

Gartner Research

The DNA of Top Sales Organizations

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29 January 2025

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29 January 2025 - ID G00826039 - 21 min read

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Initiatives: CSO Effectiveness

In the constantly shifting B2B sales landscape, CSOs grapple with two challenges: the relentless pressure to hit quarterly targets and the need to sustain competitiveness in the long term. Use this research to learn how the best sales organizations design for adaptability in order to thrive.

Overview

Under constant pressure to drive growth, sales leaders tend to lean on tried-and-true solutions such as hiring, training and upskilling sellers, and adding technology. But these efforts perpetuate a cycle of overwhelmed sellers and stagnating productivity. Our research identifies a better approach to improve productivity and organizational adaptivity, which is to first develop a granular, data-driven understanding of the actions that drive commercial success as a foundation for simplifying seller roles. Next, simplify seller roles by eliminating extraneous tasks and leveraging technology to significantly enhance productivity and adaptability.

These simplified roles will help your organization be more adaptive, continuously innovate and rapidly respond to market changes. By focusing on these strategies, chief sales officers (CSOs) can clear the path to improve overall productivity, preparing their organizations for sustainable growth and an increased ability to adapt to future changes.

Key Findings

- To drive productivity in times of rapid change, CSOs frequently rely on seller-based solutions (e.g., training and upskilling, hiring, and adding new or improved enablement tools). These often result in overwhelmed sellers and limited productivity gains.
- Sales organizations that focus on action-centered insight and design are more likely to be among the top sales organizations in terms of ease of transformation and commercial success. ¹ To produce that insight, sales leaders must identify the specific workflows and actions that contribute to commercial success.
- A foundation of action-centered insight then enables radical role simplification, wherein organizations purposefully reduce the scope and complexity of the seller role through role design and deployment of technology as a teammate (TaaT). This improves commercial performance in times of change, reduces the likelihood of overwhelming sellers and improves organizational adaptability.
- Top sales organizations combine action-centered insight and design and simplified seller roles, enabling focused adaptation to external events while minimizing disruption.

Traditional Efforts to Boost Productivity Have Diminishing Returns

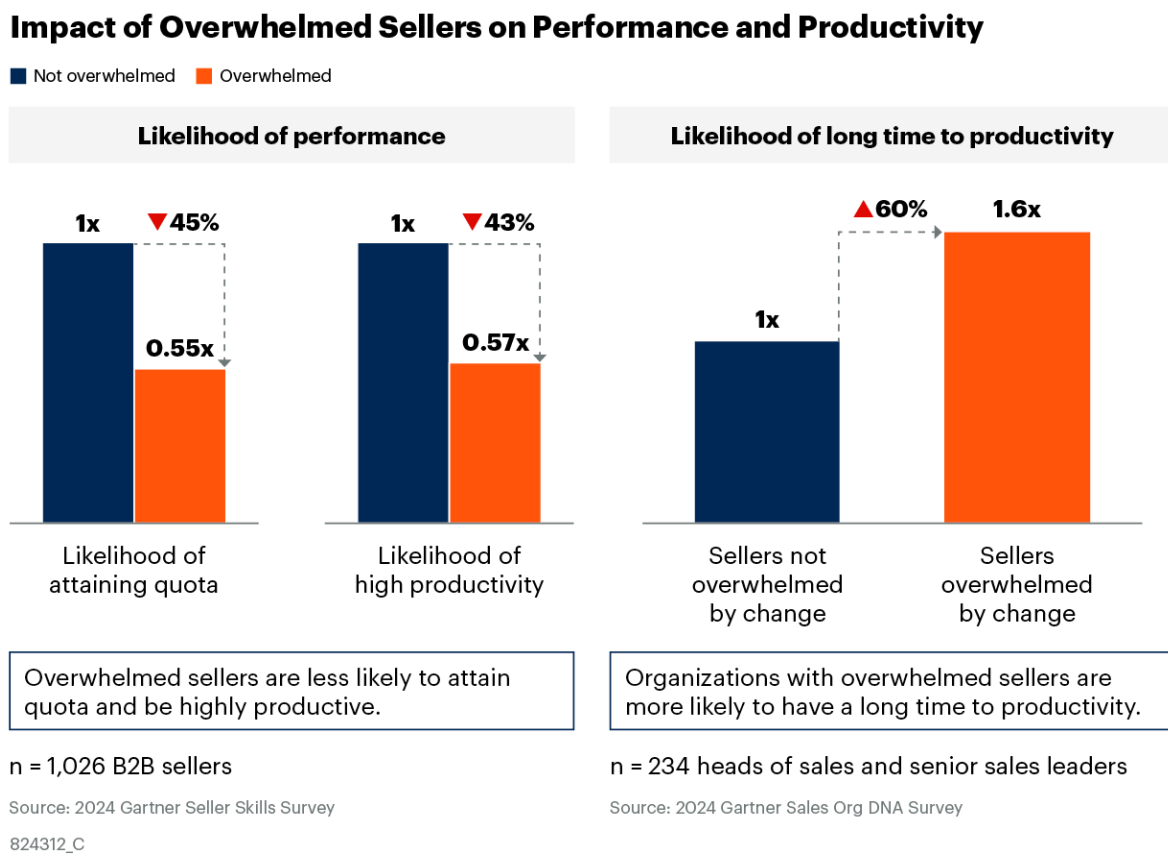
Sales organizations are making dramatic changes to keep up with technological advancements, changing buying behaviors, economic headwinds and unforeseen global events. From 2022 through 2024, sales organizations completed an average of four transformations. ¹ Throughout it all, sales leaders are expected to sustain and grow revenue.

