



# There's Never Been a Better Time to Be in Sales

By Barry Trailer

## Is there any future in sales?

Imagine you're a photographer who turned pro just before the digital revolution. You built and equipped a darkroom in your house. At great expense, you bought high quality lenses, camera bodies, lights, filters, and a hundred other things. You painstakingly researched the options before each of those purchases, and it took years before you could say to yourself: Yeah, I've got all the right gear.

*"Sales allows an individual to learn many aspects of business to have a successful career and allows you to pivot in different directions if that's desired."*

And just a few short years after that, the gear is obsolete, and the new iPhones and Samsungs are taking photographs of remarkable quality. So, is your career over? No. *It was never about the tools.* Your talent, training, creativity, experience and knowledge form the core of your professional ability. You put down the old tools and pick up the new ones.

True, some of your colleagues simply give up. The transition to digital is too wrenching, the learning curve too steep. Maybe they can't accept that things have changed. Maybe for them it *was* about the tools.

In the world of professional selling, we've all already made our transition to digital, and, more recently, to social. Yet we know that further change is on the way, and we can be sure that it will rock the boat so hard that the faint of heart will return to shore even if it means turning their backs on new opportunities appearing on the horizon.

A convenient way to describe this coming change is to simply say, "Artificial Intelligence." There is a lot of speculation and concern about what AI will or won't do to headcount in sales. One thing we know for sure is that the tools salespeople rely on today are going to be discarded tomorrow.

Who will rise to the challenge of new tools, new ways of working, and new buyer expectations? We're betting on two types of salespeople:

1. The best of the best – the people who have always been learning, always finding creative solutions, always doing more than making the sale. Like our hypothetical photographer, they don't define themselves by their tools.
2. The new ones, who are starting now or will soon start.

In category 1, we know who these people are. If you belong in this group, you know it. Anyone in any sales organization could name the sellers who are keeping pace with the changes in the market and in

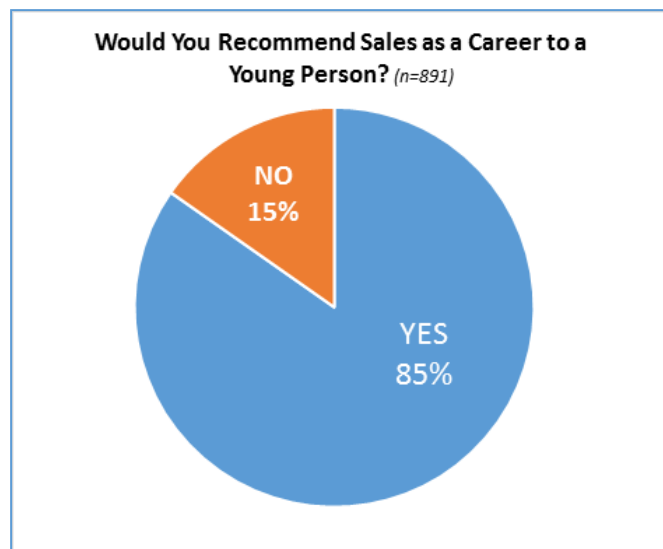
technology; who are crushing it even as overall quota attainment rates are slipping.

Category 2 has a question mark over it. We talk a lot about “next gen” technology, but not so much about the next generation of salespeople. Who will want to enter a field where the jobs are melting away, and where it’s all too easy to imagine a future in which the vendor’s AI and the buyer’s AI cut deals in the blink of an eye without any meddling humans in the middle?

At CSO Insights, our considered opinion is that the pessimism is unwarranted. In fact, we’ll go on record with the opposite proposition: There has never been a better time to become a professional salesperson.

We’re not the only ones who feel this way. CSO Insights recently polled 900 full-time sellers to see what they thought of sales as a career choice. Specifically, we asked, “Would you recommend sales as a career to young adults considering their future?” Their answers may surprise you.

Eighty-five percent (see box) answered emphatically that yes, they would recommend sales as a career. These are individuals who are, almost entirely, working for companies that are investing in developing their sales skills, paying salary and expenses to get them to a training program, and who compete in complex sales situations (i.e., multiple buying levels and individuals, complex decision-making, etc.). These are not minimum-wage, seasonal, or temporary sales people.



These are also individuals that make good incomes, enjoy working with people and like what they do (see boxed quotes). Yes, technology is going to change sales interactions in the coming years, because buying behaviors will continue to change and evolve. Transactional sales roles (i.e., rapid, repetitive, routine) are the most easily automated and, therefore, will be the first to evaporate. Interactional sales (i.e., complex, creative, protracted) will continue to have higher expectations and demand higher levels of sales competence.

What do these changes mean for Sales as a Profession (SaaP)? And if you’re trying to decide on a field of endeavor, is sales right for you? Read on and then decide.

### **Who Should Go into Sales?**

Yes, there will be considerable shrinkage in the overall number of sales jobs – anything that can be automated will be – but the lost jobs are at the transactional end of the spectrum. The world of professional sales is infinitely more complex, and populated on both the buying and selling sides by bright people who are making big things happen.

*“Selling helps overcome fear of rejection and that can propel a person to great heights in their career.”*

Big things – product innovation, new technologies, breakthroughs, advances in the state-of-the-art – require creativity, intuition, resourcefulness, and vision. Ezra Pound said that great art combines the shock of the unexpected with the satisfaction of the inevitable. We are reminded of this quote at moments along the customer’s journey when the salesperson is able to show the client new ways of looking at their problems as well as new ways of solving them.

