RAIN Group

RESEARCH REPORT

B2B SALES CHALLENGES REPORT: HOW LEADERS ARE STRATEGIZING FOR GROWTH IN 2026

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Executive Summary of Key Findings

The 2026 Sales Performance Question

For years, sales leaders have pushed for more pipeline, more opportunities, and more at-bats. After all, more pipeline should create more revenue. But our 2026 data reinforces what many teams are experiencing in practice: pipeline growth doesn’t automatically translate into stronger results.

That reality brings a persistent performance question into sharper focus: are organizations struggling to create enough pipeline, convert it effectively, or both?

Based on responses from 252 sales management, leadership, and enablement professionals, RAIN Group’s 2026 B2B Sales Challenges Report research identified that many sales organizations need stronger capabilities and execution discipline to consistently convert pipeline into wins, quota attainment, and growth.

As the third wave of this study, following research fielded in 2019 and 2023, this analysis examines both today’s sales challenges and priorities, as well as how the sales performance agenda has evolved.

Prevailing Themes in the Research:

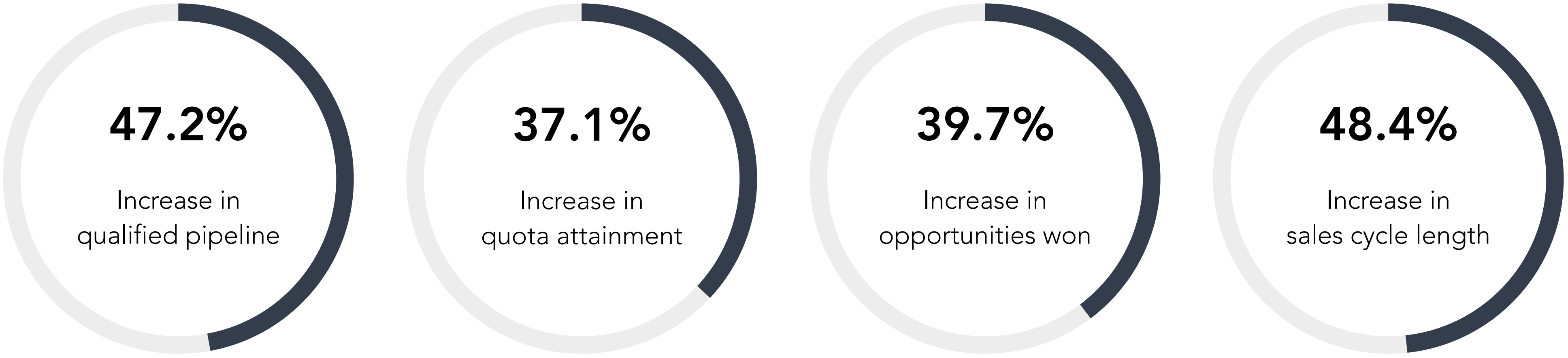
1. **Pipeline momentum is improving, but performance is inconsistent.**
   More organizations report growth in qualified pipeline than improvement in quota attainment.
2. **Conversion remains a persistent performance gap.**
   No-decision outcomes, longer cycles, competitive pressure, and value communication all affect whether opportunities advance.
3. **Performance profiles highlight where results are breaking down.**
   The data reveals four distinct profiles that point to differences in pipeline generation, conversion, execution, and risk.
4. **The response should be diagnostic, not programmatic.**
   Enablement should address the issue behind the performance pattern rather than defaulting to the same intervention across teams.
5. **Execution discipline and manager reinforcement help capability shifts stick.**
   Sellers and managers need consistent practices for qualification, value communication, stakeholder engagement, forecasting, coaching, and deal-risk inspection.

Pipeline Is Up, Performance Isn't Keeping Pace

Pipeline momentum creates the opportunity for growth, but it doesn't guarantee performance improvement. The question is whether organizations can convert pipeline into wins, quota attainment, and deal progression. Our findings revealed that:

1. Opportunity flow is improving for many
2. Performance isn't keeping pace
3. Conversion gains are inconsistent
4. Deal velocity remains under pressure

THE SALES PROFESSIONALS SURVEYED REPORT:



The Sales Environment Remains Structurally Difficult

Respondents reported challenges across a wide range of sales leadership and enablement issues.

The most frequently reported challenges point to pressure not only on pipeline generation, but also on conversion, execution, and sales and management capability development.

