

SALES MANAGEMENT ASSOCIATION RESEARCH REPORT

# Sales Planning Practices

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March 2022

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First published March 2022.

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Research Report: Sales Planning Practices

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# CONTENTS

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- 4 INTRODUCTION**
- 5 CLARIFYING SALES PLANNING'S IMPORTANCE**
- 7 HOW (AND HOW MUCH) SALES PLANNING IS DONE**
- 10 SALES PLANNING EFFECTIVENESS: ITS OUTCOMES AND INFLUENCES**
- 17 SALES PLANNING'S IMPACT ON SALES PRODUCTIVITY**
- 20 IMPROVEMENT PRIORITIES**
- 23 RESPONDENT DEMOGRAPHICS**
- 26 COMMENT FROM RESEARCH UNDERWRITER ANAPLAN**



# INTRODUCTION

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Sales organizations that plan effectively outperform their peers. They demonstrate higher overall levels of sales productivity, and their sales forces have a greater percentage of successful salespeople.

But most firms aren't effective sales planners. Their sales organizations spend too little time planning, or too much; or their planning efforts are too late to be effective. Some lack assets crucial to effective planning, or approach planning with insufficient process discipline or stakeholder participation.

In one sense, this is not surprising. Sales organizations' traditional focus is execution, not planning, and it's easy to see how the pursuit of short term objectives crowds out bandwidth that might otherwise be available for planning. Nevertheless, our research shows that sales leaders who discount planning's importance do so at their own peril – and that of their organization's.

We find sharp distinctions in performance between planning-competent sales organizations and those less capable in sales planning, and we unequivocally establish planning competence as a defining feature of high performing sales forces.

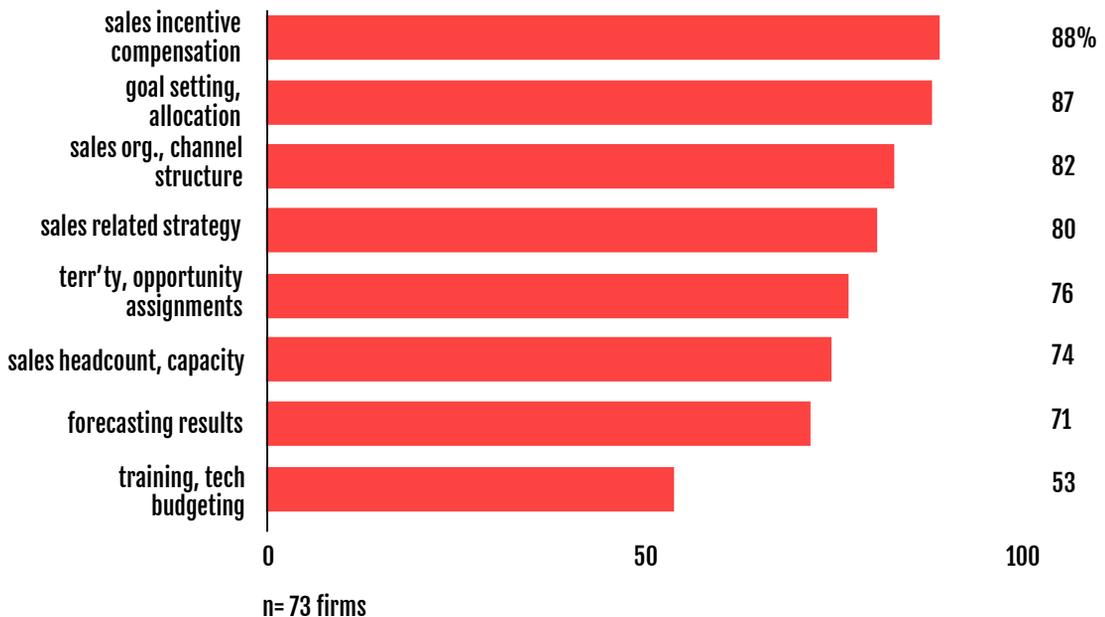


## CLARIFYING SALES PLANNING'S IMPORTANCE

Sales planning spans a wide range of planning disciplines, from tactical to strategic. Our research addresses eight of these, each of which a majority of sales organizations found important to their overall success. Four of eight are considered important by 80% or more or sales forces; and seven of eight by 70% or more. (Budgeting for sales related training and technology expenditures is considered important by the fewest firms, 53%.)

The four most important planning disciplines (and the percentage of firms that consider them important to the sales organization's overall success) are: planning related to sales incentive compensation (considered important by 88%), goal setting and quota allocation (87%), sales organization and channel design (82%), and sales related strategic planning (80%). Other disciplines are establishing salesperson territories and assignments (76%), sales headcount and capacity planning (74%), forecasting results (71%), and planning for sales related technology and training expenses (53%). **Fig. 1.1.**

**fig. 1.1. sales planning disciplines' importance to overall sales force success**  
percentage of firms that consider important to overall sales force success

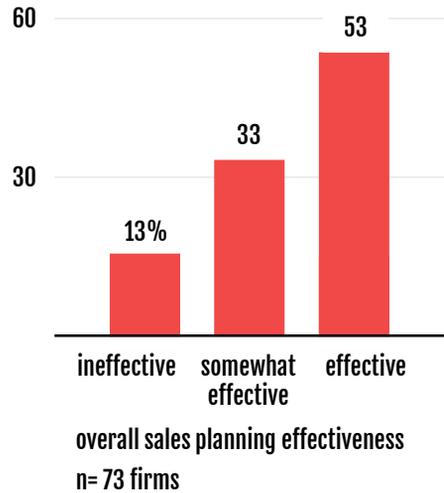


Sales planning is not only considered important by firms, it is closely linked with their performance, our research shows.

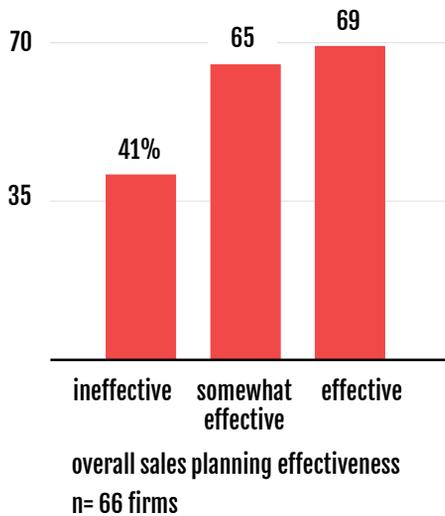
For our research participants, effective sales planning correlates with firm sales productivity, achievement of firm sales objectives, and with a broader distribution of objective achievement among quota carrying salespeople.

Firms effective overall in sales planning are four times more likely to achieve sales objective. Among firms ineffective in sales planning, just 13% achieved sales objective in the preceding 12 months, compared with 53% of firms with effective sales planning. **Fig. 1.2.**

**fig. 1.2, overall sales planning effectiveness and firm sales productivity**  
**average percentage of firms achieving sales objective, preceding 12 months**



**fig., 1.3. overall sales planning effectiveness and percentage of salespeople achieving quota**  
**average percentage of salespeople meeting quota, preceding 12 months**



What's more, salespeople in organizations that plan effectively are substantially more likely to achieve individual sales objectives. In firms with effective sales planning, 69% of salespeople met sales objective in the preceding 12 months, compared with just 41% of salespeople in firms ineffective in sales planning. **Fig. 1.3.**

Across all firms, 55% of salespeople met or exceeded their individual sales objectives in the same period. **Fig. 6.6.**

