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Sales Excellence Hub



Actionable Research Connected To Those Who Take Action



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The Sales Excellence Hub (SEH) is based at Warwick Business School. It is a primary knowledge transfer hub for sales managers and sales professionals in the UK, connecting sales professionals with leading sales researchers to achieve sales thought leadership. It was founded by Dr Roland Kassemeier and Professor Nick Lee in 2024 and has the objective to initiate and conduct actionable research to connect its findings to those who take action. Dr Roland Kassemeier is Associate Professor of Marketing and Professor Nick Lee is Full Professor of Marketing at Warwick Business School. The Sales Excellence Hub is supported by the Institute of Sales Professionals, and Akeron as a technical partner.

Executive Summary

The State of Sales Study explores the State of the UK Sales Profession and Challenges for UK Sales Organisation. The Sales Excellence Hub conducted five events throughout 2024 to identify key topics and challenges of the UK sales profession and UK sales organisations. Around 70 sales leaders from leading UK sales organisations participated in these events to connect sales research and sales practice. Based on the events, the Sales Excellence Hub designed the State of Sales Study. 125 sales professionals participated in the State of Sales Study. The findings from the State of Sales Study provide an overview of the State of the UK Sales Profession and the challenges that it is facing, while providing implications on improving and professionalising the sales industry, and best practices on mastering the challenges of UK sales organisations.

State of the Sales Profession

Sales is a critical organisational function, but suffers from a lack of professionalisation and a mixed reputation. Only 34.7% of sales professionals feel the profession is well-regarded, with 47% holding a negative perception. However, those working within sales view it as demanding yet rewarding and would recommend it as a career. Correlated with the rather negative image of the profession is that talent acquisition and development reflects a key challenge for it. Only 21% of professionals find it easy to hire sales talent, and just 4% believe the UK education system adequately prepares candidates for sales roles. The profession in itself needs to improve in providing attractive career pathways and avenues for development as satisfaction with professional development opportunities (31%) and career pathways (37%) remains low.

To address this challenge, the sales function needs to become more professional and attractive to current and future sales talent. This can be achieved by unified standards, a code of ethics, mandatory governance and by creating professional sales qualifications and an accreditation system for benchmarking sales professionals and industries. Sales modules and courses at different education levels can address the skills-gap and help promote it as an attractive profession with credible careers

Challenges for UK Sales Organisations

Achieving sales targets is the primary challenge for UK sales organisations, followed closely by adapting to evolving customer needs and purchasing behaviours, attracting and developing sales talent, and implementing and adapting to digital technologies. The State of Sales report provide in-depth insights to the attracting and developing sales talent, integrating digital and ai, and designing compensation and incentive plan challenges:

- Attracting and Developing Sales Talent: While most organisations rate themselves as average or above average in managing this challenge, there is significant room for improvement. Effective training and clear career development pathways are essential for success.
- Integrating Digital and AI: Integration of artificial intelligence and digital tools remains a significant hurdle, with 43% of sales leaders describing their organisations as underperforming in this area. Reluctance to adopt non-standardised AI tools exacerbates the issue. Despite this, 48.7% of leaders are optimistic about AI's potential to drive future growth, highlighting the need for strategic investments in AI adoption.
- Compensation and Incentives: Incentivising revenue while aligning compensation plans with organisational goals builds confidence in achieving targets. Simplicity, fairness, transparency, and achievable goals are critical to effective plans. Offering career development and training opportunities as incentives has proven particularly effective in motivating high performance.