- **Challenges are broad and interconnected.** Talent, economic uncertainty, sales cycle length, no-decision outcomes, competition, manager development, buyer complexity, sales skills, pipeline quality, and budget constraints all rank among the top challenges organizations face.
- **Conversion and execution friction is visible.** Longer sales cycles, no-decision outcomes, competitive pressure, and pipeline quality all affect an organization's ability to turn opportunities into revenue.
- **Capability development remains a central issue.** Organizations continue to report widespread challenges developing both frontline sales managers and core selling skills.

MOST REPORTED CHALLENGES
% VERY / SOMEWHAT CHALLENGING

The Challenge Landscape Points Back to Conversion

While challenges span multiple areas of the commercial organization, many ultimately affect the same outcome: whether opportunities advance to revenue or stall before conversion.

CHALLENGE THEMES AFFECTING CONVERSION
% VERY CHALLENGING

Customer Retention and Expansion	Execution and Operating Discipline	Talent and Manager Capability	Buyer and Market Constraints	Conversion Friction
▪ **Existing-account revenue:** 22.8% ▪ **Portfolio selling:** 21.5% ▪ **Sales / CS / Marketing alignment:** 19.6%	▪ **Forecast discipline:** 23.4% ▪ **Consistent sales process:** 22.2% ▪ **AI tool selection:** 27.8%	▪ **Recruiting / Hiring talent:** 35.1% ▪ **Developing managers:** 23.8% ▪ **Coaching:** 19.7%	▪ **Economy:** 43.0% ▪ **Budget constraints:** 26.7% ▪ **Complex buyer requirements:** 25.3%	▪ **No-decision:** 28.2% ▪ **Longer sales cycles:** 25.9% ▪ **Competitors:** 23.4%
Impact: Growth increasingly depends on retaining, expanding, and proving value to current customers.	**Impact:** Strong sales results require disciplined processes, forecasting, and opportunity management, not just individual seller effort.	**Impact:** Consistent execution depends on effective coaching, inspection, and manager reinforcement.	**Impact:** Buying decisions face greater scrutiny, complexity, and financial pressure, making opportunities harder to advance.	**Impact:** Pipeline growth doesn't translate into revenue when opportunities stall, slip, or lose momentum

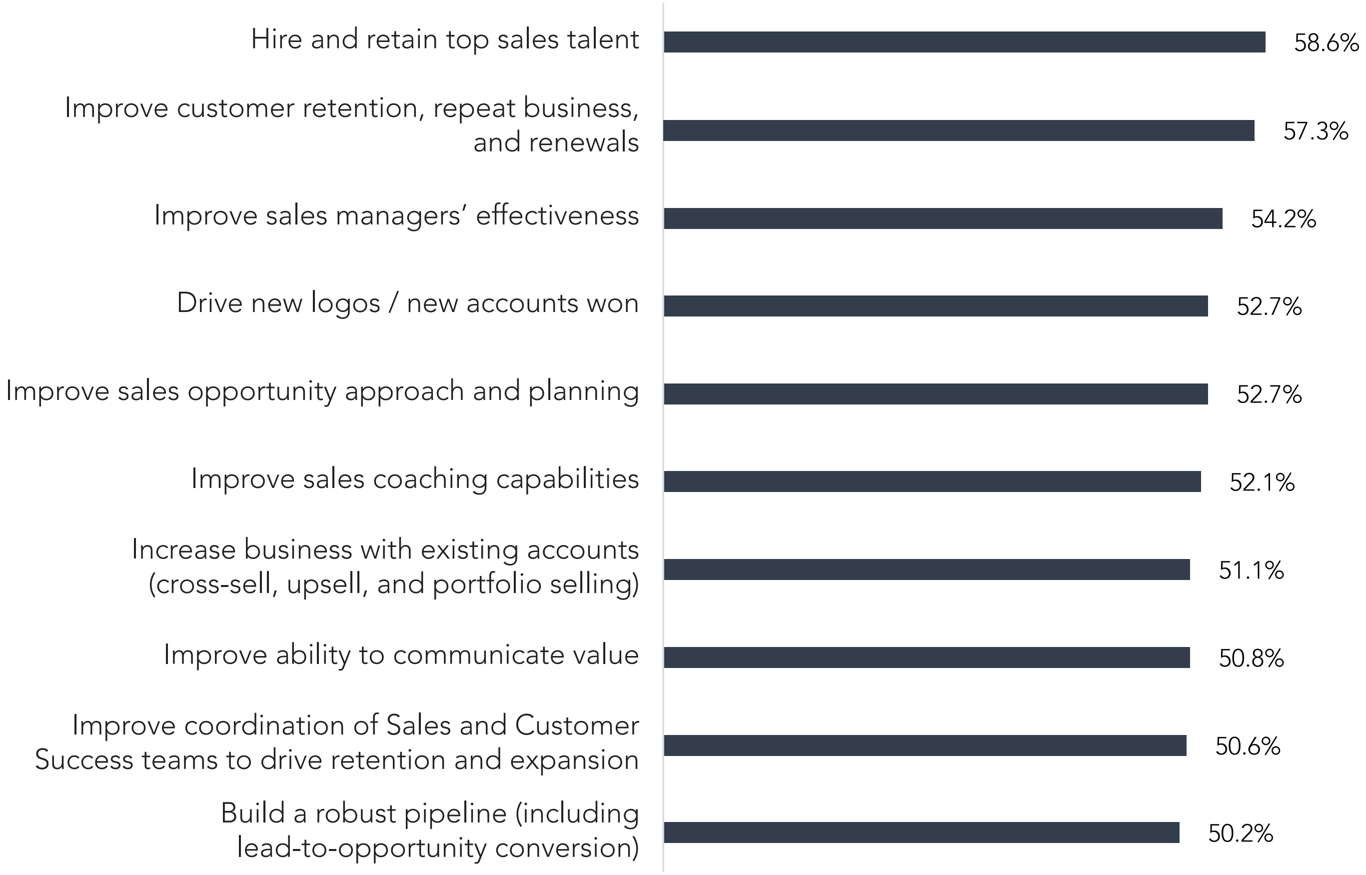
The Sales Leadership and Enablement Agenda