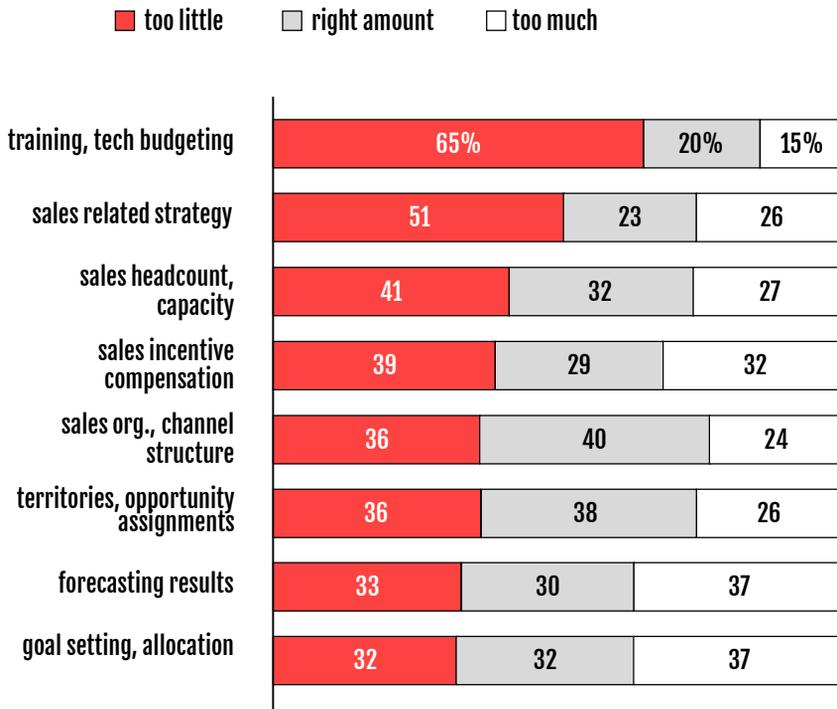


## HOW (AND HOW MUCH) SALES PLANNING IS DONE

Our research does not quantify the amount of time sales organizations spend planning in absolute terms. Planning time and effort depends on many factors beyond the scope of our research, including sales process complexity, market and buyer characteristics, and a host of other context dependencies. Rather than measure the amount of time spent planning, we investigate instead how appropriate our respondents consider the amount of time their sales organizations spend in planning activities.

We learned that only between 20 and 40% of firms think they do the right amount of sales planning, depending on the specific planning type. The planning activity most likely to be in short supply is budgeting for training and technology investments; 65% of firms believe they do too little of it. A majority of firms (51%) also consider sales related strategic planning something their firms do too little of.

**fig. 2.1. appropriateness of amount of planning done in sales organizations**  
percentage distribution of responses



n= 85 firms

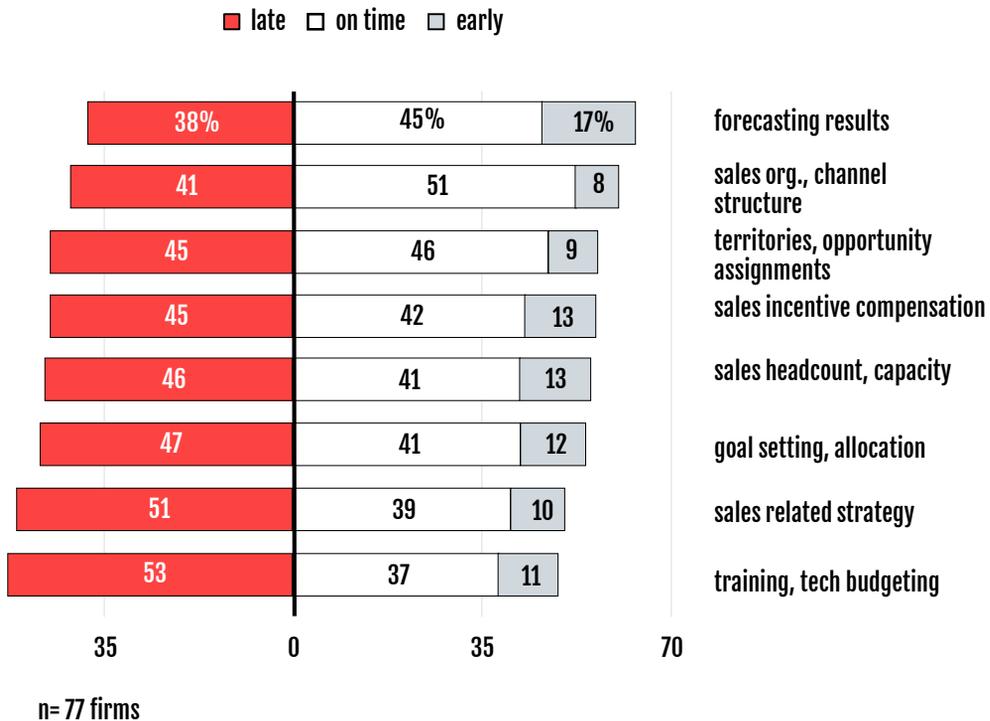


Activities most likely to be viewed as given too much planning focus are goal setting and allocation, and forecasting results; 37% of firms think they do too much of each of these two planning types. Planning related to sales incentive compensation is viewed as generating too much planning activity in 32% of firms – though a greater portion of firms (39%) believe they do too little sales compensation related planning.

The planning activities most likely to be given insufficient planning focus are sales related strategic planning (51% of firms do too little planning in this area) and budgeting for training and technology investments (65% do too little). **Fig. 2.1.**

Firms must not only plan in the right amount, but complete planning in a timely fashion. Between 38% and 53% of firms are late with sales planning, depending on the planning type. Firms are most likely to be late budgeting for technology and training investments (53% of firms are), and completing sales related strategic planning (51% of firms). Firms are most likely to complete planning most closely associated with shorter term performance management elements; these include forecasting results (on time or early in 62% of firms), designing sales organization and channel structure (59%), territory assignments (55%), and sales incentive compensation (55%). **Fig. 2.2.**

**fig. 2.2. timeliness of sales planning  
percentage distribution of responses**



Sales planning activities are done predominantly by sales management and sales effectiveness functions.

Sales management is most likely to be chiefly accountable for territory and opportunity assignments (they are in 70% of firms), goal setting and allocation (63%), and forecasting results (61%); and least likely to be chiefly accountable for budgeting training and technology investments (29%).

Sales effectiveness functions (“sales operations,” “sales effectiveness,” “commercial excellence,” etc.) are most likely to be chiefly accountable for planning related to sales incentive compensation (they are in 40% of firms), sales related strategic planning (35%), and budgeting for training and technology investments (29%). **Fig. 2.3.**

In addition to being chiefly accountable, these two functions share responsibility for doing most of the work in sales related planning (see Appendix **Fig. A.2.1.** for more detail).

**fig. 2.3. firm function or department chiefly accountable for sales planning, by planning type percentage distribution of responses**

sales planning type	sales mgt.	sales effectiveness	corp. planning	finance	hr	mktg.
sales org, channel structure	45%	26%	9%	11%	8%	1%
sales headcount, capacity	59	20	11	9	0	1
sales related strategy	43	35	10	11	0	0
goal setting, allocation	63	15	11	4	8	0
territories, opportunity assignmts.	70	13	15	1	0	1
sales incentive compensation	51	40	9	0	0	0
forecasting results	61	18	20	1	0	0
training, tech budgeting	29	29	20	15	5	1

n= 81 firms



# SALES PLANNING EFFECTIVENESS: ITS OUTCOMES AND INFLUENCES

Sales organizations are not likely to be effective overall in planning; just 40% are. Fig. 3.1. Furthermore, their effectiveness across a range of sales planning focus disciplines is also low.

These planning focus areas might be said to represent the constituent elements of general sales planning effectiveness.

Among these disciplines, firms are least likely to be effective budgeting for training and technology investments (just 30% are), and most likely to be effective planning sales organization structure and channel design (44% are). Fig. 3.2.

This despite the acknowledged importance of these planning disciplines, each considered important by a majority of firms, and half considered important by more than 80% of firms.

## Key sales planning variables: how much planning, how soon?

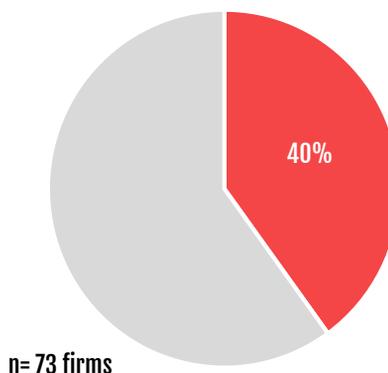
What explains the lack of sales planning effectiveness in many organizations? Two findings from our research offer immediate insight: firms least effective in sales planning are those doing too little of it, or getting too late a start in their planning activities.

