FINDINGS BRIEF

# A View of Sales Enablement from Industry Leaders

Overview

Sales Enablement is a rapidly growing profession, as more and more organizations establish job roles and functions with the expectation that the investments will yield better results in revenue growth from sales and service teams. Considering that Sales Enablement is a relatively new and evolving function that can be difficult to implement effectively at scale, Oxygen has been approached by dozens of enterprise clients who are moving into or building a sales enablement function. Their main questions: what is Sales Enablement, and how do we make it effective inside a business?

We had the opportunity to speak to six senior executive leaders (Vice President-level and above) who have successfully implemented Sales Enablement within their organizations. Their companies fit a profile of global, multi-billion-dollar businesses whose models have shifted in the digital age to accommodate a wide variety of customer and buyer types. As 20 to 30-year veterans of enablement and sales, the leaders interviewed have seen the growth of Sales Enablement as a profession in its own right, experienced the major pitfalls that plague Sales Enablement, and described a view of today's opportunities and challenges of implementing Sales Enablement globally.

This research brief provides the feedback, information, and patterns that we gathered from those interviews.
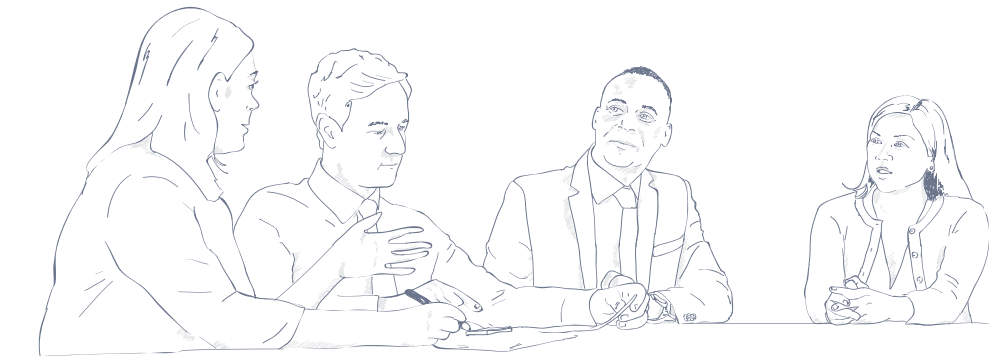
The Subject Matter Experts (SMEs)

* VP of Go-To-Market Strategy & Operations, $40B Enterprise Software Company

* CMO, $2B Business Furniture Manufacturer

* VP of Global Sales and Partner Enablement, $28B Enterprise Technology Company

* Head of Global Sales Product, $110B Global Technology Company

* VP of Learning Services, $41.5B Cable and Communications Provider

* VP of Global Sales Enablement, $8B Global Outsourcing Provider

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"Sales Enablement is not a department, it's not training. It is a complete orientation of the business to be forward-looking and to be thinking about what we can do, whether it be Customer Care, Marketing, Product Marketing... anything that is meant to help support the Sales team. How do we make content relevant, useful, and easy to access for sales people? How do we streamline sales jobs? How do we put practices into the sales force and between the sales force and the company that make it easier for salespeople to sell?"

Sales Enablement is...

Strategic

At a strategic level, Sales Enablement is a transformative function that helps leadership (e.g., Chief Sales Officer or Chief Revenue Officer) drive go-to-market transformation through improvement in sales efficiency and effectiveness.

It ensures the right leverage is being created by working collaboratively with different organizations across the business (marketing, channels, products, etc.).

Sales Enablement is not a rigid department or function. Setting up a new sales enablement department won't work without strong leadership.

"The goal of sales enablement is to enable ALL of your customer-facing employees and partners with the right mixture of content, process, skills, and tools to maximize the value of the conversations they are having and ultimately improve sales productivity."

Transformative

The role of Sales Enablement is to drive outcomes or solutions-based sales that demonstrate measurable business value to customers.