When we examined sales priorities, the data showed that organizations increasingly view growth as an execution challenge, not simply a pipeline challenge.

While pipeline creation remains important, leaders are simultaneously prioritizing customer retention, manager effectiveness, coaching, opportunity planning, account expansion, and value communication.

The pattern suggests that leaders recognize that revenue performance depends not only on generating opportunities, but also on executing consistently across the full sales process. As buyer complexity, competitive pressure, and no-decision outcomes increase, execution quality becomes important in determining whether pipeline converts to revenue.

MOST REPORTED SALES PRIORITIES
% VERY IMPORTANT



The Urgency List

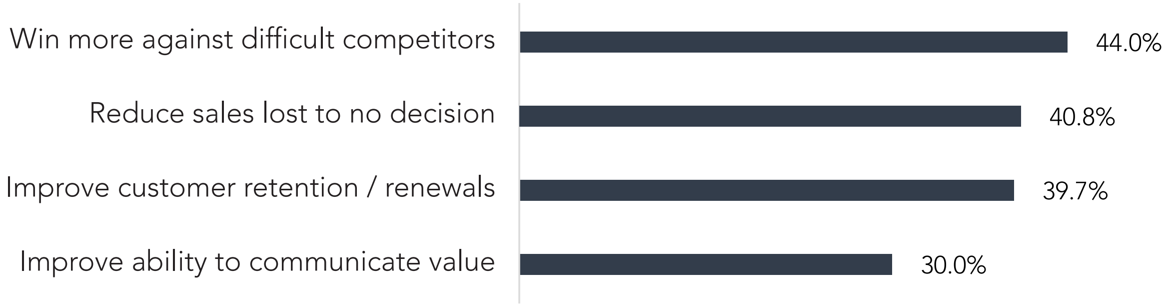
Overall priorities reflect a broad sales agenda spanning pipeline generation, customer growth, coaching, and execution.

When respondents were forced to choose their top three priorities, however, urgency concentrated around a narrower set of issues tied directly to conversion and revenue realization.

The priorities most frequently listed among respondents' top three forced-choice selections are all tied to whether opportunities convert, stall, or are lost:

1. Winning against difficult competitors
2. Reducing no-decision losses
3. Improving retention / renewals
4. Communicating value

TOP RANKED SALES PRIORITIES
% SELECTED



When Market Pressure Increases, Execution Is the Lever Leaders Can Control

Many of the top sales challenges identified in the research—economic uncertainty, buyer complexity, budget constraints, and longer sales cycles—can't be solved directly.

As a result, leadership priorities increasingly focus on the execution capabilities that influence whether opportunities advance, stall, or convert to revenue. Stronger opportunity planning, value communication, stakeholder engagement, deal qualification, no-decision prevention, and manager reinforcement all represent areas where organizations can strengthen execution despite external pressure.