While the amount of planning had significant bearing on its ultimate effectiveness, planning's timeliness had an even more pronounced effect.

Fewer than one-quarter of firms who do "too little" planning have effective planning outcomes in the eight planning focus disciplines researched. They fared far worse than firms doing "the right amount" or "too much" planning.

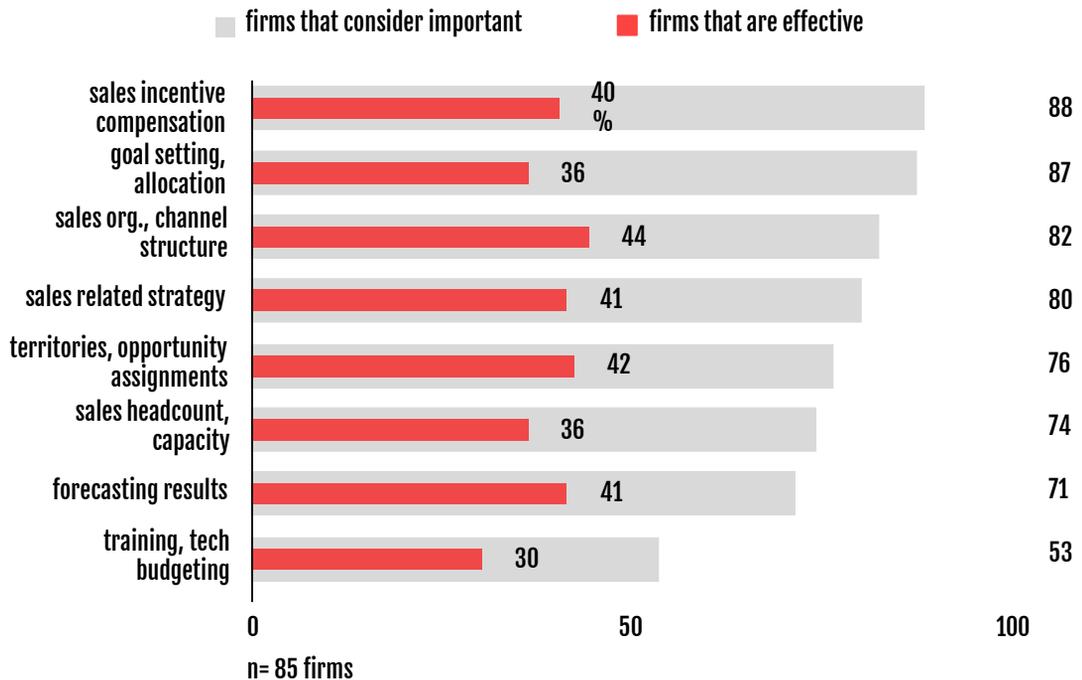
In fact, in five of eight sales planning disciplines, firms doing too much planning were significantly more likely to be effective than firms doing the right amount of planning, suggesting firms may underestimate the amount of planning effort required.

**fig. 3.1. sales planning effectiveness**  
**percentage of firms with overall effective sales planning**



The opposite is true of forecasting results - firms that do too much planning are less likely to be effective (52% are) than those doing the right amount (61%). Two other topics - incentive compensation related planning and goal setting - have only small differences in effectiveness between firms doing too much and the right amount of planning in these disciplines. Fig. 3.3.

**fig. 3.2. sales planning disciplines' importance, and firms' effectiveness in them**  
**percentage of firms that consider important to sales force success, are effective**



Of greater impact on effectiveness is the timeliness of firms' sales planning activities. In all eight planning disciplines, firms completing planning on time are significantly more likely to plan effectively than late planners. And "early" planners far outpaced other firms in planning effectiveness; they are at least twice as likely to plan effectively than their late peers, and in five of the eight planning categories, more than three times as likely. The impact of planning timeliness suggests the earlier planning activities are completed, the better. Fig. 3.4.



fig. 3.3. amount of planning and planning effectiveness by planning topic

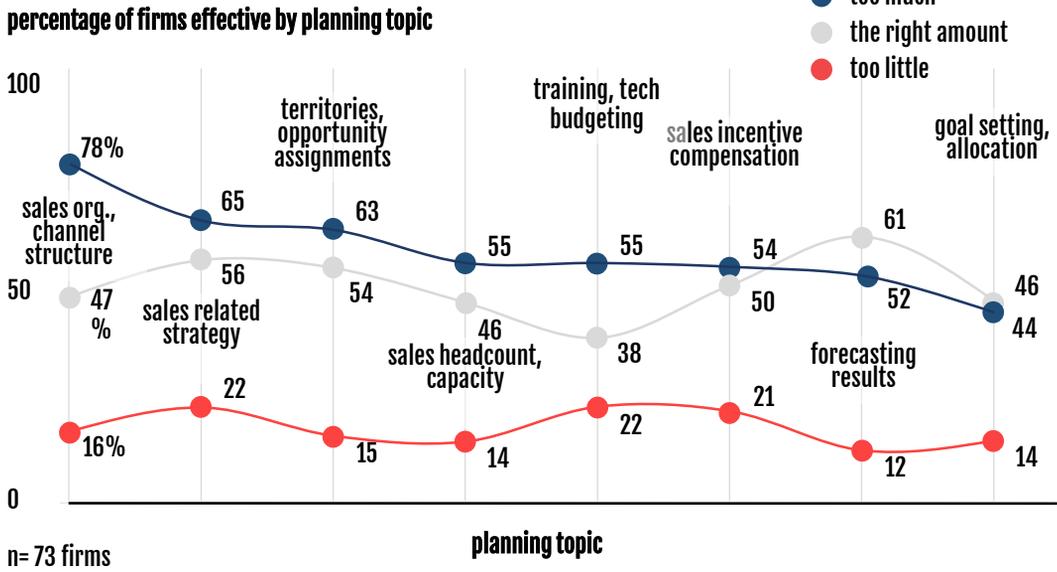
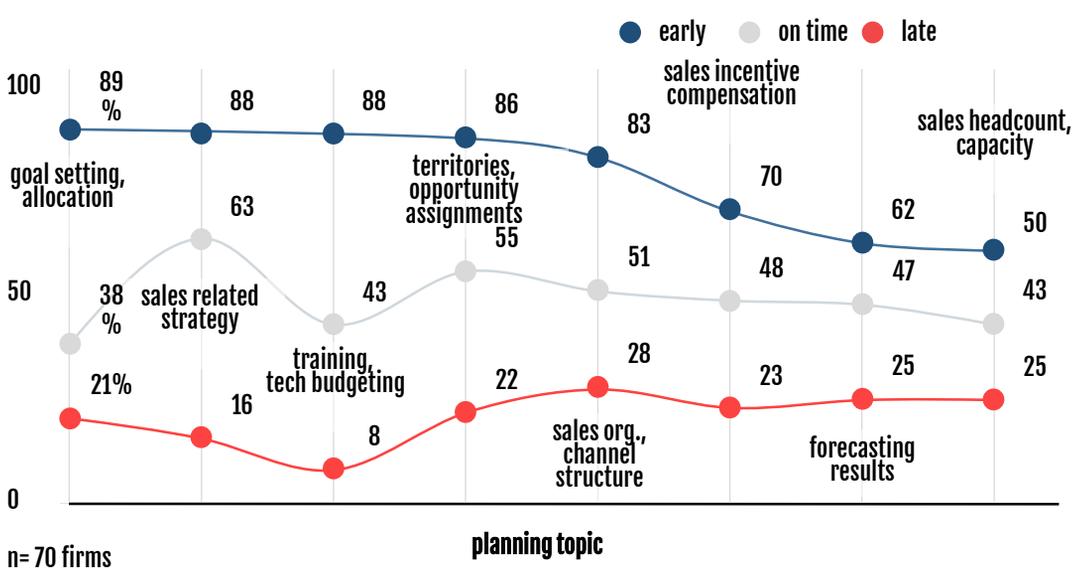