To start the process, Sales Enablement must move away from product-based discussions. Customers are smarter about vendors' products and services because information is readily available, so Sales Enablement must help customers understand the business outcomes a product or service delivers. It's moving from what to sell to how to sell.

This allows sellers to progress the conversation with buyers, so that sellers are able to engage with executive-level buyers by demonstrating their product/service's measurable business value.

"Sales Enablement is a transformative function....it drives change from something to something. It is changing from a product-selling mindset to a solution selling mindset; changing from selling to a technology buyer to a business buyer; change from selling licenses to selling subscriptions."

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Customer-centered

Sales enablement must be aligned to what customers are doing in each stage of procurement and purchase of goods and/or services.

Yet most companies don't know how their customers make buying decisions. Here is what SMEs found after studying sellers within their organizations:

* Many sales people weren't actually selling
* Many were only responding to customers questions or taking orders
* Many weren't making a proactive business case for the product

Why? Many sales organizations have misconceptions about what customers do, their buying criteria, the people involved and who has influence.
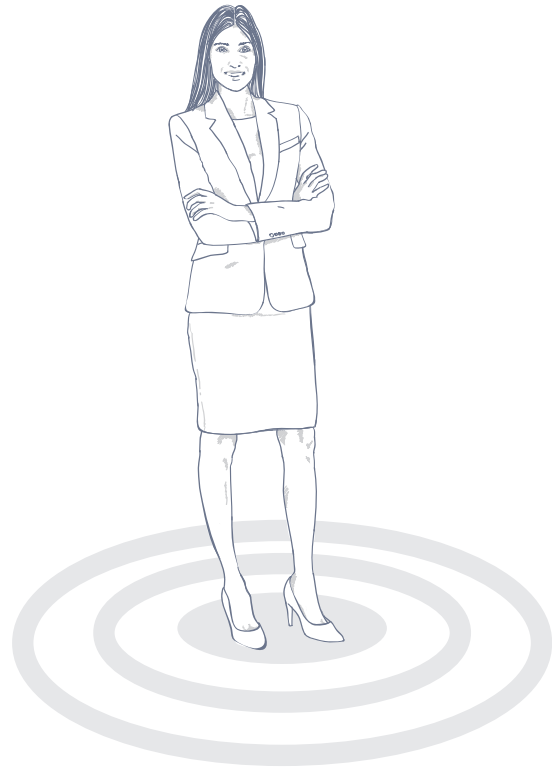
Sales Enablement Organizations

Design and deliver relevant content and context for sellers

✳ Focus content on specific areas and experiences: Sales Skills, Sales Readiness, Sales Plays, New Hire Readiness and On-boarding, and Leadership Development services.

✳ Elevate training so that it is much smaller, bite-sized chunks.

✳ Make it mobile; take it to where the sellers are located. Do not create another access location.

✳ Provide the structure and safe environment for sellers to obtain knowledge, practice their talk track, and refine their processes before they get in front of customers.

✳ Focus on customer care: Sales Enablement helps sellers navigate internal problems with delivery or fulfillment issues post-sale, so that time is not taken away from customer-facing conversations.

Sales Enablement is not just training or tools or communications, it's a blend of the whole environment—education, tools, & communications.
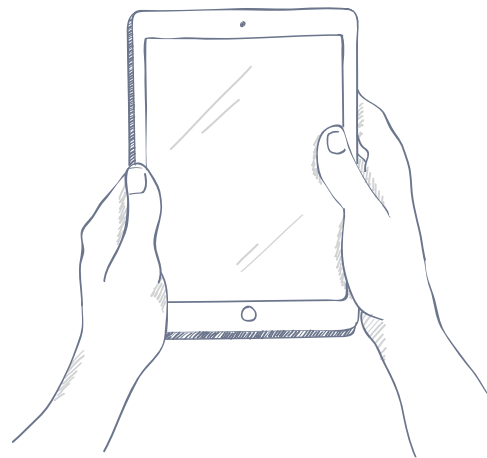
Help communicate

✳ Provides information regarding specific situations, circumstances, and scales to sellers so they understand what's going on at pace.

