2023 State of Sales Training

atd
RESEARCH

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Survey Overview

Target Survey Population

The target population for this research was talent development and sales enablement professionals across different organizations and industries. Participants from 71 organizations completed the survey.

Survey Instrument

The survey was composed of 44 questions including those related to the demographics of the respondents.

Procedure

ATD Research distributed a link to an online survey to the target population in February 2023. The survey closed in March 2023.

Identifying Statistically Significant Differences

This report notes differences between groups. All differences are significant at a level of at least $p < 0.05$. A significance of $p < 0.05$ implies a less than 5 percent probability that the difference is a result of chance and one can be 95 percent confident that the results represent a statistically significant relationship.

About the Sponsor

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A Note From Highspot

If you were to walk a mile in a salesperson's shoes, you'd likely feel exhausted. Selling gets harder every day as global markets, buyers, and competition shift at a breathless pace. As a sales leader or trainer, reps depend on you to get the resources, training, and support they need to hit their numbers and drive revenue growth.

If your sales training isn't moving the needle, you're not alone. Every year, companies lose billions of dollars on training that is all but forgotten. Gartner research finds that B2B sales reps forget 70 percent of the information they learn within a week of training, and 87 percent will forget it within a month.

At Highspot, we understand that it's one thing to make training stick, and another to get your salespeople to apply those skills in real scenarios. Companies that drive growth today have one thing in common: They eschew patchwork sales strategies in favor of operational rigor, ensuring that their enablement efforts operationalize seller behavior change. In a constantly evolving world, driving behavioral change is the key to ruggedizing your reps to take on new sales challenges and unlocking your team's potential to achieve business outcomes in any environment.

Highspot is the sales enablement platform that increases sales productivity and performance. Our solution delivers training based on how humans want to learn. With an outcome-based approach anchored in the real world, Highspot supports training and coaching that is just-in-time, engaging, and designed to drive retention and behavioral change. The natively built capabilities work seamlessly within the platform, giving revenue leaders a singular system that empowers every salesperson to close with confidence.

Salespeople equipped with the right training, tools, and systems win deals time and time again. And there is no better time to set your team up for success than right now.

About Highspot

Highspot is a sales enablement platform that increases the productivity of sales teams by bridging the gap between strategy and execution. With Highspot, our customers turn initiatives into the actions that sales teams must execute and enable sales leaders to measure what is and is not working with deep and actionable insights. Companies like Aetna, Siemens, Staples, and Yahoo use Highspot to manage content, train and coach sellers, and engage buyers. Executing your strategic initiatives with Highspot increases revenue, drives sales rep productivity, and increases sales pipeline. Learn more at **highspot.com**.

Executive Summary

An effective sales function is a critical aspect of organizational success, and sales training is part of a strong sales organization. According to Sales Insights Lab, 60 percent of salespeople say selling today is more difficult than it was five years ago.[1] What's more, 2023's projected economic downturn would make selling even more competitive and amplify the value of salespeople talented enough to consistently close deals in difficult economic conditions.[2]

The *2023 State of Sales Training* draws upon a sample of sales enablement and talent development professionals from 71 organizations to investigate key questions about sales training and provide benchmarking data and highlight best practices. Of the responding organizations, 61 percent reported performing well across several key business areas and having talent development functions that made strong contributions to organizational performance. The research compares these highly effective organizations with other study respondents to identify sales training practices with statistically significant connections to being a high performer. For example, 65 percent of high-performing organizations incorporated non-technology simulations (such as in-person role plays) into their sales training, compared with 39 percent for organizations that were not high performers. Post-training activities provide another example—79 percent of high performers included them in their sales training, compared with 46 percent of other organizations.

Defining High Performers

This report identifies practices associated with being a high performer. Organizations were categorized as high performers if they met two criteria:
- They reported themselves as performing as well as or better than their competitors in financial performance, customer and client satisfaction, employee engagement, and growth potential for the next five years.
- They strongly agreed that their talent development functions helped them achieve their business goals.

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1   Sales Insights Lab, *The Latest Data on Top-Performing Sales Reps* (Boston, MA: Sales Insights Lab, 2022).

2   World Bank, *Sharp, Long-Lasting Slowdown to Hit Developing Countries Hard* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2023).

When examining sales training expenditures, the study found that the median organization spent between $1,000 and $1,499 per salesperson in 2022 on formal training before accounting for sales kickoff meeting expenses; about 90 percent planned to maintain or increase their spending over the next two years. Sales kickoff meetings accounted for an additional $1,000 to $1,499 per salesperson in 2022.

