

The Evolution of B2B Sales: Trends and Transformations

A statistical analysis of sales leaders' perspectives on B2B sales trends, challenges and technologies

B2B sales resides at the heart of a business: the intersection of companies and their customers. Despite its central role, many B2B sales teams have been slow to adopt technology that helps them close deals efficiently—instead, they’ve continued to rely heavily on paper-based processes. Over the past few years, however, sales teams have been inching toward digital transformation. Progress was slow and steady—until the COVID-19 pandemic hit.

Switching to remote work accelerated the digitization trajectory, and now there’s no turning back—B2B sales teams expect about half of deals to be purely remote after the pandemic, up from just one-third before the pandemic. These shifts have driven sales teams to consider adoption of new technologies and approaches, but this is just the beginning.

Now, in an effort to adapt to the new reality of their work, B2B sales teams are prioritizing digitization and customer experience more than ever. Though these trends have long been buzzworthy topics, sales teams are now making real progress, from adopting new technology to pivoting their selling strategies.

The potential for technology to transform how sales teams work and how they serve customers is vast. Unlocking that potential is a central driver that defines sales success now and in the future. While a majority of B2B sales teams consider themselves to be innovators already taking advantage of technology, DocuSign’s research reveals that many are not actually leveraging their available toolsets effectively. There is a tangible opportunity to optimize, automate and improve sales workflows to close deals more efficiently and be prepared for disruption.

DocuSign's report based on data from over 750 surveyed B2B sales professionals offers a look at the state of B2B sales in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic. The report highlights underutilized technology and identifies an opportunity to digitize and automate a key process that slows sales down: contract management.

50%

of deals are expected to be purely remote after the pandemic, up from just one-third before the pandemic

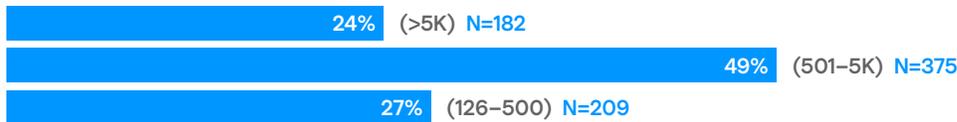
Methodology and demographics

For this report, DocuSign surveyed 766 B2B sales decision makers and influencers during November 2020. Respondents spanned 10 countries on five continents, representing a mixed sample of industries, titles and organization sizes.

The most respondents were from the United States, while others came from the United Kingdom, Germany, ANZ/Singapore, Canada, Japan and others.

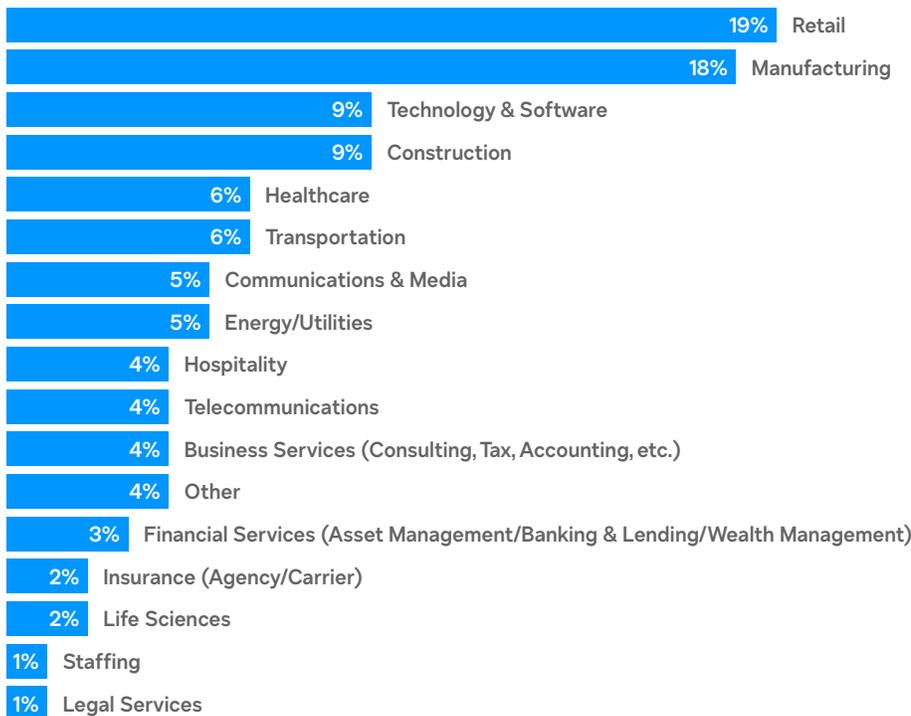
Roughly half of respondents (49%) were from companies with 501-5000 employees, while the other half were from mid-sized companies and enterprise firms.