fig. 3.4. timeliness and effectiveness of sales planning by topic



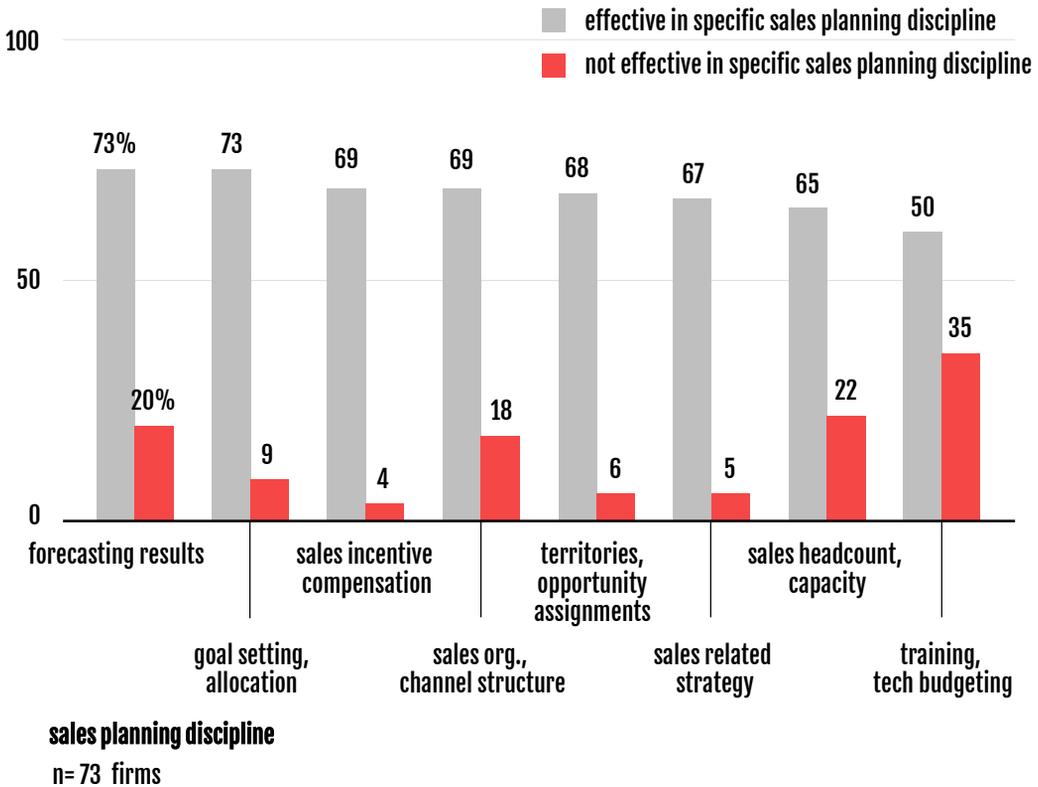
### Which planning disciplines are essential to overall sales planning success?

Many of the sales planning focus disciplines included in our research appear to be integrally connected to overall sales planning effectiveness. In other words, firms can't be effective overall in sales planning without being effective in one or more of these focus disciplines.

Firms ineffective in sales incentive compensation related planning, sales related strategic planning, territory assignment, or goal setting are exceedingly unlikely to be effective overall in their sales planning efforts (just 4%, 5%, 6%, and 9% are, respectively).

On the other hand, more than one-third of firms ineffective in budgeting for training and technology investments consider their overall sales planning efforts to be effective; budgeting seems to be a planning discipline least integral to overall sales planning effectiveness. Fig. 3.5.

**fig. 3.5. effectiveness in specific sales planning disciplines and overall sales planning effectiveness**  
**percentage of firms with overall effective sales planning**

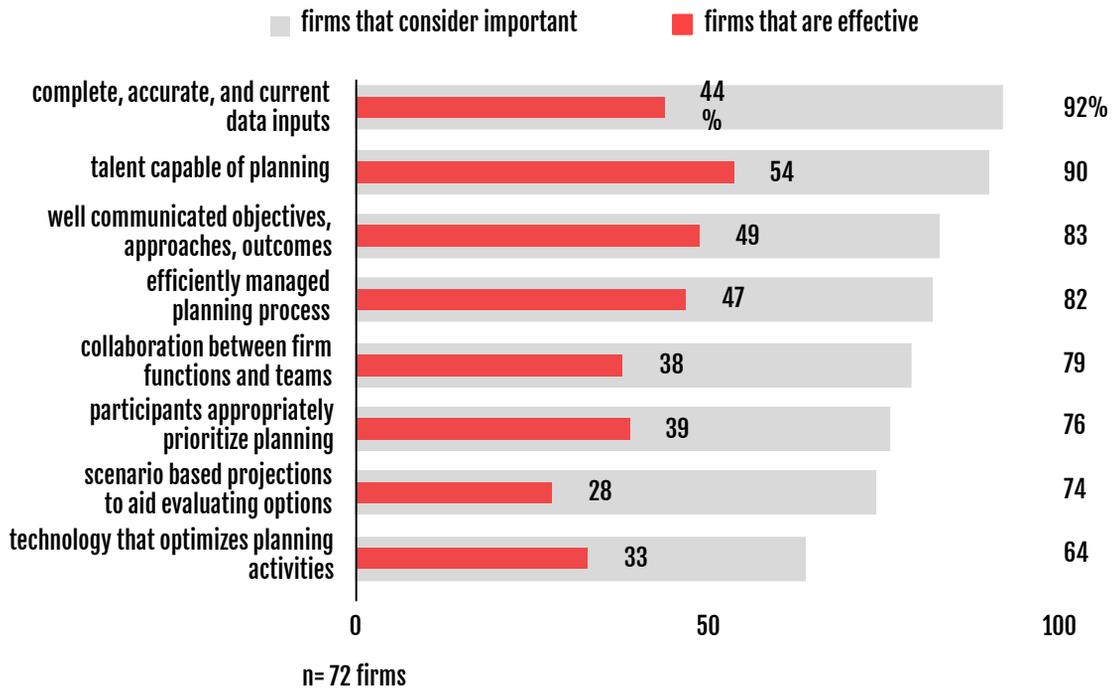


### What organizational characteristics contribute to sales planning effectiveness?

Sales organizations consider important a range of planning capabilities important contributors to their planning effectiveness. Chief among these is access to complete, accurate, and current data (considered important by 92% of firms), managers with planning competency (90%), well communicated planning objectives (83%), and an efficient planning process (82%).

In fact, a substantial majority of firms considered all eight capabilities researched important to sales planning effectiveness.

**fig. 3.6. sales planning attributes considered important, and firms' effectiveness in them**  
**percentage of firms that consider important, are effective**



