

Can College Classrooms Create Better Salespeople?

Should sales training
start before a sales career?

- Why **Mentoring** Matters
- 3 Realities of **Leading**
- AI vs. Human **Coaching**



Should sales training start before a sales career?

BY PAUL NOLAN

A November 2005 *New York Times* article examining a trend among pharmaceutical companies to hire former college cheerleaders as sales reps riled many in the industry. The article failed to depict pharmaceutical sales with the high degree of professionalism they felt it had earned.

“Known for their athleticism, postage-stamp skirts and persuasive enthusiasm, cheerleaders have many qualities the drug industry looks for in its sales force,” stated the *Times* story, which carried the headline “Gimme an Rx! Cheerleaders Pep Up Drug Sales.”

“Your article reinforces shameful stereotypes that fair-minded Americans have rejected time after time,” Ken Johnson, senior vice president of the Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America, wrote in a letter to the *Times*. “These stereotypes are unfair, and they are wrong.”

At the time the article was published, B2B sales was still a career that many college graduates fell into almost by accident. Few 20-something students were learning the intricacies of the B2B buyers’ journey or studying methods to deploy when a large sale stalls. For starters, only a handful of colleges and

universities offered such courses.

What was it about college cheerleaders that made them attractive candidates for pharmaceutical sales jobs? Their physical attractiveness, for starters. “There’s a saying that you’ll never meet an ugly drug rep,” one doctor was quoted as saying in the *Times* story.

T. Lynn Williamson, a cheering advisor at the University of Kentucky, told the *Times* in 2005 that he regularly fielded calls from recruiters looking for talent. “They don’t ask what the major is,” Williamson said. “Exaggerated motions, exaggerated smiles, exaggerated enthusiasm – they learn those things, and they can get people to do what they want.”

That was then. Surely, successful selling in today’s complex B2B environments requires more than a firm body and a welcoming smile. With all the technology, behavioral psychology and data analysis that’s involved in sales processes, a formal education in sales will clearly provide a young salesperson a leg up on competitors who haven’t majored in sales, right?

Right?

FEATURE STORY

A History of Sales as a Curriculum

In an article on [the history of sales as part of a post-secondary education](#), Eric Janssen, a Canadian-based leadership consultant and sales educator, states that many aspects of salesmanship were regularly taught in colleges and universities into the early 1940s. However, the percentage of schools offering sales courses declined between 1943 and 1947. Janssen's research indicates that educators felt that sales courses were "too vocational and lacked analytical rigor."

Sales as an academic discipline reemerged in the 1980s. The first dedicated Center for Professional Selling was established at Baylor University in 1985. Four years later, Northern Illinois University launched its professional sales program, which became the first university program to receive a Certified Sales Curriculum from the Professional Society for Sales and Marketing Training (SMT).

Currently, more than 250 universities in the U.S. offer dedicated, formal professional sales education programs. One report puts the number of higher education institutions that offer a full sales major at 37.

A report from the [Sales Education Foundation](#) (SEF), a nonprofit organization that promotes academic sales programs worldwide, states "when employees with sales backgrounds receive standard company training, they ramp up 50% faster than other new workers, turn over an average of 30% less, and potentially save companies approximately \$200,000 per hire within the first year and a half of employment."

What Sales Curriculums Cover

Sales education programs are typically housed within a university's business college. Core coursework includes prospecting, identifying needs, CRM technology, sales analytics, negotiation and sales management.

Stefanie Boyer, heads the [Bryant University Sales Institute](#) outside of Providence, Rhode Island. Boyer believes a key element of academic sales programs are the simulated sales competitions held regularly that draw hundreds of students from multiple schools. In these events, which typically last two days, students role play with real-life business representatives who serve as judges, honing skills such as building rapport, speed selling, handling objections and closing.

Through sales competitions and course work, students are constantly receiving feedback on their techniques, Boyer said. That doesn't happen in the real world.