State of the Sales Profession

State of the Sales Profession Key Findings and Paths to a Better Future

State of the Sales Profession

- While there is strong agreement that sales is a critical function in organisations, sales professionals are concerned about how the sales profession is regarded. Only 34.7% say that it is regarded well and 47% believe it is not
- Those within the profession do not share this negative view. While working in sales is demanding and requires constant adaption to change, sales professionals perceive it as rewarding and would recommend working in sales
- A key reason for the negative sentiment of the sales profession is its **lack of professionalisation**. The sales profession, therefore, has much to gain by attracting and developing higher skill levels and by becoming more rigorous and regulated
- However, talent acquisition and development, which are critical for this, are key challenges. Only 21% of sales professionals find it easy to find
 and hire sales talent and with 4% even fewer sales professionals say that the UK education system helps with this by producing good sales
 professionals
- Nonetheless, the profession has much to catch-up itself to become more attractive and professional. Only 31% of sales professionals are satisfied with professional development opportunities and 37% with organisational career development pathways

Paths to a Better Future

- Sales needs to be seen as a credible and professional career choice. Chartered Salesperson status, unified standards, a code of ethics, and mandatory governance can contribute to this
- To meet the sales talent challenge of the sales profession, there need to be professional sales qualifications and an accreditation system sales professionals and industry can be benchmarked against. These developments need to ensure that the necessary skills to navigate the sales function in the future are considered in their design.
- Sales needs to be promoted as a career in schools and universities. Sales modules help to produce better sales professionals and to promote the profession to future talent. University education must equip future sales professionals with the skills to navigate a constantly evolving sales function while effectively integrating human intelligence and expertise with artificial intelligence and capabilities.

State of the Sales Profession: Relevant and recommendable to work in, but not highly regarded

How do sales professionals perceive their profession and how do they feel it to be perceived by others?

While there is strong agreement that sales is a key function for organisations, sales professionals are concerned about how sales as a profession is regarded. Only 34.7% feel that the profession is regarded well. In contrast, 47% believe it is not. This sentiment is even more pronounced among those with more than 10 years of selling experience.

When asking sales professionals about their own profession, the majority of respondents would recommend a job in sales to others and tend to be optimisic about the future of the profession.



State of the Sales Profession: Talent acquisition and development are key challenges

Sales talent is a scarce resource

Sales	professiona	ls who sa	ay that
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21%

...it is easy to find and hire skilled sales professionals.

4%

...education in the UK produces good sales professionals.

There are significant challenges in the recruitment of skilled sales professionals indicating a critical shortage in the market. This intensifies competition among businesses, increasing recruitment costs and the time to fill key sales positions.

The UK education system's limited contribution to producing skilled sales professionals may stem from two issues: First, the education system may fail to effectively promote sales as a career path to young people. Second, there might be a disconnect between the theoretical knowledge and the practical competencies required in the workforce.

Career development opportunites need development

Sales professionals who are satisfied with...

31%

...professional development opportunities.

37%

...organisational career development pathways.

Despite the lack of sales talent, satisfaction among sales professionals with career development opportunities is rather low. This suggests a significant gap in support for long-term professional growth, which could impact retention and engagement within sales teams.

Internal upskilling and training programs are crucial to development and retain sales talent. More attractive development opportunities can also increase the attractiveness of the profession to future graduates.

State of the Sales Profession: What three words best describe the sales function?



The question we asked:

We asked respondents what three words best describe the sales function. Our sample comprises overall 223 words of which 162 words are unique. In the wordclouds, fewer words show a higher coherence and larger fonts a higher number of mentions of the word.

State of the Sales Profession: How do sales leaders perceive working in sales?

Working in sales is rewarding but requires constant adaption to transformation

There is a strong sense among the respondents that the sales profession is evolving and transforming at a pace. This transformation is perceived as an opportunity to advance sales and is welcomed.

Within this environment, the emphasis is on adaptability, high levels of skill and experience, and on a consultative approach to selling.

Overall, sales is perceived as rewarding and a good career to have.





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State of the Sales Profession: How do sales leaders perceive working in sales?

Constant change is making it demanding to achieve sales targets and fuels anxiety

Working in sales is challenging. Salespeople are dealing with a difficult work environment and a demanding workload.

The changing environment, whilst offering opportunities, also brings uncertainties about the future such as question whether sales jobs might become obsolete. Demanding sales targets and this volatile environment are creating feelings of stress and anxiety.



7

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State of the Sales Profession: How do sales leaders perceive the sales profession?

The sales profession – A profession that is not perceived as professional

The sales profession faces significant challenges with its public image, as sales professionals are often met with scepticism and a lack of trust.

