



RESEARCH REPORT

The SKO Shakeup: Running an Impactful Sales Kickoff



CONTENTS

- 3 Executive Summary: What Separates High-Impact SKOs from the Rest
- 5 A Blueprint for Sales Kickoffs
- 6 5 Drivers of High-Impact SKOs
 - 7 Your SKO Impact Scorecard
 - 8 Strategic Alignment Alone Is Not Enough
 - 9 Motivation and Team Building: Creating the Social Glue
 - 10 Interaction Over Information
 - 12 Motivational Guest Speakers: Curating Credible Voices
 - 13 Role-Playing: Turning Practice Into Performance
- 14 Amplifiers & Sustainers
 - 15 Measurement
 - 16 Reinforcement
 - 17 Rhythm: Cadence That Sustains Impact
- 18 Deliver Impactful SKOs
- 19 Research Background
- 20 Design Your Next SKO
- 21 About Alchemist Group



WHAT SEPARATES HIGH-IMPACT SKOS FROM THE REST

Sales kickoffs (SKOs) are among the most visible—and expensive—investments in sales enablement. Yet too often, they fail to produce lasting impact. Our research reveals that the difference between high-impact and low-impact SKOs is stark.

What High-Impact SKOs Do Differently

Our analysis of 221 sales leaders, enablement professionals, and sellers shows that **five key drivers** account for 43% of the variance in SKO behavior impact:



Strategic Alignment

High-impact SKOs are **1.8x more likely** to be tightly linked to company strategy.



Motivation & Team Building

SKOs with strong outcomes are **2x more likely** to spend extensive/considerable time on bonding and morale activities that create the “social glue” sustaining collaboration and accountability.



Session Interactivity

High-impact SKOs are **2.7x more likely** to be highly interactive, with sellers participating in activities and discussion.



Motivational Guest Speakers

The most impactful SKOs are **2.8x more likely** to feature carefully curated external voices—customers, industry experts, thought leaders—who deliver both inspiration and practical relevance that contribute to achieving SKO objectives.



Role-Playing

Sellers in high-impact SKOs are **2.8x more likely** to spend extensive/considerable time engaging in realistic role-plays, which accelerates skill adoption and builds confidence.

Beyond the Event: Amplifiers and Sustainers

Organizations with the most successful SKOs extend and reinforce kickoff momentum through three amplifiers:



Measurement: Organizations with highly effective SKOs track metrics, including manager feedback, sales metrics, adoption rates, and engagement data so they can continuously improve. Those with less effective SKOs fall down here: they're **3.3x more likely** not to measure SKO success at all.



Reinforcement: High-impact SKOs are significantly more likely to include **pre-work, structured coaching, AI-powered simulations, and gamification**, all of which boost skill application.



Rhythm: High-impact SKOs are **1.9x more likely** to be held twice per year as compared to SKOs with less behavior impact. Consistent cadence sustains energy, reinforces strategy, and drives lasting behavior change.

The Bottom Line

High-impact SKOs don't happen by accident. They're intentionally designed to align strategy, energize teams, and transform knowledge into skills through practice and interactivity. And critically, they don't end when the event does—they're measured, reinforced, and sustained throughout the year.

For sales leaders, the message is clear: if you want SKOs to deliver more than short-term enthusiasm, design them as systems for seller behavior change. Done right, SKOs evolve from costly gatherings into powerful engines of long-term sales performance.

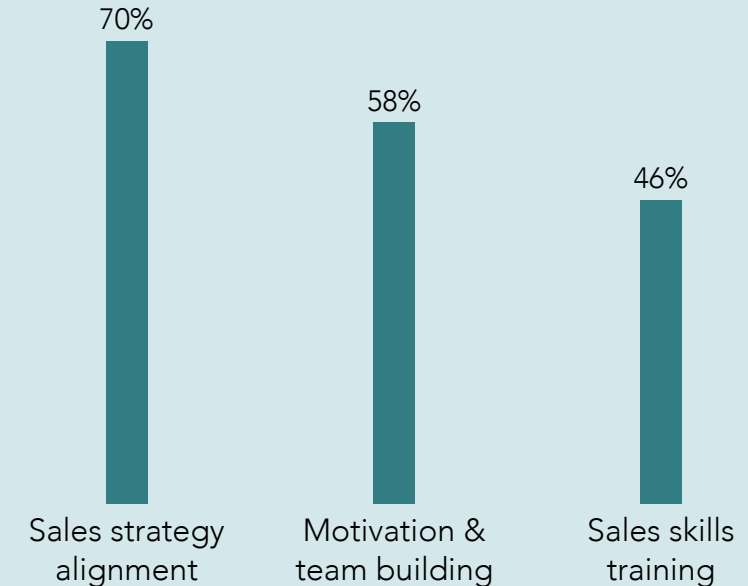


A BLUEPRINT FOR SALES KICKOFFS

Sales kickoffs (SKOs) are among the most significant investments in sales enablement—high-profile, high-cost events designed to inspire, align, and equip sales teams for the year ahead. Yet despite the money spent annually, too many SKOs fall short: sellers leave motivated for a few days, but the impact fades quickly. When budgets are scrutinized and leaders are pressed to show measurable ROI, organizations can't afford one-and-done events that fail to change behavior.