"Who is giving you regular feedback in the work world? It takes a lot longer [to learn effective selling approaches] if you're

not required to watch a conversation that you had, or if no one is reviewing them regularly with you," she said. "In the real world, your manager may be able to ride along with you once a quarter or review a call or two per month. That's not the same as having a semester filled with constant role plays, learning the science behind the structure, and understanding what good and bad look like."

Real-World Observations

Faster ramp up to productivity is something sales managers who we heard from agree that college students who complete sales curriculums often bring to the table.

"I've seen how formal sales training can move a new rep to baseline productivity in 60 days, while those without it are still struggling with discovery calls four months later," said Branden

Wells, CEO and founder of [TrueCraft Construction](#), a general contractor in Garden Grove, California. "An organized curriculum prevents your team from eating lead time on basic skills that should be mastered by week two."

Rick Elmore is founder and CEO of [Simply Noted](#), which provides robotic technology for companies to create handwritten notes for marketing campaigns. He said he has hired, trained and managed sales representatives with a formal education in sales

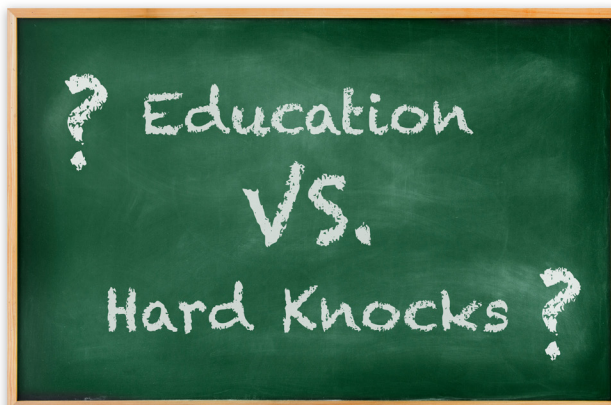
as well as those who did not study sales in college. In his experience, those who completed a sales curriculum "know the funnel stages, understand pipeline management, and speak the language from day one."

Volen Vulkov is a human resources professional and co-founder of [Enhancv](#), an AI-powered resume builder. He said he has been part of internal studies that showed university-educated sales reps outsold equally qualified sales reps without a formal sales education by more than 20 closed units on average in their first year.

Vulkov credits the edge that sales-educated reps have – at least early in their career – to their learned ability to build rapport with prospects through stories, humor and making connections about each buyer's business.

"Unlike self-taught sales reps, sales grads are more likely to elicit an emotional reaction from a buyer that ends with a sale," Vulkov said. "Emotional traction is the secret sauce and curriculum touch that sales grads bring to the table."

"I've hired salespeople with formal sales degrees and salespeople without them," said Christopher Coussons, director of [Visionary Marketing](#), a UK-based SEO and digital marketing consultancy. "The graduates with sales degrees come in stronger on process. They understand pipeline stages, know CRM



FEATURE STORY

hygiene without being told, and can articulate a sales methodology from day one. That's genuinely useful. It took our non-degree hires four to six months to develop that same structural thinking through experience alone."

The number of universities offering formal professional selling education has increased significantly, with **176** programs in North America as of 2023, up from only **44** in 2017.

Some Skills Can't Be Taught

Nearly all the sales professionals we heard from stated there are aspects of selling that can't be learned in a classroom, chief among them being resiliency.

"What is not taught in any classroom is rejection absorption," said Andy Wray, sales manager at Ace Commercial Laundry Equipment, which sells commercial-grade laundry equipment to laundromats, multitenant housing developers and other businesses.

"Selling equipment to businesses is a gradual plod with tough losses. It takes four months to [strike] a deal in building a laundromat and then, over a financing term on a Friday afternoon, you lose it. Those who get through that without losing their heads are almost never the ones with the spotless academic histories; they are the ones who had previous employment where things went bad and recovery was not a choice," Wray said. "You can learn the mechanics of follow-up sequence in degree programs, but you cannot get a feel of what it is like to have a deal pulled out from under you and still make a call to your next prospect an hour later."