✳ Offers only the relevant information without overloading sellers with more than they need. Sales Enablement provides a communication structure and prioritization methods, managed through governance.

✳ Messages come from the leaders (like the Chief Sales Officer) and sales leadership.

"You have to make content easy and simple for sellers to use. If it's not, it won't be used and isn't useful. No matter how smart it seems."

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"Sales Enablement isn't a separate function— it's integrated into our sales process business rhythm. You can boil it down to this: what do sellers need to go do and what insights can be made available to help them go and do it? We hold ourselves, as well as them, to be more disciplined."

Characteristics of a High-Performing Sales Enablement Function

Strong Executive sponsorship

* Someone who is senior enough to get buy-in.

* Without a senior level sponsor, sales enablement cannot be successfully implemented.

A leader who has tenure

* Successful Sales Enablement leaders relate to sales people and have experience selling.

* Ideal leaders have a long tenure and an existing network inside the company. If the Sales Enablement leader doesn't have sales experience, they won't have credibility with sales.

* Leaders also had experience in Learning & Development (L&D) experience and Field Sales, both of which inform sales training designs.

Strong alignment to Sales and CFO

* Someone in the C-level must act as a champion to engage with Sales leadership and front-line managers.

* Must maintain strong connection to Chief Financial Officer (CFO).

* CFOs will become willing partners once they see that their investments in outside consultants, headcount, or vendors have impact on yield per sales rep.

"You need strong alignment with the sales leader especially if you haven't worked with that person before or have been hired into the organization."

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Cross-functional Involvement is Critical to Sales Enablement Success

Many departments are involved...

∗ Sales Enablement includes organizations that perform marketing outreach, sales support activities, technical sales, bids and quotes, training, and order fulfillment—any function that touches customers, the customer buying process, or the sales process.

∗ Sales and Marketing must get along for Sales Enablement to work and drive change across the organization. They must be unified behind a common message and approach. The Sales teams must know Marketing is in the trenches with them, listening to them, and helping them—it is key for Sales to see this engagement.

∗ Sales Enablement organizations have a good relationship with the Head of Product, especially if they are responsible for enabling the technical audiences. Sales Enablement collaborates with Product development to ensure they are building content and collateral that can be re-purposed and used to train pre-sales and services people on how to demonstrate and build proofs of concepts.
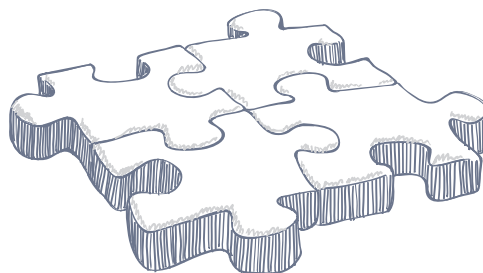
...And some functions need to rethink how they create outputs

∗ The relationship between Sales Enablement and product groups is key. Their point of reference should focus on the value the product delivers to the customer, not just the features of the product.

∗ Product Marketing and Product Management should listen to what is going on with customers and engage with Sales to understand and communicate what customers want.

∗ Marketing must consider what they create with this viewpoint as well—their materials should reflect conversations that are for Sales teams.

Sales Enablement is more like an orchestrator

* In larger organizations, one practitioner had a group called 'Stakeholder Management' that was responsible for communications and engagement with audiences (sales, pre-sales, services, client support, partners, and alliances).

* The team also managed all the related enablement programs and functions impacting the organization.

* This practitioner typically engaged with executive leaders of internal partners to plan and execute agreements (with Finance, Marketing, Product Marketing, etc.).

* Sales Enablement must establish a communication cadence with each leader to make sure they stay aligned.

With supporting capabilities to help build and deliver its services to sellers

* Vendor management

* Operations and measurement of programs (Analytics)

* Program management

* Communications

* Infrastructure and platforms (Learning Management Systems and Knowledge Management)

* Content development

"Fifty percent or more of an enablement leader's time should be spent communicating and engaging other leaders from Sales, Marketing, Product, Finance, etc.—communicate what you are doing, what you've done, what impact it had, recap agreements and commitments made with each leader. This needs to be done on a continuous basis. If you don't do this level of engagement, leaders will forget why they made the investment and the value proposition."

