



# Rethinking the B2B Sales Org Structure: Virtual Sales Post-COVID-19

WHITE PAPER

COVID-19 has challenged senior leadership across industries requiring rapid responses to unexpected and fluid situations. Many companies furloughed or laid off their field sales representatives as client visits, trade shows, and other face-to-face selling opportunities were canceled. Some brought their outside sellers inside but are finding that the skills that made them successful in the field are quite different from what is required for inside sales.

While the pandemic has challenged companies in ways they never imagined, many are using the changes to re-think the ways in which they do business so that they can emerge stronger and better positioned for long-term success.

Forward-thinking sales leaders are looking at ways in which they can adapt to the new—or next—normal. For many, rethinking the structure of their sales organization is one way they can create a long-term, strategic advantage.

## The Move to Virtual Selling

“Sales leaders are already moving quickly to navigate the crisis, with the best ones focusing on how to make targeted changes that help their businesses weather the storm and start preparing for the recovery,” according to a survey of B2B businesses by **McKinsey & Company**. Only 5% of sales departments in the U.S. still have their full field sales team visiting customers, with more than 90% having transitioned to a virtual sales model. McKinsey found that, in the U.S.:

- 40% of companies have shifted their entire teams to remote sales
- 34% have laid off some staff and are shifting the rest to a remote model
- 18% have remote sales teams collaborating with field sales

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These virtual sales teams are using videoconferencing, phone, web, or other digital technologies at least some of the time. And more than half of B2B decision makers believe that their new model is just as effective or better at reaching and serving customers.

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“The sudden and massive shift to remote working prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic and the ‘consumerization’ of B2B buying that was already underway have profound implications for how companies sell to and buy from one another,” according to the McKinsey report.

Where organizations may have resisted change and the adoption of a new paradigm in the past, buyers' willingness to buy in this way have quickly eliminated much of that hesitation.

The quickly redesigned sales organization, dictated by the dual demands of changes in customer behaviors and rapid acceleration of digital trends, has caused many leaders to recognize the necessity of moving forward in a fundamentally different way than their pre-pandemic way of doing business.

As we emerge into the next normal post-COVID-19, sales leaders are grappling with the question of whether to maintain—or even grow—their remote teams. Reimagining the sales organization as entirely remote or with a significant remote component requires thinking about several critical areas to ensure success.

## Bringing the Outside Sales Team In

Before COVID-19, outside sales reps were already starting to do more of their work remotely.

There has been a **migration to the inside sales model** over the past decade with companies coming to the realization that inside sellers can be just as effective at selling higher value deals and complex products and solutions. But this doesn't mean that these sellers are equipped to sell in an entirely virtual environment. Or that sales leaders are prepared and able to manage a virtual team.

Inside salespeople must have the ability to sell from a distance, develop leads, move prospects through a sales cycle, and close deals without any in-person contact.

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One inside sales manager **shared with MarketSource** that her most successful remote inside salespeople have been those who previously worked in outside sales. Those sellers have already learned to self-motivate and pursue performance targets independently. But not all field sales representatives make the transition to virtual selling so easily.

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If sellers are working virtually for the first time, they may need more contact from their managers—and perhaps more group meetings than one might expect. Managers of these teams will need to touch base regularly, at least at first, and will need to continually monitor performance.

Management of a virtual sales team requires the ability to set clear expectations, establish trust and team camaraderie, monitor performance, and coach. While sales leaders are often skilled at managing in an in-office environment, virtual management brings unique challenges, and often requires a greater time investment.

Every rep needs to know what's expected of him or her. Setting clear KPIs, goals, and standards provides the kind of structure that teams often miss when they are virtual. Sales reps who know what they need to accomplish, how their performance will be measured, and how their goals connect to the organization's success are more likely to hold themselves accountable. As well, defined and measurable goals give managers metrics against which they can track and manage progress throughout the year.

Building trust can be more difficult and requires extra effort when managing remote sales teams. When managers don't see their teams in the office every day, communications become ever more important. Leaving room in their calendar, along with an increased frequency of planned and spontaneous check-ins, can go a long way towards maintaining open lines of communication and building trust.

And don't forget that virtual teams need time around the water cooler just as much as in-office workers. Managers who give their teams the opportunity to learn about one another and encourage conversations around non-work topics find that it combats workplace loneliness and builds healthy team relationships.

## The Right Tech Stack

With the right support, virtual sales teams can perform exceptionally well.