That's why RAIN Group and Alchemist set out to understand what makes an SKO effective and impactful. Through our research with sales leaders, enablement professionals, and sellers across industries, we identified the core drivers and amplifiers that distinguish high-impact SKOs from those that don't deliver on their potential. The findings in this report provide a blueprint for designing SKOs that not only energize teams in the moment, but also support sustained performance lifts after the event ends.

TOP 3 SKO OBJECTIVES % RESPONDENTS



Research Finding

The top three cited objectives, regardless of an SKO's effectiveness and behavior impact, are: **sales strategy alignment, motivation and team building, and sales skills training.**

5 Key Drivers of High-Impact Sales Kickoffs

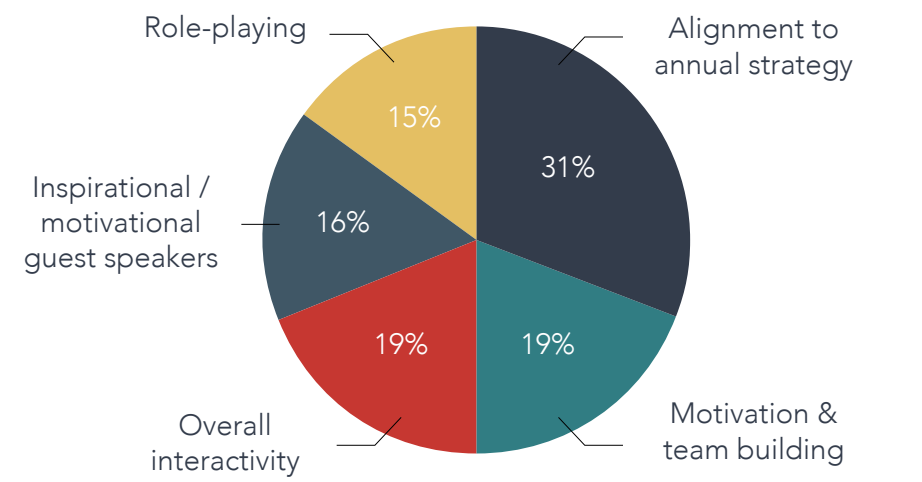


YOUR SKO IMPACT SCORECARD

To understand what makes some SKOs more impactful than others, we analyzed which SKO elements have the strongest influence on seller behavior impact. Five factors stood out:*

Key Driver	Recommendation
Strategic Alignment	Make sure every session clearly links to the company’s strategy, so sellers see “why now.”
Motivation & Team Building	Use high-energy inclusive activities that build camaraderie beyond pure skills work.
Interactivity	Keep formats hands-on: polling, breakouts, live debriefs. Passive listening is associated with lower impact.
Motivational Guest Speakers	Curate credible voices that reinforce key messages rather than generic motivation.
Role-Playing	Protect agenda time for realistic practice and feedback, not just product demos.

5 KEY DRIVERS OF SALES BEHAVIOR IMPACT
% RELATIVE IMPORTANCE OF EACH VARIABLE IN THE MODEL



*We conducted a regression (relative importance) analysis to estimate the contribution of each predictor to the outcome variable (seller behavior impact). Five predictors emerged as statistically significant at the $p < .01$ level. Together, these factors accounted for 43% of the variance in reported SKO behavior impact ($R^2 = .43$, adj. $R^2 = .417$, $N = 207$).

1

STRATEGY ALIGNMENT ALONE IS NOT ENOUGH

Strategic alignment is the single strongest driver of SKO impact, explaining 31% of the variance in seller behavior impact. High-impact SKOs are 1.8x more likely to be tightly linked to company strategy than low-impact ones.

But alignment alone is not enough. Organizations that translate strategy into action through practice, relevance, and reinforcement see the strongest results. The most successful SKOs carry a consistent theme (a so-called “golden thread”) that anchors every session and makes the company’s priorities tangible for sellers.

The chart on this page shows the clear association between tight strategy alignment and stronger behavior outcomes.