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Core Sales Enablement Processes

Constant engagement with stakeholders is all part of the process

✴ Establish a core team of people from Sales and Marketing to engage different stakeholders (enablement partners, executives, and sales) at various levels in a sales enablement pilot program.

✴ Conduct audits to determine what sales people get from different departments, keeping salespeople from being overloaded by information.

✴ Focus on getting engagement with Sales leadership and integrating them into the problem statement to secure buy-in for enablement initiatives.

✴ Build a website and hold regular meetings with stakeholders to keep them informed on the progress and insights.

Creating relevant content requires involving sellers and subject matter experts

✴ Use ideas from the Agile manifesto[1]: content developers must work together with people who represent the audience, daily, throughout any initiative.

✴ The most relevant and usable assets are those that involve lots of iteration, fast, with the end seller audience or people who represent that group.

✴ Spend time doing up-front work to make sure there is a measurable result that teams can always look to as a way to show success with stakeholders.

"One of the big roles of enablement is to align, coordinate, and weave together the various activities and initiatives going on within the Go-To-Market functions."

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Communications planning is critical throughout a sales enablement program

* Use stakeholder analysis (detractors v. advocates) to determine how to manage and engage them as part of a communications plan.

* Build a communication structure and prioritization that is managed through governance. Messages come from the leaders (like the Chief Sales Officer) and sales leadership.

* Create communications around pilots and have the VP of Sales message to the sales teams to manage and engage all stakeholders.

* One interviewed leader reported: Marketing had a dedicated Communications team focused on distribution and field sales. All sales communications were delivered through this team. All departments were given a publishing deadline each week for communications requests (external and internal). This team deconflicted other requests, prioritized, and assured compliance with defined principles and standards.
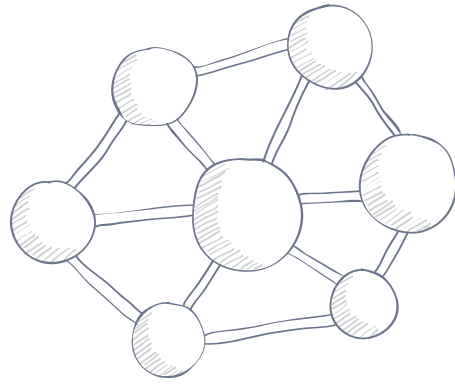
Deploy programs using an initial pilot

* Pilots brought Sales and Marketing closer together—truly integrated across executives, working together on all key initiatives.

* One company involved all the departments (IT, Customer Care, Fulfillment, etc.) in pilots so each enablement function could see and learn what was happening. Stakeholders learned that people outside of Sales and Marketing had no idea about customers—getting this insight helped inform the work each department did in the company.

"There is too much stuff landing at one time with sellers. But we now have a process to alleviate it: we use a sprint model, where once a quarter they decide what's important, and then it's a two-hour call that covers everything in a fast and actionable manner."

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Platforms and Technology that Deliver Sales Enablement Experiences

In every business we work with, sellers need to use technology as a core part of their job, both to store information but also to access what they need in order to have conversations with customers. Typically, these are systems such as knowledge management, content or asset management, and the underlying systems that allow teams to design, create and deliver learning experiences or online content.

Knowledge and content repository

* One leader implemented a packaged solution that took hundreds of SharePoint sites and created a single place for sellers to access content. This leader was quick to point out that not every organization will be able to implement this kind of solution. Requires strong effort and leadership to instill and maintain governance over content that is added to the system.

* Most of the content management tools and learning management systems available won't meet the need to provide a one-stop place for sellers to access content in a simple, curated way.

* After a failed pilot with a vendor, one group decided to build an in-house website to deliver content customized to sellers' needs. It was a long, painful process to figure it out.

* The end goal is getting the right knowledge to the right seller at the right time.