Pressure	How Challenging	Leadership Response	How Important
Talent pressure Recruiting and hiring strong sales talent	35.1% very challenging	**Hire and retain top sales talent**	58.6% very important
No-decision / stalled deals Losing deals to no-decision or status quo	28.2% very challenging	**Reduce sales lost to no-decision**	40.8% selected in top 3
Competitive pressure Winning against strong or difficult competition	23.4% very challenging	**Win more against difficult competitors**	44.0% selected in top 3
Buyer complexity / budget pressure Dealing with more decision makers, buying teams, and committees; budget constraints	26.9% very challenging 26.7% very challenging	**Improve sales opportunity approach and planning; improve ability to communicate value**	52.7% very important 50.8% very important
Manager and execution pressure Developing sales managers	23.8% very challenging	**Improve sales managers' effectiveness**	54.2% very important

PERFORMANCE PROFILES

Different Revenue Outcomes Reveal Different Performance Profiles

While many organizations face similar market pressures, sales performance challenges don't always appear in the same form. Some organizations generate pipeline that fails to convert, while others struggle to build enough qualified opportunities in the first place.

To better understand these patterns, we mapped organizations based on changes in pipeline and quota attainment, revealing four distinct performance profiles.

These profiles help identify whether the larger issue is pipeline risk, conversion, or both.

- **Growth Leaders** improved both pipeline and quota attainment
- **Conversion Constrained** organizations improved pipeline but not quota attainment
- **Lean Performers** improved quota attainment despite weaker pipeline momentum
- **Stalled Performers** improved neither pipeline nor quota attainment

SALES PERFORMANCE PROFILES

Qualified Pipeline	Quota Attainment: Not Improved	Quota Attainment: Improved
Improved	Conversion Constrained 19.0%	Growth Leaders 29.3%
Not Improved	Stalled Performers 43.4%	Lean Performers 8.3%

As you look at these four profiles, which one most closely resembles your organization today?

Note: These profiles are diagnostic, not prescriptive. Because Lean Performers represent a small share of the sample, findings for this group should be interpreted directionally.

Same Pipeline, Different Results

The market is difficult across profiles. Sales organizations face many of the same pressures: economic uncertainty, buyer complexity, longer sales cycles, talent constraints, competitive pressure, and no-decision. The contrast calls attention to what happens after pipeline is created.

Organizations with similar levels of pipeline growth don't always achieve similar sales outcomes. Differences in qualification, opportunity management, value communication, stakeholder engagement, and manager coaching all influence whether pipeline converts efficiently into wins and quota attainment.

GROWTH LEADERS VS. CONVERSION CONSTRAINED

Growth Leaders	Vs.	Conversion Constrained
Pipeline and quota improved	**Pattern**	Pipeline improved; quota did not improve
Convert opportunity flow into outcomes more effectively	**Core Issue**	Pipeline momentum is not translating into quota performance
Scale the commercial operating system	**Likely Focus**	Improve conversion quality
Sustain method, process, coaching, enablement, and cross-functional coordination	**Capability Implication**	Improve opportunity quality, value communication, stakeholder engagement, qualification, and manager coaching
What is working that we can codify and scale?	**Diagnostic Question**	Where is the pipeline breaking down before it becomes quota performance?

When Pipeline and Conversion Both Break Down

Organizations in the Stalled Performers profile face challenges in both pipeline generation and quota attainment. Weak opportunity flow combined with poor conversion creates compounded revenue pressure that is difficult to overcome through isolated interventions.

These organizations often require coordinated improvements across pipeline creation, qualification, sales process discipline, manager coaching and reinforcement, and execution consistency rather than a single-point enablement response.

GROWTH LEADERS VS. STALLED PERFORMERS

Growth Leaders	Vs.	Stalled Performers
Pipeline and quota improved	**Pattern**	Pipeline and quota did not improve
Codify and scale what is working	**Likely Focus**	Rebuild pipeline creation, qualification, process discipline, and manager reinforcement
Sustain method, process, coaching, enablement, and cross-functional coordination	**Capability Implication**	Strengthen prospecting, targeting, qualification, sales process, forecasting, coaching, and core selling skills

Stop Solving the Wrong Problem

Sales leaders often respond to revenue pressure by defaulting to familiar solutions: more prospecting, more training, more pipeline inspection, and more activity.