While CSOs have a variety of mechanisms at their disposal to drive productivity, it's often unclear which are most effective, especially in a rapidly shifting landscape. That ambiguity, combined with the relentless need to hit quarterly targets, leads most CSOs to default to the seller-centric solutions that have worked to drive productivity in the past. Given that typically 82% of sales budget goes toward personnel, ² it's not surprising that these are often the first efforts. Hiring, manager coaching, upskilling/training and enabling with technology are among the most commonly used sales productivity levers. ¹

In essence, the common strategy for driving productivity in a constantly changing environment seems to be: hire the best talent we can, train them, coach them and equip them with tools, then they will figure out the rest on their own. Indeed, our analysis of over 100,000 job descriptions in B2B sales reflects that the desired ability to “figure it out” independently is on the rise. It shows that the core competencies of adaptability and creativity are growing and prevalent, and that self-management and autonomy is currently the fastest-growing competency that sellers are required to possess or develop. ³

Unfortunately, these efforts are yielding diminishing returns as many sellers are feeling overwhelmed and unable to absorb the volume of change required. ¹ In our research, 70% of sellers report being overwhelmed by the number of technologies required to do their work, and 72% of sellers are overwhelmed by the number of skills required for their roles. ⁴ Organizations with overwhelmed sellers are less productive (see Figure 1). ¹