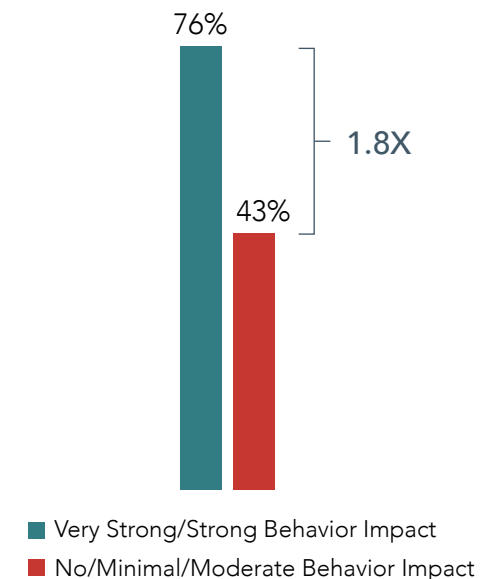
Voice of Respondents

- “The most successful element was the engaging keynote speakers who effectively communicated the company’s visions and goals.”
- One thing to change: “Make all sessions relevant to sales with the key idea: what does the commercial team need to know, say, and do?”
- “Better planning, alignment, reviewing survey results from prior year, making more interactive and actual takeaways of learning for participants.”

The message from respondents is clear: strategic alignment is critical, but alignment alone is not enough.

➤ **Take Action:** Design your SKO around a single, compelling theme (we call it a “golden thread”) that cascades across sessions. Ensure every activity links back to the strategy so sellers walk away clear on how to execute.

SKO COMPLETELY/VERY ALIGNED WITH STRATEGY % RESPONDENTS



2

MOTIVATION & TEAM BUILDING: CREATING THE SOCIAL GLUE

Motivation and team-building account for 19% of the variance in SKO behavior impact, making this a strong driver of outcomes. Organizations reporting strong impact are twice as likely to invest in team-building and morale activities compared to those with weaker results.

These moments of energy and connection aren't "nice-to-haves"—they create the social glue that fuels collaboration, accountability, and seller engagement both during and long after the event.

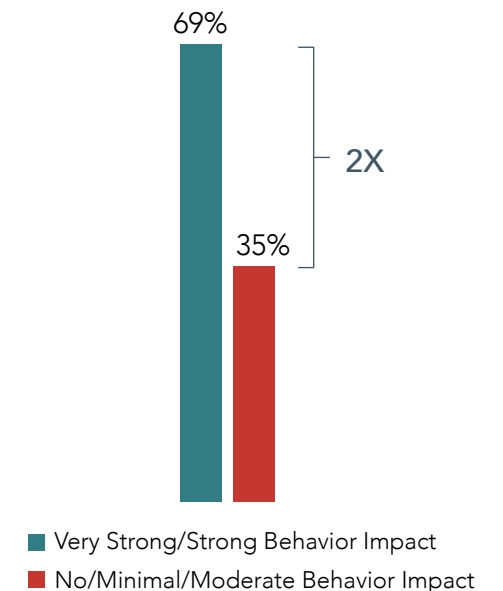
The chart on this page highlights how a greater time investment in motivation and team-building is strongly associated with SKOs that deliver lasting behavior change.

Voice of Respondents

- "Connection/bonding is a great part of our SKO and we do this through shared learning."
- "Morale and cross functional team building was dramatically increased."

➤ **Take Action:** Build intentional opportunities for bonding—peer-led sessions, structured breakouts, team-building time, and team challenges—that connect sellers with the broader team and strengthen accountability.

TIME SPENT ON MOTIVATION & TEAM-BUILDING ACTIVITIES EXTENSIVE/CONSIDERABLE



3

INTERACTION OVER INFORMATION

High-impact SKOs are built on interaction, not monologues. Our research shows that interactivity accounts for 19% of the variance in behavior impact. Moreover, SKOs with the strongest impact are 2.7x more likely to be highly interactive.

Activities including role-plays, breakout discussions, gamification, and panels help transform content into applied skills and build confidence sellers can take directly into the field (see data related to specific activities on the next page).

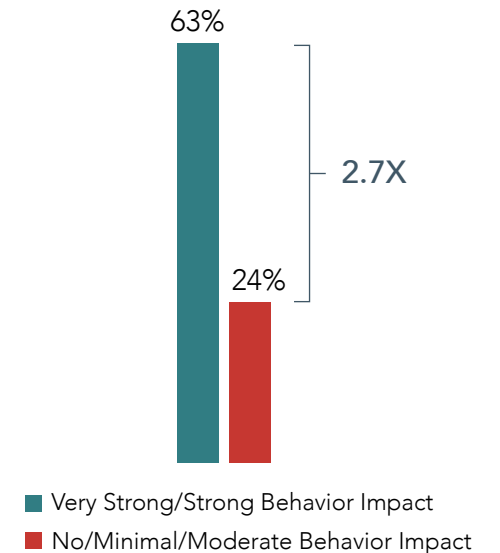
Sellers value the interactive moments where they participate and learn: peer discussions, customer stories, and shared problem-solving make strategy tangible. Interactivity sustains energy, builds camaraderie, and accelerates adoption far more than passive listening can.

Voice of Respondents

- “The most successful element was the interactive discussions about specific sales tactics and wins.”
- “Success stories, customer participation, and panels were the best part.”
- “A Q&A style peer showcase where 3 top-performers shared how they leveraged skills and resources that had been introduced to the sales organization and the positive outcomes they gained was a highlight.”