"A degree does not equip you with what will become of a deal frozen in the middle of a pitch," adds Branden Wells of TrueCraft Construction.

He said one of the best sales reps he has ever hired had no college education in sales, but came with four years of door-to-door sales experience in four cities. "He met quota during his first 45 days and has not missed a quota since.

"It's possible to take someone through a closing structure step by step on paper but impossible to recreate that feeling when a client who was about to sign a job becomes silent on a \$20,000 job," Wells said. "The latter is a volume instinct, big pickups, missing out on deals that you thought you had won, re-pitching without anyone marking the score. Those degree graduates who overlooked that initial volume tend to stop at some point in production, and they are familiar with the theory. The reps that made 200 cold calls during the first year are those who cease to second-guess the process."

Degree vs. School of Hard Knocks?

One thing that most sales curriculums get wrong is they teach selling as if the tools and channels are static, said Runbo Li,

co-founder and CEO of [Magic Hour](#), an all-in-one, browser-based AI platform used to generate and edit video and image content.

"The reality is that AI has fundamentally changed how you prospect, how you personalize outreach and how you close," Li said. "What I'd tell any young person considering a sales degree is the curriculum will give you vocabulary and frameworks. That's valuable. But the real edge comes from doing the work in the wild, experimenting with new tools, building in public, and learning to read people."

Boyer – and likely most other academicians in sales programs around the U.S. – would disagree vehemently with Li's assessment. A new course on applied AI in sales has been added to the curriculum at Bryant University Sales Institute. Boyer said students are now learning all about using AI to find, move and close deals, as well as conduct better prospect research to prepare for calls and have better conversations.

Consensus among those we heard from seems to be that a sales degree can equip a new rep with the skills necessary to speed past some aspects of career development. However, a degree is no assurance that a rainmaker is waiting to be set loose.

"Hiring someone with a sales degree tells me they were serious enough about the profession to study it deliberately. It does not inform me whether they are able to cope with rejection, or whether they can develop a real rapport or bond when the pressure is on. Those appear during the interview and during the first 90 days," said Cal Singh, head of marketing and partnerships at [Equipment Leasing Canada](#), which leases to transportation, agricultural, construction and industrial businesses.

Singh said he has employed top-performing salespeople with both types of backgrounds. "The similarity was never what they learned. What did it was their desire to get better, their capacity to be honest in looking at what was not working, and their readiness to do the unpleasant aspects of the job on a regular basis without being forced into it."

Sales degrees accelerate the learning curve on methodology and give people a professional vocabulary, but they can create a false sense of readiness that breaks down the first time a prospect goes silent for two weeks, said Rick Elmore.

"The most underrated skill in sales is pattern recognition. Knowing which deals are actually progressing and which ones are just friendly conversations. That only comes from real experience, not coursework. The ideal hire combines both worlds: formal training provides the framework; real-world experience gives them the flexibility to adapt when the playbook stops working."

Adds Li, "The best salespeople I've ever met, whether they had a degree in it or not, shared one trait: they were relentlessly curious about what makes people say yes. A sales degree is a head start. But the race is won by whoever adapts fastest, not whoever studied longest." **SM**

Mentoring Is Different Than Training, But Just As Important

BY PAUL NOLAN

Great salespeople aren't born, they're created. Formal training and continuous coaching are vital to developing the skills to thrive in B2B sales. A third leg of the developmental stool that gets less attention, less budget and less credit is mentorship.

The importance of mentorship is not a new concept, but it's more critical to developing successful sales reps than ever, says Colleen Stanley, co-author of "Be the Mentor Who Mattered."

Today's tech-centric approach to sales, which has managers and their teams leaning on artificial intelligence to frame every aspect of the seller-buyer interaction, has resulted in a decline of the mentorship mindset, Stanley says.