Figure 1: Impact of Overwhelmed Sellers on Performance and Productivity



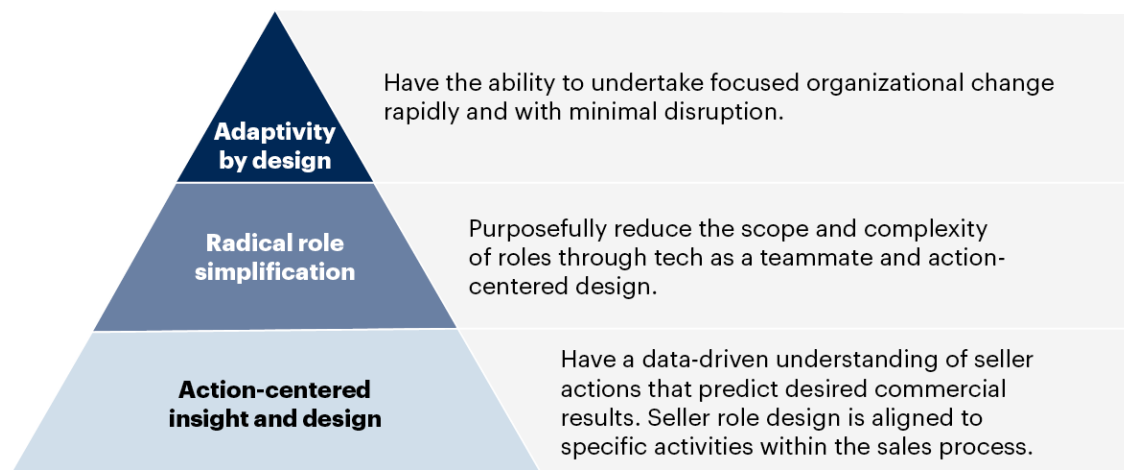
We don't expect the rate of change to slow down anytime soon, so CSOs will continue to need to evolve their organizations to keep pace with the market. Given that, how can CSOs manage these change efforts while maintaining seller productivity and continuing to meet revenue goals? While incremental, seller-focused initiatives may offer short-term gains, they ultimately overwhelm sellers. This renders them less productive and less capable of absorbing additional change, setting organizations further back than where they started. This research identifies more sustainable strategies for driving productivity and adaptability in sales organizations.

Top Sales Organizations Use a Multilayered Strategy for Success

For our research, we defined a “top” sales organization as one that is able to drive commercial success while executing a transformation. In our research, only 11% of sales organizations met that threshold. ¹ Figure 2 shows the three key components that set those organizations apart from the rest.

Figure 2: What Top Sales Organizations Do Differently

What Top Sales Organizations Do Differently



Source: Gartner
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Action-Centered Insight and Design

The foundation of a top sales organization’s approach is developing a deep, granular understanding of not just its sales process but of how individual actions contribute – or don’t – to overall commercial performance. The top sales organizations in our study have a data-driven understanding of seller actions that produce their desired commercial results. They also align sellers to specific parts of the sales process, and use data-driven insights to clarify seller priorities. Organizations with that action-centered insight and design are 2.5 times more likely to be among the top sales orgs. ¹

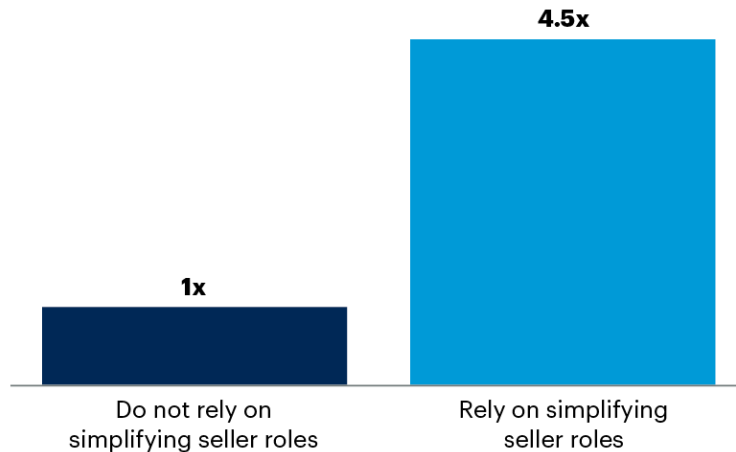
Radical Role Simplification

Leaders can use those action-centered insights to radically simplify seller roles. In our survey, simplifying seller roles is statistically linked to being a top sales organization. In fact, participants that report relying on simplifying seller roles to drive productivity are 4.5 times more likely to be among that elite group of sales organizations than those that do not (see Figure 3). ¹

Figure 3: Likelihood of Being a Top Sales Organization

Likelihood of Being a Top Sales Organization

By reliance on simplifying seller roles to drive productivity



n = 234 heads of sales and senior sales leaders

Source: 2024 Gartner Sales Org DNA Survey

Note: “Simplified seller roles” reflects respondents who commonly use that lever to increase sales productivity. Being a top sales organization is defined as completing a recent transformation more easily than expected and exceeding within at least three of the following: targeted revenue growth, profit growth, new customer acquisition and customer growth.