Company size



Participants held a variety of roles, including sales management, field reps and sales operations. About a third identified as sales managers, while about a quarter identified as director of sales. Finally, respondents represented a wide range of industries, including retail, manufacturing, software, construction and others.

Industry



North America

- 18% United States (N=319)
- 10% Canada (N=73)

LATAM

- 6% Mexico (N=48)
- 10% Brazil (N=76)

APAC

- 11% Japan (N=82)
- 12% ANZ/Singapore (N=88)

EMEA

- 8% France (N=65)
- 12% Germany (N=90)
- 2% Netherlands (N=14)
- 12% United Kingdom (N=91)

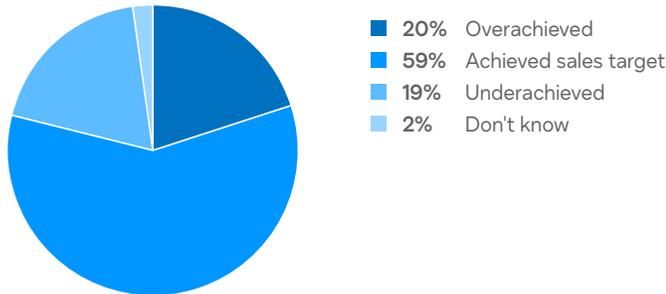
State of B2B sales

Snapshot of sales

B2B sales teams had to adapt to a new work landscape, including a shift to remote work and changing expectations from customers and prospects. Given these shifts, we start with an overview of what sales looks like today—how they reached targets, measured success and collaborated with other teams.

In years past, more than 80% of B2B sales teams exceeded their targets ([source](#)) but 2020 was notably more difficult, with only 20% exceeding targets. This suggests that there's plenty of potential for teams to improve how they are operating and closing deals in a more digital and remote selling environment.

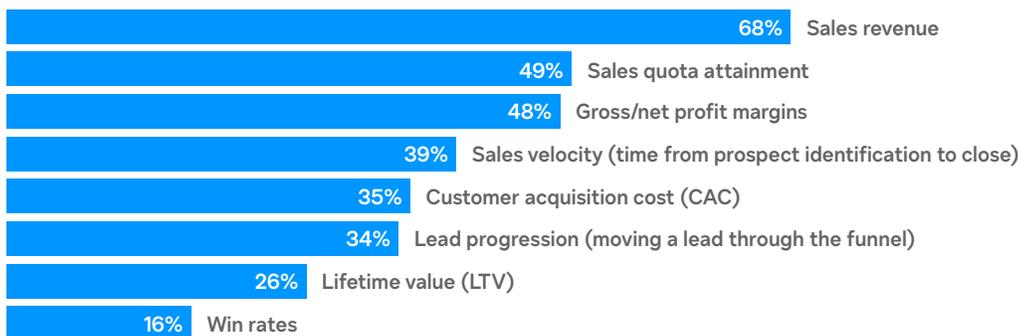
Percentage of companies reaching sales targets in 2020



B2B teams' ability to reach their targets also plays a role in the KPIs they use to measure success. Overachievers (those that overperformed their target) are more likely than underachievers (those that underperformed their target) to measure sales velocity (50% vs. 31%), customer acquisition cost (45% vs. 30%) and lead progression (45% vs. 33%).

Overall, however, revenue is clearly the top KPI for sales teams with quota attainment and profitability also considered important. Notably, win rate, which can be a proxy for efficiency, competitive standing and effectiveness, is not highly utilized.