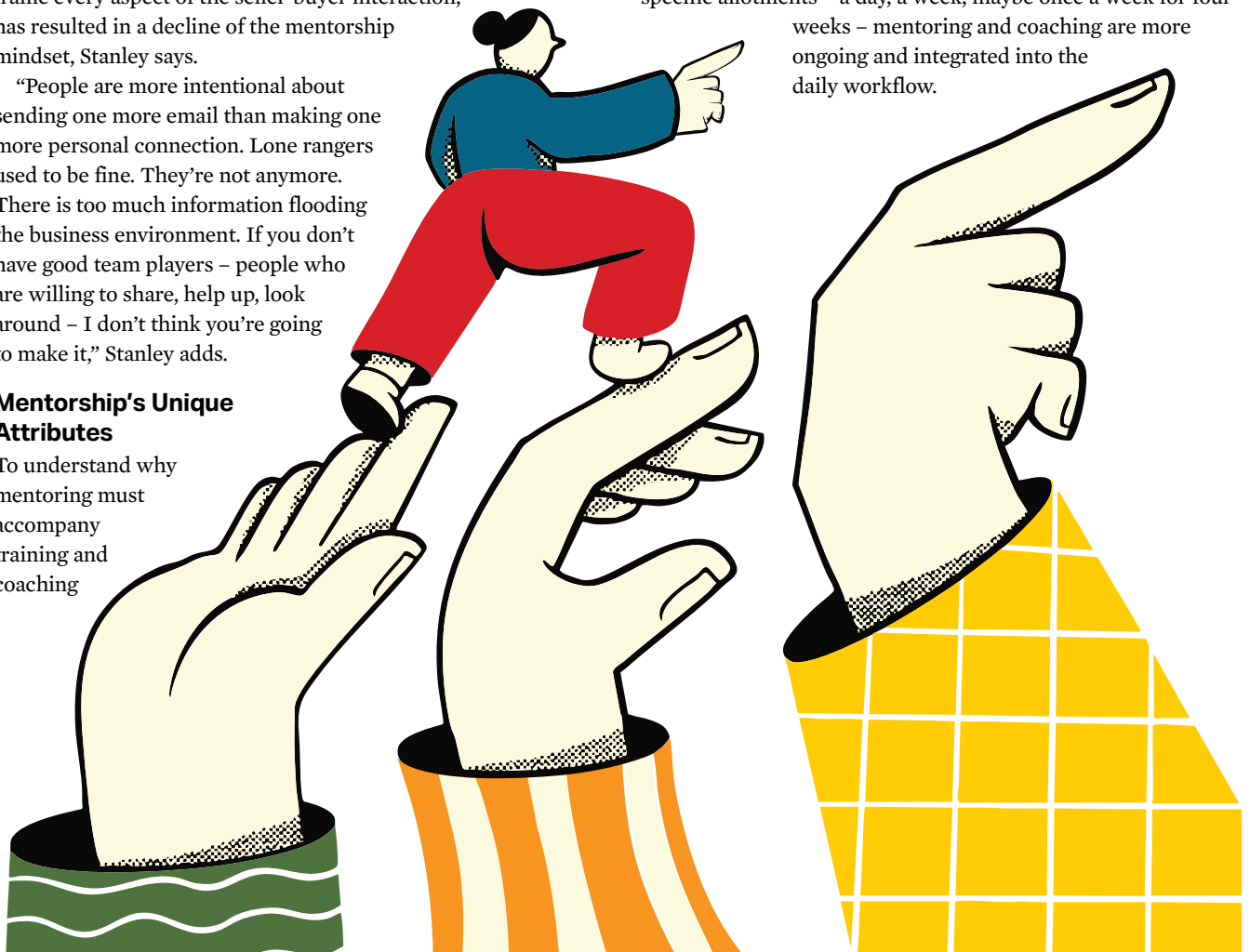
"People are more intentional about sending one more email than making one more personal connection. Lone rangers used to be fine. They're not anymore. There is too much information flooding the business environment. If you don't have good team players – people who are willing to share, help up, look around – I don't think you're going to make it," Stanley adds.

