

Gartner®

The CSO Report

Gartner answers top CSO challenges.

3Q26



CSO 3Q26 insights to action

Each quarter, Gartner looks across client interactions, proprietary content and external media to identify the top issues facing CSOs. In 3Q26, CSOs report being caught in a productivity paradox, with ongoing sales optimization efforts delivering limited measurable gains. At the same time, they face pressure to prove returns on AI investments and drive predictable revenue amid volatility. The gap between investment and impact is increasingly evident, as AI has delivered largely incremental improvements. As a result, many CSOs struggle to influence outcomes directly, with 60% saying revenue is driven by factors outside their control.

Use this edition of The CSO Report to break through the productivity paradox, improve decision making and strengthen enterprise impact.

Top questions: 3Q26

How do I improve sales productivity without increasing headcount?



How do I boost the impact of frontline sales managers on seller productivity and results?



How do I improve pipeline health to drive more predictable revenue?



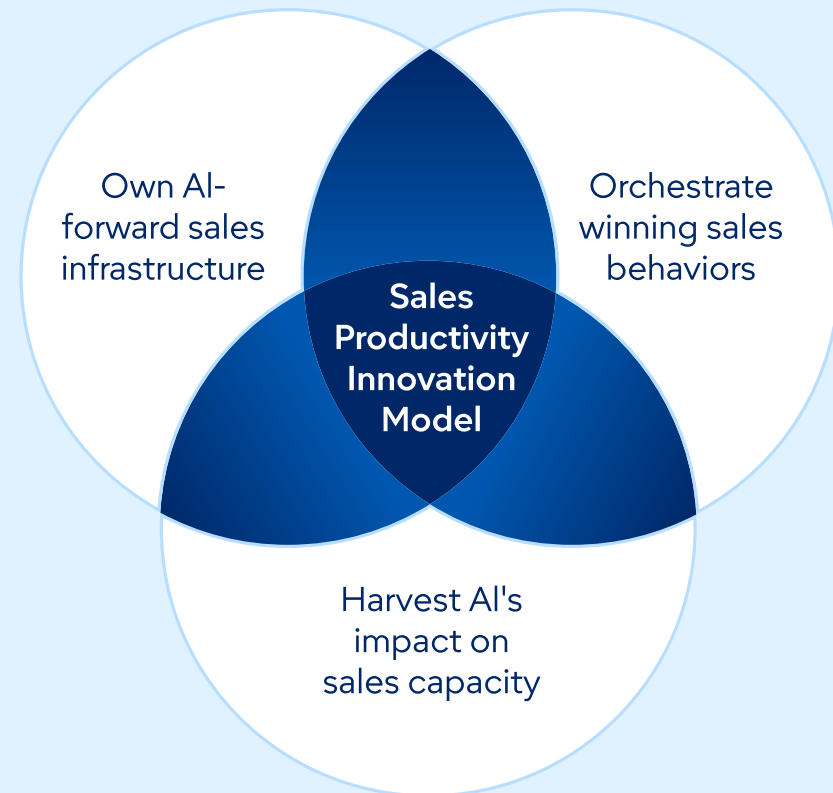
Source: Gartner

How do I improve sales productivity without increasing headcount?

Sales leaders find themselves trapped in a productivity paradox, as years of investment in tools, technology and talent have not yet yielded expected productivity gains — amplifying pressure from boards and CEOs to achieve AI-enabled growth without increasing headcount.

