



SALES SKILLS FOR THE MODERN SALES ENVIRONMENT REPORT

Sales Skills for the changing
face of commercial sales

Findings of a national survey of 251 sales professionals
and interviews with 20 sales executives across Canada

Funded in part by the Government of
Canada's Sectoral Initiatives Program

Canada 

CPSA Mission

To empower sales teams and equip them with the industry's most trusted sales training



ON-DEMAND RESOURCES
NETWORKING EVENTS
TRAVEL SAVINGS
PROFESSIONAL DESIGNATIONS

ADVANCING SALES, ACCELERATING PERFORMANCE

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



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Sales & Marketing Professional, Assistant Professor and Director Ted Rogers Sales Leadership Program at TRSM Ryerson with an exceptional record of exceeding revenue targets and client expectations.

Global sales and marketing experience gained by working in Australia, Canada, China, Denmark, Hong Kong, India, Ireland, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, New Zealand, Singapore, Taiwan, UK and USA. Strong negotiator with skills in motivating others through encouragement, enthusiasm, coaching, collaboration and team building.



Dr. Peter Kerr, PhD

Dr. Kerr's research focuses on strategy implementation issues related to the capabilities, behaviors and performance of the firm's salesforce and its alignment to organizational strategy. Peter has over 25 years experience in strategic planning, general management, marketing and sales, including 5 years as Vice-President of Marketing for Bell Canada's Small & Medium Business division where he was responsible for a \$1.2B portfolio, 10 product lines and 150 sales and marketing staff. His experience spans multiple industries including, telecommunications, data center & cloud services, financial services, equipment financing and the Canadian newspaper industry.

Peter holds a PhD from Cranfield University, Bedfordshire, England and an MBA from the University of Western Ontario where he is recognized as an Ivey Scholar for top academic achievement. Peter teaches graduate and undergraduate courses at the Shannon School of Business, Cape Breton University.



Julia Gropper

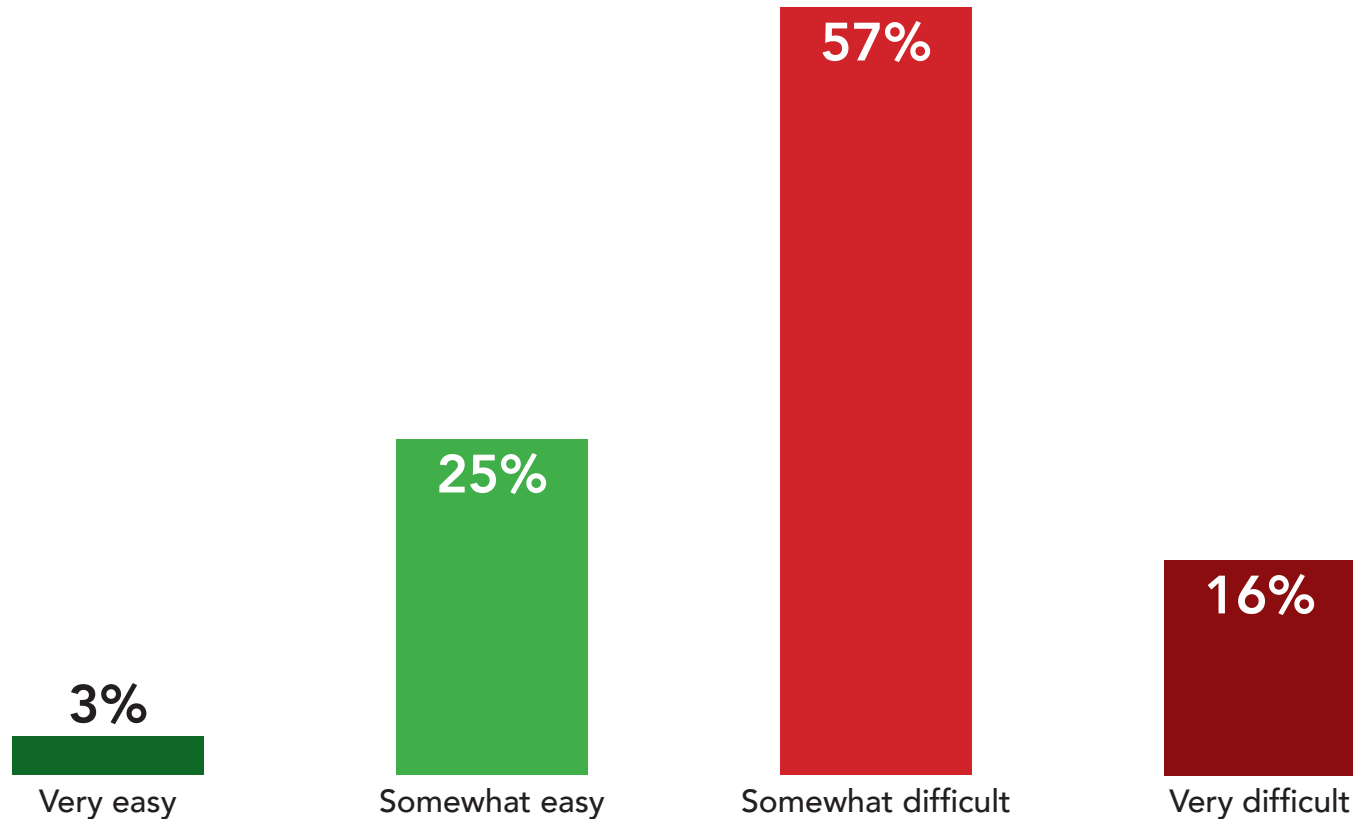
MBA Candidate, 2022

CPSA IDENTIFIES A SALES SKILL GAP IN CANADA

73% of businesses say it's hard to fill open positions with qualified candidates

Recruiting new sales people

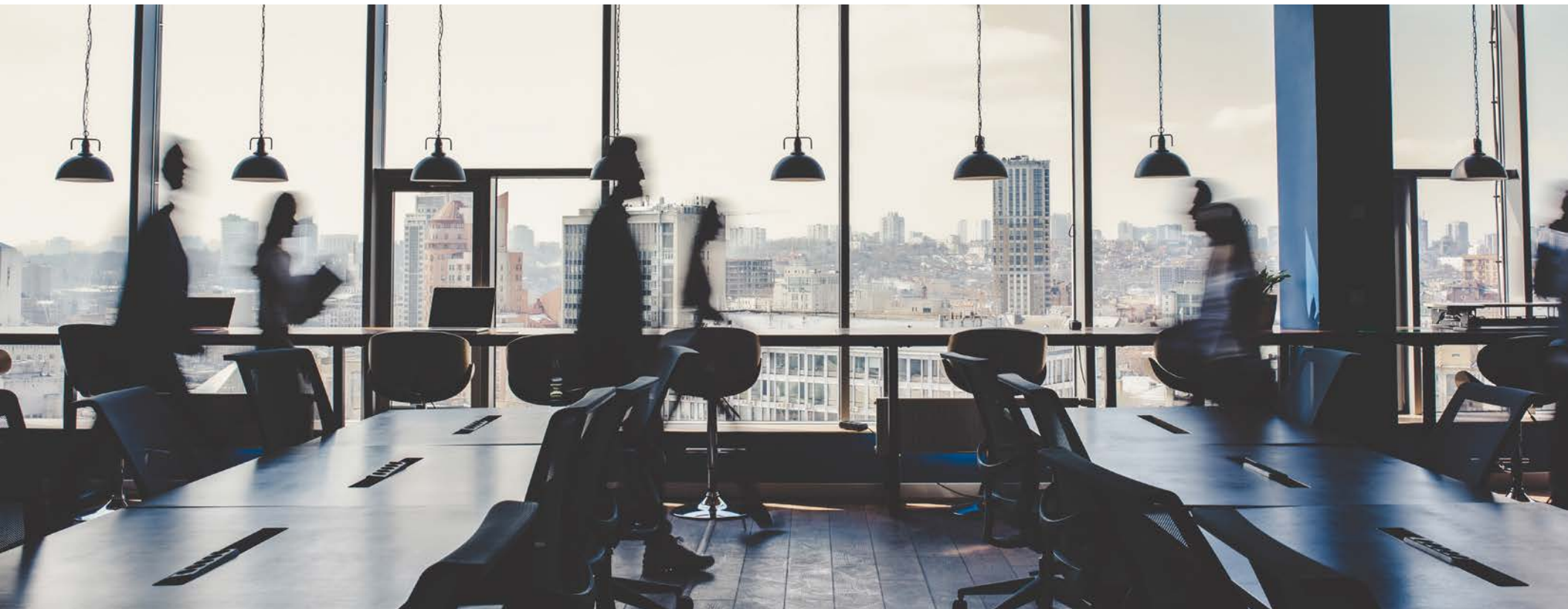
When it comes to hiring sales people for your firm, is it very difficult, somewhat difficult, somewhat easy, or very easy to find qualified candidates to fill open positions?



WHY RESEARCH SALES SKILLS?