Mentorship's Unique Attributes

To understand why mentoring must accompany training and coaching

to fully develop salespeople, it's necessary what mentoring is. The International Mentoring Center defines it as "a collaborative, dialogic and reflective learning relationship characterized by mutually inspirational learning agreements and shared responsibilities."

Mentoring is less formal than training. Both can be about improving skills, but mentoring often doesn't focus on a specific performance improvement objective or improvement on a specific skill. While training is typically provided in time-specific allotments – a day, a week, maybe once a week for four weeks – mentoring and coaching are more ongoing and integrated into the daily workflow.



What Matters Most Is Harder to Measure

Training typically has more measurable outcomes than mentoring, in part because companies treat training as a budget item while mentoring is often less structured and comes at no additional cost to a company. Stanley concedes that measuring the ROI of mentoring is more complicated than some aspects of training, but she buys into organizational consultant Simon Sinek's belief that the contributions from workers that are hardest to measure are often the most important.

Inarguably, aspects of sales such as close ratios, length of sales cycle and revenue growth are critical to measure and important to improve upon. However, Stanley says, softer skills, which are frequently honed through mentoring – trust, empathy, meaningful connection, fulfillment – are the very things that lead to measurable improvement.

[Gallup studies](#) show that Millennial and Gen Z workers are more engaged and likely to stay at their jobs when they have a mentor. As Gallup reports, young workers want a coach instead of a boss. They thrive on the ongoing development that results from continual conversations and guidance on an as-needed basis.

In a 2016 TED talk on the [gap between Millennials and their older managers](#), hospital administrator Lauren Hoebee, a Millennial herself, said, young professionals have been shaped by technology and a higher education system that is all about providing feedback. When they enter the work world, many are struck by the paucity of that feedback.

Mentees and Mentors Benefit

Hoebee emphasizes that both the mentor and the mentee need to work to produce a successful outcome. And there is a payoff for both parties. She credits a senior-level hospital official for helping her gain the confidence to create a position for herself once her internship ended. In turn, “being vocal about both of our needs and my growth in workplace mannerisms allowed my manager to advance in his own career,” Hoebee said.

In a recent [Reddit discussion on mentoring vs. training, a participant](#) who goes by the name “dumpsterfyf,” stated, “Mentorship is reciprocal; the mentor selects the mentee as much as the mentee selects the mentor. That selection is similar to dating; alignment, chemistry and shared direction determine the outcome. Without that alignment, mentoring thought process and decision-making becomes theoretical, like raising a child in isolation.”

Mentoring encourages experienced workers to reexamine processes and to be open to alternatives. Gen Z employees are entering the work force with advanced technological skills and creative ideas that deserve to be considered.

Mentoring can also improve communication skills of veteran workers, stretch their collaboration capabilities and extend their own professional network, both internally and outside the company.

And mentoring is proven to improve the mental health of mentors, offset the effects of stress and promote well-being. **SMM**

Mentorship Develops Leaders at All Levels

Mentoring develops leadership skills by embedding them in everyday work life. Continuous, hands-on learning helps build practical leadership skills in a way that formal training cannot.

An essay published by [TechClass](#), an onboarding software platform, lists these unique benefits of mentorship:

Personalized Development – Because mentors address the nuanced, human side of leadership growth, they're able to provide guidance to the mentee's individual needs and goals, a customization that is difficult for formal trainers to achieve.

Knowledge Transfer – The loss of intellectual capital through the retirement of legacy leaders is one of the biggest threats that companies face in the next decade. Mentoring allows leaders to pass down institutional knowledge and hard-earned wisdom.

Higher Engagement and Retention – Employees who are mentored feel more valued and connected to their organization. A well-known study at Sun Microsystems discovered that retention rates for mentees (72%) and mentors (69%) were far higher than for employees who did not participate (49%).