➤ **Take Action:** Build your SKO around active participation and engagement at every stage. Replace monologues with workshops, gamified activities, and peer showcases that keep energy high and drive skill application. Use executive keynotes sparingly—focused, concise, and tightly connected to SKO goals—then put sellers back at the center of the action.

HIGH-IMPACT SKOS ARE MORE LIKELY TO BE HIGHLY INTERACTIVE % RESPONDENTS



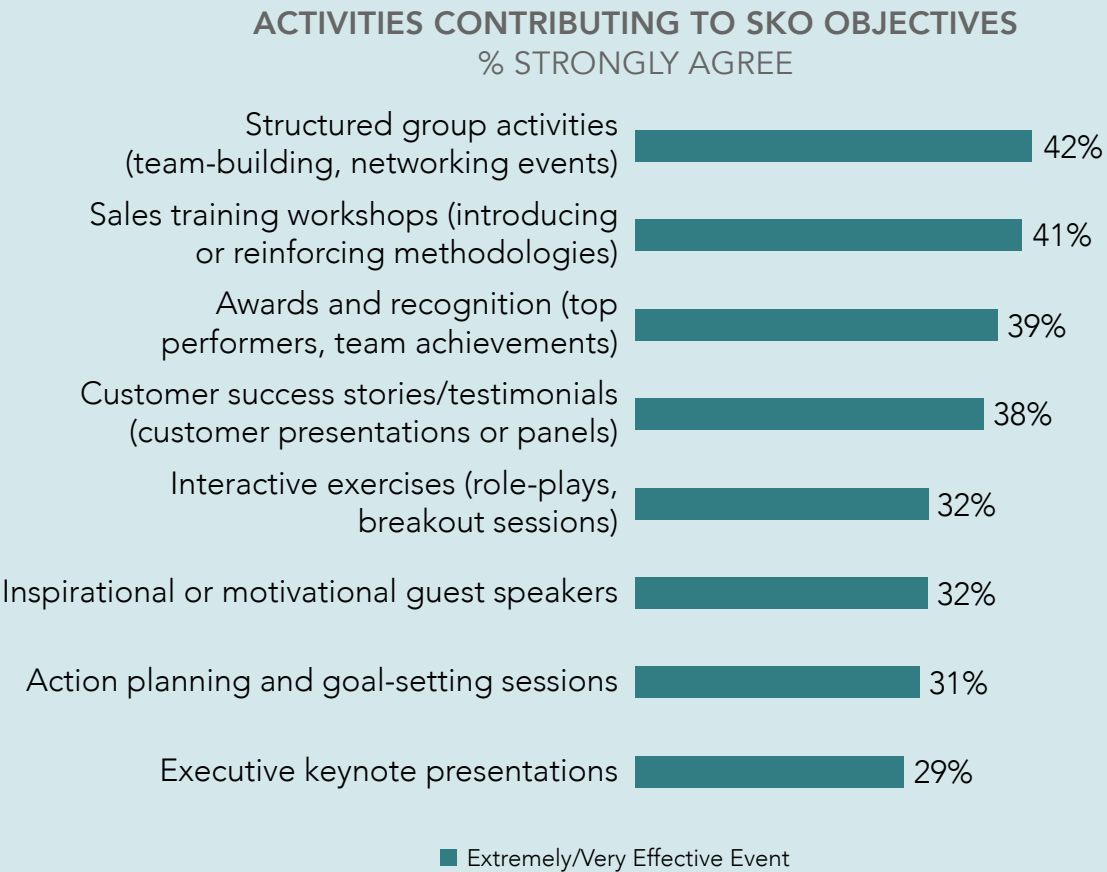
Research Finding

What you do matters more than where/how you gather. No significant differences were identified based on in-person vs. virtual vs. hybrid design.

EXECUTIVE KEYNOTES ARE OVERRATED

Executive keynotes often dominate SKO agendas, but they rank below several other activities in terms of efficacy. In our research, only 29% of respondents with highly effective SKOs strongly agreed that keynotes contributed to achieving goals, a lower rate than for activities such as team-building exercises, sales training workshops, and customer success stories.

While leader remarks can set the tone and provide strategic alignment, they rarely deliver the reinforcement or interactivity needed to influence seller behavior or sustain momentum after the event.



4

MOTIVATIONAL GUEST SPEAKERS: CURATING CREDIBLE VOICES

Motivational guest speakers explain 16% of the variance in SKO behavior impact. High-impact SKOs often feature carefully chosen external voices who bring fresh perspective and reinforce company priorities in ways internal leaders cannot.

