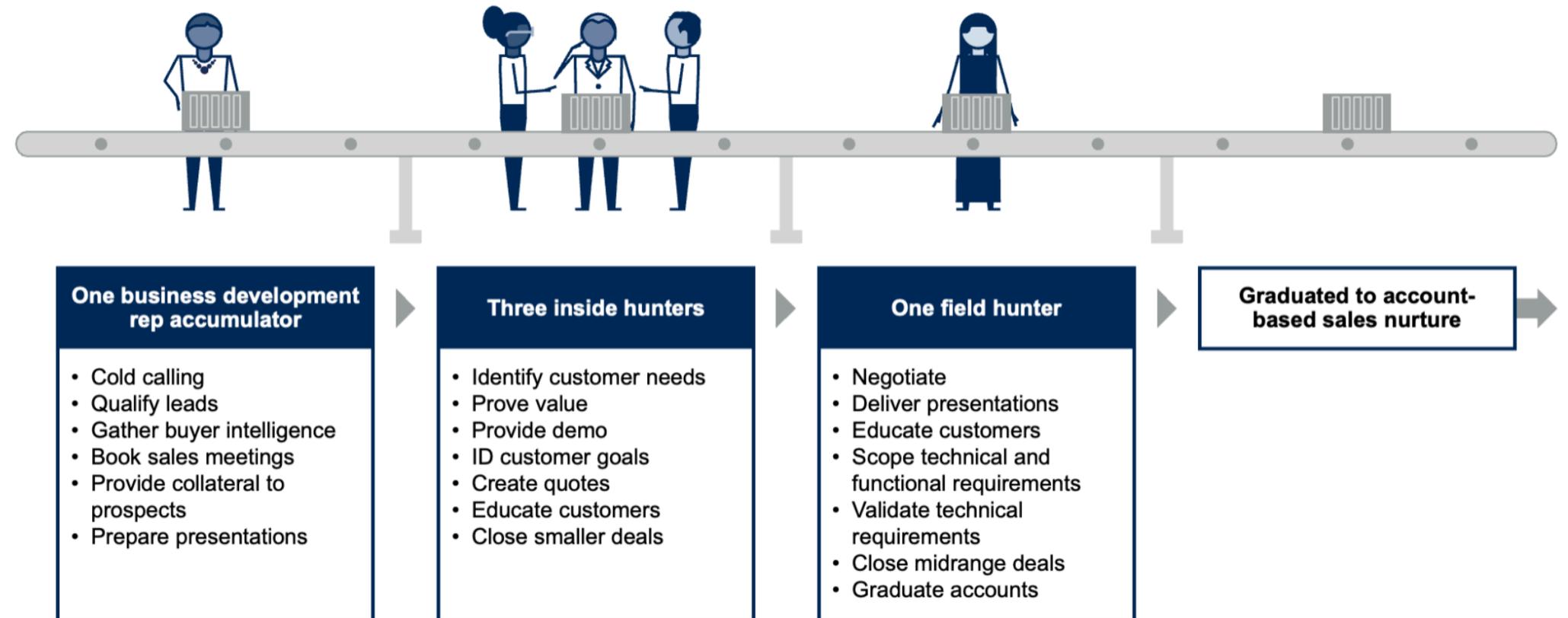
The pod functioned as an assembly line, breaking down the complex workflow of new customer acquisition into discrete, repeatable tasks (see Figure 2):

- BDRs sourced and qualified leads with no or low spend.
- Inside sellers closed lower-complexity deals and advanced larger opportunities.
- Account executives handled complex deals and managed accounts through graduation.

This specialization simplified roles, reduced overload, and improved efficiency. According to Gartner research, sales organizations that simplify seller roles are 4.5 times more likely to be top-performing sales organizations than those with more complex roles.² Pods were empowered to execute quarterly “velocity sales plays,” with the flexibility to adapt tactics, fostering experimentation and best-practice sharing.