The performance profiles suggest a better starting point: diagnose the pattern first.

Some organizations need more pipeline. Some need better conversion. Some need stronger manager reinforcement. Others need to codify and scale what is already working.

Enablement teams should target the issue behind the pattern, not default to the same response for every performance problem.

Profile	Don't default to...	Focus instead on...
Growth Leaders	Leaving success dependent on top performers	Codifying, reinforcing, and scaling sales method, coaching, process discipline, enablement, and cross-functional coordination
Conversion Constrained	"More pipeline" as the primary answer	Improving opportunity quality, value communication, stakeholder engagement, no-decision prevention, and manager deal coaching
Lean Performers	Assuming current performance will continue	Protecting execution while fixing pipeline risk
Stalled Performers	One-off skills training	Rebuilding pipeline creation, qualification, sales process discipline, forecasting, manager reinforcement, and core selling skills

PERFORMANCE DIFFERENTIATORS AND ISSUES

The Operating Disciplines Behind Pipeline Conversion

The profile analysis reveals that pipeline growth alone doesn't explain stronger performance. Pipeline conversion is shaped by a combination of sales capabilities, manager reinforcement, and operating discipline rather than any single factor alone.

This points to a critical management question: what happens after opportunities enter the pipeline?

Leaders must look beyond pipeline volume and inspect the disciplines that determine how opportunities are qualified, advanced, coached, forecast, and converted.

Operating Discipline	Why It Matters	What to Inspect
Method and process	Creates a common language for opportunity quality, buyer commitment, value, risk, and next steps	Are sellers and managers using consistent criteria to qualify and advance opportunities?
Forecasting and pipeline discipline	Moves the conversation from seller optimism to buyer evidence	Are forecasts based on confirmed need, decision process, stakeholder alignment, business impact, and mutual next steps?
Manager effectiveness and coaching	Helps turn methodology into day-to-day execution	Are managers coaching deal strategy, value communication, stakeholder engagement, and no-decision risk?
Enablement and productivity	Improves execution when it's reinforced in the workflow	Are enablement efforts tied to live opportunities, manager follow-up, behavior change, and performance outcomes?
Sales / Customer Success coordination	Connects retention and expansion to coordinated customer-value creation	Are teams aligned on renewal risk, expansion opportunities, stakeholder coverage, and value realization?

Why These Disciplines Are on the Agenda

- 40.8% of respondents identify **reducing no-decision as a top-three priority**
- 54.2% rate **improving sales managers' effectiveness** as very important
- 52.1% rate **improving sales coaching capabilities** as very important

Sales leaders are prioritizing the disciplines that help opportunities advance: reducing no-decision, strengthening manager effectiveness, and improving coaching in the flow of deal execution.

Watch for Seller Capability Blind Spots

Some seller capability issues appear less frequently in the data, but that doesn't necessarily reduce their influence on conversion outcomes. Capabilities such as relationship development, discovery, value communication, and understanding the buyer's process materially affect whether sellers can create urgency, navigate buying groups, and move opportunities forward.

Organizations that focus only on the most visible or widespread seller challenges may underinvest in capabilities that play an outsized role in win rates, stakeholder alignment, and opportunity progression.

Capability	Overall Prevalence *% Very Challenging*	Outcome
Relationship development	13.5%	2X more likely to be rated very challenging when opportunities won did not improve
Discovery quality	16.2%	1.9X more likely to be rated very challenging when opportunities won did not improve
Value communication	17.9%	2.3X more likely to be rated not at all challenging when opportunities won improved
Buyer-process understanding	18.6%	1.7X more likely to be rated not at all challenging when opportunities won improved

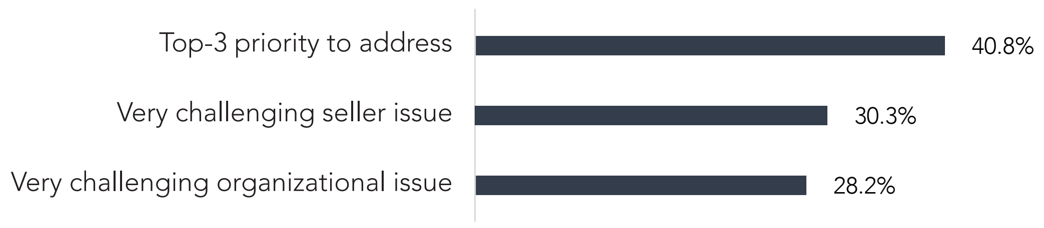
Note: These findings reflect organizational perspectives on seller challenges, not a seller-only respondent base.