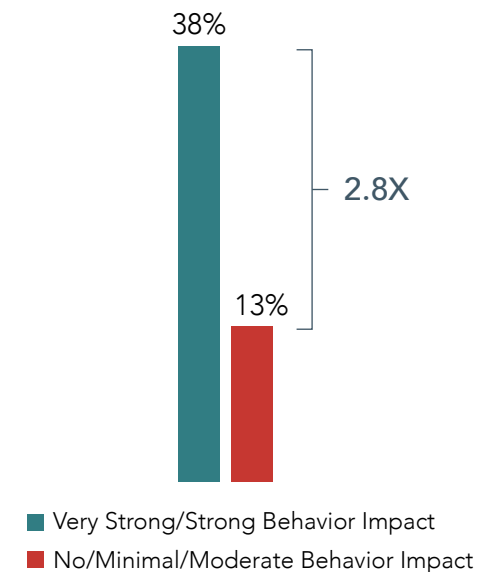
When curated well, guest speakers deliver energy, credibility, and relevance that sellers connect directly to their own work. Customers, thought leaders, and industry experts are especially effective because they combine inspiration with practical insight sellers can act on.

Voice of Respondents

- “The most successful element of our organization’s most recent SKO was the engaging Keynote speaker who inspired and motivated our sales team.”

➤ **Take Action:** Select external voices who both inspire and reinforce your strategic narrative. Prioritize speakers who are credible, relevant to your sellers’ reality, and aligned to your SKO’s “golden thread.”

HIGH-IMPACT SKOS MORE LIKELY TO REPORT MOTIVATIONAL GUEST SPEAKERS CONTRIBUTE TO SKO GOALS % RESPONDENTS



5

ROLE-PLAYING: TURNING PRACTICE INTO PERFORMANCE

Role-playing is a significant predictor of SKO success, explaining 15% of the variance in behavior impact. Yet many agendas still under-invest in practice, focusing on product demos and information-heavy sessions instead.

Organizations with the strongest outcomes protect time for sellers to rehearse skills in realistic scenarios, receive coaching, and get immediate feedback. This hands-on practice drives adoption, builds confidence, and accelerates on-the-job application.

Why Role-Playing Matters

- **Practice drives adoption:** Sellers who rehearse new skills are more likely to apply them in the field.
- **Feedback accelerates learning:** Structured role-plays with coaching provide immediate reinforcement that passive listening cannot.
- **Simulation builds confidence:** Realistic scenarios prepare sellers for high-stakes customer conversations.

Voice of Respondents

- "Practice application of learning, follow up coaching."
- One thing to change: "Sales practical exercises: actual role-playing, product certifications, how to handle questions, objections, active listening, etc."
- "Expand best practices workshops to include role-play and small group discussions."

➤ **Take Action:** Dedicate meaningful time to realistic role-plays tied to your SKO's "golden thread." Pair them with coaching and feedback to ensure practice translates into lasting behavior change.

AI-powered sales simulations or role-play exercises are currently among the least used activities, yet organizations reporting their SKOs had a very strong/strong positive impact on seller behaviors and sales practices are

2.5x more likely

to incorporate them into SKOs compared to less impactful SKOs.

Amplifiers & Sustainers of SKO Success



1

MEASUREMENT

A common SKO pitfall is failing to measure success effectively. While sales performance and activity are frequently tracked, our research shows organizations with less effective SKOs are 3.3x more likely not to measure at all.

By contrast, organizations with highly effective SKOs are significantly more likely to look at results through multiple lenses, beyond sales performance and activity, including:

- Manager feedback/observations
- Engagement levels
- Adoption rate

Voice of Respondents

- One thing to improve: "Improving metrics and regular interaction sessions with teams."

➤ **Take Action:** Build a measurement plan that includes leading and lagging KPIs. Set baselines and targets and put mechanisms in place so you can capture meaningful data during and after the event. Assign owners, establish a reporting cadence, and create feedback loops so insights translate into ongoing improvements.

SKO SUCCESS METRICS % RESPONDENTS



2

REINFORCEMENT

High-impact SKOs are treated as a milestone, not a standalone event.

Organizations with stronger behavior impact are significantly more likely to include pre-event role-plays, structured reinforcement, coaching, AI simulations, gamification, and formal review processes. These activities build momentum before the SKO and sustain it after.

The chart on this page shows how high-impact SKOs are significantly more likely to incorporate pre-work, ongoing coaching, and reinforcement activities compared to weaker SKOs.