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Adaptivity by Design

Finally, the organizations that are designed for change are the ones that can transform with less disruption. Having these analytically defined actions and simplified roles helps make organizations more adaptable by simplifying change efforts. All elements of the sales process and their downstream effects have been identified and assigned to accountable parties, and roles have been narrowed and made discrete. This allows for more precise, targeted change initiatives that focus on only a subset of segments, roles or individuals – increasing predictability and decreasing risk and change complexity.

What does implementing action-centered insight and design, radical role simplification, and adaptivity by design actually look like? Below we explain in detail with examples from various organizations.

Create Action-Centered Insight and Design

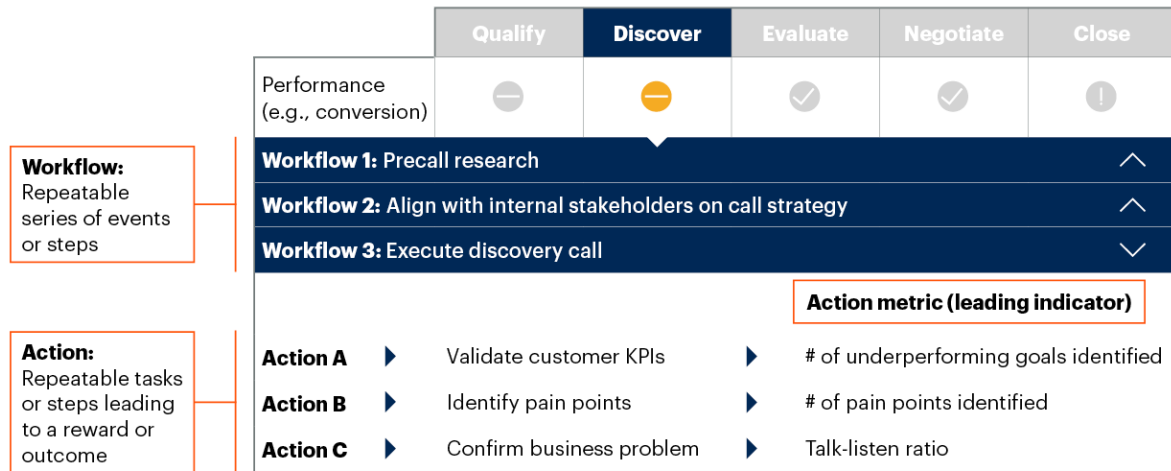
Action-centered insight and design means looking at a much deeper level of sales execution than the standard, high-level stages of the sales process. It involves documenting the underlying workflows and actions that build to those stages and ultimately drive commercial success. Figure 4 shows an example of how stages of the sales process can be broken down into workflows and the underlying actions behind those workflows.

Figure 4: Actions Within Sales Workflows and Their Impact on Results

Sales Workflows and Their Impact on Results

Illustrative sales dashboard

✔ Good ⚠ Cause for concern ❗ Major issues



Source: Gartner
824312_C

While many organizations base their playbooks and processes on assumptions about customer behavior, the top organizations quantitatively establish and reverify the connection between different sales actions and desired outcomes. These organizations understand the quantitative impact that specific actions have on commercial performance – and how they roll up to and predict key metrics like conversion. This action-level insight allows for precise, targeted interventions (through just-in-time learning, coaching, etc.) to dial up different actions depending on market needs.

Below is an example of a company that took an incremental approach to developing action-centered insights.