CSOs who use AI to challenge productivity constraints — rather than simply layer it onto existing processes — are 2.7x more likely to exceed commercial targets, including lead-to-opportunity conversion and revenue growth

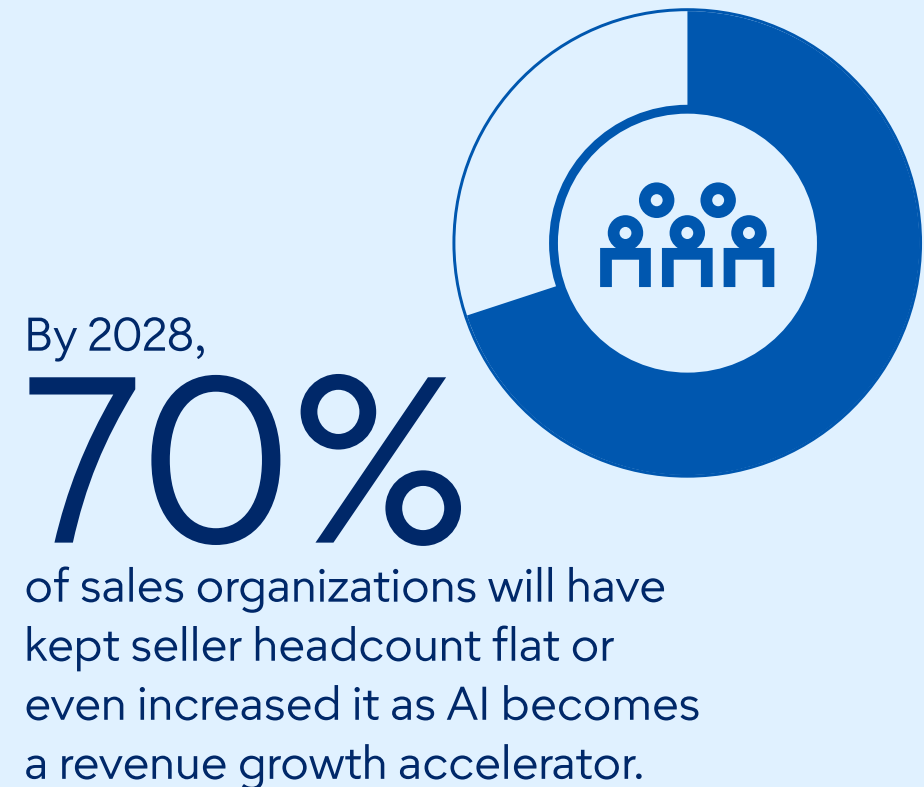
Sales productivity innovation model



Drive breakthrough sales productivity with AI

To break the productivity paradox, CSOs must stop layering AI onto flawed legacy processes and instead address the underlying constraints that cap sales productivity, such as demand ceilings, fragmented systems, limited manager capacity and poor decision quality. To do so, CSOs must focus on three activities that power a sales productivity innovation model.

- **Make productivity possible by owning AI-forward infrastructure:** Build a centralized context layer managed by revenue operations that connects enterprise data, systems and human judgment to ensure AI outputs actually reflect how top performers think and win.
- **Make productivity repeatable by orchestrating winning behaviors:** Apply a “strip, stack and sharpen” design rule to workflows. CSOs must strip away the administrative judgment tax that distracts sellers, stack top-performer expertise into on-demand guidance to improve decision quality at the point of action and sharpen frontline coaching with cross-system diagnostics.
- **Make productivity visible by harvesting AI’s impact:** Redefine how sales capacity is measured by using digital capacity units (dCUs) to calculate the total human-plus-AI contribution. Intentionally design and allocate total selling capacity.



Source: Gartner

Take action with Gartner support



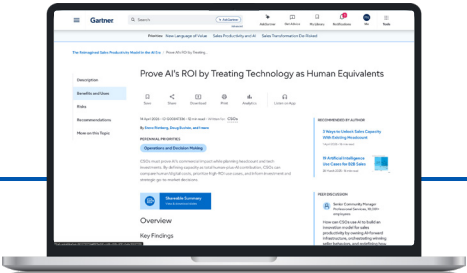
Learn how **Cisco adopted technology as a teammate** and offloaded key tasks throughout the prospecting workflow to AI and machine learning.



Schedule a call with a Gartner analyst to learn how to operationalize AI as a workforce resource with strong data and context ownership.



Learn how to **measure capacity using total human-plus-AI contribution** to better gauge digital ROI and inform planning.



Already a client?