CPSA Previous Research Summary

- Companies Say They Will Have Difficulty Meeting Demand
- Companies are Looking for Soft Skills
- 40% Receive No Formal Training



Background

- Substantial and rapid changes in professional selling context, including information technology advancements and increased solution complexity
- CPSA Research board discussed the need to understand key skills for the modern sales environment to help CPSA members hire, recruit and train more effectively to support key goals and mission
- A lack of research on (new) skills required for the dynamic and constantly evolving sales environment was identified along with a need to create more training programs to meet the membership needs

METHODOLOGY

The survey and interviews commissioned by the Canadian Professional Sales Association, were conducted from June 1 to September 1, 2020.

The research was conducted using a mixed-methods design with two sample sources:

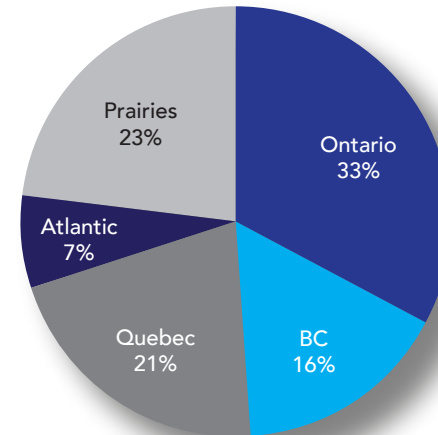
- **Qualitative Research:** 20 in-depth interviews were conducted with sales executives, recruited from the CPSA membership. The sales executives were invited to participate through email.
- **Quantitative Research:** 251 surveys were completed by B2B sales professionals in small, medium, and large firms across Canada. Surveys were completed online with members of the Canadian Professional Sales Association who were invited to participate through email. The survey was available in both official languages.

SALESPEOPLE SURVEY SAMPLE DISTRIBUTION

Canadian Region

Atlantic	18	7.2%
Quebec	52	20.7%
Ontario	82	32.7%
Prairies	59	23.5%
BC	40	15.9%

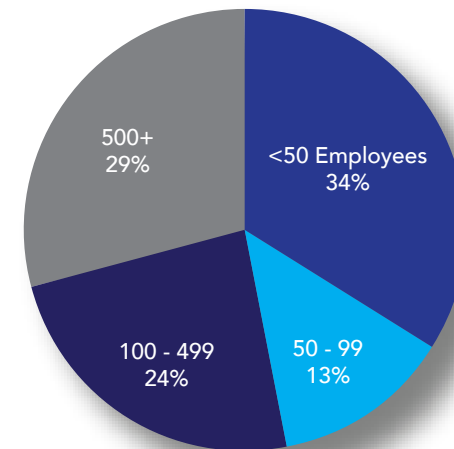
Sample by Region



Firm Size

<50 Employees	86	34.3%
50-99	32	12.7%
100-499	61	24.3%
500+	72	28.7%

Firm Size



SALESPEOPLE SURVEY SAMPLE DISTRIBUTION

Gender

Male	200	79.7%
Female	45	17.9%
Prefer not to say	6	2.4%

Age

18 - 29	5	2.0%
30 - 39	26	10.4%
40 - 49	64	25.5%
50 - 59	95	37.8%
60+	56	22.3%
Prefer not to say	5	2.0%

Language

English	217	86.5%
French	34	13.5%

Sales Experience

<3 Years	19	7.6%
3.0 - 4.9 years	24	9.6%
5.0 - 9.9 years	32	12.7%
10 - 19.9 years	71	28.3%
20+ years	105	41.8%

SALES EXECUTIVE INTERVIEW SAMPLE DISTRIBUTION

Gender

Male	10	50.0%
Female	10	50.0%

Age

18 - 29	0	0%
30 - 39	3	15%
40 - 49	8	40%
50 - 59	9	45%
60+	0	0%

Sales Experience

<3 Years	0	0%
3.0 - 4.9 years	0	0%
5.0 - 9.9 years	5	25%
10 - 19.9 years	10	50%
20+ years	5	25%

KEY INSIGHTS

11 Key Sales Skills and 4 Key Sales Traits were identified as important to enabling sales performance.

In alignment with CPSA's finding in 2018, soft skills, including excellent interpersonal communication skills remain key skills that recruiters should hire for, and one that sales executives need to continue to develop and train in their sales team.



KEY INSIGHTS

In addition to these soft skills, hard analytical and technical skills become increasingly important in today's modern sales environment.

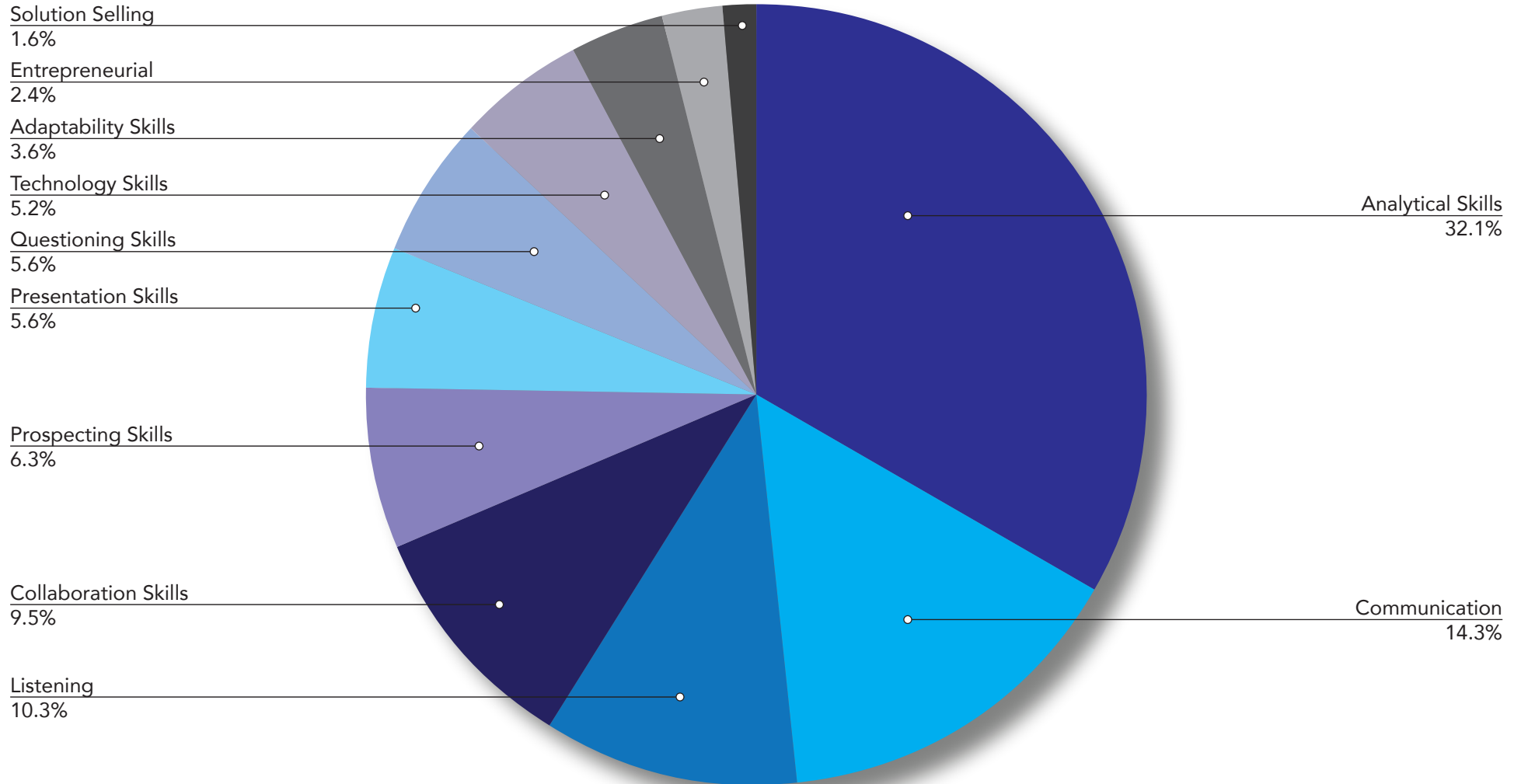
19 out of 20 sales leaders emphasized the importance of analytical skills in sales. The ability to think and process information analytically plays an invaluable role throughout the entire sales cycle, and needs to be applied to nearly all sales activities, beginning with prospecting all the way to the closure of a sale.

This finding suggests that recruiters and sales managers need to hire for strong analytical skills and continuously focus on further developing and training these skills.

The finding further implies that university graduates with strong analytical skills may provide a large talent pool to reduce the sales skills gap.