> The median organization spent between $1,000 and $1,499 per salesperson on sales training each year, with an additional $1,000 to $1,499 on sales kickoff expenditures.

This study also compared the current findings to those in ATD's *2021 State of Sales Training* report, where appropriate. For instance, 17 percent of companies provided salespeople with tools training at least once a quarter in 2022, which was down from 32 percent in 2020.

Finally, this report asked questions about who designed and delivered formal sales training, the tools they used to store and manage sales training content, and how they provided training to salespeople. It also looked at how often they trained salespeople and how much time salespeople spent in training depending on their experience level. It also covered the types of on-the-job learning organizations used to develop their salespeople, how they structured their annual sales kickoff meetings, and how they developed salespeople who work remotely some or all the time.

Key Findings

- Organizations dedicated 63 percent of their sales budget to internal costs such as talent development and sales enablement staff salaries and the costs to deliver sales training, such as classroom facilities or online learning platforms. Supplier expenses took up 26 percent of the average sales training budget, and tuition reimbursement took up the remaining 11 percent.
- Sales training content was created by a dedicated internal sales enablement function at 40 percent of responding organizations, but this figure rose to 56 percent for high-performing organizations.
- A learning management system (LMS) was the most popular tool for storing and managing sales training content, used by 65 percent of respondents. This was up nine percentage points from 2020, when 56 percent of respondents used an LMS to store and manage their sales training.
- The top instructional methods to make sales training more engaging and interactive were scenario-based learning (69 percent), post-training activities (66 percent), and video (66 percent).

- On average, first-year salespeople spent 10.2 days in training each year. That's more than twice as much time as the average third-year salesperson (3.9 days) and fifth-year salesperson (3.8 days).
- On-the-job coaching by managers was the top method of on-the-job learning for salespeople, used to a high or very high extent by 56 percent of respondents.
- More than half of organizations included knowledge training and skills training activities in their sales kickoff meetings, but high-performing organizations were significantly more likely to do so compared with other organizations.
- More organizations had entirely remote sales forces (27 percent) than had sales forces without any remote employees (11 percent).
- Among companies with at least some remote salespeople, only 32 percent offered a fully structured training program for those employees. However, companies that did were significantly more likely to be high performers.

Whitepaper

Why does sales training matter? According to LinkedIn's *2022 State of Sales* report, "by investing in training to instill the behaviors of top sellers in the rest of the sales team, sales managers can boost results throughout the organization."[3] In other words, sales training is a critical tool to take an organization's most successful sales practices and equip its entire sales force with the knowledge and skills to use them.

Sales enablement consultancy Seismic also highlights how sales training can improve an organization's customer experience, which Boston Consulting Group has tied to increased shareholder value for publicly traded companies.[4] According to a Seismic blog post, "sales training improves interactions with customers, builds better relationships, and has a positive impact on customer service."[5]

This section shares key information about participants to understand their approaches to this important subject. It covers sales force size, sales models, and performance, as well as the basic demographic information about the respondents.

Sales Force Size and Structure

Nearly half of participants in this research had midsize sales forces with between 50 and 499 salespeople (Figure 1). Of the remainder, 30 percent had a small sales force with fewer than 50 salespeople, and 25 percent had a large sales force with 500 or more salespeople.

FIGURE 1

Nearly Half of Participants Had a Midsize Sales Force

What is the number of salespeople in your organization?

30%	45%	25%
Fewer than 50	50–499	500 or more
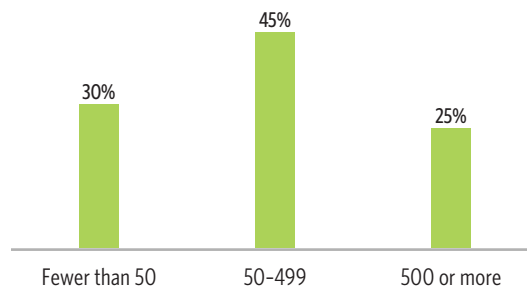
3   LinkedIn, *State of Sales 2022—United States and Canada Edition* (Chicago, IL: LinkedIn, 2022).

4   BCG (Boston Consulting Group), *CEOs Need a Customer Experience Revolution—Not an Evolution* (Boston, MA: Boston Consulting Group, 2021).

5   Seismic, "Sales Training Guide: Topics and Methods for Success," seismic.com/enablement-explainers/the-guide-to-sales-training.