One contributing factor is the profession's lack of a clear and recognized professional identity. The absence of established career pathways and formal qualifications makes it difficult to distinguish between trained and untrained sales professionals.

This negative perception is further reinforced by the need for greater rigor, regulation, and higher skill levels within the profession. Consequently, the sales function has much to gain by professionalising.





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State of the Sales Profession: How do sales leaders perceive the sales profession?

The sales profession – Whilst business-critical it is hugely undervalued

Sales professionals perceive the role of sales within organisations as misunderstood. While sales is a critical function in organisations, sales professionals feel undervalued.

Feeling undervalued has multiple reasons such as being underpaid and not receiving sufficient respect from other functions of the organisation. Furthermore, there is a feeling that sales is often invisible and not adequately supported through investments.



essential



The question we asked:

We asked respondents what three words best describe the sales function. Our sample comprises overall 223 words of which 162 words are unique. In the wordclouds, fewer words show a higher coherence and larger fonts a higher number of mentions of the word.

State of the Sales Profession Future Outlook

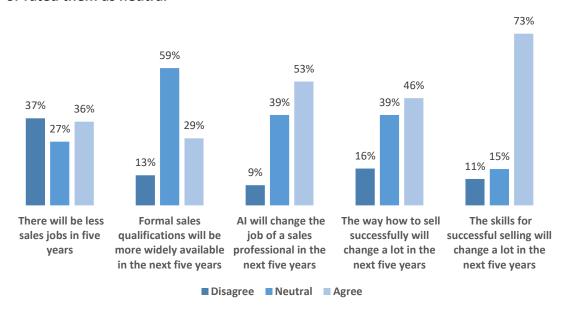
The only constant is change. Sales professionals agree that the sales profession will continue to change in the next five years and this change is fueled by artificial intelligence. Although sales jobs and necessary skills are going to change, there is a notable ambivalence regarding whether these changes will significantly impact the number of sales jobs.

The slightly higher availability of formal sales qualifications in the future is a key finding indicating a potential blind spot. While these qualifications may better equip sales professionals to address emerging challenges, they must be designed to suit a profession in constant flux. Importantly, training should also emphasize developing skills in managing and adapting to change—abilities that have always been critical for salespeople and are likely to become even more essential in the years ahead.

64.9% of sales professionals say it is important to have widely acknowledged qualifications

The largest consensus (73%) among sales leaders concerning the future of the sales profession is that the skill needed for successful selling will change. At will be a driver of this change and the way to sell successfully is likely to change.

Percentage of sales professionals who disagreed or agreed with the statements or rated them as neutral



Challenges of UK Sales Organisations

Summary Challenges of UK Sales Organisations and Best Practises

Key Challenges

Achieving sales targets is the primary challenge for UK sales organisations, followed closely by adapting to evolving customer needs and purchasing behaviours, attracting and developing sales talent, and implementing and adapting to digital technologies

01 - Sales talent

Although the majority of sales professionals rate their organizations as average or above average in mastering and adapting to the sales talent challenge, it is still one of the most relevant challenges. To improve, sales organisations must prioritise providing effective training and, most importantly, clear and rewarding career development pathways.

02 - Integrating digital and AI

Integrating AI effectively is a major challenge. Currently, 43% of sales leaders describe their organisations as underperforming in this area and express reluctance to adopt (non-standardised) AI tools. However, 48.7% are optimistic about artificial intelligence's potential to drive future sales growth, underscoring its importance for long-term success.

03 – Compensation and incentive plans

Incentivising revenue enhances confidence in addressing compensation and incentive challenges. Effective plans should prioritise simplicity, fairness, transparency, alignment with organisational goals, achievable targets, and the motivation of positive behaviours and outcomes. While career development and training opportunities are the least commonly offered incentives, organisations that provide them as rewards for strong performance report the greatest success in designing effective compensation and incentive plans.