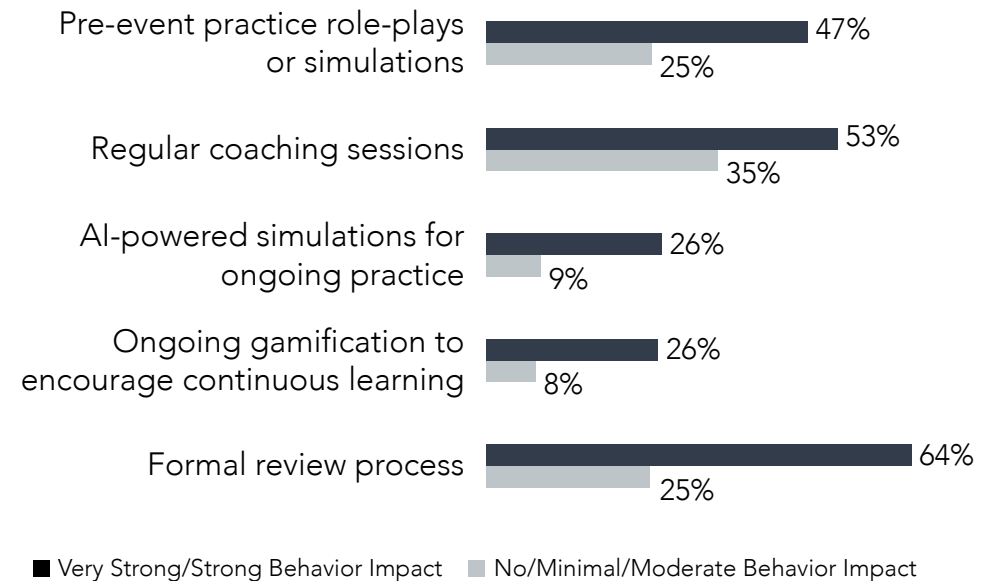
Pre-work and reinforcement may feel like extra effort, but it often proves to be the X factor in driving readiness and sustained behavior change.

Voice of Respondents

- One thing to improve: "Increase one-on-one time in coaching."

➤ **Take Action:** Design your SKO as one milestone in a continuous journey. Create detailed pre-event plans, then reinforce with AI-based simulations, micro-learning, gamification, and coaching, all of which are linked to stronger behavior impact.

HIGH-IMPACT SKOS ARE SIGNIFICANTLY MORE LIKELY TO INCLUDE... % RESPONDENTS



3

RHYTHM: CADENCE THAT SUSTAINS IMPACT

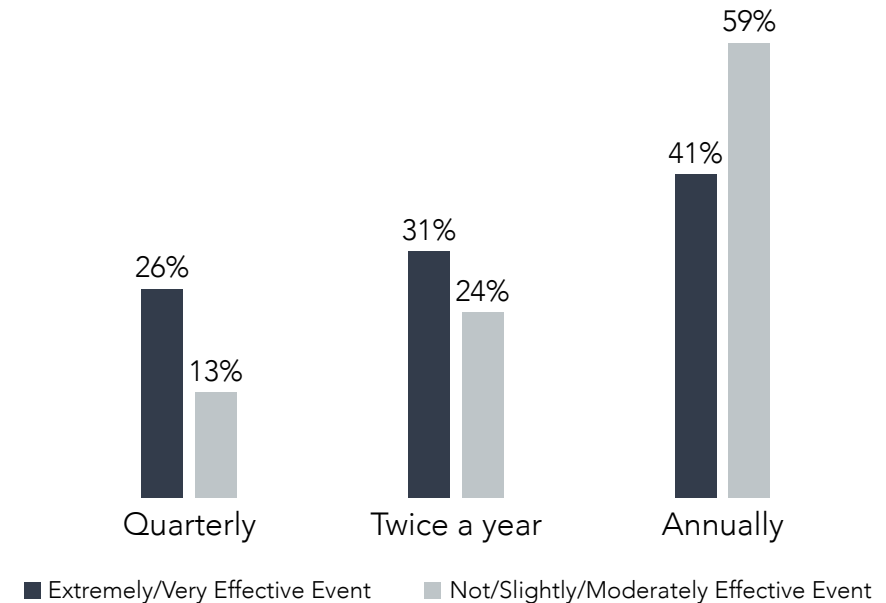
Annual SKOs might not be enough: more frequent events are strongly associated with better outcomes.

Our research indicates that companies with highly effective SKOs are about twice as likely to run them quarterly compared to those with less effective SKOs. And high-impact SKOs are 1.9x more likely to be held twice per year compared to those with less behavior impact.

A consistent cadence of events builds momentum, keeps strategy front of mind, and helps sellers sustain new behaviors throughout the year.

➤ **Take Action:** Reframe the SKO as a launch event, not a standalone initiative. Use quarterly boosters, themed enablement campaigns, and mid-year mini-kickoffs to reinforce strategy and turn strategic priorities into lasting habits.

SKO FREQUENCY
% RESPONDENTS



Research Finding: Budgeting & Resourcing

Organizations with SKOs that are the most effective and have the strongest behavior impact are significantly more likely to budget \$4,000-\$5,999 per attendee, indicating this level of investment per attendee is often linked with greater impact. As one respondent shared, "A bit higher budget would help with not doing everything so scrappy."

DELIVER IMPACTFUL SKOS

Our research shows that when organizations...

- Align their SKOs with strategy
- Build energy and connection
- Engage sellers through interactivity
- Bring in credible external voices
- Protect time for practice

... they're more likely to be impactful.