KEY SKILLS OF A SALES PERSON

(% of sales executives interview responses)



95%

of sales executives view

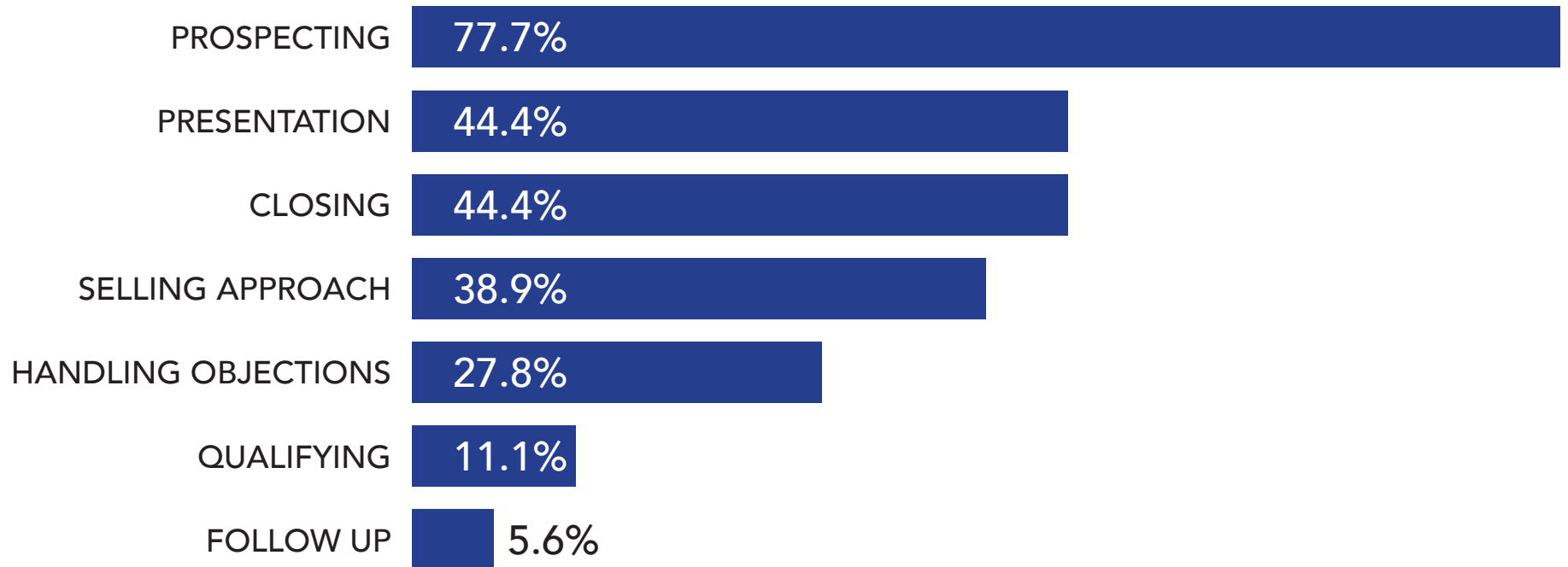
analytical skills

as key to enabling

sales performance

ANALYTICAL SKILLS

ANALYTICAL SKILLS PLAY A MAJOR ROLE ACROSS ALL STAGES IN THE SALES CYCLE ACCORDING TO SALES EXECUTIVES RESPONSES IN THE INTERVIEWS



ANALYTICAL SKILLS

FOR WHICH TASKS ARE ANALYTICAL SKILLS IMPORTANT?

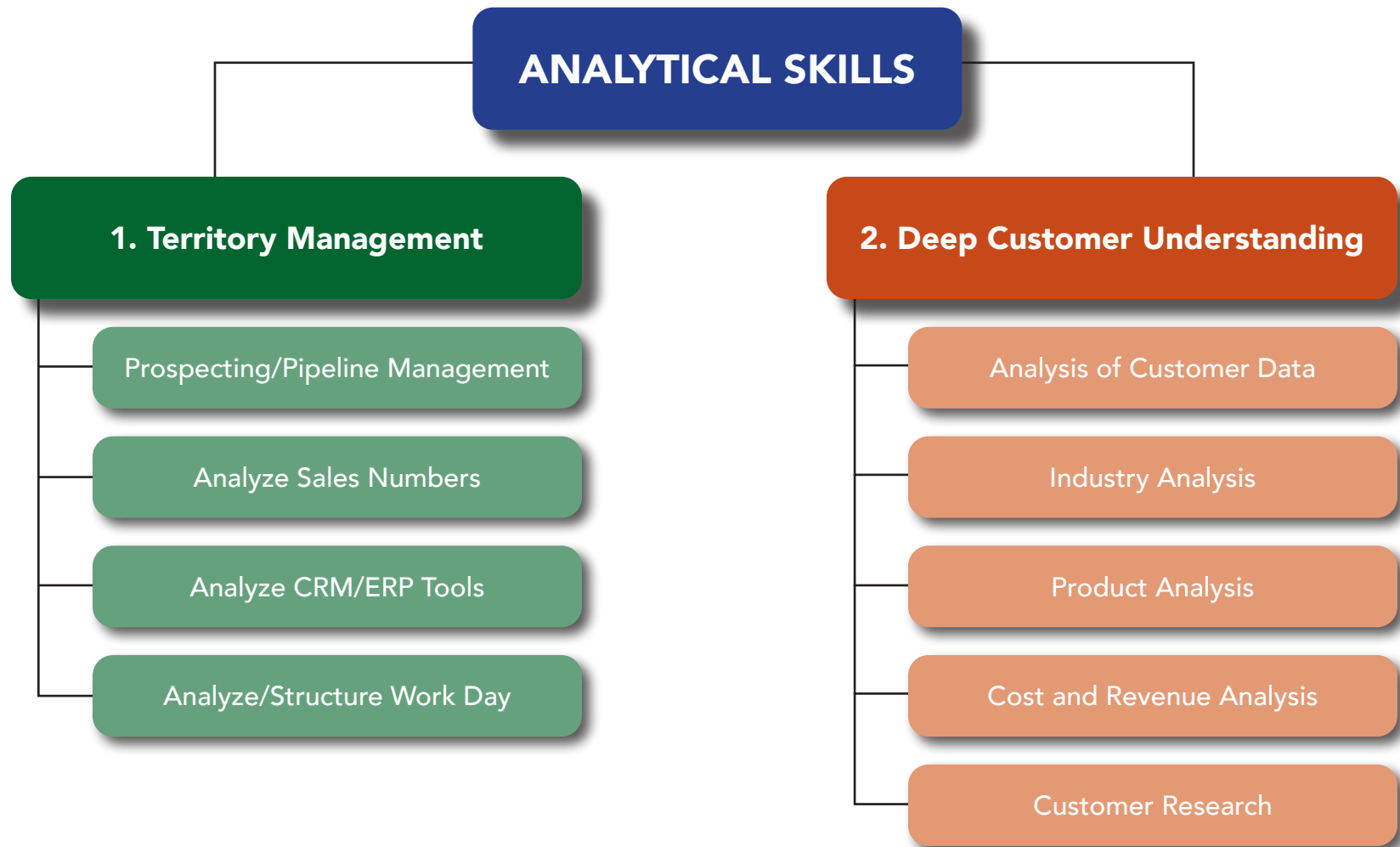
Analytical skills are a key component to successfully managing one's sales territory.

In addition to territory management, analytical skills are useful for gaining a deeper customer understanding.



ANALYTICAL SKILLS

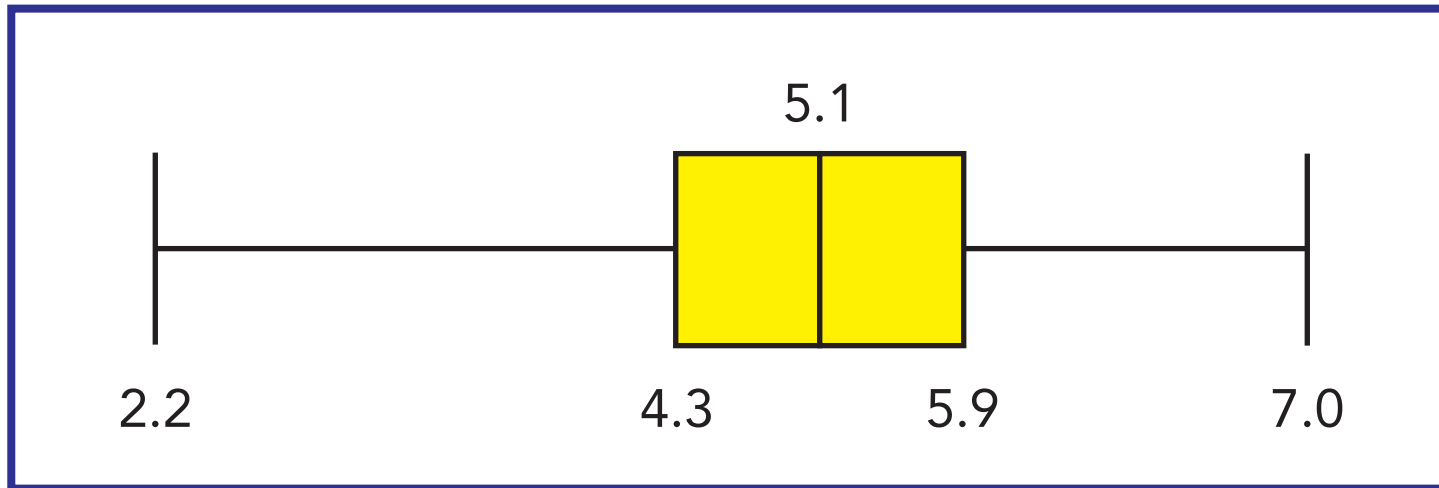
OVERVIEW OF ANALYTICAL SKILLS AND ASSOCIATED TASKS



ANALYTICAL SKILLS IN SALES

“If you don’t practice analytical skills, if you don’t learn them, you won’t succeed as a sales person in today’s environment. It’s that simple. They’re so critical today.” (Sales Leader 20)

AVERAGE RATING OF ANALYTICAL SKILLS



BASED ON A 7-POINT SCALE

COMMUNICATION SKILLS IN SALES

Being able to communicate efficiently allows the salesperson to connect with the client, have meaningful conversations and create strong, long lasting relationships.