Top KPIs for B2B sales teams



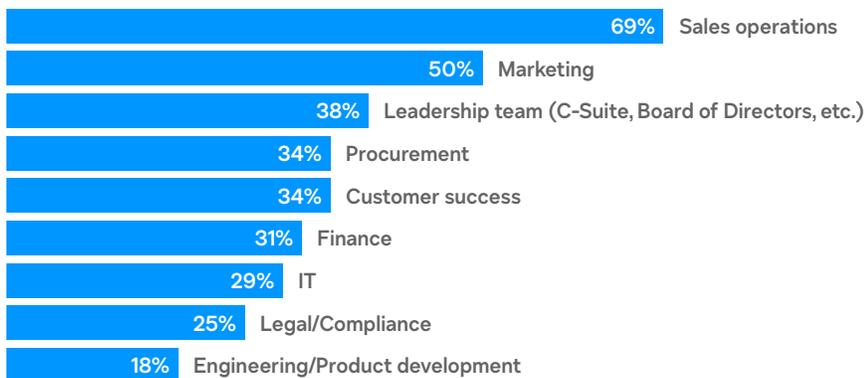
With these KPIs driving behavior, sales teams have focused on selling to existing customers rather than targeting new customers, likely due to the unique challenges of this year. However, high performers sold more to new customers than low performers.

Proportion of sales to new vs current customers



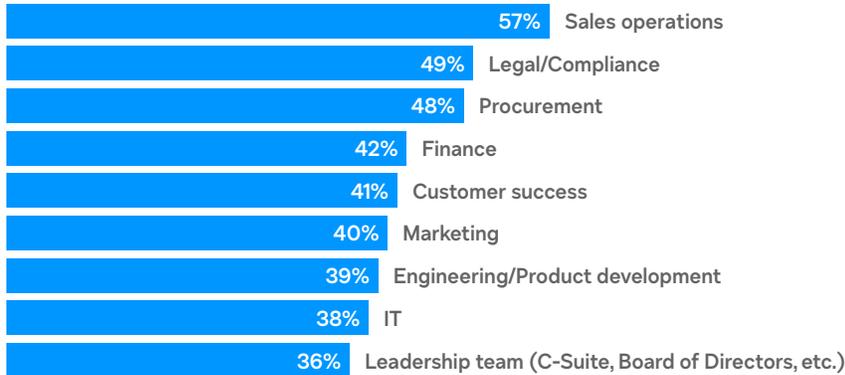
As sales teams navigated remote work and adjusted to an unusual year, one thing didn't change: the need to work closely with other departments to close deals. Sales is an innately collaborative process, from working with marketing on lead generation to handing contracts off to legal for review. But the shift to remote work likely made it more difficult than ever to work seamlessly with colleagues. Less than half of sales teams collaborate with departments outside of sales ops and marketing.

Teams that B2B sales collaborates with



In fact, even without the obstacles introduced by the pandemic, working together isn't always simple. Sales operations, for example, is not only the most common collaborator for B2B sales teams, but also the most challenging group for sales to work with. The relationship that B2B sales teams have with the legal department is complex as well—this is particularly problematic given that any large deal generally requires legal involvement, making effective collaboration absolutely essential. Improving internal collaboration presents a significant opportunity for sales teams to improve their processes and the customer experience.

Most challenging teams for B2B sales to collaborate with



With the tumultuous year behind them, B2B sales teams have overcome many hurdles. However, the trends and challenges that arose in 2020 aren't going anywhere. Instead, they are shaping the future of B2B sales.

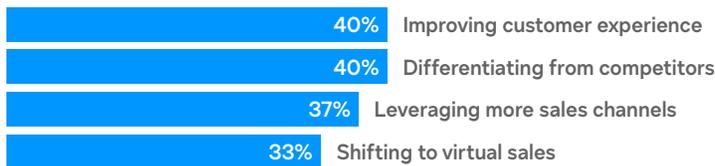
Sales priorities and trends

One of the most important trends in B2B sales is the growing focus on customer experience, which can be improved through digital transformation and technologies like automation and artificial intelligence. These trends have been paid lip service for years, but now sales teams are taking action on them in order to adapt to the current business landscape.

Unlike in [past surveys](#) where customer experience and digital transformation ranked as very low priorities, this year, customer experience specifically is king. It's the top priority across companies around the world, and 67% say it will become even more of a priority in the next five years. The pandemic likely played a role in this shift in priority, but there's more to it.