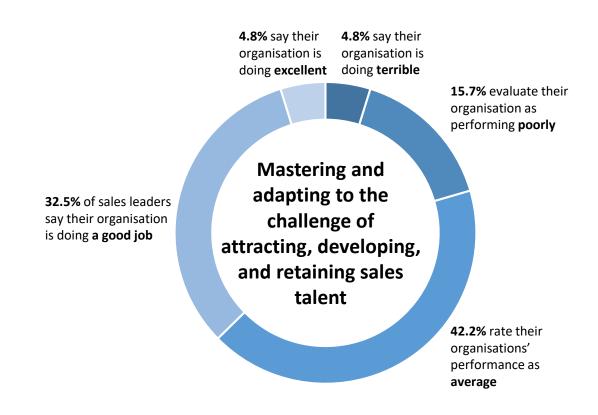


01 – Sales Talent Status Quo in Mastering and Adapting to the Sales Talent Challenge

The majority of sales professionals rate their organizations as average or above average in mastering and adapting to the sales talent challenge. However, developing sales talent ranks as the third most significant challenge, while attracting talent ranks fourth. This suggests that sales organizations face considerable difficulties in improving their performance in this area, and sales leaders may hold a rather pessimistic outlook on the future of addressing this challenge.

Interestingly, there are no significant differences in performance evaluations among sales professionals from small, medium, or large organizations, nor between organizations offering low-complexity versus high-complexity products or services.

Only 21% of sales professionals say it is easy to find and hire skilled sales professionals



01 – Sales Talent Offering the Right Training Helps Mastering the Sales Talent Challenge

Amount of training provided

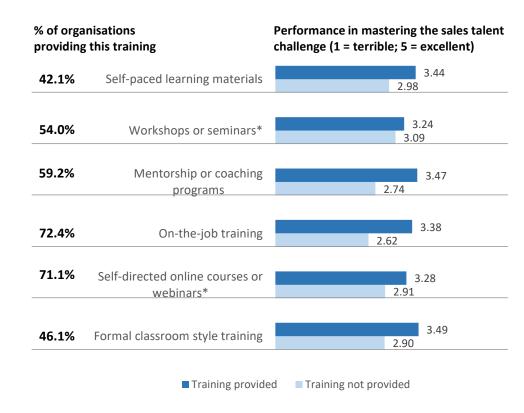
Sales professionals receive on average 39 hours of training per year (Standard deviation = 47.08 hours). However, in our data, receiving more training hours does not correlate with sales leaders' perceptions of mastering the sales talent challenge.

Top 3 training types offered

72% of sales organisations offer their sales professionals on the job training, 71% self-directed online courses or webinars, and 59% mentorship or coaching programs.

Effectiveness of training types

The majority of training types contribute to sales leaders' perceptions of mastering the challenge of attracting, developing, and retaining sales talent. However, providing workshops or seminars or self-directed online courses or webinars are training types that make organisations not perform better in mastering this challenge.



*Training type does not improve performance in mastering the talent challenge

01 – Sales Talent Satisfying Career Development Pathways help Meeting the Challenge

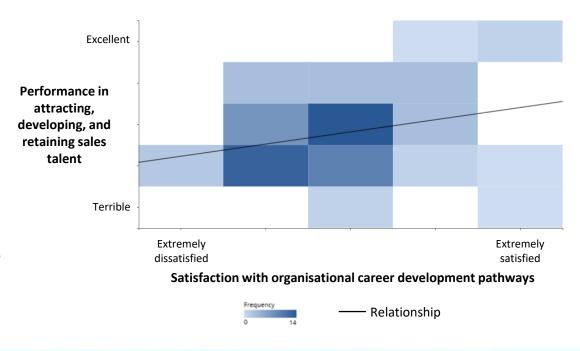
Our data shows that improving satisfaction with career development pathways by one unit, makes sales organisations perform 30% better in meeting the sales talent challenge.

Thus, offering attractive career development pathways contributes to becoming a more attractive employer for sales talent.