The next generation of salespeople will have this kind of ability. They will relish problem-solving and crafting custom solutions. They will have the mindset to pursue lifelong learning and self-development. They’ll take pride in being nimble, adaptable, and highly attuned to fast-changing customer expectations and market conditions. And they’ll enjoy the feeling of being in control of their own destiny.

Far from seeing Artificial Intelligence as a threat, these next gen sellers will welcome it as a tool. One complaint we hear from salespeople today is that too much of their time is taken up with clerical tasks. But within the next five years, the tedious tasks of

the sales role will increasingly shift from the person to the machine. The young salespeople of tomorrow will literally not know what “paperwork” means.

The new sellers will come from diverse backgrounds. There have always been many routes to a sales career, but B2B companies seeking new hires often have preconceptions about who is right for the job. As “creativity” gains recognition as a highly desirable characteristic, sales organizations will begin to look at a larger pool of resumes.

So if your daughter or son has just completed an expensive degree in Renaissance Studies, and now they’re working part-time at Starbucks, you might want to call their attention to the fact that the world is changing. And the world of sales is hiring. Not just STEM majors, but others with lateral and critical thinking abilities. Not fast talkers, but fast thinkers. Not “coin operated” (i.e., money driven) individuals, but individuals driven by a direct connection between applied effort and earned income. Yes, financial rewards matter but they were further down the list of what matters (see below).

### **Putting “Professional” in the Profession**

Quite apart from the changes in technology and buyer behavior, there’s been a cultural shift that is dissolving the negative stereotypes that have dogged professional selling for so long. The key word here is “professional” – sales offers a career with ethical standards, formal processes, rigorous metrics, continuous learning, and a huge body of research behind it.

If these are, and increasingly will be, the characteristics that define professional sellers, we’ll conclude by cataloging the main points (in order) that our survey respondents identified as making sales a profession with a future.

*“Sales is an exciting and challenging job. There are always new things to learn and best practices to apply to get the deal.”*

- 1. Job varied and satisfying.** It was a little surprising, and tremendously gratifying, to discover how many professional salespeople are really happy with their jobs. There were many comments like this one: Sales offers the best of many worlds in the work environment and is constantly changing. The job rarely gets boring.” Several people went so far as to say their jobs are “fun” and even “exciting.” Other common themes were flexibility and the thrill of closing a deal.
- 2. Continuous learning and self-development.** “The opportunities to evolve, grow and learn never stop,” one respondent wrote. “Sales leads to maximum utilization of both sides of the brain,” said another, “including relationship building, social interactions, and personal brand development.” And many noted the development of communications and interpersonal skills.
- 3. Career with a future.** Our survey respondents were clear-eyed about the changing nature of the sales role, but they weren’t worried. “Even with new technologies and new ways of doing business, the skills and competencies of sales will always be crucial for successful deals,” said one. Another great comment was that, “Selling with quality is the distinct future for upcoming generations.” And several noted that competition for high performers is strong now and will only increase over time.
- 4. A great job for the right person.** There was broad agreement among the survey respondents that the “right person” for sales has two essential traits: They are self-motivated and they like people. “It’s not easy, and it’s not for everyone,” some cautioned, but “young creative minds who like a challenging environment should be in sales.” And, “It’s rewarding to help people solve problems.” It’s notable, too, that salespeople themselves did not subscribe to outdated ideas that sales is just for extraverts or fast-talkers.
- 5. Earnings are commensurate with efforts.** Simply put, “You can earn more by putting in more effort.” “Meet your goals and get rewarded based on performance.” “If you can build relationships, learn the products and make deals, the income will follow.” And here is a motto to live by from one field rep: “The sky is the limit. Hustle and be rewarded.”
- 6. Self-determination.** Flexibility, not being stuck at a desk all day, feeding one’s entrepreneurial spirit without having to start a business, all contributed to a sense of freedom and control over one’s time. “Sales still provides the ability to control your own destiny while making a meaningful contribution to the growth of the company.”
- 7. Working in sales prepares you for other careers.** This was a common theme, and it should appeal to college grads who may have clear goals but don’t see a path that will take them there. Our respondents had excellent advice: “The skills that you learn will propel you in sales as well as any other profession.” “Lots of opportunity to learn transferable skills.” “The behavioral change business is universal – these are skills you can take anywhere and add value.”

## **Conclusion**

We see three forces converging so that there has never been a better time to become a salesperson.

First, there are the various technological innovations that fall under the AI umbrella. These will make the sales role less tedious, more productive, and better able to help customers in deep and enduring ways.

Second, we can expect a new wave of young salespeople who won't need to be told to think outside the box, because they were never in a box to begin with. And just as they will deliver great value to their organizations, their employers will pay that back with professional development opportunities, a clear path to career advancement, and compensation aligned with performance.

Third, the new generation of sellers will work in a world where they are respected as highly skilled, creative, resourceful, and indispensable to the global economy.

Is now the perfect time to go into sales? You decide, after all, it's your career.

## **About CSO Insights**

[CSO Insights](#) is the independent research arm within Miller Heiman Group™, dedicated to improving the performance and productivity of complex B2B sales. The CSO Insights team of respected analysts provides sales leaders with the research, data, expertise, and best practices required to build sustainable strategies for sales performance improvement. CSO Insights' annual sales effectiveness studies, along with its benchmarking capabilities, are industry standards for sales leaders seeking operational and behavioral insights into how to improve their sales performance and to gain holistic assessments of their selling and sales management efficacy. Annual research studies address sales and service best practices, sales enablement and sales performance optimization.