Digital transformation is closely tied to teams' ability to efficiently deliver a great customer experience, from opening up new sales channels to simplifying contract execution. The pressure to carry out true transformation is growing. For example, B2B buyers now prefer to engage with suppliers through digital and self-service channels, placing growing emphasis on multi-experience selling, according to the [Gartner Future of Sales 2025](#).

Current priorities for B2B sales departments



In the past, customer experience was on sales teams' radar, but it was overshadowed by other focus areas

Just 4% of respondents said improving customer experience was a top three priority for sales last year

The best way to meet customer expectations is to build a flexible digital experience for B2B sales. Digital transformation is no longer just a buzzword, it's a commitment that is imperative to make to improve sales now and in the future.

Not only is customer experience a more important priority than ever before, but other top priorities are directly tied to it: leveraging more sales channels, shifting to virtual sales and differentiating from competitors. Almost every priority—including the basics of more leads, better closing and better response rate—is inextricably linked to customer experience.

Looking beyond priorities at important trends for B2B sales more broadly, customer experience once again tops the list and digital transformation is evident throughout. These two themes dominate the list of trends from selling through multiple channels to virtual selling and use of AI. Improving experience with technology is not simply a temporary priority—it's the top ongoing requirement.

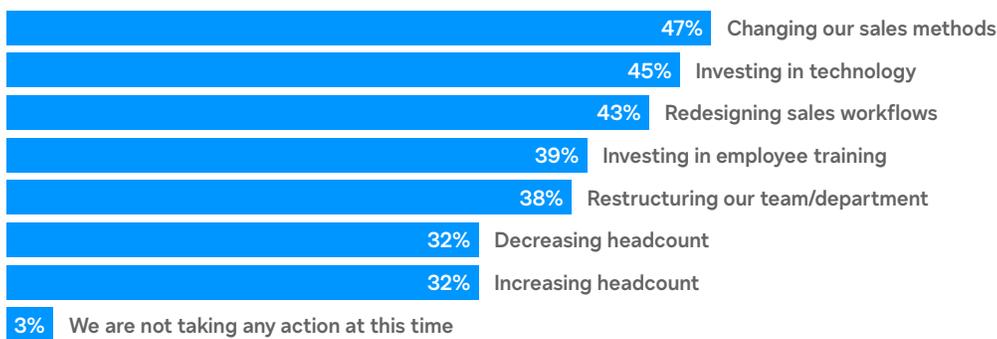
Diving into more detail, sales teams indicate significant interest in using data and AI to make more informed sales decisions, enable self-service and personalize sales approaches. These are trends that aim to create a better experience and teams are keenly aware of the need to implement them.

Impact of COVID-19

When the COVID-19 pandemic forced companies around the world to pivot to remote operations, just 22% say they were very prepared.

The pandemic, however, will certainly not be the last disruption that companies face. Disruption can happen quickly, so companies are intent on making changes to get ahead of future disruptions. Instead of reorganizing their teams, sales leaders are focused on modernizing processes and technology to adjust to the new selling environment—focusing on digital transformation, one of the two big themes identified in the previous section.

Changes B2B sales departments made as a result of COVID-19



Diving deeper into how specific changes are being prioritized, digital transformation initiatives are expected to become even more urgent and important. Traditional sales metrics like response rate, deal closure and selling time are now seen as less urgent than digital transformation initiatives. It's surprising, however, to see that customer experience initiatives such as shifting to a trusted advisor role fall a bit below traditional sales metrics in terms of future urgency. As sales teams continue to navigate their new normal, we expect both customer experience and digital transformation broadly to remain important priorities with top sales teams investing the most in these areas.

Change in priority urgency as a result of COVID-19

Digital transformation focus

Leveraging new sales channels (social selling, etc.)



Shifting to virtual sales



Differentiating from competitors/losing fewer deals to competitors



Digital transformation



- Increased in urgency
- No impact
- Decreased in urgency

Traditional sales focus

Improving response rates from prospects



Closing more deals



Maximizing selling time



Customer experience focus

Improving the customer experience



Shifting to a trusted advisor role (vs. a sales rep)



Process focus

Reducing administrative work/making work processes more efficient



Improving quality and volume leads



The tangible change that sales teams will feel the most from the COVID-19 pandemic is certainly the shift to remote selling. Before the onset of COVID-19, only one-third of deals were remote (no in-person interaction), but post-pandemic respondents expect half of all deals will be remote (49% remote, 51% in-person).