Regardless of the size of their sales force, 60 percent of participants reached their customers through a hybrid sales model that incorporated two or more of outside sales, inside sales, and channel sales (Figure 2). Outside sales, which was the most popular standalone sales model, involves selling through in-person meetings with potential customers. Inside sales involves selling online or by phone, and channel sales is the process of distributing a product to the market by segmenting sales into different conduits, such as direct marketing, contracted sales representative groups, or retailers.

60% of Organizations Used Hybrid Sales Models

Which sales model does your organization use? (Select all that apply.)

|	
Hybrid	60%
Outside sales only	23%
Inside sales only	10%
Channel sales only	7%
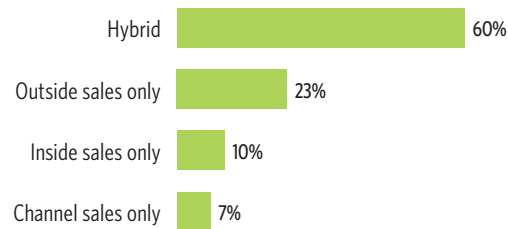
Sales Performance

In terms of performance, this research asked participants to indicate whether their median salesperson met or exceeded their sales goal in the most recently ended year, which was 2022. ATD's *2021 State of the Industry* asked the same question, but for 2020. If an organization's median salesperson met their sales goal, it means a majority of its salespeople were also meeting their sales goals. Likewise, if the median person failed to meet their sales goal, at least half of the organization's salespeople were not meeting their sales goals either.

This study found that the median salesperson exceeded their sales goal at 20 percent of organizations in 2022, down slightly from 25 percent in 2020 (Figure 3). The percentage of companies whose median salesperson met their sales goal slightly increased, rising from 47 percent in 2020 to 55 percent in 2022. The percentage whose median salesperson did not meet their sales goal fell slightly, declining from 28 percent in 2020 to 25 percent in 2022.

FIGURE 3
Sales Performance Was Largely Unchanged From 2020

Did your organization's median salesperson hit their sales goal in the last full fiscal year? (Median salesperson is defined as a salesperson who falls in the middle of the performance spectrum of your organization's sales force, where performance is defined as progress toward sales goals.)

	Did not meet goal	Met goal	Exceeded goal
2020	28%	47%	25%
2022	25%	55%	20%
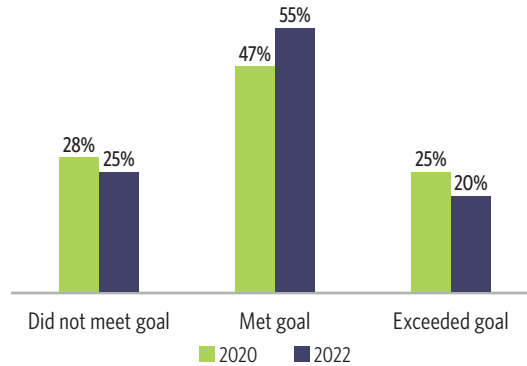
About the Participants

This research surveyed 71 talent development and sales enablement professionals about sales training in their organizations. Of these, 25 percent were directors or above, 46 percent were managers or supervisors, and 25 percent were individual contributors.

Small organizations with fewer than 500 employees made up 46 percent of participants. Midsize organizations with between 500 and 9,999 employees represented 31 percent of the sample. The remaining 23 percent were large organizations with 10,000 or more employees. Participating organizations were most likely to come from three sectors:

- Healthcare and pharmaceutical (32 percent)
- Finance, insurance, and real estate (26 percent)
- Manufacturing (8 percent)

Action Plan

ATD asked organizations about their sales training efforts and found that while organizations were making substantial investments in sales training, there is room for improvement when applying best practices. For example, the research found that less than half of organizations used a dedicated sales enablement function to create sales content. It also found that while 89 percent of organizations used virtual salespeople, only 32 percent of this group offered a fully structured training program for these employees.

Based on the study's findings, this report makes several recommendations.

Build a Dedicated Sales Enablement Function

This research found that using a dedicated sales enablement team to create at least some sales training content was associated with being a high performer, but this was currently only being done by 40 percent of surveyed companies. Instead, organizations most frequently relied on internal subject matter experts, such as product managers, to create their content, followed by sales leadership.

According to Korn Ferry, sales enablement practitioners amplify the value of sales training by bringing it together with the people and other resources necessary to align a company's sales organization with the rest of its customer journey.[6] In terms of content, most organizations will still rely on their internal experts, sales leaders, and product experts, but mixing in content from sales enablement and trusting the sales enablement function to align that content with their other sales tools and processes results in better performance.