Use **AskGartner** to explore:

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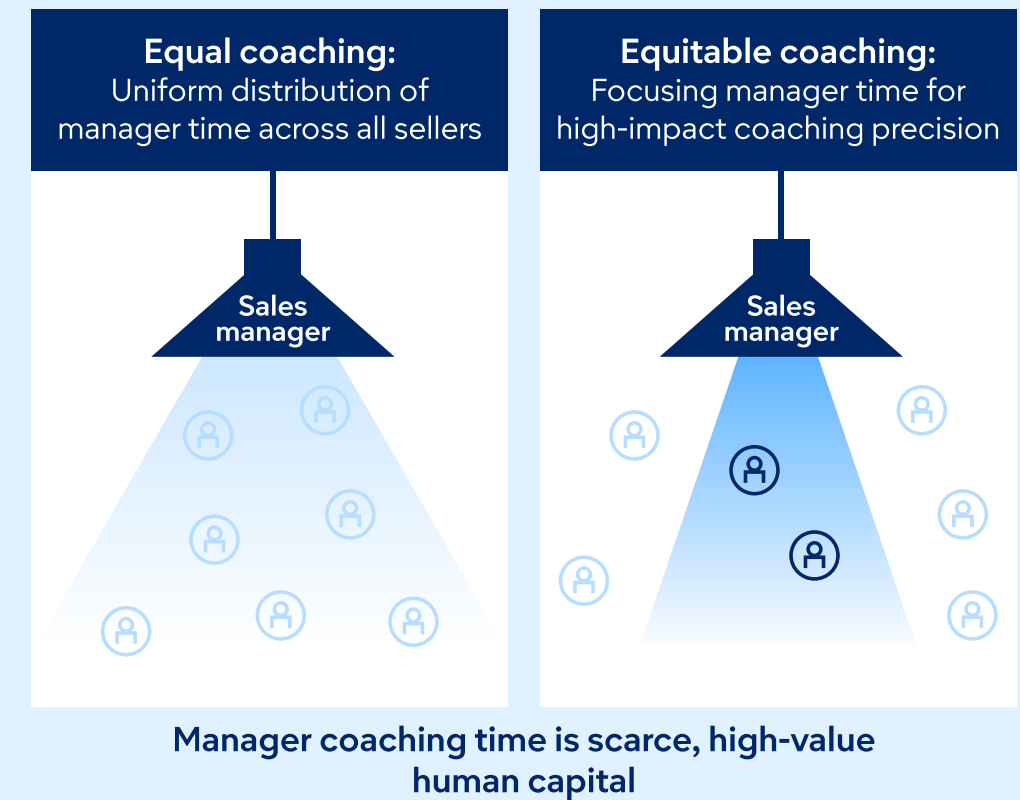
How do I improve the impact of frontline sales managers on seller productivity and results?

Frontline sales managers (FSMs) can act as powerful force multipliers, driving up to 5x to 6x better seller performance. However, that impact is often unrealized. The issue is often design: unclear expectations, expanding responsibilities and limited support pull managers away from their core role of coaching sellers. This strain is reflected in the 52% who report misalignment between their daily tasks and formal job descriptions.

As the role stretches to absorb competing demands, this critical driver of performance remains consistently underleveraged.

Frontline sales managers with clear role clarity are 3.2x more likely to achieve strong team performance.

Sales manager coaching: Equal coaching time, unequal returns



Sharpen frontline manager impact

To elevate the impact of FSMs, CSOs must treat manager bandwidth as a scarce, highly valuable resource and execute a structural shift to optimize that resource.

- **Diagnose hidden time drains:** CSOs must replace anecdotal assumptions with a data-driven time audit to uncover the hidden operational friction eroding manager focus.
- **Embed AI to augment the manager role:** Integrate agentic AI as embedded role support, which can help managers quickly diagnose performance issues and identify deal and pipeline risks. This enables managers to focus their efforts where they deliver unique human value in areas such as problem-solving, empathetic coaching, and deal strategy.
- **Shift to precision coaching:** With this reclaimed capacity, organizations must abandon the ineffective practice of equal, blanket coaching in favor of precision coaching. By operationalizing data-backed decision guidance that evaluates sellers on skill, will, and coachability, CSOs ensure that this protected managerial effort is invested directly where it will yield the highest commercial return.