As companies get more comfortable with remote selling, this shift will likely continue. Sellers and buyers are already getting more comfortable with the value of remote sales. [McKinsey found](#) that 75% of sales teams say that remote engagement is at least as effective as traditional in-person sales, compared to only 54% early in the pandemic.

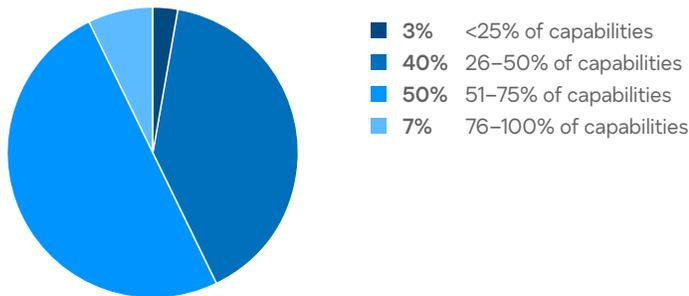
This shift to remote selling should not be ignored by sales teams that want to continue to win. It is critical for teams to act on their priorities of customer experience and digital transformation by investing and enacting true change to avoid falling behind in a new selling paradigm.

Technology enables companies to lean into industry trends and new opportunities

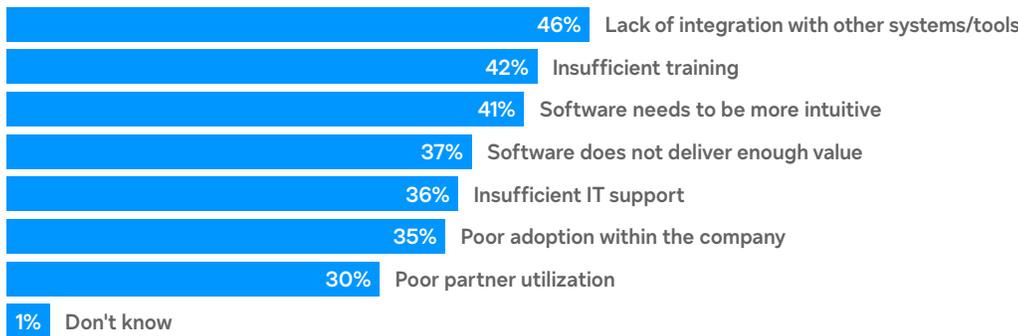
Even before the pandemic struck, sales teams were turning to technology to address three key needs: automation, speed and customer experience. Now, 65% of respondents consider themselves innovators, meaning they transform their team through the implementation of new solutions and tools. But many aren't as innovative as they may think.

Despite self-identifying as "innovators," respondents struggle to unlock the potential of their technologies and overcome tactical challenges—93% of B2B sales teams are not fully utilizing their tools. However, proper implementation of the right solutions can overcome some of the top challenges with these tools, including integration, training and ease of use.

Extent to which B2B sales teams use existing sales software



Reasons why B2B sales teams underutilize sales software



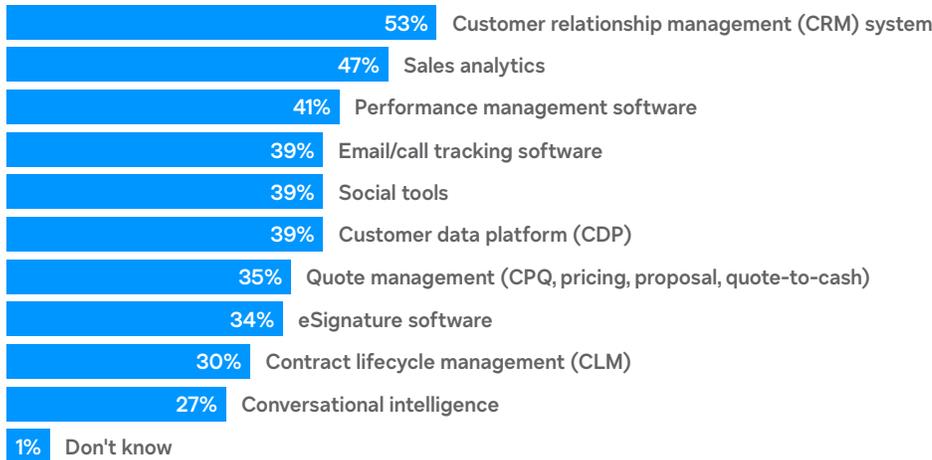
For sales teams, getting the most value out of their technology would mean more effectively achieving some of their top desired outcomes, such as saving time, improving customer and supplier experience and reducing errors. These outcomes translate to important business results, such as strengthening customer relationships and closing deals faster.