Figure 2. Agile Hunting Pod Model

Assembly line pods with 800 accounts per pod



Source: Adapted from Autodesk

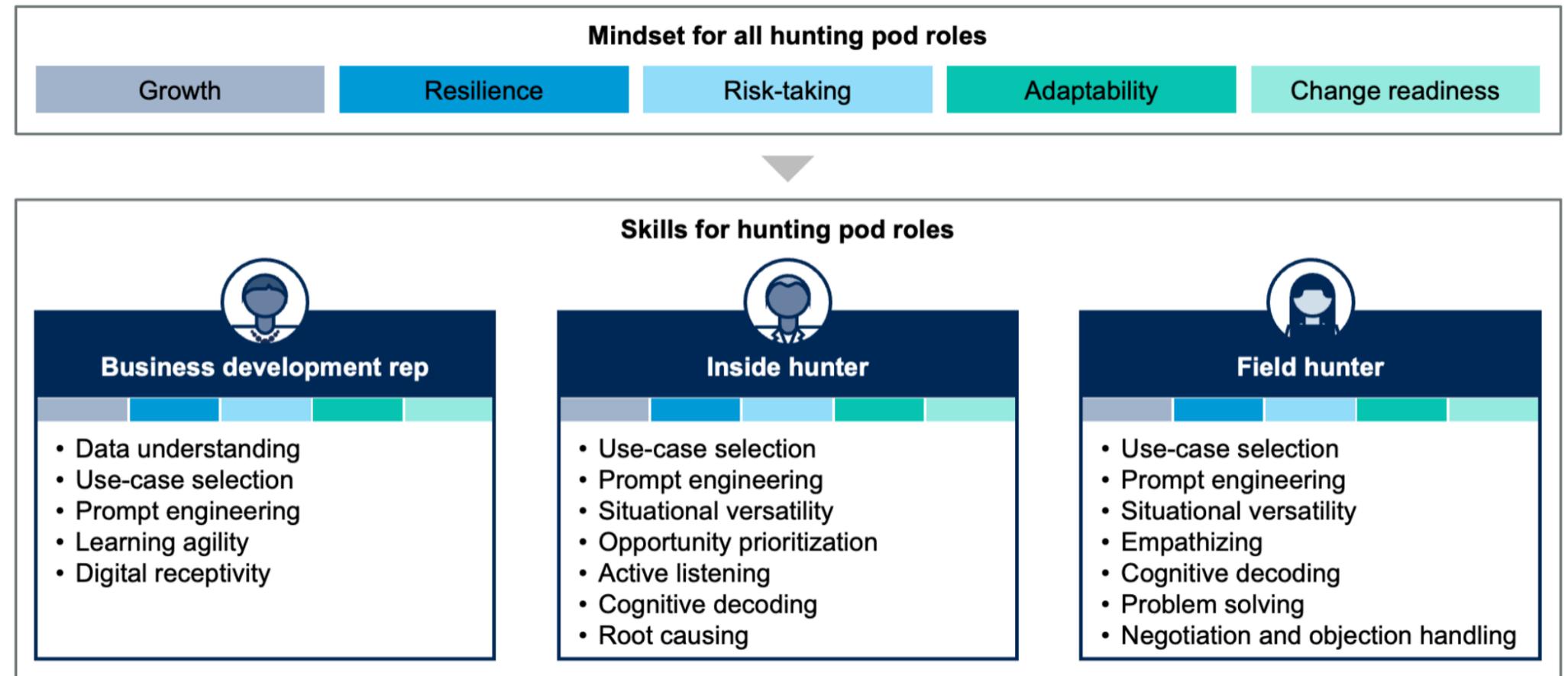
While Autodesk's new customer acquisition approach was designed as a direct sales motion, Autodesk's strong channel ecosystem remains integral to its broader commercial strategy. The hunting pods leverage partner services where appropriate, and there are future plans to enable partners to replicate the pod approach.

Precision Hiring for Hunters

Autodesk revamped its talent acquisition strategy to attract individuals with a true hunter mindset. The attributes of these mindsets include being growth-oriented, resilient, risk-tolerant, and adaptable (see Figure 3). Job descriptions emphasized AI proficiency, data literacy, and new customer acquisition experience, diverging from traditional product and account management requirements.

Compensation for hunters was adjusted to a 50-50 split between base and variable, incentivizing risk-taking and performance. Due to low internal interest in hunter roles, Autodesk sourced candidates from the broader technology sector, where hunting skills were more prevalent.

Figure 3. Precision Hiring With Strategic Alignment



Source: Adapted from Autodesk

Feedback-Driven Evolution

Continuous improvement was embedded in the hunter pod strategy. Autodesk established a real-time data cockpit using Power BI, tracking key performance indicators such as account activation, win rates, and pipeline growth. Pod members logged every prospect outcome, enabling rapid refinement of targeting models and sales plays.

Regular feedback sessions with pod members informed ongoing adjustments to roles, responsibilities, and tactics. The agile pod structure allowed the organization to redeploy high-performing leaders to new teams, further scaling success.

Results

The hunting pod strategy, launched in 2Q25, delivered a rapid and measurable impact. Prior to the rollout, Autodesk averaged 120 new accounts per year. Within just four months of launching the pods, the company acquired 110 new accounts, including a doubling of monthly totals in July. Autodesk is on track to exceed its annual target of 300 new accounts.

The data-driven feedback loop enabled continuous optimization, with pods quickly identifying and correcting targeting errors, refining sales plays, and sharing best practices. The simplified, specialized roles reduced seller overload and improved execution, which the cross-functional GTM council ensured sustained alignment and support.

Recommendations

Organizations seeking to scale new customer acquisition should focus on:

- **Cross-functional alignment** — Establish a GTM council with representation from sales, marketing, customer success, and IT. This approach ensures that shared definitions, goals, and accountability prevent fragmentation and enhance consistent execution.
- **Role simplification and specialization** — Breaking down complex workflows into specialized roles, supported by an assembly-line approach, reduces overload and improves focus.
- **Targeted talent acquisition and incentives** — Hiring for hunter mindsets and skills, supported by tailored compensation structures, attracts the right talent and drives desired behaviours.
- **Continuous feedback and data-driven iteration** — Embedding real-time data collection and feedback loops enables rapid learning and adoption. Treating pods as experiments fosters innovation and scalability.
- **Agility and flexibility** — Empowering pods to adapt tactics and share best practices promotes agility.
- **Maintain a balanced go-to-market approach** — Ensure that direct sales innovations complement, rather than replace, channel partner strategies. Involve partners in new models where possible to maximize reach and impact.