Managers who use data to focus their coaching are more than **4x** as likely to exceed expected profit growth.

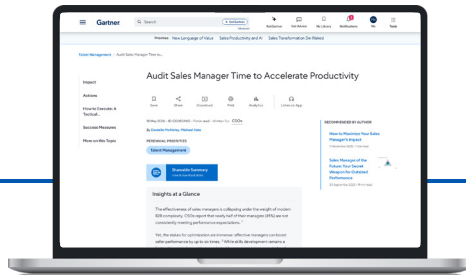


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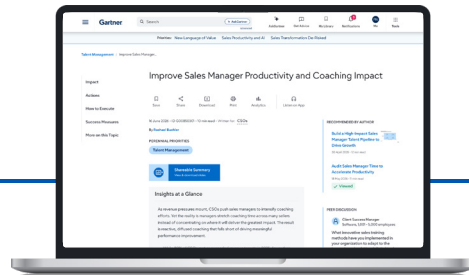
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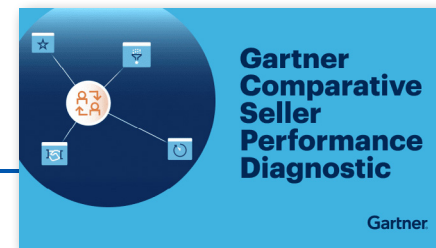
Learn how to **deploy a data-driven, multimethod time audit** to identify operational friction and reclaim manager bandwidth, and audit sales manager time to accelerate productivity.



Learn how to **improve sales manager productivity and coaching impact** by shifting from equal to equitable seller coaching and prioritizing sellers with the highest potential return.



Use the **Gartner Comparative Seller Performance Diagnostic** to assess productivity drivers, enable data-driven coaching, and empower frontline managers to deliver personalized coaching and sustain revenue growth.



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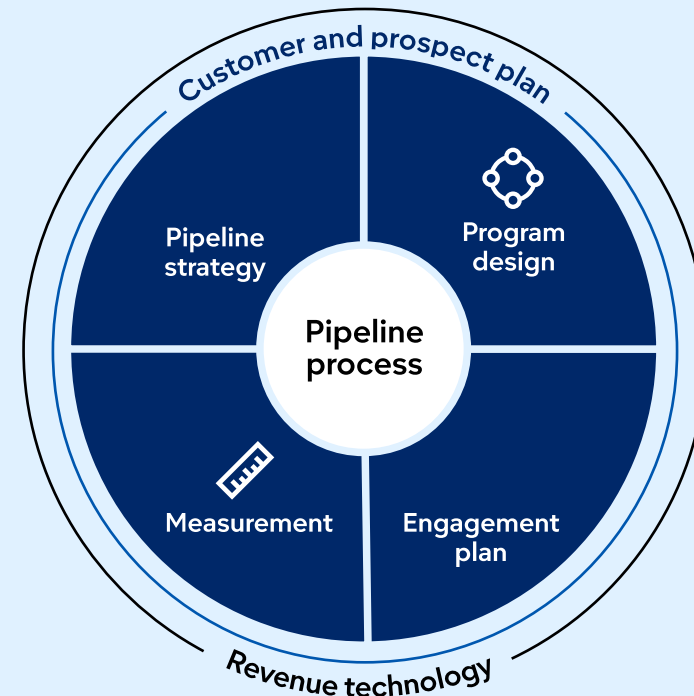


How do I improve pipeline health to drive more predictable revenue?

In an effort to hit ambitious growth targets, CSOs often push for more pipeline volume; however, 51% report a fundamental misalignment with marketing on what defines a high-quality lead. This creates a “pipeline trap,” where marketing-qualified leads (MQLs) reflect superficial interest rather than real buying intent, inflating pipeline, wasting seller time on false positives, and ultimately undermining forecast credibility.