In contrast, opportunties for professional development (e.g., recognised qualifications, mentorship programs) at the sales profession level are less effective in helping sales organisations to meet the sales talent challenge

Sales leader quote:

"It is all centred around financial targets/quotas and not around progression and development. The landscape has changed massively and sales organisations need to change with it." Relationship between satisfaction with organisational career development pathways and performance in meeting the sales talent challenge



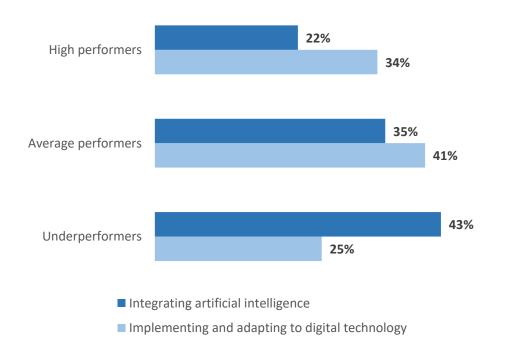
02 – Digital Enhancement Organisational Performance in Integrating Digital Technology and AI

With Artificial Intelligence being a relatively new challenge, 43% of sales leaders describe their organisations as underperforming when meeting this challenge. In contrast, sales leader's performance evaluations are much higher for meeting the challenge of implementing and adapting to digital technology. Here, 34% of sales leaders describe their organisations as performing above average.

The reluctance is probably due to the fact that 53.5 % of sales leaders assume that AI will significantly change the sales job. Nonetheless, nearly half of the sales leaders is optimistic that their organisation will be able to effectively use AI assisted tools in the future to drive sales growth.

48.7% of sales leaders are confident that their sales organisation will use AI to increase sales growth

Organisational performance evaluations in meeting the challenges to integrate artificial intelligence and implement and adapt to digital technology



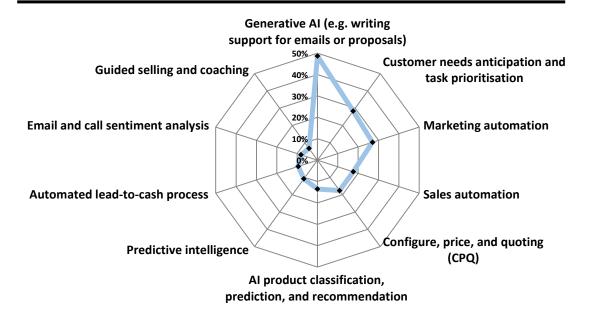
02 – Digital Enhancement How do sales organisations utilize Artificial Intelligence in 2024?

The use of artificial intelligence in sales organisations remains relatively low. Most sales teams primarily use generative artificial intelligence applications. The use of these can likely be attributed to the easy accessibility of standardised tools.

While these tools can effectively support salespeople in their day-to-day activities, it is evident that sales organisations have yet to fully leverage the broader potential of artificial intelligence. Advanced applications that could significantly enhance sales effectiveness—such as predictive intelligence, artificial intelligence-driven product classification, prediction, and recommendation systems—are rarely utilized.

One key challenge with integrating nonstandardised artificial intelligence tools is their higher upfront cost, which can deter organizations from investing in these more tailored solutions.

48.6% of sales organisations use Generative AI. However, most of them do not use any other AI applications.



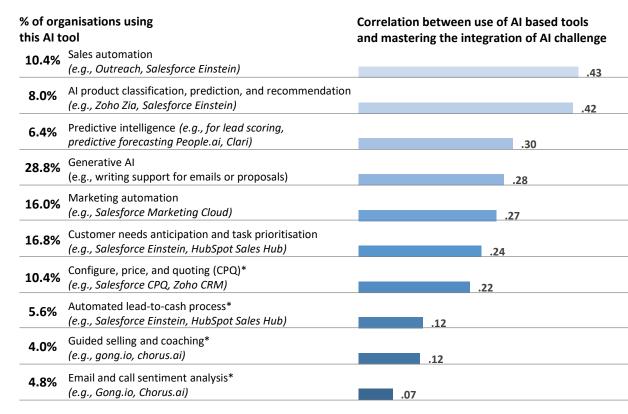
→ Use of AI tools

02 – Digital Enhancement Effectiveness and Impact of AI Tools on AI-Sales-Integration

Al tools that are widely utilized, such as generative Al, customer needs anticipation, task prioritization, and marketing automation, tend to have moderate effectiveness. Sales organizations using these tools perceive themselves as better at addressing the challenge of integrating Al.