Lower prevalence doesn't mean lower importance.

No-Decision Requires More Than Seller Persistence

No-decision outcomes continue to rank among the most significant sales challenges organizations face. It stands out in three places: as a top-three priority, a seller challenge, and an organizational challenge.

NO-DECISION LOSSES ARE A:

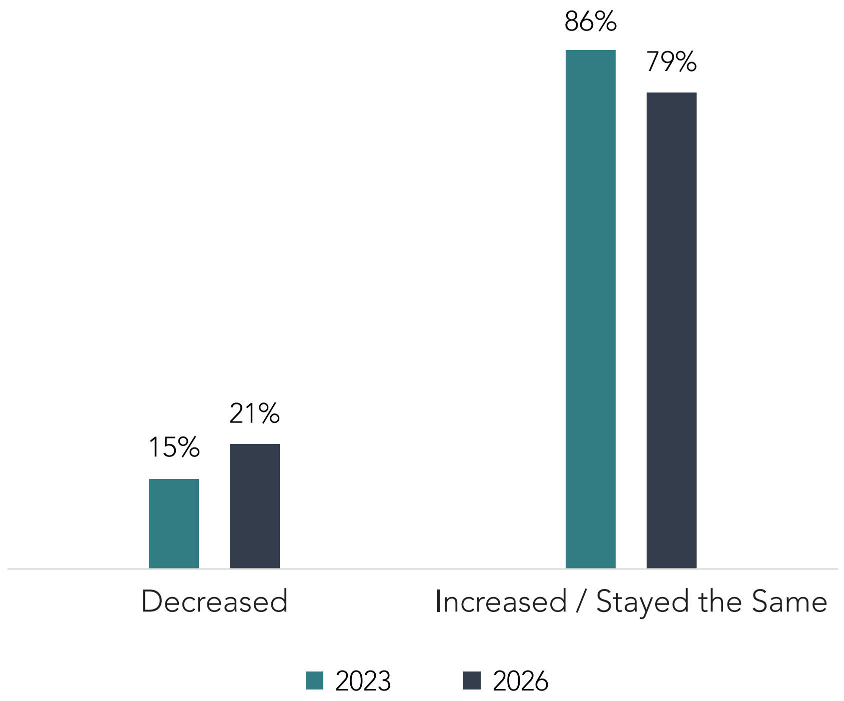


Compared to prior iterations of the research, the data suggest that stalled buying decisions remain a persistent barrier to converting pipeline into revenue.

The trend is nuanced: fewer respondents say no-decision losses increased than in 2023, but 79% say losses stayed the same or increased.

Reducing no-decision losses requires earlier risk detection, stronger value creation, better stakeholder engagement, rigorous qualification, and manager coaching.

PERCENT OF PROPOSED / QUOTED OPPORTUNITIES LOST TO NO-DECISION
% RESPONDENTS 2023 VS 2026



Capability Shifts Need Manager Reinforcement and Leadership Support

Capability shifts don't stick through training alone. Managers reinforce conversion behaviors in the workflow: coaching live opportunities, inspecting deal quality, challenging weak assumptions, reinforcing value communication, and surfacing no-decision risk earlier.

As buyer complexity, no-decision outcomes, and competitive pressure increase, frontline managers play a larger role in helping sellers maintain qualification discipline, advance opportunities effectively, convert pipeline, and sustain behavior change.

Sales research:

- 79.6% say developing sales managers is very / somewhat challenging
- 72.7% say coaching the sales force effectively is very / somewhat challenging

Leadership research:

Sustaining behavior change is also a leadership challenge. In Alchemist's 2026 Leadership Challenges & Priorities research, 71.8% say sustaining behavior change is very / somewhat challenging.