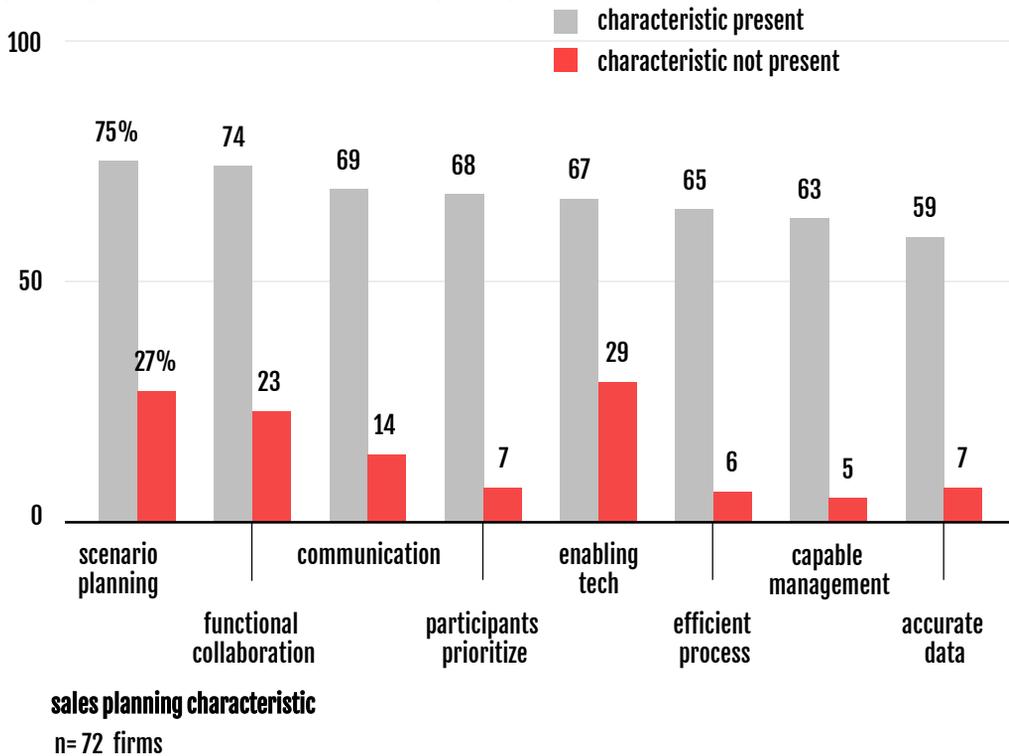
However, only one of these elements - management talent capable of effective planning - is present in a majority of firms (though only just - 54% of firms say their managers have this competency). Other capabilities cited as important to planning effectiveness are even more likely to be missing. Those least likely to be present are scenario planning capabilities (present in just 28% of firms), technology that optimizes planning activities (33%), and participants that appropriately prioritize their involvement in planning (38%).

Fig. 3.6.



fig. 3.7. sales planning characteristics and overall sales planning effectiveness

percentage of firms with overall effective sales planning



Firms that have one of these capabilities in place are substantially more likely to be effective overall in sales planning - though surprisingly, having access to complete, accurate, and timely data was the least predictive of overall planning effectiveness (despite being rated as important by the highest percentage of respondents). Factors that appear most predictive of overall sales planning effectiveness are capable management, participants that appropriately prioritize their involvement in planning; and an efficient planning process. **Fig. 3.7.**

What effective looks like: when sales planning is effective, what outcomes result?

Sales organizations that plan effectively enjoy these previously noted advantages over other firms:

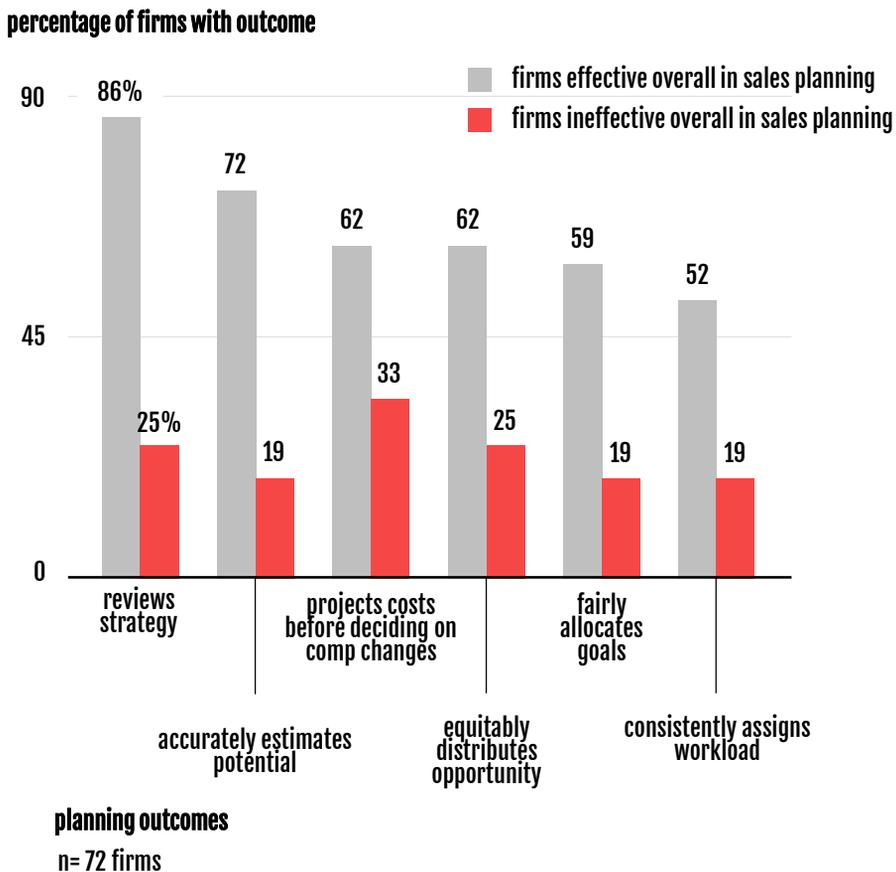
- They are more productive. Firms effective overall in sales planning are more than four times more likely to achieve sales objective than firms ineffective in sales planning. **Fig. 1.2.**
- More of their salespeople are successful. Effective sales planning correlates with a broader distribution of achievement among quota carrying salespeople. Firms effective overall in sales planning enjoy an increase in the number of salespeople achieving objectives that averages more than 25% of the sales force. **Fig. 1.3.**



Even more advantages accrue to sales organizations that plan effectively. They are...

- At least three times more likely to regularly review strategic and long range issues (86% of firms with effective sales planning do this, but only 25% of ineffective firms do).
- At least three times more likely to accurately estimate potential in customers and markets (72% v. 19%).
- More than one and one-half times as likely to benefit from accurate cost estimates of proposed incentive pay changes before implementing them (62% v. 33%).
- More than two times as likely to equitably distribute salesperson opportunity (62% v. 25%).
- Three times as likely to fairly allocate salesperson goals (59% v. 19%).
- More than two and one-half times as likely to assign salesperson workload consistently (52% v. 19%). **Fig. 3.8.**

**fig. 3.8. prevalence of planning outcomes in firms based on their overall sales planning effectiveness**

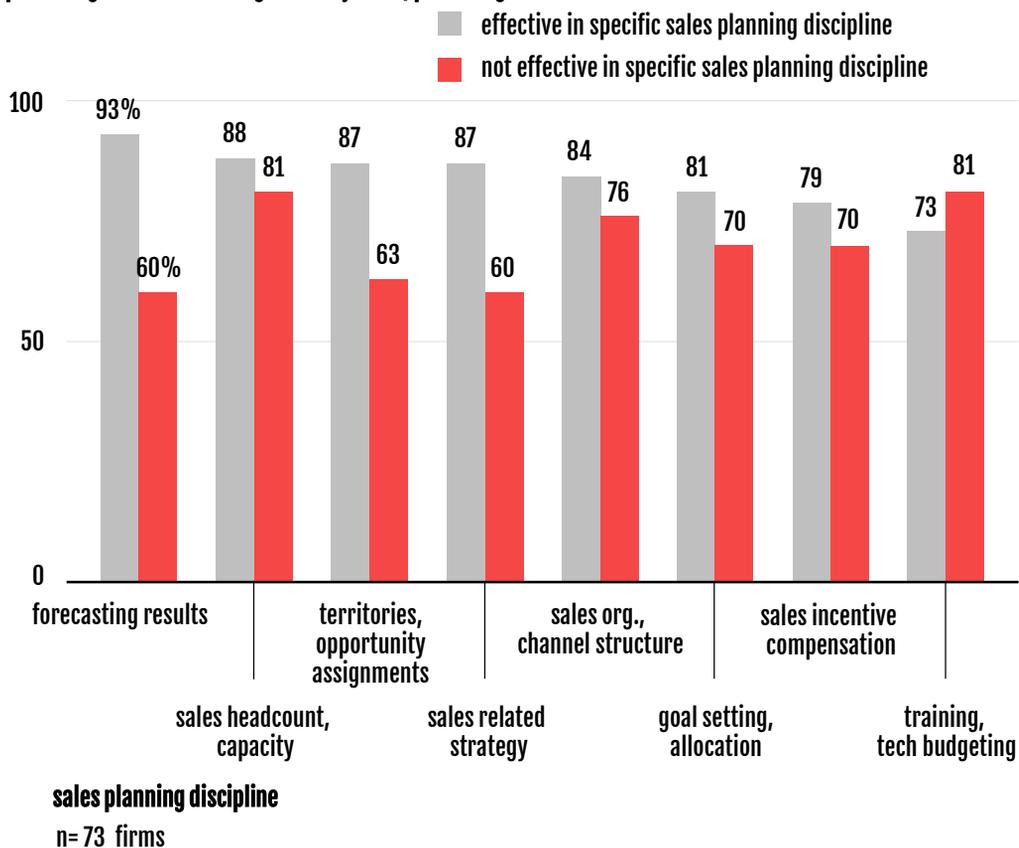


# SALES PLANNING'S IMPACT ON SALES PRODUCTIVITY

As already highlighted in this report, firms with effective sales planning are substantially (4x) more likely to meet sales objectives, and have significantly larger portions of their salesperson population meeting or exceeding individual objectives. **Figs. 1.2, 1.3.**