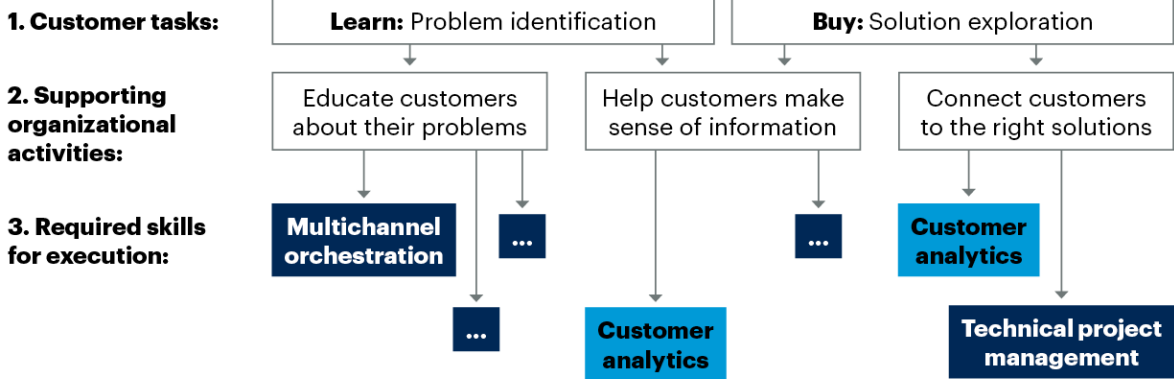
Figure 5: SMART's Approach to Mapping Customer Tasks to Employee Skills

SMART's Approach to Mapping Customer Tasks to Employee Skills

Illustrative

Mapping skills based on customer tasks and organizational activities — regardless of legacy functional responsibilities — reveals operational redundancies and gaps.

■ Unique skill need ■ Overlapping skill need



Source: Adapted from SMART 826039_C



Use Radical Role Simplification to Narrow Seller Roles

Leaders of top-performing sales organizations use their action-centered insights to strategically define seller roles, with a focus on simplification and manageability. Often, sales organizations design roles using either a broad focus (e.g., hunters and farmers) or around their internal structures (e.g., small and midsize business [SMB] team and large enterprise team).

Radical role simplification is a very targeted approach that considers how granular activities coordinate across functions — not just “selling” activities but those that support and relate to selling. These can include aligning strategy with marketing, seeking legal approval or handing off a new customer to the implementation team.

Top organizations use radical role simplification to find what to eliminate, deduplicate and/or support using technology. Roles are then built based on how they contribute to those workflows and coordinate with each other. These clear, streamlined roles are integral to making your organization resilient through transformation because they allow for more precise, targeted change initiatives.

Analyze Actions and Workflows

To radically simplify roles, start with the deep analysis of actions and workflows to:

- Remove excess or redundant activities
- Shift responsibilities to the roles that are best able to fulfill them
- Use technology to remove or support any activities that it can serve

In combination, this will reduce the number of actions each role is responsible for and show you how to narrow and define roles by the actions they must perform. This shift may be headcount neutral, depending on your organization's goals and existing structures. Your workflow/activity analysis might reveal untapped resources on hand (e.g., roles dedicated to redundant work or activities that can be better supported by tech) to redeploy to more pressing activities — or it might show coverage gaps that are inhibiting success.

Narrow Roles Based on Key Activities and Tasks

Next, look across the commercial organization to narrow roles based on those actions and workflows. Figure 6 illustrates how radical role simplification differs from the conventional approach; note that although the version on the right side of the figure shows more roles, those roles are much more narrowly defined and are interconnected cross-functionally.