However, the tools with the highest impact on mastering AI integration are sales automation, AI-driven product classification, prediction and recommendation systems, and predictive intelligence.

Some tools, however, do not necessarily enhance an organization's perceived ability to master AI integration. These include CPQ systems, automated lead-to-cash processes, guided selling and coaching, and email and call sentiment analysis.



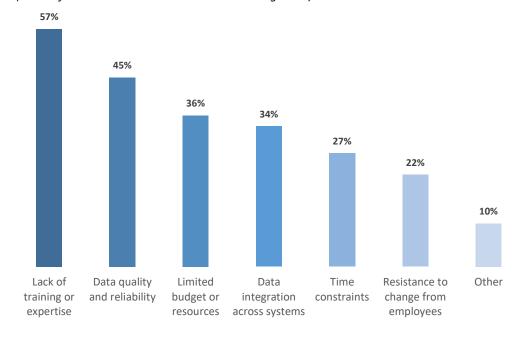
*Use of AI tool does not improve performance in mastering the integration of AI

02 – Digital Enhancement Biggest Challenges of Salespeople in Using AI Assisted Tools

The majority of sales organizations identify a lack of training or expertise as the top challenge for salespeople in effectively using Al-assisted tools in the sales process. To keep pace with digital advancements, sales organizations must prioritize effective training and attract the right talent, addressing broader challenges related to sales talent.

A second, widely recognized challenge for many sales leaders is the insufficient quality and reliability of data. Predictions made with AI are ineffective when based on poor data. Therefore, improving data quality and reliability should be a top priority. This also facilitates better integration of data across systems, paving the way for the next level of digital advancement: the effective integration of artificial intelligence.

What are the biggest challenges salespeople face in using AI assisted tools in the sales process? (share of sales leaders who selected the challenge in %)





Sales leader quote:

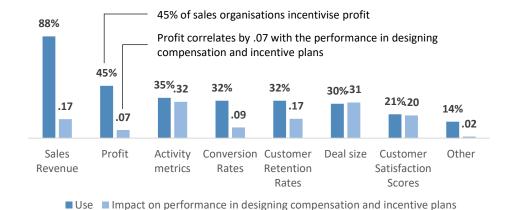
"I anticipate that the best salespeople will increasingly be trained and coached to shift from "trusted advisor" to "effective coach." This initiative could lead to fundamentally different and better conversations with a greater range of stakeholders in processes that AI can support but not replace."

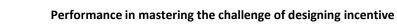
03 – Compensation and Incentives Incentivised metrics and impact on compensation plan performance

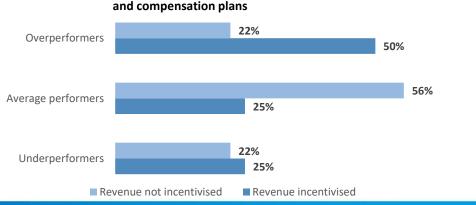
88.3% of sales organisations incentivise sales revenue, making it the most commonly used metric. Sales leaders tend to rate their organisations' performance in designing incentive schemes more favourably when sales revenue is an incentivised outcome. However, its impact on creating effective compensation and incentive plans remains limited. While incentivising sales revenue may differentiate between average and outstanding performance, it is rarely transformative.

In comparison, only 35.1% of sales organisations include activity metrics in their incentive schemes. Interestingly, sales leaders report significantly greater confidence in their organisations' ability to design effective compensation and incentive plans when activity metrics are incorporated. However, identifying the appropriate activity metrics and ensuring that these are not gamed is challenging, and poorly chosen ones may result in unintended negative consequences.

Profit, used by 44.6% of organisations, and conversion rates, used by 32%, appear to play the smallest role in shaping sales leaders' perceptions of their organisations' success in mastering sales incentive and compensation plans.