Our research also investigates the impact of eight separate planning disciplines, considered constituent parts of general sales planning. Success in seven of these are correlated with increased firm sales productivity. Training and technology expense budgeting is the lone exception (respondents effective in this planning discipline are actually less likely to meet sales objectives in the preceding 12 months, though only marginally so).

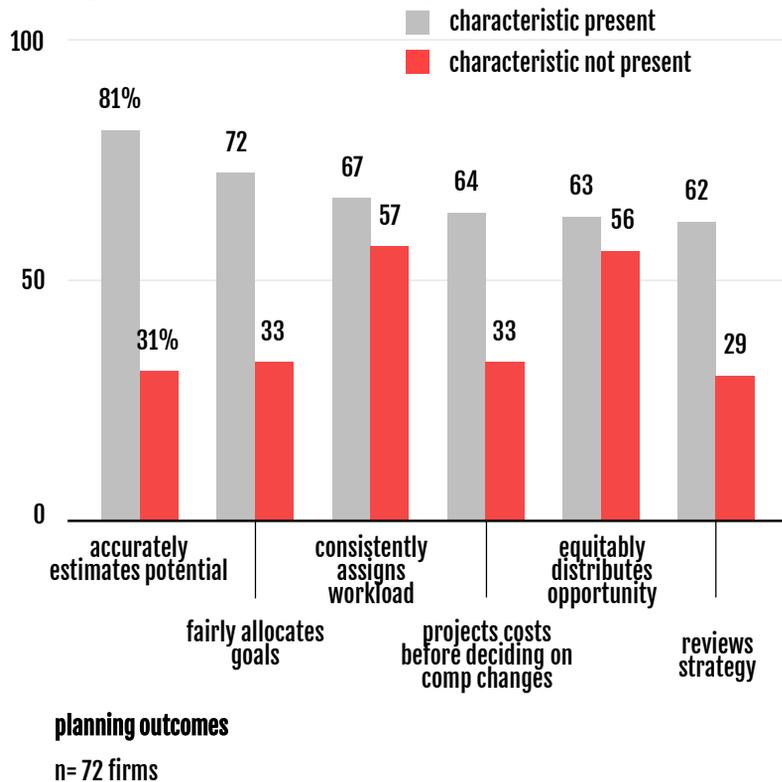
**fig. 4.1. effectiveness in sales planning disciplines and firm sales objective achievement**  
**percentage of firms meeting sales objective, preceding 12 months**



A few sales planning focus disciplines are most closely associated with increased sales productivity. These are: sales related strategic planning, territory assignment, and forecasting. Firms successful in any one of these planning disciplines are significantly more likely to meet sales objectives in the preceding 12 months, compared to firms ineffective in them (87% or more of effective firms met sales objectives in the preceding 12 months, compared with 63% or less of ineffective firms; among all firms, 79% met sales objectives in the preceding 12 months.). Fig. 4.1.

fig. 4.2. prevalence of planning outcomes and firm sales achievement

percentage of firms achieving sales objective, preceding 12 months



We expect firms that are effective sales planners to demonstrate certain capabilities and characteristics – outcomes, if you will, of planning. We compare performance of firms where there outcomes are present with those where they are not.

And, we find three such planning outcomes provide firms with a significant performance advantage. They are: the ability to accurately estimate potential in customers and markets (an outcome of forecasting effectiveness), the equitable distribution of salesperson goals (an outcome of territory planning), and strategy reviews(an outcome of strategic planning).

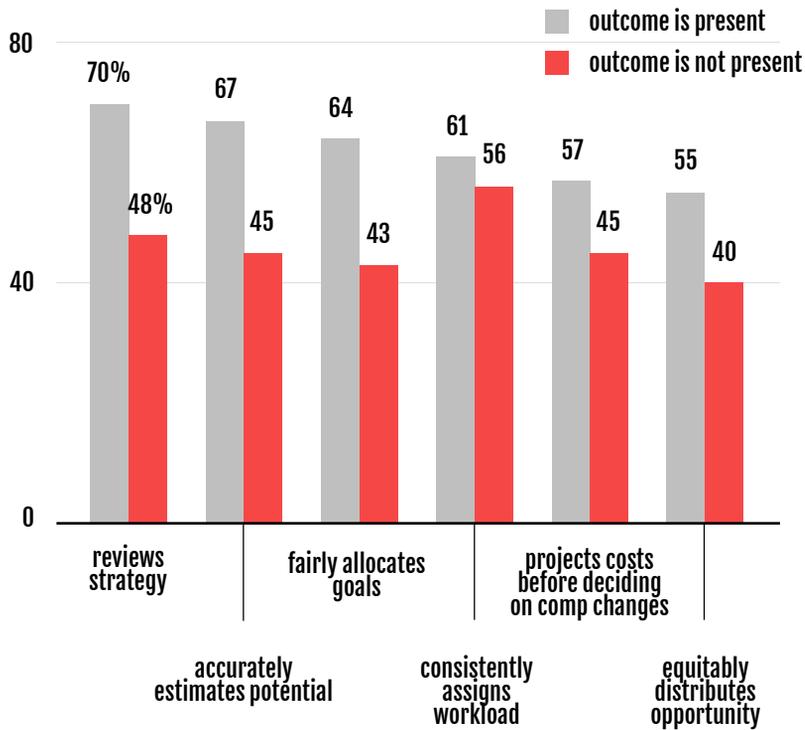


Firms that exhibit these outcomes enjoy substantial advantages in sales productivity and salesperson achievement distributions than other firms. **Figs. 4.2, 4.3.**

- Among firms that accurately estimate potential in markets and customers, 81% meet sales objectives, compared with just 31% of firms that can not; and 67% of their salespeople meet individual performance objectives, compared with just 45% of salespeople in firms unable to accurately estimate potential.
- Among firms that fairly allocate salesperson quotas, 72% meet sales objectives, compared with 33% of firms that can not; and 64% of their salespeople meet individual performance objectives, compared with 43% of salespeople in other firms.
- Among firms that review long term and strategic objectives, 62% meet sales objectives, compared with 29% of firms that can not; and 70% of their salespeople meet individual performance objectives, compared with 48% of salespeople in other firms.