¹ **2025 Gartner CSO Priorities Survey.** This survey was conducted to understand the top priorities, challenges and opportunities for chief sales officers in 2025. The survey was completed from October 2024 through December 2024 with an online sample of 246 heads of sales and senior sales leaders across North America (n = 165), Western Europe (n = 46), and Asia/Pacific (n = 35). Qualifying respondents belonged to a sales function of an organization with enterprisewide annual revenue in 2024 of at least \$100 million or equivalent. Industry segments included manufacturing, information technology and high tech, banking and financial services, and pharmaceuticals. 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 companies surveyed.

² **2024 Gartner Sales Org DNA Survey.** This survey was conducted to identify productivity levers that are most effective for chief sales officers to elevate sales performance, including role design, sales leadership, sales culture and sales technology. The survey was completed from May 2024 through June 2024 with an online sample of 234 heads of sales and senior sales leaders across North America (n = 159), Western Europe (n = 48), and Asia/Pacific (n = 27). Qualifying respondents belonged to a sales function of an organization with enterprisewide annual revenue in 2023 of at least \$100 million or equivalent. Industry segments included manufacturing, information technology and high tech, banking and financial services, and pharmaceuticals. 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 companies surveyed.

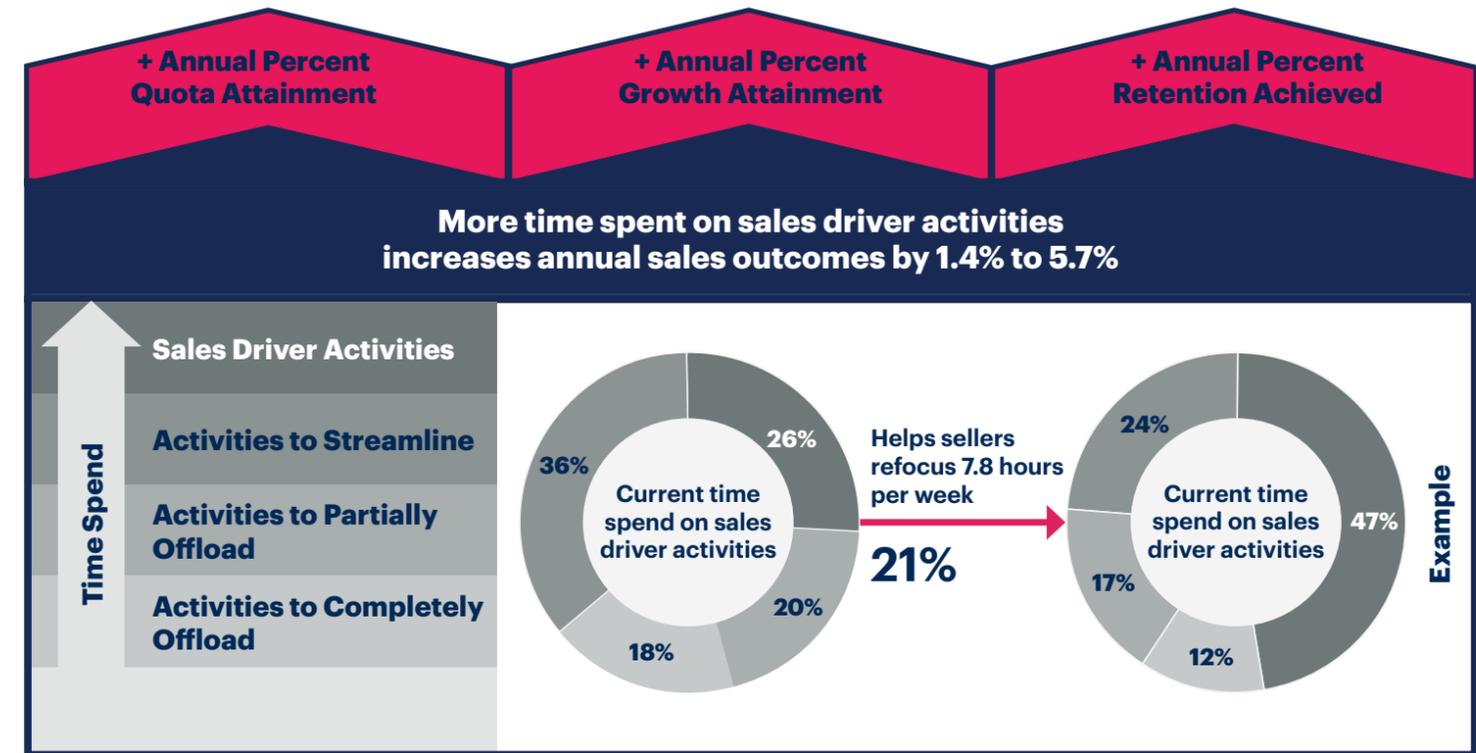
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