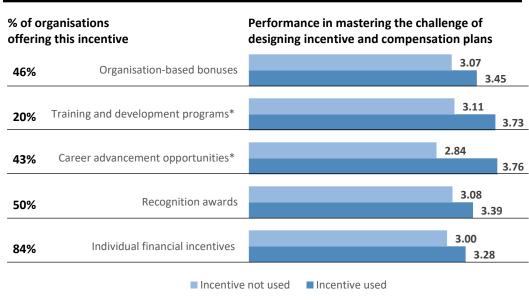
03 – Compensation and Incentives Types of incentives offered by sales organisations

Sales organisations most frequently offer individual financial incentives to reward sales performance. However, in our data, offering this financial reward seems to be too much of a standard approach to master the challenge of designing effective compensation and incentive plans.

When career advancement opportunities are offered as incentives, sales leaders' perceive to perform better in designing compensation and incentive plans. Yet only 4 out of 10 organisations reward sales performance with opportunities for career advancement because, often, career advancement makes top performers no longer available for contributing to future performance goals. To avoid this limitation, sales leaders can offer their salespeople training and development programs as a reward, which show to be effective in meeting the challenge as well.

Recognition awards, however, used by half of organisations is the least likely incentive to move the needle on how sales' leaders perceive their organisations' performance in the sales incentive and compensation plans challenge.

Sales organisations that provide training, development, and career advancement opportunities as incentives excel in mastering the challenge of crafting effective compensation and incentive plans



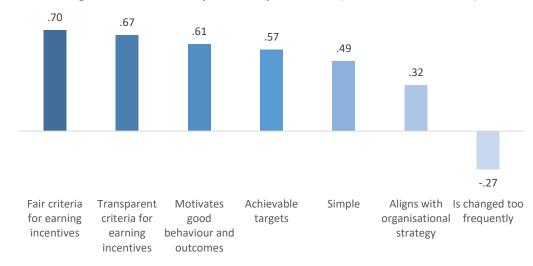
^{*}Offering these incentives makes sales leaders perceive to perform significantly better in mastering the challenge of designing compensation and incentive plans

03 – Compensation and Incentives Drivers of effective variable compensation and incentive plans

Compensation and incentive plans that are fair, transparent, and designed to motivate positive behaviours and outcomes are the most effective at driving performance. These are closely followed by plans with achievable targets, simplicity, and alignment with organisational strategy. Frequent changes to plans do not appear to harm performance; on the contrary, they may enhance their effectiveness.

There is also a growing demand for a shift away from purely financial targets and incentives towards a greater focus on skills, development, and career progression. This suggests that compensation and incentive plans should not only reward current performance but also motivate salespeople to equip themselves for meeting future challenges.

Relationships between characteristics of variable and compensation plans and the extent to which the organisational incentive plan drives performance (measured as correlation)





Sales leader quote:

"A change in attitude of executive management to treat the sales function as a professional team as they do finance, engineering and supply chain. I see so many sales teams that are fundamentally not managed by their leaders. It isn't good enough to say "here's a big bonus scheme now get on with it!"



Actionable Research Connected To Those Who Take Action



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Partner of the Sales Excellence Hub:



Promoting Professional Selling, Driving Business Growth

The ISP is the membership body for sales and the representative voice of the profession. They work with corporate partners, individual members and training organisations to promote and advance excellence in sales.

www.the-isp.org

Technology Partner of the Sales Excellence Hub:



Enterprise Software to drive Growth and improve Efficiency

www.akeron.com

Survey Demographics

Survey Demographics 125 sales professionals participated, 78 completed the questionnaire in full

Leadership or management position

Yes	82.4%
No	17.6%

Sales experience in years

Less than 1 year	.1.4%
1-3 years	4.3%
3-5 years	4.3%
5-10 years	4.3%
Over 10 years	85.7%