**fig. 4.3. prevalence of planning outcomes and percentage of salespeople achieving quota**

**average percentage of salespeople achieving quota**



**planning outcomes**

n= 66 firms

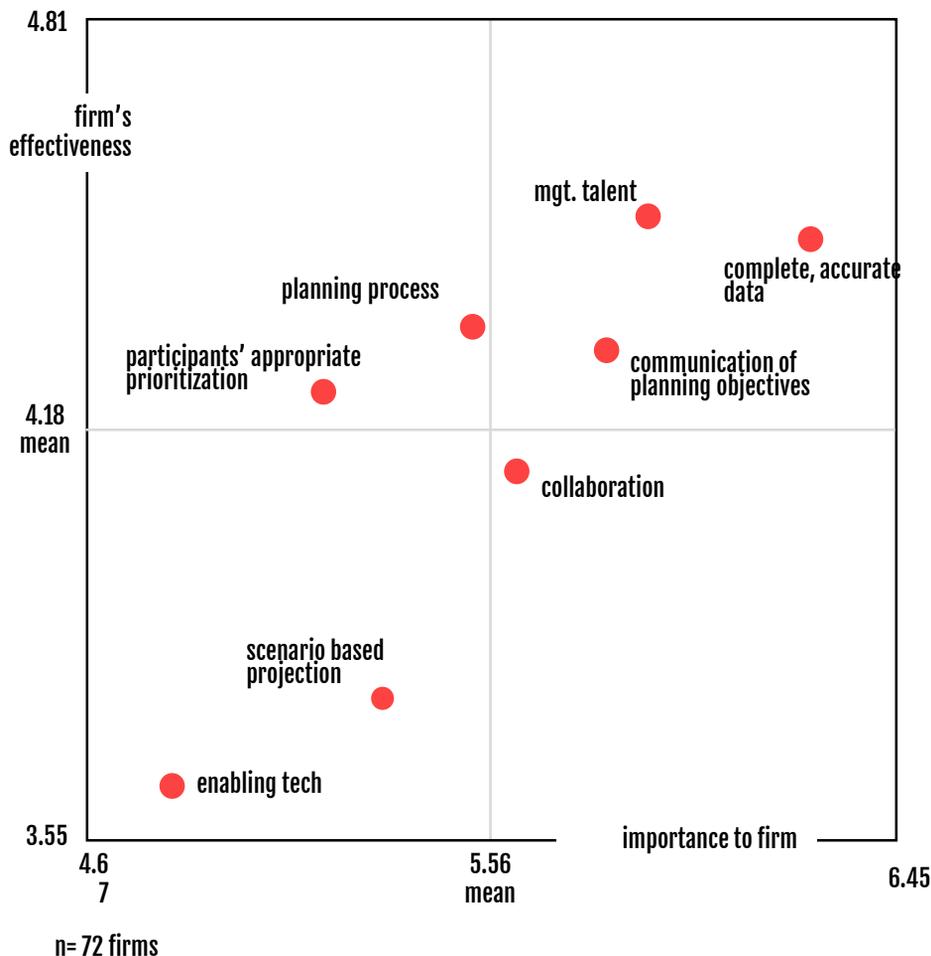


# IMPROVEMENT PRIORITIES

What areas represent the most important improvement priorities for firms focused on increasing sales planning effectiveness?

We evaluate two areas relevant to this inquiry as part of our research: (1) the organizational characteristics that contribute to sales planning effectiveness, and (2) the portfolio of constituent planning disciplines that comprise a comprehensive approach to sales planning.

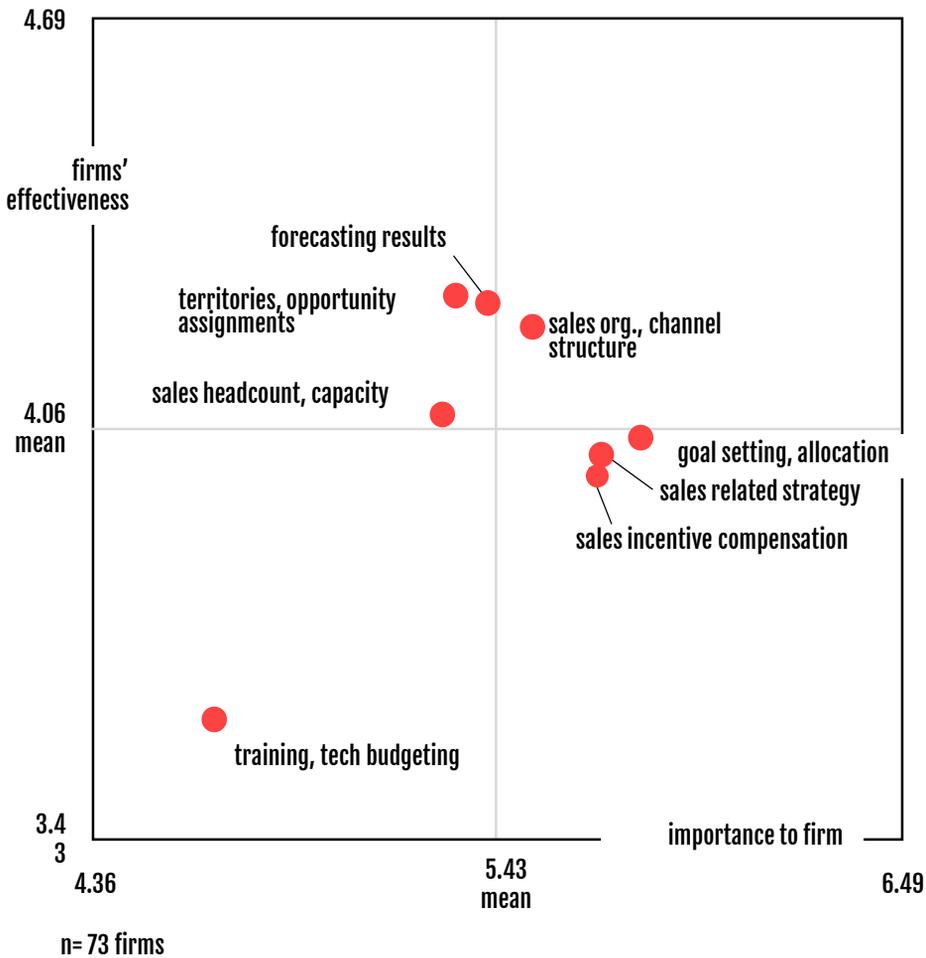
**fig. 5.1. sales planning attributes considered important, and firms' effectiveness in them**  
**average importance, effectiveness rating [7-point scale, 1- lowest, 7- highest]**



Collaboration between firm functions and planning participants represents the highest priority improvement opportunity among “organizational characteristics.” It stands alone as being rated in the top 50th percentile in importance, and also rated among the bottom 50th percentile in firm effectiveness. **Fig. 5.1.**

Among planning disciplines, there are three similarly distinct improvement priorities. They are sales goal setting, sales related strategic planning, and planning related to incentive compensation. Among the most important but least effectively executed planning disciplines, they represent the most urgent improvement priorities in specific planning disciplines for our aggregated pool of respondents. **Fig. 5.2.**

**fig. 5.2. sales planning disciplines’ importance, and firms’ effectiveness in them**  
**firms’ average rating of importance to overall sales force success, current effectiveness. [7-point scale, 1- lowest, 7- highest]**



We use an “Importance-Effectiveness” matrix to illustrate these improvement opportunities in Figs. 5.1 and 5.2. This helps visualize relationships between respondents’ importance and effectiveness ratings. It plots effectiveness and importance ratings for each reporting category on an x-y axis.

Effectiveness ratings are assigned to the vertical y-axis, and importance ratings to the horizontal x-axis. The two axes intersect at the respective mean reported value for each scale (both are seven-point scales). Each category is thereby forced into one of four quadrants, as illustrated in the figures above.

- Categories ranked in the top 50th percentile for importance are sorted on the right half of the chart; those ranked in the top 50th percentile based on effectiveness are forced to the top half of the chart.
- The lower-right quadrant contains reporting categories executed with relatively low effectiveness, yet considered highly important.
- The upper-right quadrant represents categories with relatively high ratings for both importance and effectiveness.
- Categories in the lower left-hand quadrant are relatively less important, and performed less effectively than others. In resource-constrained environments, firms are apt to reduce or outsource support for elements in this quadrant.
- The upper left quadrant includes categories of relatively lesser importance, executed with relatively high effectiveness.



# RESPONDENT DEMOGRAPHICS

This research report incorporates data from 93 survey respondents. Respondents include firms of varied size and industry makeup.