Real-World Skills Develop – Mentoring accelerates learning by tackling actual projects – learning by doing. The mentorship process creates opportunities for growth and networking that mentees would otherwise not have.

Confidence Building – Mentees gain confidence and are more likely to stretch themselves as a result of regular conversations with a mentor. And the confidence-building goes both ways, as mentors start seeing themselves as leaders who have more to offer – something they may not have realized without the mentoring opportunity.

The 2026 Leadership Reality: 3 Realities, 4 Priorities, 1 Imperative

BY RUSS HILL

Jess Elmquist, chief people officer at Dutch Bros Coffee, recently summed up the moment: “In the 30 years I’ve been leading talent, this is the most disruption and change I’ve ever seen.”

For leaders navigating 2026, this isn’t a temporary condition to wait out. It’s the new operating environment.

The contrast we’re seeing in the field is striking. One day a senior executive at a Fortune 50 manufacturer tells us, “We’re in absolute crisis mode right now.” The same day, we sit in on a town hall with another business unit president celebrating a record year while pushing her team to adapt even faster. The question every leader has to answer: Which team are you leading?

Each year at Lone Rock Leadership, we publish “The Leadership Reality Report,” drawing on our work with more than 180 organizations and 28,000 leaders. This year’s report identifies three realities defining the environment and four priorities separating leaders who thrive from those whose value is plummeting.

3 Realities

Volatility is the new normal. Nearly half of CEOs say their company won’t be economically viable in 10 years on its current path. Today’s volatility isn’t cyclical, it’s structural, driven by technological acceleration, geopolitical fragmentation and economic policy uncertainty. Leaders who pause major decisions until “things settle down” are choosing to cede ground to competitors who move despite uncertainty.

Versatility is non-negotiable. According to the World Economic Forum, the skills required for jobs have shifted 25% since 2015 and are expected to change 65% by 2030 due to AI alone. The expertise that earned someone their current role won’t be enough to succeed in it. Learning must become a continuous discipline, not a phase of a career.

Ambiguity provides less visibility. Per EY’s 2025 CEO Survey, 57% of CEOs expect today’s geopolitical and economic uncertainty to last well beyond a year. Traditional planning assumed leaders could analyze the environment, identify the optimal path, and execute. That model breaks down when conditions shift faster than planning cycles can accommodate.



GET THE
FULL REPORT

Want the complete picture? Visit lone-rock.io to download “The 2026 Leadership Reality Report” and discover how your team can build the four competencies that will define winning organizations in the year ahead.

4 Priorities

Our data reveals four capabilities separating leaders who navigate this environment from those falling behind.

Adaptive Velocity – Companies that reinvent well achieve a 71% performance premium. Adaptive Velocity isn’t about adapting to change; it’s about driving it. Flexibility paired with urgency. As Lowe’s CEO Marvin Ellison puts it, “The pace of change has never been faster, and it’s only going to accelerate from here.” In a volatile world, latency is fatal.

Relationship Fluency – In a world consumed by AI, leaders who thrive will be fluent in something no machine can replicate: relationships. Sixty-one percent of employees working under empathetic leaders report being more innovative, and 76% report greater engagement. Relationship fluency isn’t a soft skill. It’s a performance multiplier.

Networked Influence – Job postings requiring cross-functional orchestration have increased 44% year-on-year. The premium is on leaders who can see across boundaries and orchestrate value across networks of teams, functions and partners. Organizations with aligned leadership teams are nearly twice as likely to outperform peers financially.

Focused Execution – Meetings have tripled since 2020, and 40% of AI-generated work requires significant rework. Focused execution is the discipline of saying no to good ideas so great ideas get the resources they need. As P&G CEO Jon Moeller models it: “Everything else is just noise.”

1 Imperative

The era of generalized soft skill training is over. The four competencies above are best developed through training that embodies them: agile, urgent, connected and tied directly to business outcomes. HR and L&D leaders who cling to legacy approaches are justified in their anxiety. Those who adapt and mobilize feel something different – energized.