Figure 6: Conventional vs. Radical Role Simplification

Conventional vs. Radical Role Simplification



Conventional simplification

- Aligns work to existing roles
- General responsibilities are understood; specific actions are assumed
- Defines roles using the sales process or existing organizational structure
- Is a one-time event
- Is limited to sales roles
- Leverages technology as a tool

Radical role simplification

- Aligns roles to specific work
- Explicitly identifies and tracks responsibilities at the workflow and action level
- Defines roles by workflows and actions, regardless of org structure
- Is an ongoing reassessment
- Encompasses commercial roles
- Leverages technology as a teammate

Source: Gartner
824312_C



Radical role simplification differs from the conventional approach in a few ways. First, it starts with specific actions and aligns work to already identified roles. Top organizations define roles around complementary actions that depend on similar skill sets, making them easier to hire for and reducing the cognitive burden of context switching.

Radical role simplification is not limited to a one-time event; ongoing reassessment is needed to ensure that the newly defined roles are in fact performing as expected and effectively coordinated.

That coordination — the handoffs and mutual understanding across roles — is especially important in radical role design because it spans beyond sales across the entire commercial organization. Leverage TaaT rather than technology as a tool in these initiatives in order to both facilitate that coordination and avoid piling on extra tech burden and debt. For more information on how TaaT differs from conventional tech usage, see [Sellers Need Technology as a Teammate Not a Tool](#).

Benefits of Radical Role Simplification

Radical role simplification has three major benefits:

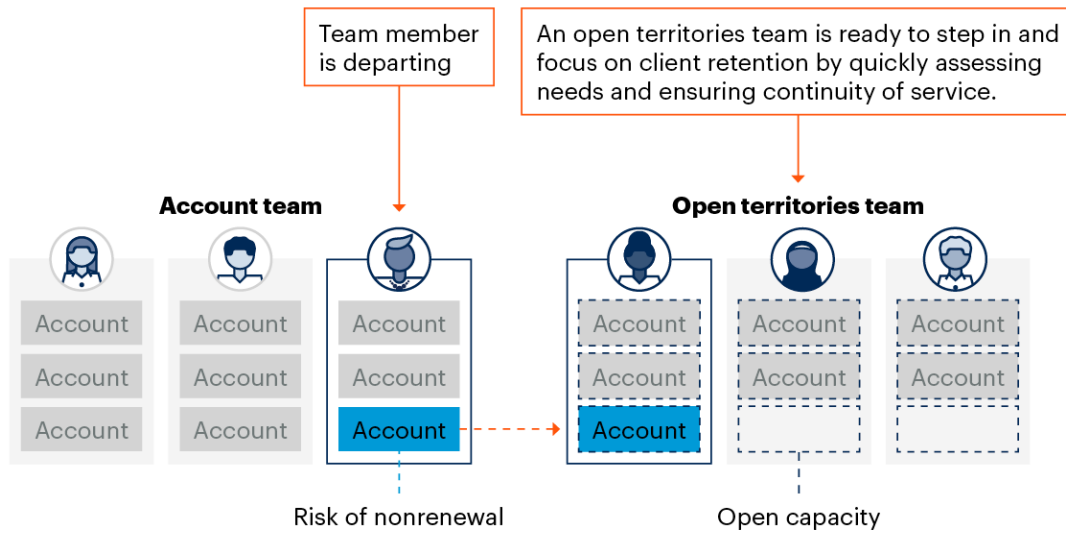
- **Boosts productivity** — Roles are defined by the specific actions required for sales success. Extraneous or duplicative responsibilities are removed, allowing sellers to do more of what's needed.
- **Increases adaptability** — Better defined roles clarify which roles will be impacted by a given change and what the downstream effects might be. Narrower roles improve sellers' bandwidth for additional change.
- **Simplifies hiring** — Roles have fewer skills requirements than do conventional roles, and priorities are clear. Sellers filling these roles are not implicitly expected to be highly autonomous; rather, they are interconnected by design.

At a broader level, establishing consistent roles across the sales organization supports interoperability, meaning that the organization can readily shift sellers across channels or segments to execute the same set of activities in a consistent sales process. Unlike sellers who are expected to be masters of every stage of the sales process, customer segment or product line, a seller responsible for a discrete set of responsibilities is easier to move or repurpose as the organization changes.