## Firm Size

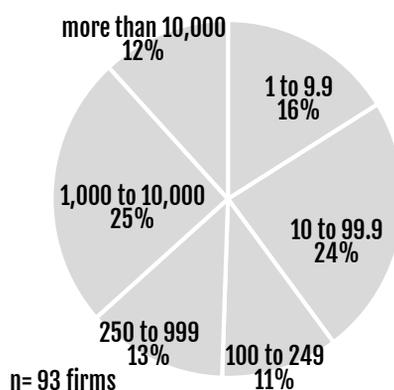
Ninety-three participating firms ranged in size from small to very large, though skewed toward larger firms. Sixty percent of respondents' firms have annual revenue in excess of US\$100 million; 37% are firms with annual revenues in excess of US\$1 billion. **Fig. 6.1.**

On average, firms directly employ 766 salespeople and 123 first line sales managers. Median values are 134 directly employed salespeople and 12 first line sales managers. In total, participating firms directly employ 67,400 salespeople and 10,841 first line sales managers. **Fig. 6.2.**

## Job Role

Respondents are predominately sales effectiveness leaders in their firms. Sales operations, effectiveness, and related sales support roles represent 49% of respondents. Eleven percent of respondents are first-line sales managers (i.e., they directly manage salespeople).

**fig. 6.1. respondents' firm revenue, us\$millions  
percentage distribution of respondents**



**fig. 6.2. respondents' number of sales managers  
and directly employed salespeople**

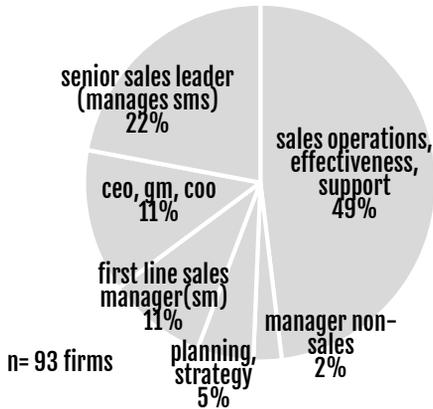
	sales- people	sales mgrs.
min	3	1
10 <sup>th</sup> perc.	10	2
25 <sup>th</sup> perc.	21	4
median	134	12
75 <sup>th</sup> perc.	550	61
90 <sup>th</sup> perc.	1,500	230
max	15,000	4,000
total	67,400	10, 841
average	766	123

n= 89 firms

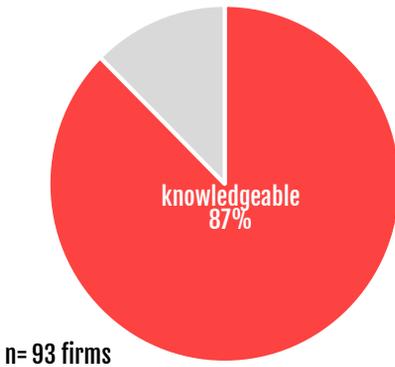


An additional 22% are senior sales leaders, managing sales managers, 11% are in non-sales-specialized senior general management roles, 5% are in planning or corporate strategy roles, and 2% are in non-sales related management roles. **Fig. 6.3.**

**fig. 6.3. respondents' job role**  
**percentage distribution of respondents**



**fig. 6.4. respondents' knowledge of sales planning in their firm**  
**percentage distribution of responses**



### Involvement in Sales Planning

Eighty-seven percent of respondents were knowledgeable or very knowledgeable about their firm's sales planning objectives, processes, and activities. The remaining respondents were "somewhat knowledgeable," where applicable, their responses were withheld from questions demanding a higher degree of knowledge of corporate sales planning approaches. **Fig. 6.4.**

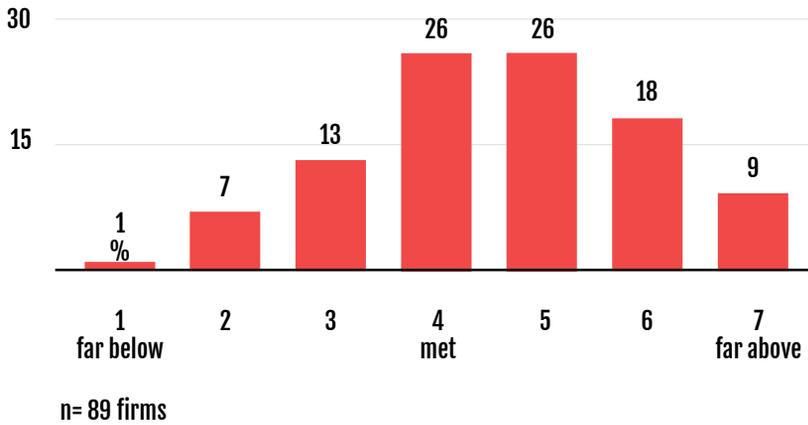
### Firm Performance

A large majority of respondents met or exceeded firm sales objectives in the preceding 12 month period. Fifty-three percent exceeded objectives, 26% met objectives, and 21% fell short of firm sales objectives. **Fig. 6.5.**

On average, 61% of firms' salespeople met or exceeded quota in the preceding 12-month period (the median value is 60%). **Fig. 6.6.**



**fig. 6.5. respondents' sales performance, prior 12 months  
percentage distribution of responses**



**fig 6.6. perc. of salespeople  
achieving objective, by firm  
(preceding 12 mos.)**

min	-
10 <sup>th</sup> perc.	28
25 <sup>th</sup> perc.	50
median	60
75 <sup>th</sup> perc.	80
90 <sup>th</sup> perc.	90
max	100
total	55
average	61

n= 66 firms



# COMMENT FROM RESEARCH UNDERWRITER ANAPLAN

*Dana Therrien, VP, CRO Practice*

As this report highlights, most sales and revenue leaders agree on two aspects of go-to-market planning: it's important, and it's challenging. The stakes for sales plans are high. They impact sales performance, talent retention, and ultimately profitability. Yet the process of building sales plans – territories, quotas and goals, account segmentation, incentive programs, etc. – is a highly manual, cross-functional effort, and plans are often communicated after the fiscal year kicks off.



Revenue growth is activated through strategic objectives set by leadership. Even when these goals are clear, optimizing a complex organization for growth and scale is a constant challenge.

Revenue leaders struggle to keep teams aligned as they seek to deliver adaptable go-to-market plans that drive reliable growth. Sales and commercial teams are faced with daily challenges as they navigate volatility. Strategic initiatives get lost as they are cascaded across multiple teams. Investment decisions in sales and revenue plans become an exercise in “this is how we’ve always done it,” rather than “it’s time for change.”

The findings in this report provide some detail around these challenges. They also shed light on those organizations that have found a better way to deliver high revenue performance.

Many CSOs and CROs are being tasked with streamlining their operations – connecting all aspects of the revenue engine to drive more predictable growth. Many approaches focus on data, organizational, or technology transformation. But these efforts are built on a foundation of sales and revenue planning.

Leading sales organizations are finding a way to strengthen that foundation – driving unmatched speed, agility, accuracy, and decision-making confidence using evolved strategy and planning methods. They know that conducting thorough planning is important, and that timing is critical. So they seek to build more dynamic planning processes that enable real-time collaboration and decisive action in the face of market shifts.

This report confirmed much of what we at Anaplan see with our customers. A connected approach to sales planning is vital to the success of today's sales organization. At Anaplan, we're committed to providing revenue leaders with the solution to develop a connected revenue strategy and deliver reliable growth for their organizations.

## About Anaplan

Anaplan (NYSE: PLAN) is a transformative way to see, plan, and run your business. Using our proprietary HyperblockR technology, Anaplan lets you contextualize real-time performance, and forecast future outcomes for faster, confident decisions. Anaplan for Sales includes Sales Planning, Sales Incentives, and Sales Insights solutions all designed to connect the revenue strategy and drive growth, because connecting strategy and plans to collaborative execution across your organization is required to move business FORWARD today. Based in San Francisco, Anaplan has 20 offices globally, 175 partners, and more than 1,750 customers worldwide. To learn more, visit [anaplan.com](https://anaplan.com)