B2B sales teams' desired technology outcomes



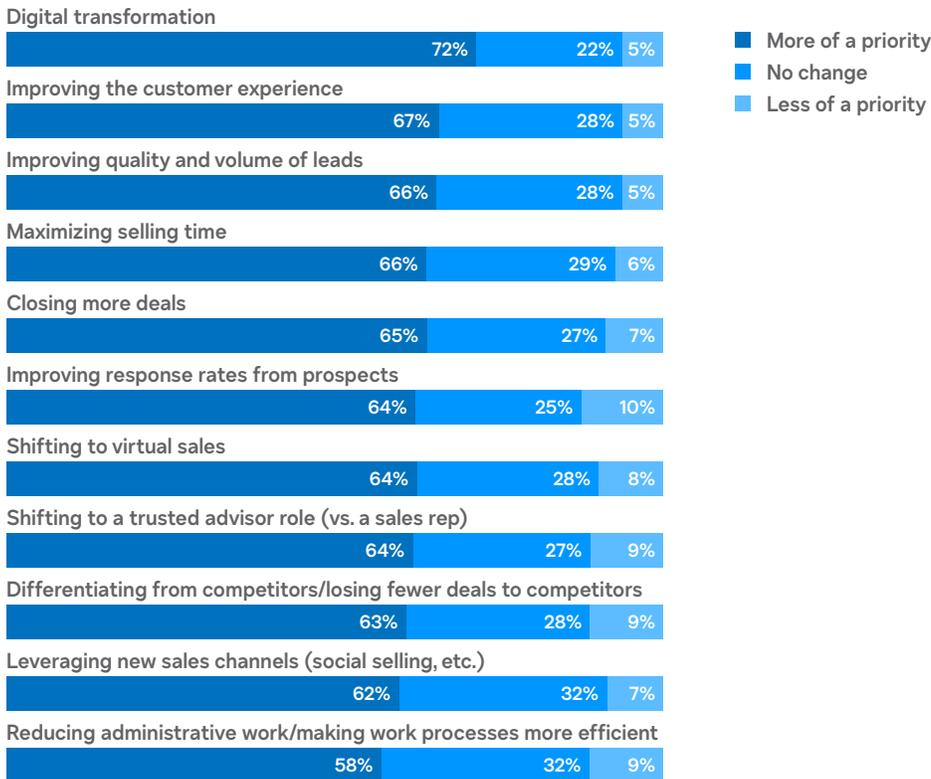
Sales teams rely on several technologies to try to achieve these outcomes with CRM being the primary platform for sales—more than half have adopted it. Sales analytics and performance management tools are gaining traction as well, but there is opportunity for organizations to better leverage proven technologies like quote management (CPQ), electronic signature and contract lifecycle management (CLM). Overachievers, in particular, use electronic signature and CLM more than underachievers (40% vs. 34% and 33% vs. 17%), meaning there’s room for underachievers to adopt the technology and improve how they work.

Software used by B2B sales teams



As priorities continue to shift over the next five years, B2B sales teams will continue to focus on digital transformation and customer experience. Two-thirds of respondents say closing more deals and shifting to virtual sales will become more of a priority, and CLM tools are instrumental in enabling both of these transformations through automation.

B2B sales teams' priorities over the next 5 years



Due to the pandemic and the digital transformation efforts that were already in motion, there's a pressing need for B2B sales to tap into the deeper potential of existing and new technologies. This is particularly true when it comes to underutilized tools such as CLM, that are designed to deliver the automation, time savings and customer experience improvements that sales teams clearly want.