Following are examples of two sales organizations that have approached role simplification from different angles. Cisco uses TaaT to dramatically simplify seller roles, and BroadSilver* reconfigures the seller role for a dedicated team within its broader sales force to handle specific, high-impact workflows.

Figure 7: Managing Gaps in Coverage With a Team of Experts

Managing Gaps in Coverage With a Team of Experts



Source: Adapted from BroadSilver*
 *Pseudonym
 826039_C

BroadSilver*
Gartner

Become Adaptive by Design

Once the data-driven insights and role simplification are in place, sales leaders can truly design for adaptivity.

“Adaptive by design” is an organizational and leadership philosophy that emphasizes continuous evolution in response to constant change.

An adaptive organization will be able to much more easily achieve ease of transformation alongside commercial success because:

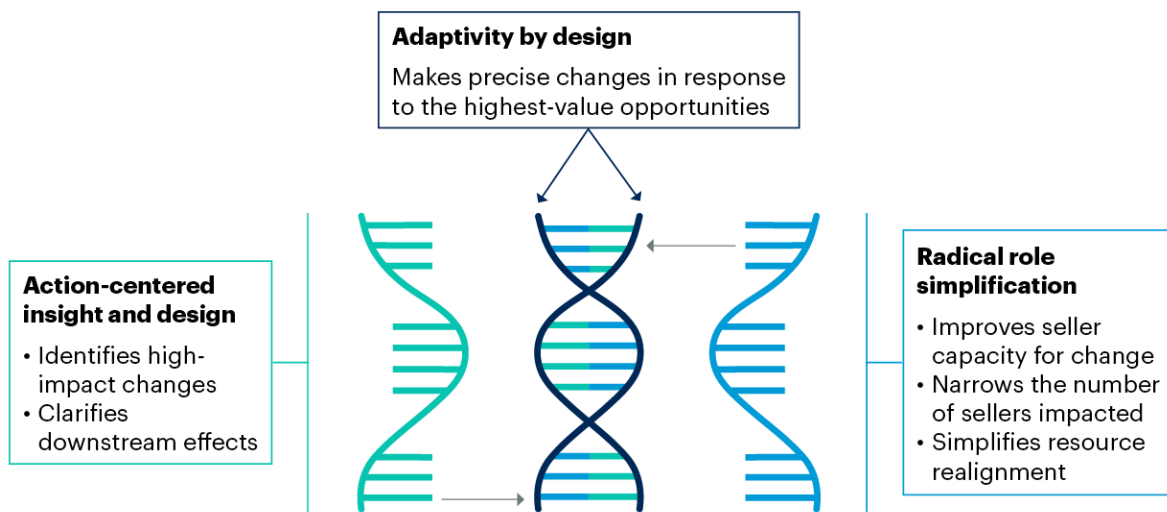
- Action-centered insight specifies the connection between sales actions and performance, clarifying what changes need to be made and what impacts may result.
- Consistent and interoperable roles facilitate the ability to align resources to address these changing external environments.

- Sellers with their narrower and simplified roles are less in a state of being consistently overwhelmed, more able to focus on proven higher-value activities and more likely to have the capacity to adapt to precise changes.

Figure 8 shows how the three concepts fit together to comprise the DNA of a top sales organization.

Figure 8: DNA of a Top Sales Organization

DNA of a Top Sales Organization



Source: Gartner
824312_C

These building blocks allow the sales organization to confidently make the necessary organizational changes with minimal disruption overall. Top sales organizations use their granular, data-driven understanding of activities to (re)define processes and roles, with a focus on radical simplification. Their commercial roles focus on a small number of high-impact activities, making them easier to hire for and enable while minimizing likelihood of sellers being overwhelmed. Simplified roles are also easier to assign to new initiatives as organizational needs change. The potential disruption can be minimized because the downstream impacts of a specific change are more clearly understood. (For more detail on adaptivity by design, see [Accelerate Decision Making and Adaptability to Drive Commercial Growth](#).) Those same changes can also be tested by comparing results to existing action-based metrics.