A strong sales person is skilled and comfortable in virtual, verbal and written communication. Being able to communicate a clear value proposition and product differentiation is key to success, in particular during the prospecting stage.

The ability to communicate a compelling story around the product solution and its unique value to the client is essential to leaving a long-lasting impression with the prospect.

The 3 ways of communication

VIRTUAL

Virtual product demonstration

Connection with customer

VERBAL

Communicate a compelling story

WRITTEN

Proposal writing

Email personalization

COMMUNICATION SKILLS IN SALES

“You’re going to have customers that are very yes, no, black, white, and really don’t want to engage much further in a conversation, and you have to be able to read that. And know this is that type of individual. Whereas with other people, they are going to want to talk about their weekend at the cottage for 5 or 10 minutes and you have to be able to relate to that. Even if you don’t have a cottage and you hate camping and you don’t want anything to do with it. But you have to know how to be able to talk to people and make them feel good about themselves.” (Sales Leader 19)



LISTENING SKILLS IN SALES

COUPLED WITH EMPATHY

Listening with empathy and a genuine interest in the customer's business and its unique challenges leads to insightful questioning and ultimately to gaining superior knowledge and customer understanding.

Empathy is key to developing a long-lasting customer relationship built on mutual trust.

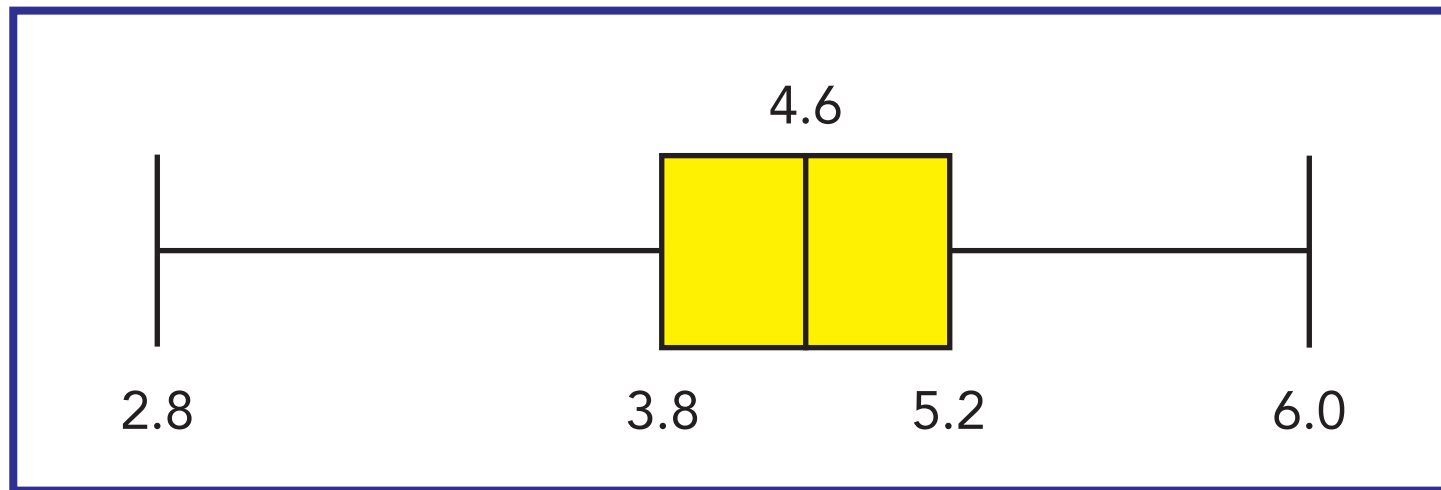
In addition, the sales person's ability to relate empathetically to the customer and treat the customer's challenges as if they were their own, typically leads to solutions that are more uniquely tailored to the specific customer. This in turn leads to higher customer satisfaction.



LISTENING SKILLS IN SALES

“Are you listening twice as much as you speak to absorb the situation and to ultimately better understand the challenges that your customer faces and then respond in a way that shows an understanding of their challenges and an empathy to whatever challenges they may be facing so that you are now solving them together” (Sales Leader 2)

AVERAGE RATING OF LISTENING SKILLS



BASED ON A 7-POINT SCALE

INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL COLLABORATION

The ability to work collaboratively internally includes sharing knowledge and helping coworkers within the same sales team.

Developing and maintaining good internal relationships with team members and colleagues across other departments of the organization can be a huge asset to a sales person, particularly if they encounter a situation in which a trusted relationship can assist them with advancing or closing a sale.

Similarly, working collaboratively with the external client and building a trusted relationship is key to becoming the client's invaluable partner.

Internal Collaboration

Knowledge, sharing and trust development

Leverage of internal relationships

External Collaboration

Working with a client as a team and developing trust

Become the client's invaluable partner

COLLABORATION SKILLS IN SALES

“A good relationship with your General Counsel, with the CFO because you need to get a discount, with your Chief Operating Officer, because I need something special from services, from the Pre Sales VP because I need you guys to do “oops, sorry, two more demos”, with the Business Development Rep’s, you have to know how to kind of guide them and coach them ... It’s being able to wear 15 different hats and still make people feel awesome.” (Sales Leader 19)

“So, it’s changed in the way that you have dialogue, it’s more about not just setting up a presentation but it’s actually about listening to the customer and then working together. It’s more about collaboration” (Sales Leader 17)



PROSPECTING SKILLS IN SALES

Prospecting is the most important step in the sales cycle to focus on. The key is to ensure a consistently full pipeline, with new, valuable leads to be tackled as soon as another sale has closed.

Too many sales reps tend to focus on the more exciting parts of the sales cycle, while failing to understand that a closed sale needs to directly be followed by a new opportunity to engage with and convert into the next sale.

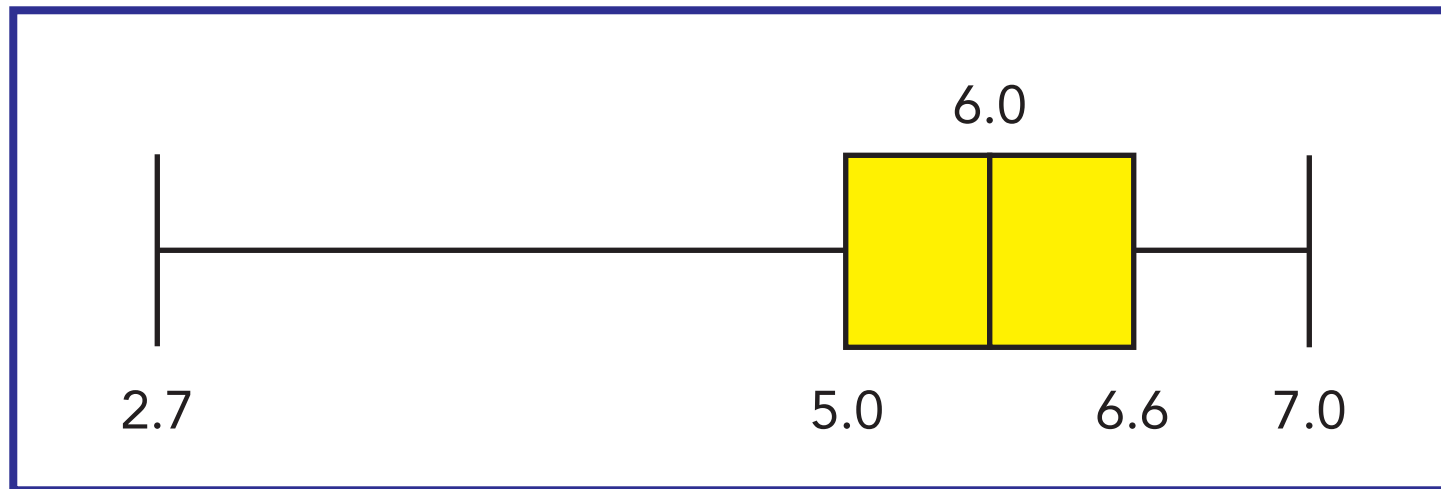
In addition to maintaining a full pipeline, the ability to critically evaluate and analyze these prospects in order to identify the most promising opportunities is crucial.