Organizations where sales and marketing use shared metrics and/or processes are 3.6× more likely to drive profitable revenue growth from current customers.

Pipeline process framework

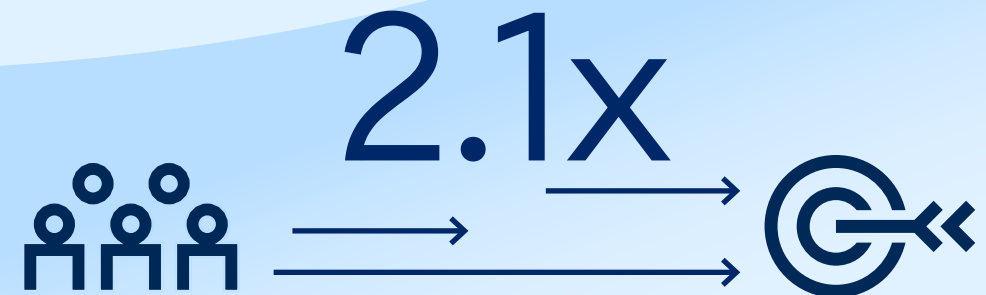


Increase pipeline quality

Fixing the funnel isn't about more leads. It's about better-qualified leads.

- **Shift focus from activity volume to interaction quality:** CSOs must prioritize the quality of buyer-seller interactions by deploying a comprehensive pipeline process framework that orchestrates targeted, high-value engagements.
- **Formalize cross-functional alignment:** Establish a formal go-to-market (GTM) council to replace ad hoc collaboration with rigorous, cross-functional governance over lead definitions and handoff standards. Align sales and marketing on verified purchase intent rather than superficial interest. Shift MQLs to a leading indicator.
- **Anchor success in revenue metrics:** By shifting success measurement to outcome-based, revenue-linked metrics — such as lead-to-qualified conversion rates and pipeline velocity — CSOs can accurately diagnose pipeline health, refine engagement plans, and restore forecasting credibility with the board. Shift MQLs to a leading indicator.

Organizations with a formalized GTM council that collaborates on targets are **2.1x** more likely to achieve their revenue and profit goals.

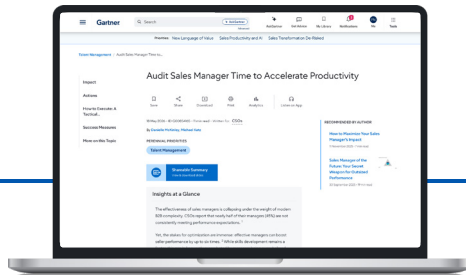


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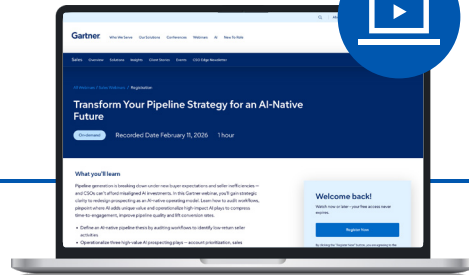
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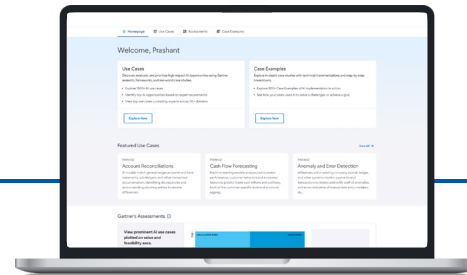
Enhance the quality of buyer-seller interactions by **deploying a comprehensive pipeline process framework**.



Watch our on-demand webinar, **Transform Your Pipeline Strategy for an AI-Native Future** to learn how to audit workflows, identify high-impact AI opportunities, and improve pipeline quality and conversion.



Discover how CSOs **use Gartner-validated AI use cases** to enhance buyer-seller interactions, improve pipeline health and accelerate revenue performance.