* Think about the seller and put content where they are.

Understanding the technology landscape for enablement is an ongoing challenge

* Finding a tool to help manage and store content is incredibly difficult—there are many tools out there, but hard to figure out what fits the need, especially for the experience.

* There are also content creation and authoring tools that have to be factored into the enablement view.

* Don't underestimate the need for different types of tools that will help enable the enablers.

"We created a centralized communications hub for the sales team to easily access."

"We kept hoping that [our vendor] would have a technology platform that would work for us. They didn't."

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Measuring the Impact of Sales Enablement

Measuring impact is difficult— you have to work with your organization's leaders and talk it through

* Work with your executive leadership to define the measurements and the outcomes before you start— this will help you get additional investment.

* Stick with no more than three business metrics to keep it simple.

* Business results are tough, but you must try to correlate enablement to something (e.g., revenue, close ratios, etc.). If the business is going through a transformation (e.g., industry focus vs. product focus), you need metrics to show the transition.

* Measuring business impact is hard because there are many variables involved, and causality is very difficult to prove (e.g., this training resulted in X% revenue growth). Measurement works best when looking at correlation between people that took training versus those did not, and what their results were.

* Understanding customer analytics and the way that customers buy is a focus. Use customer maturity models and predictive analytics to inform actionable things sellers can get in front of customers to get them to start buying.

"Take measurements continuously."

Measurement must correlate to business results

* Analytics should be actionable to sellers and make their time more useful—make them activity-based and binary. Did someone do something?

* Adopt exit surveys and other methods for feedback.

* One group measured time-to-productivity in a Sales On-boarding program. They compared revenue generated over a period of time between sellers that went through the on-boarding against those that did not. Time to on-board went from 12 months to eight months to achieve quota.

*"Demonstrate the impact of enablement quantifiably.
A key activity when you start an enablement function is to
benchmark and baseline metrics and perform an assessment
to get a clear picture of where you are so you can demonstrate
causality six to 12 months later (e.g., bookings per head)."*

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Biggest Challenges with Sales Enablement

Executives don't fully grasp the vision or strategic nature of Sales Enablement

* In one company, executive leadership didn't fully understand sales enablement, and as a result the function was moved around from department to department for four years, impairing strategic impact.

* One group hired an external consultant, but the CEO wouldn't listen or take their recommendations. The most senior people were the most change resistant and hardest to deal with.

* Keeping C-level executives (the CEO) true to what they were trying to accomplish. While the CEO was in favor of the sales enablement program and very supportive—there were changes in sales compensation, sales reorganization that were required to transform. The VP of Sales wanted to remove some sellers because they couldn't work in the new way—the CEO made it clear no one loses their job.

> "In the absence of being communicated to, people assume the worst."

Organizational drag or resistance

* The last mile of delivery and consumption by Sales is a challenge. Sales Enablement creates great things, but there are often gaps in the last mile delivery of the experience. In one instance, an executive level practitioner had staff co-located with sales in a region, but they were viewed as outsiders and had difficulty getting enablement adopted.

* One company wanted to do account-based marketing for customers purchasing $50-100M of product a year. They had resistance with some of their global account managers to try new things because the account managers were risk averse.

Stakeholder navigation and alignment

* Developing Sales Enablement down to a single corporate strategy, a single corporate message, and getting everyone aligned to it. Example: If you add a new offering to a deep portfolio—how do you message it?

* Strong stakeholder engagement with executive sponsors, sales and sales leadership, and internal enablement providers (Marketing, Product Marketing, IT, Finance) is very complex and difficult.

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Concluding Thoughts

Enablement in a complex world is harder than ever

Many different constituents (Marketing, HR, L&D, IT, Finance) try to help sellers sell with good intention, but without a connection to a business outcome, nor empathy for the environment or role of the seller, the resulting "random acts" add up like this:

* People and processes exist in silos with unclear ownership of an increasingly tangled environment of tools, technologies, and content.

* There is no shared understanding of outcomes, measurements for success, or decision criteria.