But the event itself is only the beginning. To sustain momentum and impact, incorporate measurement, reinforcement through coaching and simulations, and sustained rhythm across the year.

Download the Checklist

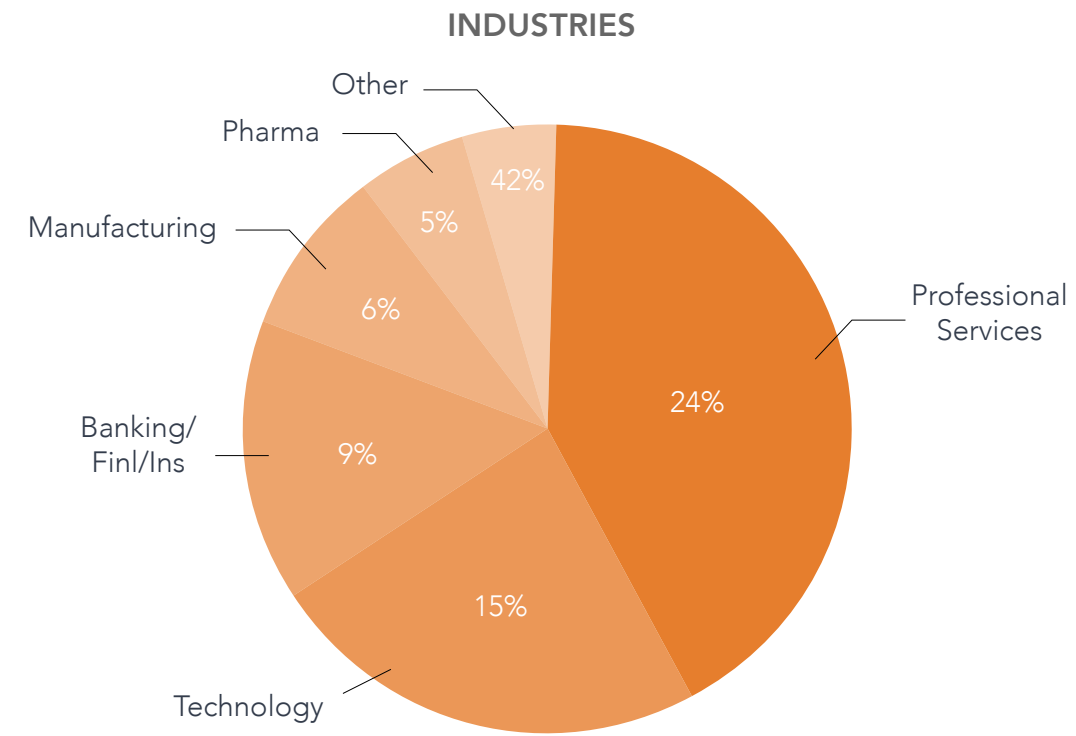
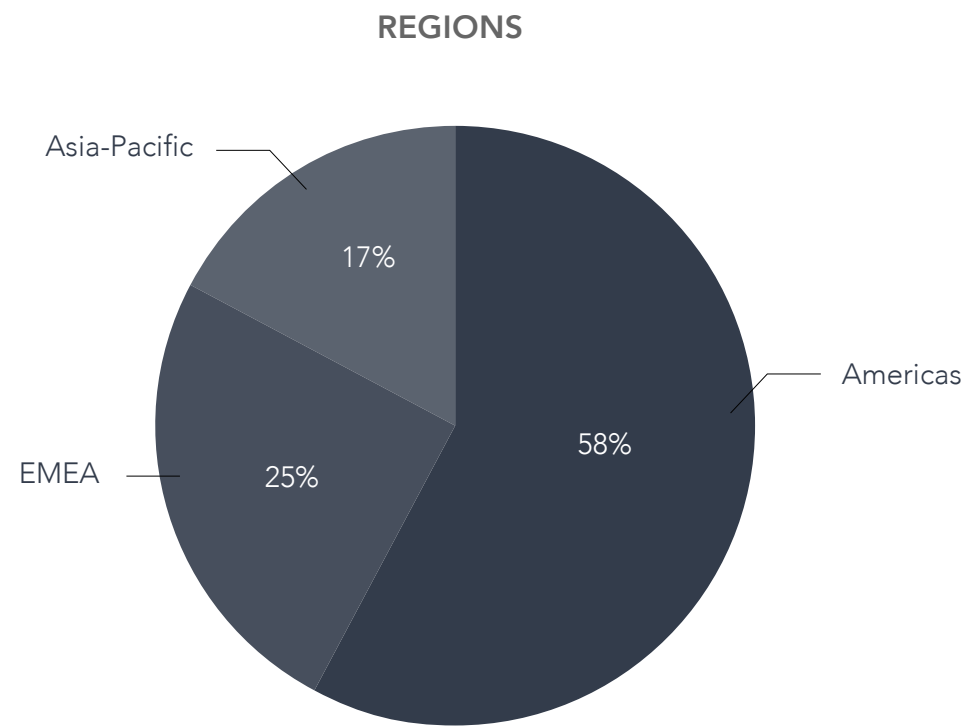
Ensure your SKO contributes to lasting behavior change.