Incorporate Application-Focused Instructional Methods

Most organizations incorporated at least some features and elements to support engagement, interactivity, and real-world application in their sales training, but high performers went above and beyond. ATD's research consistently finds that high-performing organizations incorporate more interactive instructional methods in their formal training than their peers, and the *2023 State of Sales Training* was no exception.[7]

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6   Korn Ferry, "A Guide to Sales Enablement," kornferry.com/insights/featured-topics/sales-transformation/a-guide -to-sales-enablement.

7   ATD (Association for Talent Development), *E-Learning: The Evolving Landscape* (Alexandria, VA: ATD Press, 2020); ATD (Association for Talent Development), *Effective Trainers: Traditional and Virtual Classroom Success* (Alexandria, VA: ATD Press, 2020).

In particular, companies should incorporate experiential learning, scenario-based learning, and non-technology-based simulations in their sales training. Among participants that used each of the instructional methods identified for this research, those that used scenario-based learning were more likely to see it as effective for sales training than any other method. Likewise, organizations that incorporated non-technology-based simulations into their sales training were significantly more likely to be high performers.

Other instructional methods to prioritize in sales training include video, post-training activities, and games and gamification, which all had their own connections to better organizational performance.

Prioritize Sales Strategy Over Product Knowledge for Regular Training Activities

Sales training content can be broadly divided into four categories:

- **Knowledge training**, which includes product, industry, and business acumen.
- **Strategy training**, which includes sales processes, methodologies, and systems.
- **Skills training**, which includes selling, interpersonal, and leadership skills.
- **Tools training**, which includes technologies and other tools.

Knowledge training was the top category, accounting for 37 percent of regular sales training hours at the average organization. However, high-performing organizations spent less of their salespeople's training time on this subject compared with other organizations. Instead, they allocated more of their salespeople's time to strategy training throughout the year. This suggests that high-performing organizations focus on ensuring their salespeople apply the organization's sales processes, methodologies, and systems on an ongoing basis.

Of course, the need to prioritize strategy training throughout the year shouldn't mean that other sales content areas fall by the wayside. At high-performing organizations, this results in an increased likelihood of including knowledge training and skills training as part of the annual sales kickoff meeting.

Provide Tailored Experiences for Virtual Salespeople

It's also critical that organizations take steps to address the specific needs of virtual salespeople. While more organizations have entirely remote sales forces (27 percent) than no remote salespeople (11 percent), only 64 percent of organizations with virtual salespeople offered content designed specifically to help them thrive in a virtual selling environment.

When setting up a training program for virtual salespeople, it's especially important to build in a formal structure. Organizations that had fully structured training programs for their virtual salespeople were significantly more likely to be high performers than those that either provided only individual courses or assets and those who lacked any training specifically designed for virtual salespeople.

Virtual sales training programs should cover both selling capabilities in a virtual context and specific tasks or activities that are unique to virtual selling. High-performing organizations were significantly more likely to discuss questioning, objection handling, and relationship building in a virtual context in their virtual salespeople training. They were also significantly more likely to practice conducting effective virtual sales meetings and using specific virtual communication and work technologies.

About the Author and Contributors

The Association for Talent Development (ATD) champions the importance of learning and training by setting standards for the talent development profession. ATD is the largest, most trusted organization for the professional development of practitioners in training and talent development, serving a worldwide community with members in more than 100 countries. Since ATD was founded in 1943, the talent development field has expanded significantly to meet the needs of global businesses and emerging industries. ATD's mission is to empower professionals to develop talent in the workplace. Learn more at td.org.

The resources we provide to help talent development professionals increase their impact and effectiveness include our research. ATD's researchers track trends, inform decisions, and connect research to practice and performance. By providing comprehensive data and insightful analyses, ATD's research products, which include research reports, briefs, infographics, and webinars, help business leaders and talent development professionals understand and more effectively respond to today's fast-paced industry.

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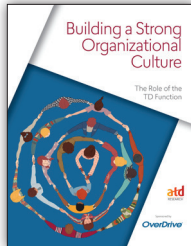
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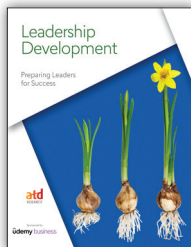
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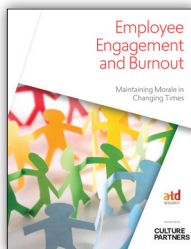
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