See slides 67 through 76 of the downloadable presentation below for an illustration of how one company, Workday, tests and scales innovations using an adaptive-by-design methodology.

Conclusion

Taken together, action-centered insight and design, radical role simplification, and adaptivity by design make sales organizations resilient and able to evolve over time. Implementation of these three interlocking strategies differentiates the organizations that are able to grow through change.

Recommendations

CSOs of top sales organizations that drive commercial success during transformation:

- Work cross-functionally with commercial team leaders, managers and sellers to develop a granular, data-driven understanding of the actions and workflows that impact sales performance. (A good place to start this process is the **Seller Time Spend Assessment**.) Use that understanding to align and integrate sales processes within the commercial organization and eliminate the activities that don't contribute to success.
- Avoid relying on sellers to intuit the scope of their own roles. Instead, design clear, narrow roles that ensure the most important tasks will be completed, allow a much broader talent pool to succeed, and allow for easier movement across the organization. Use TaaT to support sellers and streamline the connections between roles.
- Prepare the organization for ongoing change by establishing a dedicated innovation team to test and scale new sales initiatives.

Presentation Deck

Download presentation slides of this material.

Evidence

We conducted interviews with 20+ CSOs and senior sales leaders across industries, geographies and business types to understand their successes and challenges with driving productivity in a volatile environment. The interviews were conducted between November 2023 and July 2024.

¹ **2024 Gartner Sales Org DNA Survey.** This survey was conducted to identify productivity levers that are most effective for chief sales officers (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:

1. A recent transformation was easier to complete than expected, and
2. They exceeded at least three of the following: targeted revenue growth, profit growth, new customer acquisition and customer growth.

² **Gartner Sales Budget and Efficiency Benchmark Survey.** This survey is taken by frontline sales, sales operations and enablement leaders to assess their budgets, headcount, compensation, technology and training, and onboarding metrics. This data is then aggregated for benchmark purposes. Estimates are refreshed biannually and include responses on a rolling three-year basis. Since all questions are optional, the “n” size varies by each metric. This survey is available to take at any time of the year. *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.*

³ **Gartner analysis of Coresignal data.** Gartner analyzed 113,876 B2B sales representative job postings from U.S. companies across various industries, spanning January 2022 through December 2023, using data sourced from Coresignal, Gartner’s labor market intelligence solution, which scrapes job postings from LinkedIn. Skills were extracted from the “qualifications” sections using a machine learning model that analyzed word embeddings. Additional analysis was conducted through keyword searches in both the “responsibilities” and “qualifications” sections of the job postings.

⁴ **2024 Gartner Seller Skills Survey.** This survey was conducted to understand what seller skills are needed to excel in a changing B2B sales world, where buyers prefer digital; data and technology usage are expected; and the relationship with technology becomes more that of being teammates. The survey was held from January through March 2024. The online sample included 1,026 B2B sellers across North America (n = 696), Western Europe (n = 182) and Asia/Pacific (n = 148). Industry segments included banking and financial services, healthcare, information technology, manufacturing, business services, and telecommunications. Qualifying respondents had at least one year in the role at an organization with at least 50 sellers and enterprisewide annual revenue in 2023 of at least \$25 million or equivalent. *Disclaimer: Results of this survey do not represent global findings or the market as a whole, but reflect sentiments of the respondents and companies surveyed.*

Contributors

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Seller Time Spend Assessment

Case Study: Isolate and Measure Enablement's Impact

Case Study: Unified and Customer-Journey-Aligned GTM Structure

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Case Study: Improve Prospecting With Technology as a Teammate

Sellers Need Technology as a Teammate Not a Tool

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