PROSPECTING SKILLS IN SALES

“Reps have a tendency to get caught up and excited about late stage stuff. And forget about the early stage stuff and so they will go through a period where they, you know, tend to sell a couple deals and then suddenly turn around and they have nothing else behind them to back them up over the next couple months, and they’re scrambling to try to rebuild their pipeline, because they did not do the hard work required to maintain it.” (Sales Leader 6)

AVERAGE RATING OF PROSPECTING SKILLS



BASED ON A 7-POINT SCALE

PRESENTATION SKILLS AND THE ART OF STORYTELLING

The most successful sales reps master the **art of storytelling**, the ability to formulate a story based on numbers and metrics to which the customer can relate.

Communicating a **short, compelling story** has proven to be far more effective in **catching a customer's attention** when compared to overwhelming the customer with an abundance of complex product information.

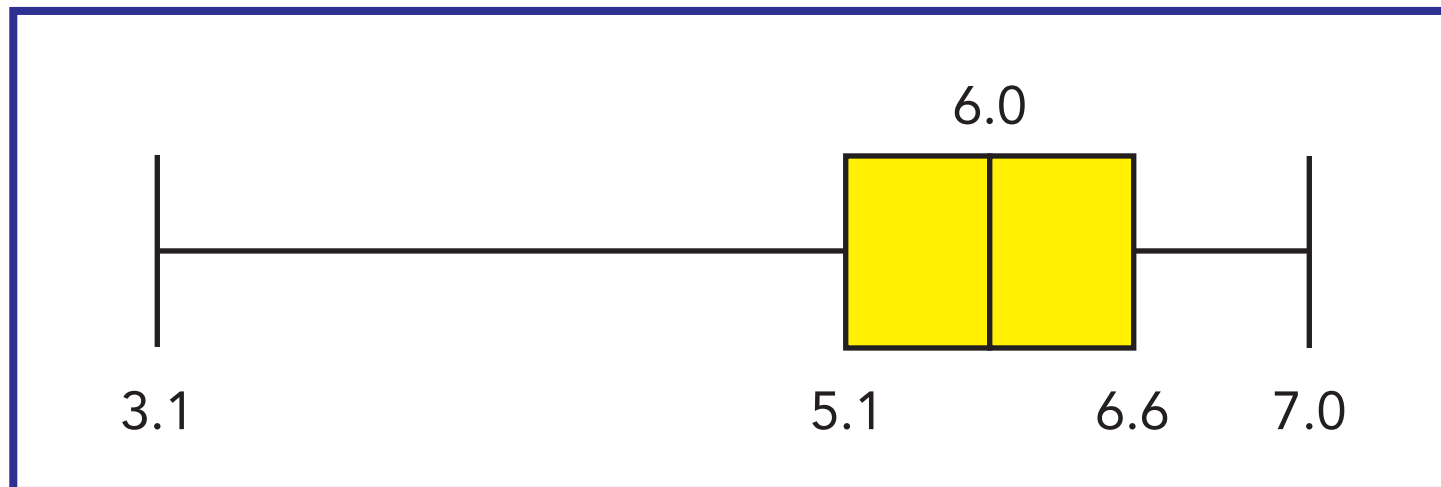
Storytelling has been compared to an engaging, motivating and highly relatable TED talk, which typically leaves a long-lasting impression with the listener. In the same way, **the art of telling a story surrounding a specific product solution** leads to creating a memorable experience with the customer, and ultimately helps with product differentiation.



PRESENTATION SKILLS IN SALES

“Yeah, and quite literally it’s like every TED talk you’ve ever watched, they start with an insightful thoughtful story that catches people’s attention. I’m constantly trying to hone that with our team or leaders with our individual contributors to just really pack a powerful punch. We say be brief, be brilliant, be gone...someone to walk in and just tell a story, that 9 times out of 10 is more effective than the person who knows the product inside out and comes in and just overwhelms the customer with all kinds of information.” (Sales Leader 8)

AVERAGE RATING OF PRESENTATION SKILLS



BASED ON A 7-POINT SCALE

TECHNICAL SKILLS IN SALES

A certain level of technical knowledge and skills is required in order to analyze and interpret the output of various technological tools.

Social Media Skills and a good understanding of CRM and ERM tools are two major areas of focus.

Social Media tools are additional touchpoints for customer discovery and instant customer engagement.

CRM and ERP tools help gain deeper insights in a customer's organization, including prospect and lead discoveries. Specific tools also aid with existing customer management and order fulfillment.

Social Media Skills

Instant customer touch point

Product differentiation

Brand Credibility

CRM/ERP Tools

Identifying leads and prospects

Organizational insights

Customer management

TECHNICAL SKILLS IN SALES

“You can’t be shy on using the technologies that are available. You know, we have a breadth of different folks on our team and some are more technology savvy than others. For those that are held back on that technology or shy on the technology, that’s a gap for them.” (Sales Leader 18)

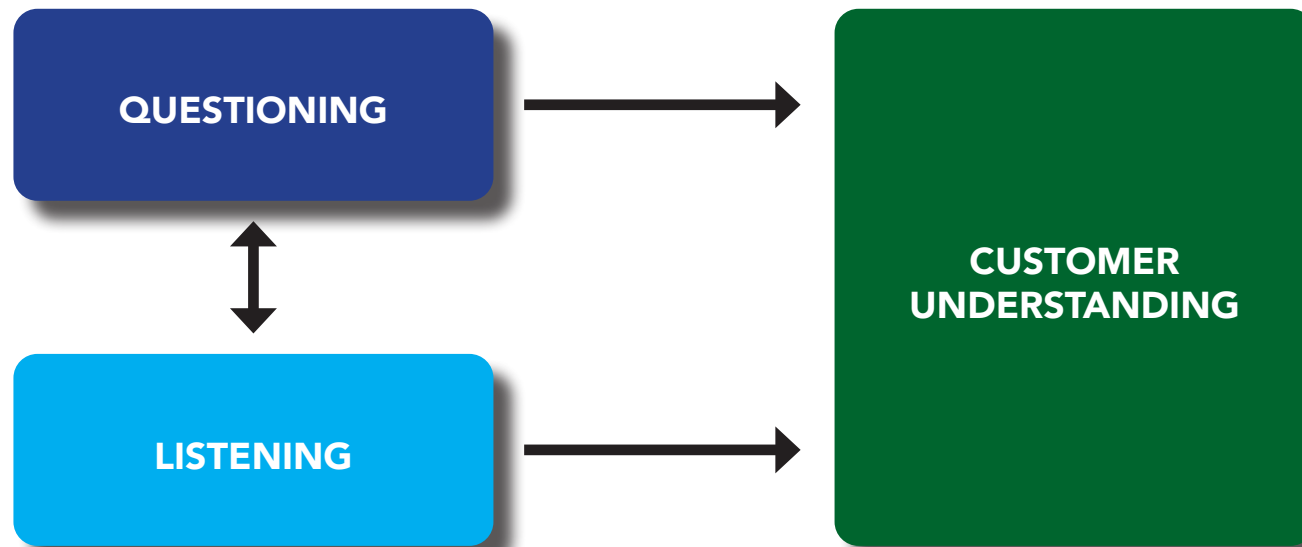


QUESTIONING SKILLS IN SALES

The ability to formulate and ask relevant questions allows the salesperson to gain an in-depth understanding of the client's business and its unique problems.

This skill is interconnected with the ability to actively listen and being able to follow up promptly with effective questions to further elaborate on any specific points of interest.

In particular, open-ended questions help to uncover the customer's true pain points and challenges, as well as their intrinsic needs.



QUESTIONING SKILLS IN SALES

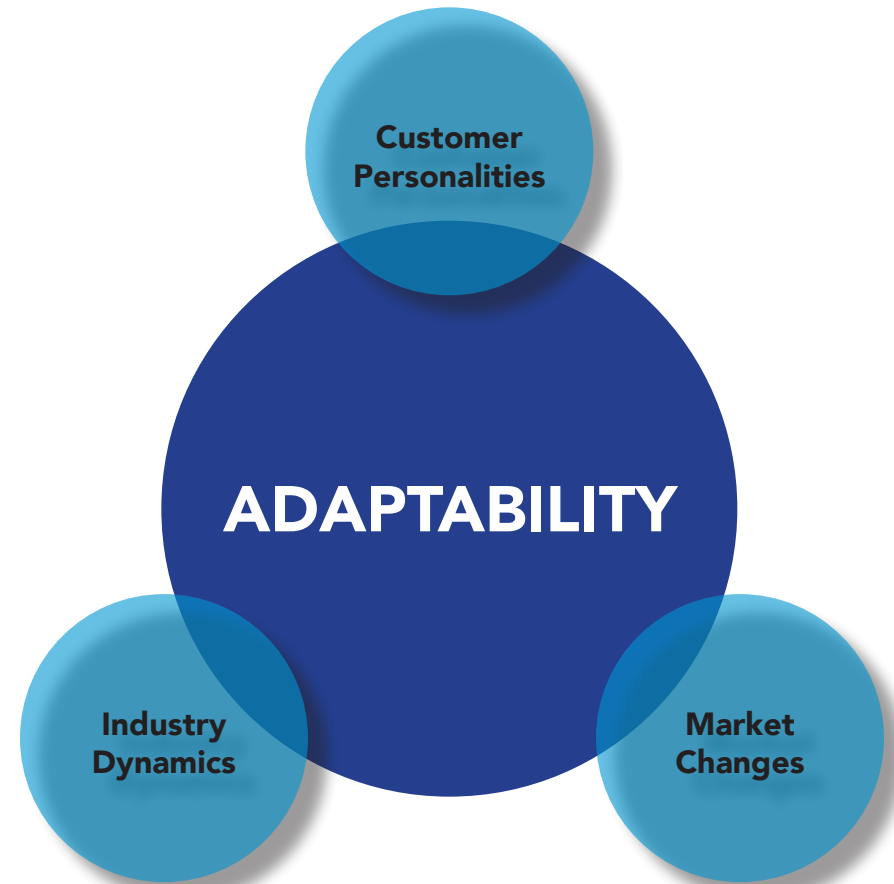
“The need to understand the right questions to ask. I mean obviously there’s closed and open questions, and open questions are very important...It’s about having that intuitive knowledge to know how to keep asking those questions that are going to really uncover truly what the customer is after” (Sales Leader 11)