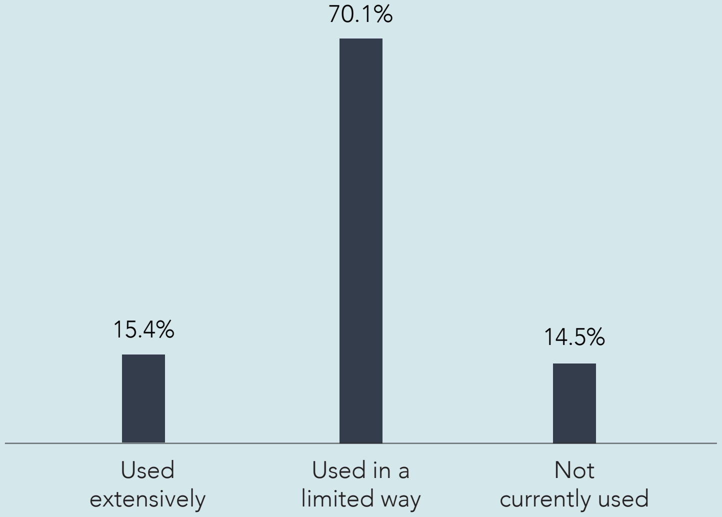
Many organizations are responding by prioritizing:

- Coaching and employee-development capabilities: 40.1% selected it as a top-three priority
- Accountability and execution: 38.9% selected it as a top-three priority

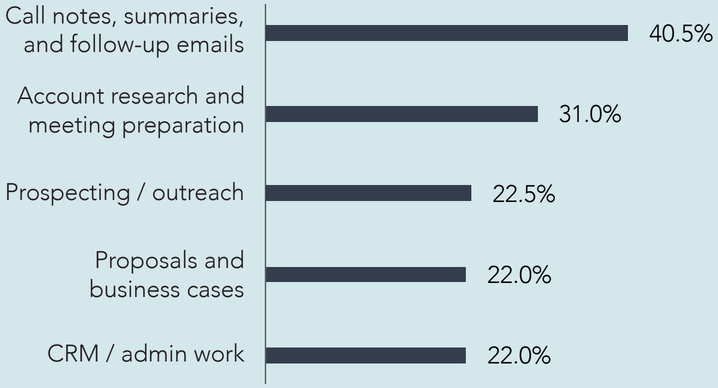
AI Is Present, But Not Yet Embedded

AI use in sales is now common, but most organizations are still in the early stages of operationalizing it. While only 15.4% report extensive AI use in the sales process, 70.1% say AI is used in a limited way.

AI USE IN SALES IS NOW COMMON, BUT EXTENSIVE USE REMAINS UNCOMMON

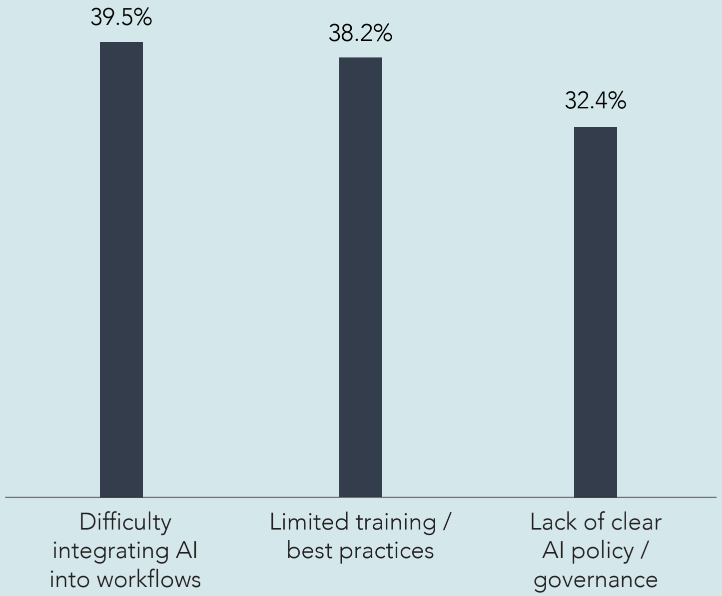


AI ADOPTION IS CONCENTRATED PRIMARILY IN TASK-LEVEL PRODUCTIVITY ACTIVITIES



These uses can save time and improve productivity, but productivity gains don't automatically translate into better conversion. To accelerate sales execution, AI should be embedded in workflow, methodology, opportunity planning, coaching, and deal execution.

THE LEADING BARRIERS TO AI IMPACT POINT TO AN OPERATIONALIZATION GAP



Pipeline or Conversion Problem

Distinguishing between pipeline and conversion problems is important because they require different enablement responses. Prospecting support may help a pipeline problem, but it won't solve weak conversion by itself.