* Material and content are difficult (if not impossible) to consume, so it goes unused.

The net effects of this systemic chaos are wasted investment, and sellers who are not effectively equipped for valuable conversations with customers.

The root of systemic chaos is due to adherence to antiquated working models

Adherence to industrialized organizational structures, like command-and-control, has eroded the ability for enablement functions to truly add value for sellers.

In today's connected, networked world, an enablement organization must be able to calibrate and adapt at scale, to reach business outcomes. Yet many organizations operate with reductionist thinking, each silo with their own view of what it means to enable sales.

The leaders interviewed for this report all took a strategic view of Sales Enablement and modernized it within their organizations.

Enablement is NOT...

Enablement does not equal "training." Under pressure to activate new capabilities and get sellers ready, many leaders automatically jump to the assumption that they need training in the form of classes, courses, or online learning. Yet the leaders pointed to much more than just these conventional methods, citing collaboration with peers, working sessions or external help as more modern ways of helping to drive success on an ongoing basis.

* Enablement works with the right mixture of content, process, skills, and tools to maximize the value of the conversations' sellers are having and ultimately improve sales productivity.

Enablement does not mean taking all of the content that exists and making sure it's given to sellers all at once. The amount of content that people are expected to digest is overwhelming and is deployed regardless of its cognitive ease. Information overload works directly against changing behavior, adopting new skills, and adapting one's job.

* Content must be made simple for sellers to digest. If it's not, it won't be used and isn't useful, no matter how smart it seems.

Enablement does not mean creating stuff to check the box. Many different people believe they are "doing enablement" regardless of role, function, or where they sit in the organization. Yet when each silo has their own view of what it means to "enable sales," much of what is created isn't actually helpful for sellers.

* Sales enablement needs help from Marketing, Product Marketing, Product Management—but must be empowered to align, coordinate, and weave together the various activities and initiatives going on within the Go-To-Market functions.

"The models of organizational success that dominated the 20th century have their roots in the industrial revolution and, simply put, the world has changed. The pursuit of 'efficiency'—getting the most with the least investment of energy, time, or money—was once a laudable goal, but being effective in today's world is less a question of optimizing for a known and relatively stable set of variables, than responsiveness to a constantly shifting environment. Adaptability, not efficiency, must become our central competency."

—*Stanley McChrystal,* **Team of Teams** *(2015, Portfolio)*

"There is so much pressure to change, and seemingly so little time to do it. An almost mystical belief prevails, where all you need to do is send those salespeople, managers, or engineers to a five-day training course, and all of the company's problems will be solved.

"Of course, most people don't believe a five-day course will magically transform their teams. There are other things that will take place that will help those people, right? But who is thinking about what those things are? Who is deciding how much content is too much? And who is factoring in that learning a concept, skill, or piece of knowledge happens through time?

"Studies show how information overload, multitasking, and prolonged repetition actually impair productivity, performance, and decision making. Yet, year after year, billions of dollars are spent on initiatives, programs, change efforts, revamps, classes, new technologies, and courseware. What's the result? A major increase in noise."

—*Juliana Stancampiano,* **Radical Outcomes** *(2019, Wiley)*

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Endnotes

1   https://www.agilealliance.org/agile101/the-agile-manifesto/

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Oxygen is a consultancy and change integrator. We modernize Enablement and L&D within organizations, transforming them from an order taker of random requests to a digital, networked and adaptable function that produces experiences and assets aligned to business outcomes.

Our focus is on customer-facing audiences, primarily sales or services, with three areas of specialization:

1 We transform L&D and Enablement functions to be business-outcome-focused through modernizing the operating model (people, metrics, process, technology, organization) and shifting from the order-takers of today to trusted service providers.

2 We create scalable, modernized, role-based enablement to help customer-facing professionals achieve business results. Our enablement architecture is a multi-modal, outcome-based view of what someone must know and do over time to be successful in their role.

3 We provide packaged corporate education solutions across a wide variety of topics that are quick to deploy.

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