ADAPTABILITY SKILLS IN SALES

The ability to adapt rapidly to unforeseen circumstances and be responsive to changes in market and industry dynamics is crucial to ensuring success in today's fast paced sales environment.

Adaptability also includes recognizing different customer personalities and preferences and the ability to adapt the selling approach accordingly.



ADAPTABILITY SKILLS IN SALES

“being flexible so that they can pivot and be responsive to dynamics in the market as they’re occurring in the moment.” (Sales Leader 5)



ENTREPRENEURIAL SKILLS IN SALES

Entrepreneurial skills help sales people to tackle and move along various sales opportunities and relationships.

Entrepreneurial skills includes taking calculated risks and recognizing the ideal moment to take an important next step in the selling process.

The entrepreneurial spirit is further linked to a sense of self-reliance and autonomy and as such the sales rep takes full responsibility and ownership for their actions.



ENTREPRENEURIAL SKILLS AND APPROACH IN SALES

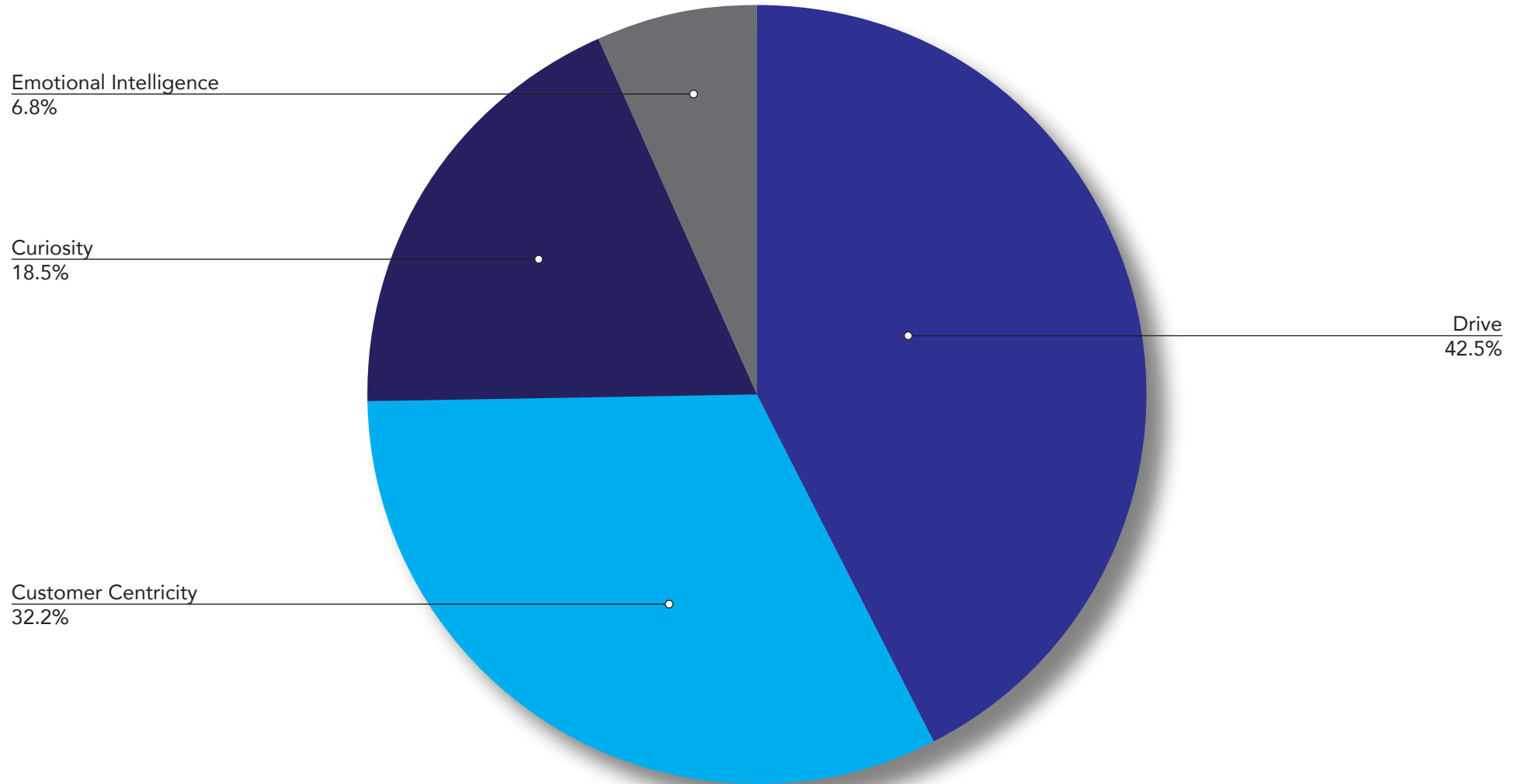
“to have that business owner mindset where they have to have their fingers in a number of different things all at once, and be able to move various opportunities, various relationships or various targets inside of an account” (Sales Leader 9)

“you need to be your own company” (Sales Leader 10)

“I think true entrepreneurs look at the world a little bit differently and keep driving on the trends, and if they get off course they course correct and move on versus waiting for, asking for permission to do something” (Sales Leader 15)



KEY TRAITS OF A SALES PERSON



KEY SALES TRAIT: DRIVE

Drive is necessary in the extremely competitive sales environment in order to stay focused on the target and goals ahead, especially in times of adversity and rejection.

Determination and discipline in particular aid in following through with tasks, particular unpleasant and tedious tasks.



Drive:

“I think it’s discipline. In just knowing what they have to do and doing it...I see so many salespeople that are incredibly talented, but just lack the ability to stay focused on what’s required of them.”

(Sales Leader 4)

KEY SALES TRAIT: CUSTOMER CENTRICITY

The role of the sales representative has shifted towards a consulting role, keeping the client's intrinsic needs at the forefront of all interactions.

Rather than simply focusing on fast revenue and quick closing of the sale, sales representatives are encouraged to have an ongoing dialogue with the customers to gain a deep understanding of their business' challenges and goals.

Sales representatives need to have strong communication and questioning skills coupled with a genuine interest and curiosity for the client's business.



CUSTOMER CENTRICITY

***“And that is a key piece that I think is always lacking, is people are focused on their product and their solutions versus the customer and what the customer’s needs are, and the customer’s challenges and the customer’s goals. Now tie your product into how that’s going to fit into building upon what the customer is really trying to achieve.”
(Sales Leader 1)***

***“But you really have to guide them down that path to start asking, kind of peel back the onion is the analogy that a lot of people use, you know, so the customers come to you with the full onion and as you start peeling back those layers, you’ve really realized they had a lot of other issues, they might need other products, hopefully.”
(Sales Leader 11)***