Pipeline Problems	Conversion Problems
Opportunity flow is weak: ▪ Not enough qualified pipeline ▪ Too few sales-ready opportunities ▪ Insufficient opportunity flow to support growth	Closing is slow / inconsistent: ▪ Pipeline is growing, results are not ▪ Deals stall, slip, or end in no-decision ▪ Opportunity flow doesn't translate efficiently into wins and quota
Enablement emphasis: Prospecting, targeting, pipeline creation	**Enablement emphasis:** Qualification, value, stakeholder engagement, manager deal coaching

Diagnose Before Prescribing

Sales organizations are facing similar market pressures but experiencing different revenue outcomes. Pipeline growth alone doesn’t determine performance. Conversion effectiveness, execution discipline, manager coaching, and operational consistency all influence whether opportunities convert.

Organizations that diagnose performance issues more accurately are better positioned to align enablement, coaching, pipeline strategy, opportunity management, and sales execution to the biggest problems.

The profile model gives leaders a practical starting point: **identify the pattern, isolate the constraint, choose the capability shift, and define the outcome measure.**

Enablement has the most impact when it targets the issue behind the pattern, not when every performance issue receives the same response.

Before investing in the next enablement initiative, ask the following questions.

Question	What It Reveals
Which pattern are we seeing?	Pipeline problem, conversion problem, or broader execution problem
Where is the performance breaking down?	Pipeline creation, qualification, value communication, stakeholder engagement, sales velocity, or manager reinforcement
Which behaviors need to change?	The seller and manager actions most likely to improve the pattern
What outcome should improve?	Quota attainment, opportunities won, sales cycle time, no-decision losses, forecast accuracy, pipeline quality, or account expansion

Research Background

RAIN Group's 2026 Sales Challenges and Priorities research is the third wave of the study, following prior research fielded in 2019 and 2023.

The 2026 study includes responses from 252 sales management, leadership, and enablement professionals. Respondents assessed sales challenges, priorities, seller and manager issues, pipeline and performance outcomes, AI use in sales, and execution barriers.

The analysis examined topline response patterns, changes across study waves where comparable data was available, and statistical testing to identify significant relationships between performance outcomes, sales challenges, and capability-related issues.

Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding. Some questions allowed multiple responses. Forced-choice priority findings reflect the share of respondents selecting an item as one of their top-three priorities.

Enabling Sales Managers to Drive Transformation

Strengthen Execution and Results with Sales Management and Coaching Training

As we shared in this report, managing a sales team is one of the most difficult—but exceptionally important—roles in any company. In addition to the findings from this study, our [Top-Performing Sales Manager Benchmark Report] found that:

- Top-Performing Sellers are 83% more likely to report having an extremely or very effective manager
- Sellers with less than 5 years' experience are 240% more likely to be a Top-Performing Seller when they have an effective manager

Sales managers hold the keys to unlocking sales performance, yet most don't have the skills to do their jobs effectively.

RAIN Sales Management and Coaching training will give your leaders the skills to lead remarkable sales team meetings, help sellers consistently exceed sales targets, and coach to top performance.

Your managers will learn to:

- Lead masterful, collaborative sales coaching conversations
- Build 90-day priority action plans for sellers to drive change and increase success
- Ignite their teams' productivity, maximize motivation, and reduce distractions
- Build capability development into their ongoing coaching rhythm
- Track and communicate progress, achievements, and resultseffective manager

Click here to request a complimentary consultation →

RAIN Group Delivers World-Class Sales Training

- Modular, multi-modal, and purpose-built for the **modern learner**.
- Unique approach to driving **behavior change** through training we call Execution Assurance.
- Focused on driving the **business results** important to you.
- A **transformational experience** that ensures the development, adoption, and implementation of new skills.
- Action-oriented **coaching** prepares sellers for real situations and provides direct feedback.

About RAIN Group

Drive Transformational Change through Award-Winning Sales Training

RAIN Group is an award-winning leader in sales transformation, with over 20 years of researching and enabling top sales performance. Recognized by Selling Power, Training Industry, and Brandon Hall, the company's modular, multi-modal approach to sales training provides flexible and customizable solutions for complex global teams.

Organizations worldwide turn to RAIN Group to:

- Identify capability gaps and uncover growth opportunities for sellers and sales managers.
- Optimize sales strategies and processes to drive measurable improvements and business impact.
- Build elite sales teams with research-backed training proven to drive success in competitive markets.
- Equip sales leaders and managers with coaching and management skills to maximize team performance.

RAIN Group partners with clients to ensure learning is adopted, drives lasting behavior change, and delivers measurable results.

RAIN Group

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