Download now ➞



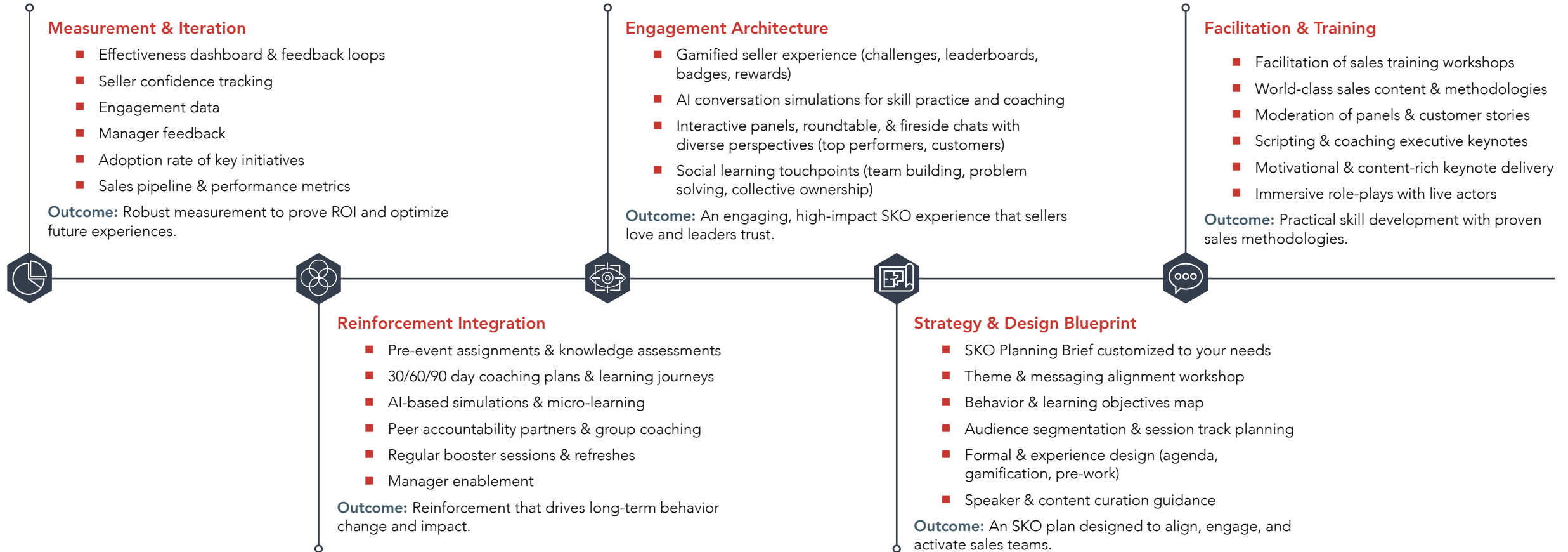
RESEARCH BACKGROUND

What sets successful SKOs apart? To answer this question, we analyzed 221 responses from sales leaders, sales managers, sales enablement, sales training professionals, and sellers based on online surveys distributed by RAIN Group and our research panel provider. Data analysis included frequencies and cross-tabulations (with significance tested at the 95% confidence level), as well as regression (relative importance) analysis to identify key drivers.



YOUR NEXT SKO: WORLD-CLASS SALES TRAINING + EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

Whether you need strategic support, world-class content and facilitation, or end-to-end SKO delivery, RAIN Group and Alchemist act as an extension of your team to design SKOs that motivate, align, and deliver results.



Visit our [website](#) to learn more or [contact us](#) to begin designing your next SKO.

ABOUT ALCHEMIST GROUP

Immersive, Experiential Learning for Lasting Behavior Change

Together, Alchemist and RAIN Group are redefining global sales and leadership development with transformative learning experiences and world-class methodologies.

Alchemist | Leadership Development

Headquartered in London, Alchemist is a global leadership development company specializing in immersive, experiential, and interactive learning. Known for its client-centric approach and innovative design, Alchemist creates learning experiences that are impactful, memorable, and built to drive business outcomes through high-stakes, real-world challenges, live actors, AI-driven simulations, and immediate coaching.

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RAIN Group | Sales Transformation

RAIN Group is an award-winning leader in sales transformation, with over 20 years of researching and enabling top sales performance. RAIN Group's modular, multi-modal approach to sales training provides tech-enabled, customizable solutions for complex global teams. Trusted by leading companies, RAIN Group partners with clients to ensure learning is adopted, creates lasting behavior change, and drives measurable results.

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