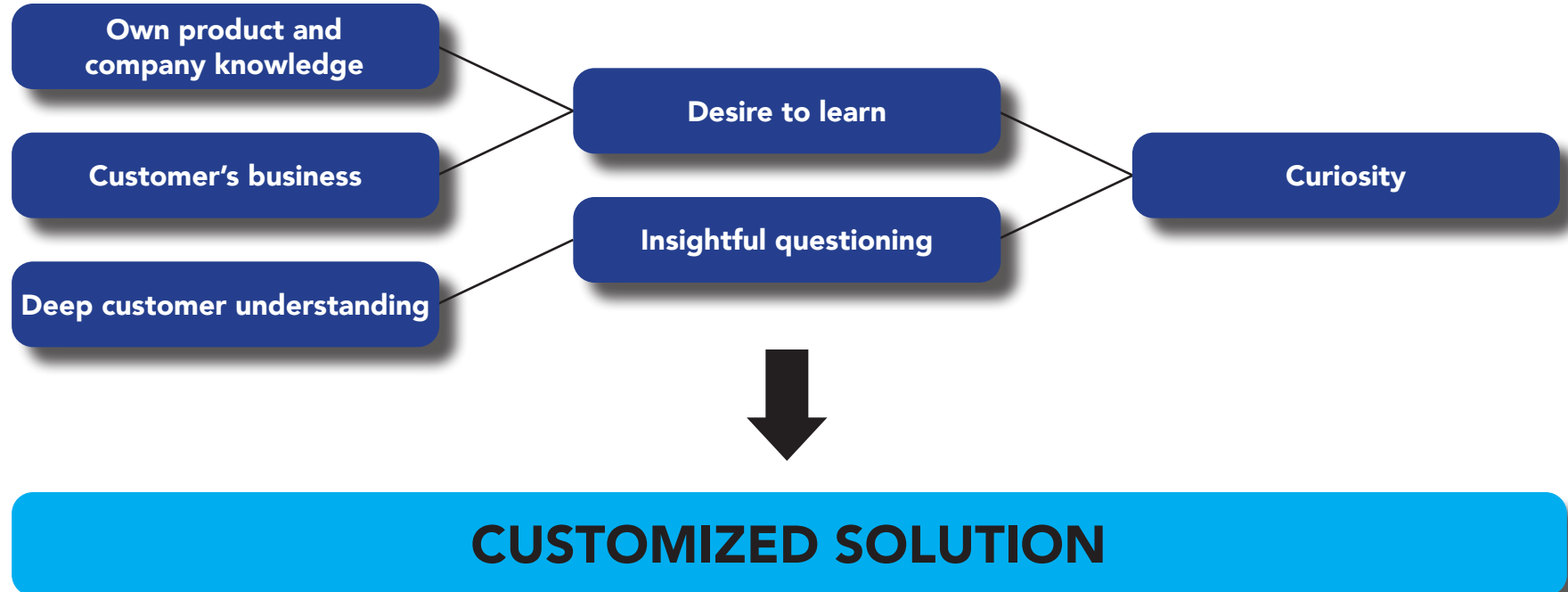


KEY SALES TRAIT: CURIOSITY

A sales person's curiosity leads to continuous questioning, which in turn results in more profound knowledge and understanding of the customer's business.

Curiosity is further linked to a persistent desire to learn, both about the sales person's own company and its products, as well as about the customer's business.

The more knowledge a salesperson can acquire about their own products as well as the customers' needs, the more likely they will be able to provide a customized solution for the client, one that will actually suit the client's needs and goals.



CURIOSITY

“Curiosity about our customers, their business and how they work, how they make money, problems and challenges that they face their industry. So, a general curiosity about the business both internally and externally, I think is something that’s really important” (Sales Leader 8)



KEY SALES TRAIT: EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

Emotional Intelligence (EQ) includes the ability and intuition to recognize different personality types and adjust conversations and the selling approach accordingly.

A high EQ allows sales people to genuinely build rapport with customers. Instead of “ticking off boxes” on a sales script, having genuine conversations and interest in the customer’s business leads to meaningful and trusted customer relationships.



KEY SALES SKILLS FOR COVID

Virtual Communication and Virtual Selling

- Interpersonal Skills and Awareness of Others (e.g. realizing when colleague/client may want to interject, allow for silences to “think”)
- Presentation skills
- Microsoft Teams, Google, Zoom and other similar platforms offer opportunities to collaborate with multiple customers and/or different departments, often based in multiple locations, at the same time, bypassing any logistical problems
- Online product demonstrations

Higher Levels of Customer Engagement Required

- Provide most recent updates and resources to customers regarding any industry-specific changes
- Product knowledge and its “usefulness” to the client

KEY SALES SKILLS FOR COVID

Adaptability

- Adapting and adjusting based on customer's needs as a result of a constantly evolving and changing environment due to the pandemic
- Provide new solutions for clients (e.g. ways to facilitate remote work for client's employees, cost saving strategies, vendor consolidations)
- Focus on upselling opportunities with existing clients instead of prospecting new clients

Heightened Levels of Empathy

- Gain a deep understanding of the customer's unique challenges as a result of the pandemic through listening "between the lines"
- Truly become a customer's trusted advisor in these times of uncertainty
- Touch-Point programs

Analytical Skills

- Account analyses, re-rankings and restructuring

STUDY 2

QUANTITATIVE SALESPERSON SKILL ASSESSMENT

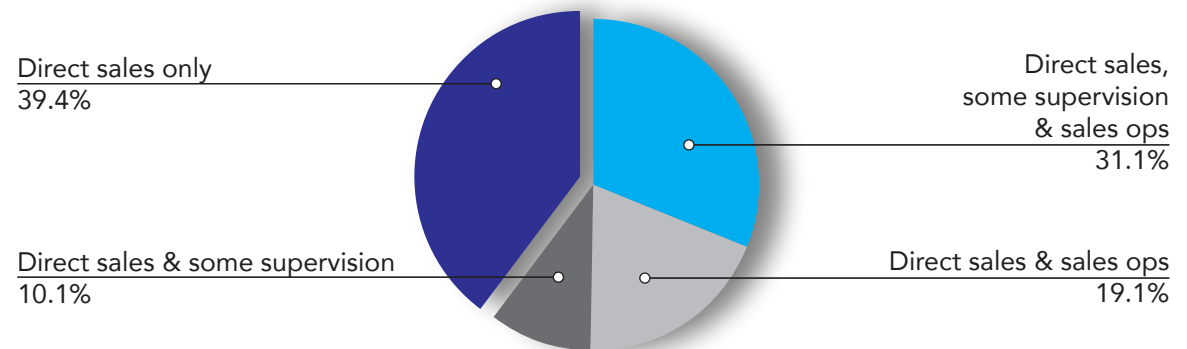
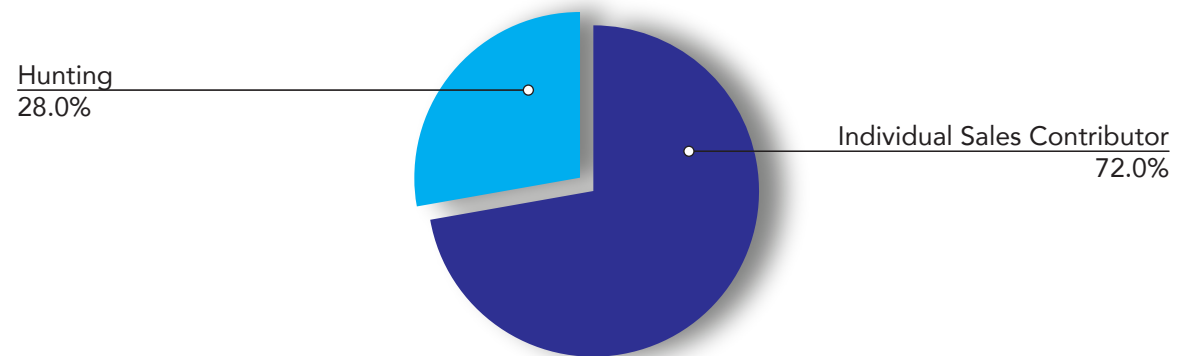
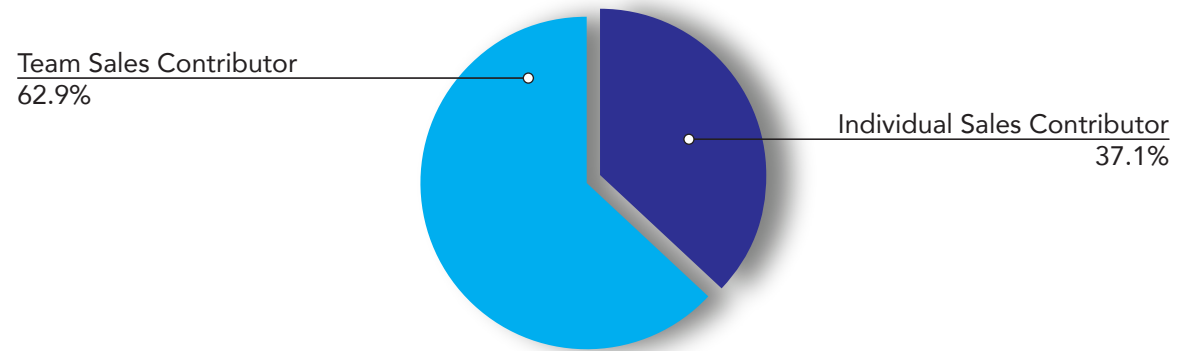
Objectives	Data Collection & Analysis	Results
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Understand how salespeople currently evaluate their skill set• Compare and contrast skills assessment across different situational factors• Validate qualitative survey results regarding the importance of analytical skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 485 survey responses (9%) received from CPSA members invited to participate• 251 surveys were completed fully to be usable for analysis• All selling skill scales statistically validated using confirmatory factor analysis• Structural equation modeling used to assess Analytical skill-sales performance relationship	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The largest sales skills gap, regardless of sector, region or sales role is in Listening and Analytical Skills• Analytical skills has a direct relationship with sales performance• Analytical skills positively influences the relationship between effort and performance

THE CHANGING ROLE OF SALES

Team-selling appears to be the primary approach to sales (62.9%) versus an individual sales contribution (37.1%).