The realities aren’t going away, and the priorities aren’t optional. The leaders who win in 2026 will be the ones who stop waiting for clarity and start building the capabilities that produce it. Meet the moment, or be left behind.

Russ Hill is the co-founder and senior partner at [Lone Rock Leadership](https://lone-rock.io).

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With Training, AI Stands for ‘Augmentation Initiative’

It's not replacing sales coaching, it's improving it

BY PAUL NOLAN

It's somehow awkward asking AI (in a few of its iterations) if it will replace human sales coaches. It feels like you're testing its confidence level or issuing a challenge.

Gemini, Google's AI multimodal tool, says AI won't entirely replace sales coaching, but adds that it already is “fundamentally transforming it from a manual, periodic process into an automated, continuous one.”

ChatGPT says AI is more than capable of handling a number of sales coaching responsibilities, possibly more effectively than humans. But it also gives sales managers reassurance that they are still needed because AI doesn't perform well with the most difficult aspects of coaching, which are “deeply human.”

“AI can diagnose patterns, but humans are still better at helping people transform behavior,” ChatGPT states.

Claude, Anthropic's AI assistant, echoes the sentiment that AI will augment rather than replace human coaches, and tacks on some constructive criticism about the current level of coaching that sales managers are providing.

Most current sales coaching that reps receive from managers isn't coaching at all, but rather pipeline management, Claude states. “Managers are spending their coaching hours on pipeline reviews and performance conversations, not on skill development. They're managing outcomes rather than building

capabilities.” (Claude accredits this information to the AI-driven sales coaching platform [SecondBody.ai](#).)

Where Coaches Can't Compete With AI

Claude identified other areas of coaching in which sales managers are falling short that AI can tackle with ease:

- **The middle 60% are being ignored.** Managers coach their top and bottom performers, while those in between are left to figure it out by themselves.
- **Feedback is delayed, vague and forgettable.** AI listens to calls or roleplay and delivers instant feedback that is specific.
- **Coaching quality is inconsistent and unverifiable.** Some coaches are excellent, others are not. AI introduces objective measurements that create consistently strong coaching.
- **Training doesn't translate into behavior.** A whopping 87% of training content is forgotten within a week if it isn't reinforced. AI is better equipped to produce behavior change that must result from training.

AI and Human Coaching Are Needed

One recent study about how salespeople specifically respond to human and AI coaching was completed by Allego, providers of an AI-powered sales enablement platform. In the study on [AI vs. human coaching](#), Dr. Carmen Simon, a cognitive

neuroscientist, discovered that both types of coaching have their strong suits.

81% of sales teams use AI, with these teams reporting significantly higher revenue growth (83%) compared to teams without AI (66%).

Salesforce "State of Sales" Report

Sellers who received AI feedback remembered 50% more content after 48 hours than those who received human feedback, the study found. However, human feedback triggered

more emotional engagement. When emotional support, motivation or personal connection are important, human involvement can't be replicated.

Rather than feel their job is threatened by AI agents, sales managers should be relieved that companies are recognizing that sales leaders are being stretched too thin. McKinsey states that 30% to 60% of sales managers' time is sucked up by administrative tasks and meetings. Another 10% to 50% is spent on non-managerial tasks, leaving 10% to 40% of their time for actual people management, including coaching.

As SecondBody.ai reports, organizations that are making strides in terms of sales coaching needs by addressing sales management time constraints are doing two things:

1. Giving managers AI-powered skill data so their coaching conversations are based on evidence, not anecdote.
2. Offloading repetitive practice coaching to an AI sales coach, so managers can focus their time on the coaching conversations that require human judgment.

Sales managers should be focused on figuring out how AI tools can take on the more mundane aspects of coaching (and administrative work) to free up time for the critically important human element of upskilling teams.

As NYU Business Professor Scott Galloway states, AI is an accelerator of human potential – but only if one knows how to implement it. Galloway warns, "AI won't take your job. But someone who understands AI will take your job." **SMM**

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