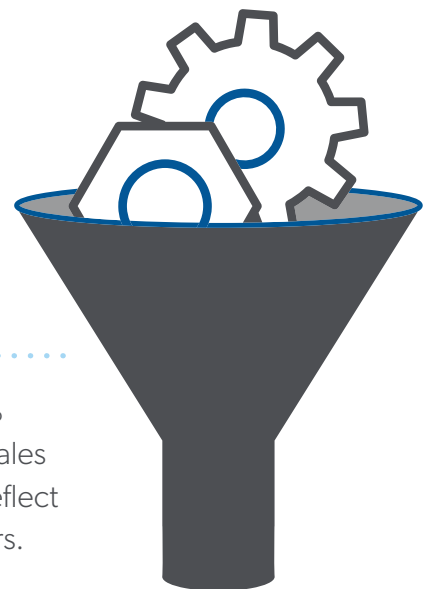
According to a [sales technology benchmark survey](#) by Smart Selling Tools (SST), sales technology usage improved across nearly all categories between 2017 and 2019. The report measured tech usage across all segments of the sales funnel—from top, bottom, and middle of funnel to management, reporting, and skills development.

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Impressively, account targeting usage grew from 4% in 2017 to 51% in 2019; lead engagement usage increased from 11% to 65%; and sales enablement solution usage grew from 6% to 40%. These metrics reflect the growing importance of technology enablement for virtual sellers.

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With more sales teams moving to virtual environments, we can only expect to see sales tech stacks expand and improve and usage continue to increase.



In order to remain competitive and give their sellers the best opportunity to uncover and win deals, organizations must provide their sales teams with tools to support all key sales activities. There are **five key activities** that sales teams depend upon to succeed:

1. Intelligence
2. Enablement
3. Engagement
4. Pipeline | Analytics | Measurement
5. Management | Coaching

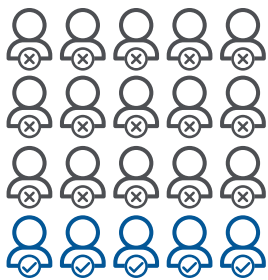
And the technology to support each activity is robust and growing. Leading sales organizations know that investing in the right stack helps them sell more and pays for itself many times over.

But technology is not cheap. It requires significant investment. It requires experimentation to find what works for the organization. And it requires time to set up and train the team.

In the wake of COVID-19, companies have learned that the ability to move quickly and the agility to pivot are critical. Quickly pivoting teams to a virtual environment is one thing but having the sales tech stack to support them is quite another.

Companies that do not have the time or resources to build, manage, and train on the wide range of technologies needed to support virtual sellers often look to third parties that specialize in virtual sales and already have their tech stack well established. These organizations typically have experimented with, and selected, the very best technologies available for each sales activity and to support each stage of the funnel. And since they are high volume users of these technologies, they often receive early beta releases of new features and functions. With their established sales tech stacks, well-trained users, and expert sellers, these companies can “hit the ground running” and give organizations the agility they need in uncertain environments.

## Don't Forget the Customer



Before the pandemic, B2B buyers were already showing a strong willingness to buy in a virtual environment. In 2017, SBI reported that approximately 75% of decision-makers did not want to spend time meeting face to face, **preferring to engage remotely** with sales reps. And with **90% of B2B organizations having now moved to a virtual sales model**, this environment will likely continue to dominate.

Digital selling requires organizations to meet the needs of their customers in new ways. Whereas human interactions previously allowed for the development of relationships and other factors that are key to selling complex products with long sales cycles, virtual sales can do the same—and so much more. Meetings that were once difficult to schedule based on calendars and travel schedules can now take place just as soon as there is a mutual calendar opening. What’s more, with just a quick check of calendars, the sales rep can bring together multiple members involved in the buying decision just as easily.

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B2B buyers will continue to rely on digital for much of the buyer’s journey. According to **McKinsey**, suppliers who provided exceptional digital experiences for buyers were more than twice as likely to be chosen as a primary supplier than a company that provided a poor experience. When a company “gets it right,” even through remote means, it can efficiently meet the needs of its clients.

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But the ‘consumerization’ of B2B sales means that B2B buyers will be unwilling “**to accept less from their professional experience as B2B purchasers than they are accustomed to getting from their personal experience as consumers.**” Indeed, McKinsey survey results demonstrate that suppliers who deliver outstanding digital experiences are chosen as the primary supplier more than twice as often than those who provide poor experiences.

Yet B2B buyers still want a human touch. While they may be content to research information, learn about product features, and navigate much of the sale digitally and on their own, there are still times when they will seek human interaction. At those times, sellers must deliver value. Using technology and data to better understand their customer and where they are in the buying journey will give sellers what they need to deliver that value—not simply a repeat of digitally available information, but true value.

## The Takeaway

The shift is happening and the move to virtual sales models is likely here to stay. Now, sales leaders must evaluate how prepared their organization is and what changes are needed to ensure their sales reps, sales managers, and sales tech stack are ready to support this shift today and in the future.



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