Salespeople spend the majority of their time focused on farming existing accounts (72.0%) versus hunting for new business (28.0%).

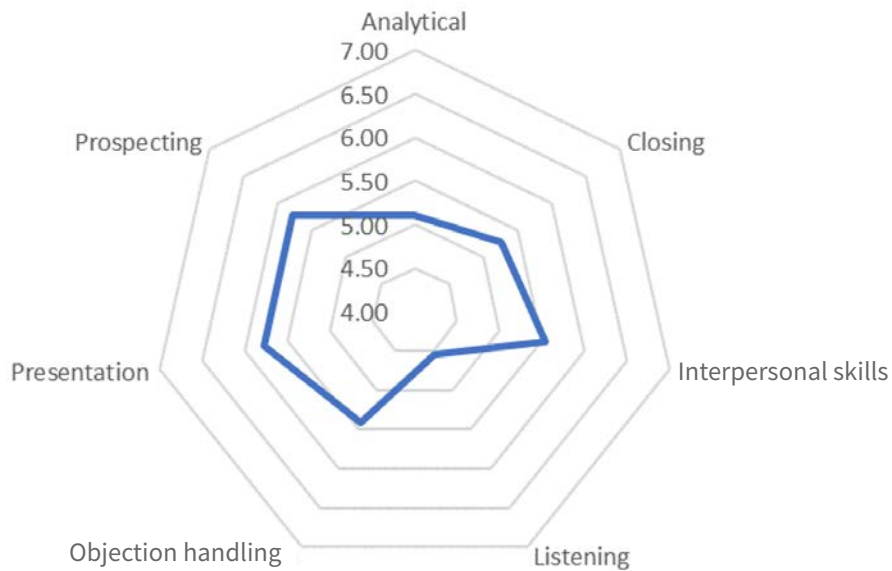
Role responsibilities continue to expand. Only 39.4% of respondents indicated that selling was their only responsibility.



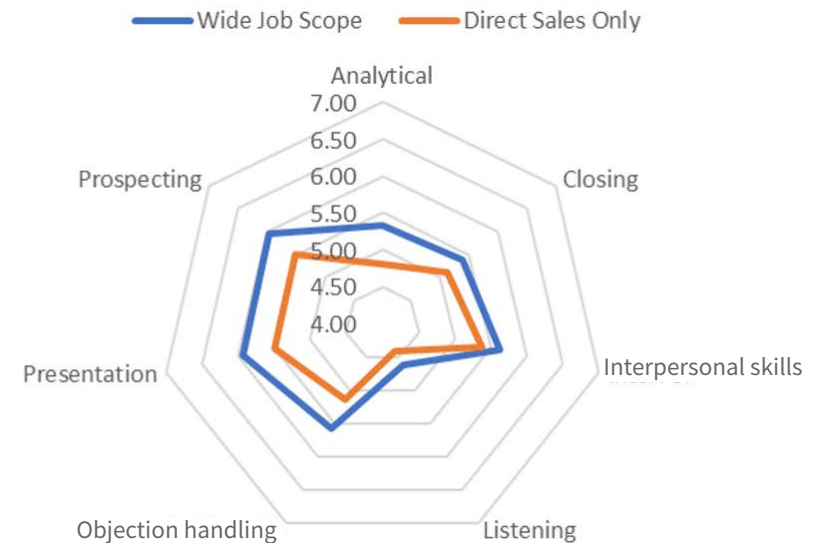
SKILLS ASSESSMENT

Overall

Listening and analytical skills appear to be where the largest skills gaps exist across CPSA membership.



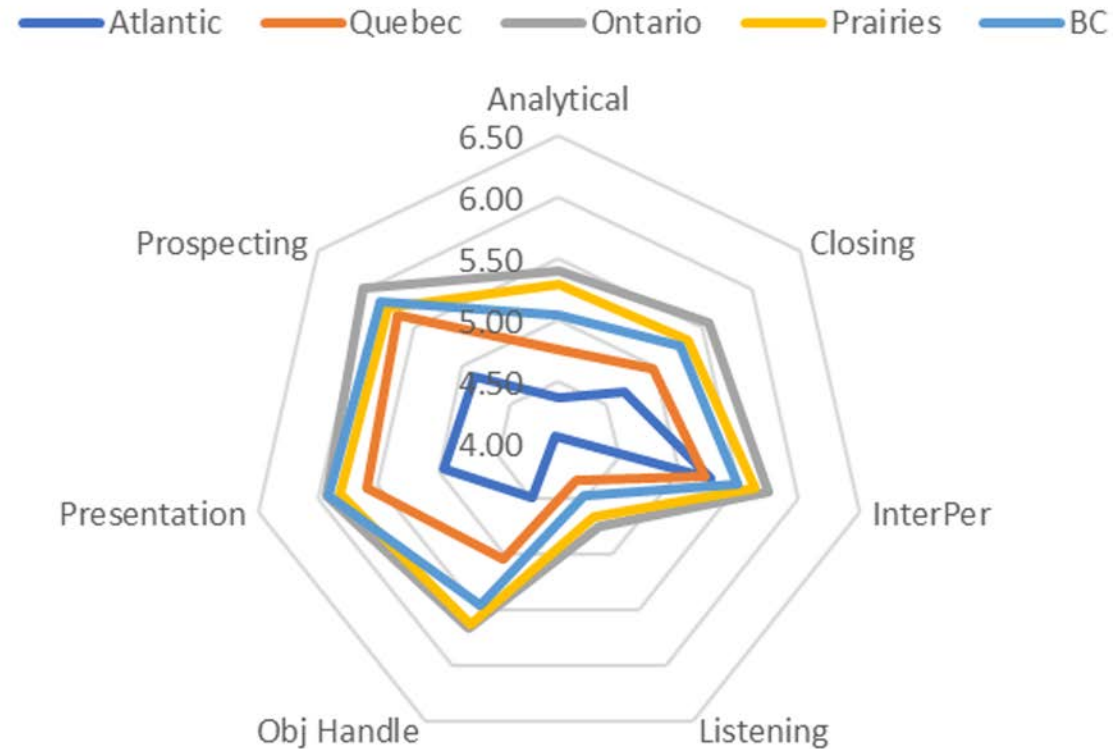
Salespeople with a broader set of role responsibilities report higher skill levels, but listening and analytical skills remain the lowest



SKILLS ASSESSMENT

Sales skills vary considerably by region, however, they maintain their relative strength to each other (i.e. Listening and analytical skills remain the lowest).

Regions with large urban markets (like Ontario) serving larger clients have higher reported skill levels.



SALESPERSON ANALYTICAL SKILLS

A scale to measure salesperson analytical skills was constructed. Factor analysis was utilized to establish and validate the dimensions of the scale.

Factor Analysis Results:

Salesperson Analytical Skills, is a two dimensional scale with the following attributes:

1) Analytics for pipeline and Territory Management and Efficiency

Using funnel data to accurately forecast results

Using funnel data to understand variance to quota

Using data to monitor potential customer churn

Using funnel data to adjust sales effort

2) Analytics for Deeper Customer Insight

Using data to customize selling approach

Using data to identify high-potential vs low-potential customers

Using data to understand industry sector

Using data to identify customer pain points

CAN SALESPERSON ANALYTICAL SELLING SKILLS PREDICT SALES PERFORMANCE?

Using structural equation modeling we tested whether or not Analytical Selling Skills could help predict individual sales performance. Our model included the analytical selling skills scale as well as scales which measured sales performance and salesperson effort (given its anticipated effect on performance).

Findings:

- There is a statistically significant relationship between Analytical Selling Skills and Sales Performance, across all levels of sales effort.
- There is a statistically significant relationship between Salesperson Effort and Sales Performance.
- The relationship between Salesperson Effort and Sales Performance is positively influenced by Salesperson Analytical Skills. As analytical skill increases, Salesperson effort has a stronger influence on Sales Performance. Analytical skills appears to focus salesperson effort, on the right pipeline activities and on the right customers to enhance performance.

SALES TRAINING: ANALYTICAL SKILLS

Challenge 1

Develop right level of analytical competency

Which analytical activities are predictable for training development and which are unpredictable and ad-hoc requiring higher skill-set?

Challenge 2

Technology Access

Do your salespeople have access to the right analytical tools and data?

Challenge 3

Linking training and recruiting strategies

Is the organization making a conscious trade-off to recruit for specific skills and develop training programs for the missing skills versus "best-efforts" on all skills?



Managerial Implications

Provide CPSA training sessions on sales technology and analytical skills & hire analytically trained candidates

- CPSA Sales Training Modules
- Hire University trained students and teach them sales
- Support the development of sales programs across Canada
- Increase sales student certification
- Provide analytical support for your sales team when possible
- Train for analytical skills