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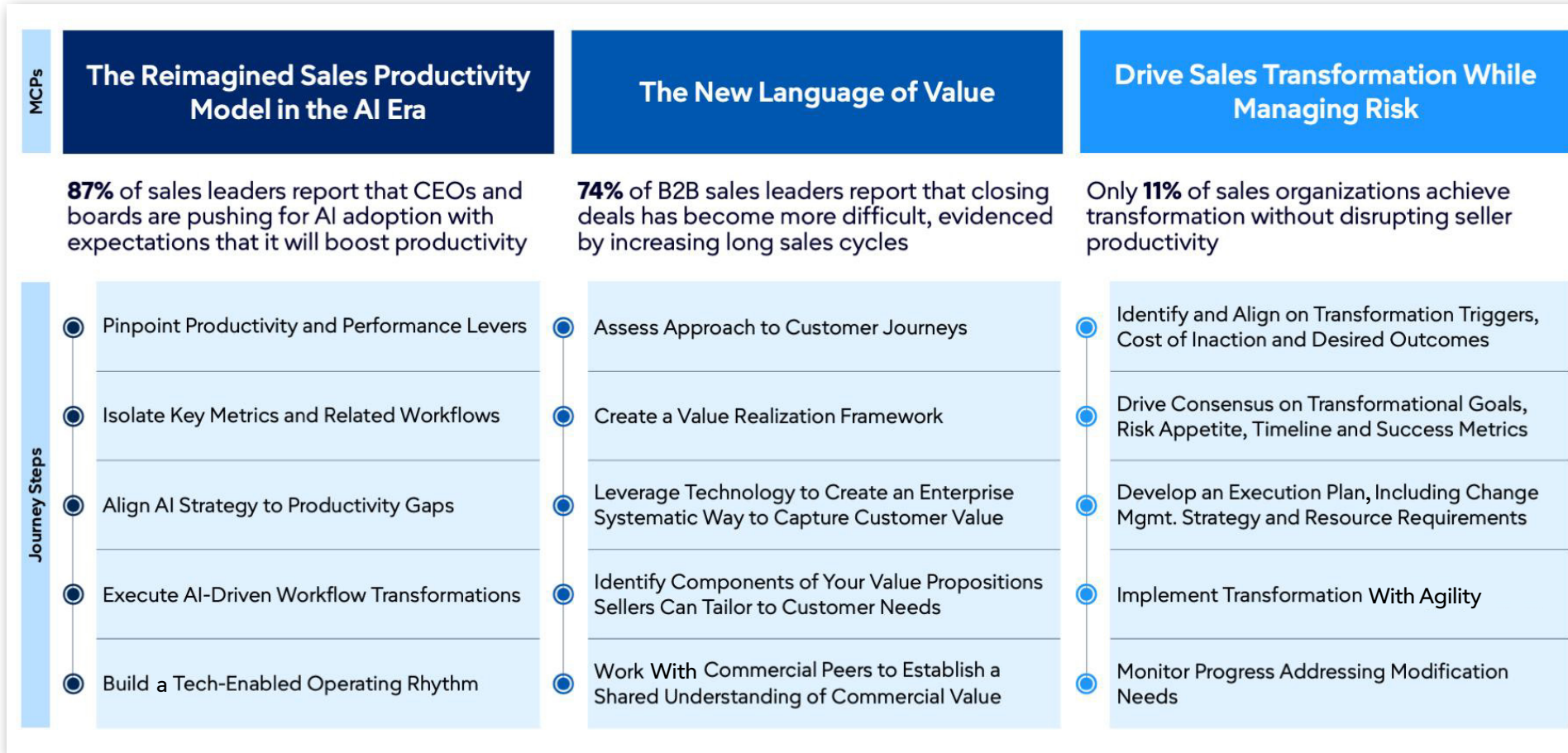
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CSO mission-critical priorities (MCPs)

With information everywhere and countless voices telling you what to do and where to focus, how do you separate what's urgent from what's truly essential? Gartner for Sales helps you focus on what matters most by prioritizing time, resources and MCPs that drive results. [Talk to us](#) to learn more.





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