Span of control

None	11.5%
1-10	36.1%
11-25	27.9%
26-50	13.1%
51-100	3.3%
More than 100	8.2%

Size of organisation

1-10	16.4%
11-50	13.7%
51-100	12.3%
101-500	11%
500+	46.6%

Complexity of the offering of the respondents' sales organisation

Simple	9
Moderate	2
Complex	4

Role types

Job titles

Executive Leadership	e.g. CEO, Founding Director, Chief Growth Officer, VP of Sales etc.
Sales Management	e.g. Head of Sales, Sales Director, Sales Manager, Account Director etc.
Business Development/ Specialised Sales	e.g. Business Development Executive, Commercial Lead, Consulting Partner etc.
Sales Enablement & Strategy	e.g. Sales Coach, Sales Training Manager, Head of Sales Strategy and Operations etc.
Functional & Cross-Department	e.g. Director Cloud & Cyber Security, Commissions Manager, HR & Training Manager etc
Emerging Roles	e g Chief Outcomes Officer Sales Reset Coach

Survey Demographics 125 sales professionals participated, 78 completed the questionnaire in full

Respondents with professional sales or related qualifications or accreditations

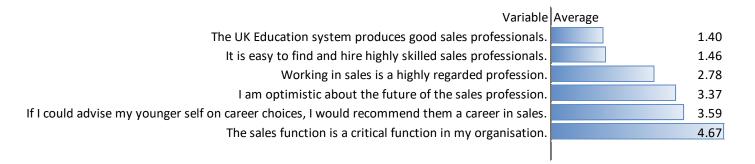
Yes	57.5%
No	42.5%

Types of qualifications and accreditations

- Formal degrees or higher education certifications.

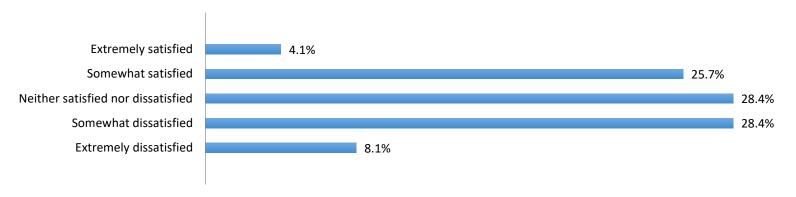
 (Academic Qualifications: under/postgraduate degrees)
- 2 Industry-recognized certifications or professional affiliations (Sales-specific certification, professional memberships, accreditations and awards)
- 3 Certifications focused on leadership and management skills (Leadership and Managements Qualifications)
- 4 Specific to certain fields or industries. (Sector-specific Accreditations)

State of the Sales Profession

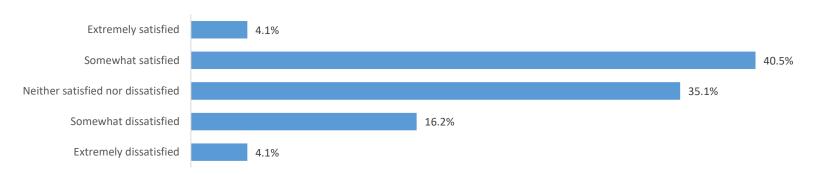


Scale: O Definitely False to 5 Definitely True

Satisfaction with the professional development opportunities



Satisfaction with career development pathways



Ranking of challenges for UK sales organisations

There is a clear divide between the top 5 priorities and the bottom 5 indicating wider trends within the UK sales overall.

Variable	Mean
Achieving sales targets	3.61
Adapting to evolving customer needs and purchasing behaviour	4.11
Developing sales talent	4.52
Implementing and adapting to digital technology	4.87
Attracting sales talent	
Retaining sales talent	5.49
Designing sales compensation and incentive plans	6.48
Adapting to social and economic uncertainty	
Employee wellbeing	
Integrating artificial intelligence	

Sales leaders' perception of their sales organisation's performance in mastering and adapting to the challenges

Sales compensation and incentive plans across the UK's sales organisations have received the best overall evaluation, followed by sales talent, and digital technology. Integrating artificial intelligence is the poorest performing, comparatively.

	Integrating artificial intelligence	Implementing and adapting to digital technology	Attracting, developing and retaining sales talent	Designing sales compensation and incentive plans
Terrible	9.60%	5.50%	5.50%	5.50%
Poor	32.90%	20.50%	15.10%	19.20%
Average	35.60%	38.40%	41.10%	28.80%
Good	16.40%	27.40%	34.20%	41.10%
Excellent	5.50%	8.20%	4.10%	5.50%