Contract processes are ripe for digitization

Contracts are a core element of the work that B2B sales teams do every day. Not only do these essential documents formally finalize the sale, they also serve as customer touch points. That makes contracts key pieces of the customer experience. Still, it's an area that has not received the same attention as customer data management with CRM systems, making it a great opportunity for digitization and differentiation.

The volume, value and complexity of sales contracts at B2B organizations provides some context for why contracting should be a high priority for digitization:

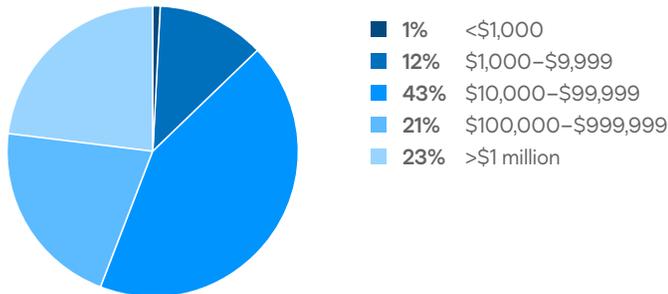
Contract volume

The volume of contracts that most teams deal with is massive—80% of sales teams execute over 500 contracts a month, according to Forrester research commissioned by DocuSign.

Contract value

The value of B2B sales contracts is significant, too. While 87% of contracts are over \$10K in value, 44% are over \$100K and 23% are over \$1M. As contract value grows, it becomes even more important for sales teams to execute flawlessly and provide a seamless, efficient customer experience.

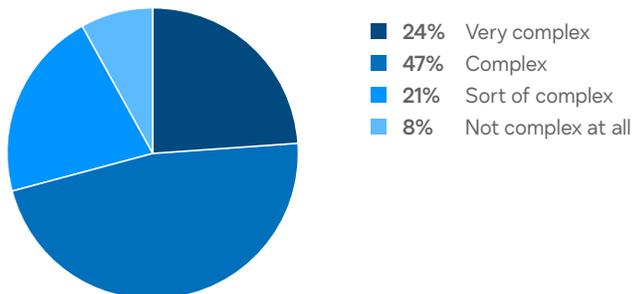
Average contract value of B2B sales



Contract complexity

Not only are sales contracts large in terms of volume and value, but 71% of B2B sales teams also say they are complex or very complex.

B2B sales teams' assessment of current contract complexity



Several factors contribute to this complexity, including the need to customize contract terms (38%), errors (37%), lack of visibility (37%) and managing a document through layers of routing and approvals (36%). Version control was also a concern for 29% of respondents.

46%

of respondents say too many manual tasks is the top challenge to collaborating on contracts with other departments

85%

of U.S. respondents consider their sales contracts to be complex or very complex

Automation can alleviate much of this complexity, yet less than 10% of sales teams have fully automated any part of the contracting process. Despite this, sales teams are starting to understand the value of automation: 70% say automation of most processes is a medium or high priority. Because of this, the sales contracting process is an excellent example of an opportunity to improve customer experience via digital transformation.

B2B sales teams' automation priorities	Prioritized automation	Fully automated
Target identification	76%	6%
Order management	74%	8%
Data entry	74%	8%
Prospect management	73%	8%
Contract execution	73%	7%
Contract creation	73%	8%
Contract approvals	72%	7%
Post-sale actions	71%	7%
Analyzing and extracting contract clauses/terms	70%	8%
Identity verification	69%	8%
Legal service requests	68%	8%
Storing agreements	66%	7%

Sales teams can execute on this desire for contracting automation with CLM solutions that unify and streamline all of these priority processes to close deals faster. Perhaps even more importantly, CLM is a critical step in sales teams' digital transformation and customer experience improvement efforts—their two top priorities for the next five years.

The state of sales is stronger with the DocuSign Agreement Cloud

The DocuSign Agreement Cloud enables B2B sales teams to tackle digital transformation and customer experience initiatives, supplement existing investments in CRM/CPQ systems and overcome industry disruptions by automating the contracting process.

The DocuSign Agreement Cloud for Sales includes:

Solution	Description	Proof point
eSignature	Sign complex sales contracts in minutes with easy-to-use forms that work on virtually any device anywhere	Improved experience: Refinitiv uses DocuSign eSignature to turn sales contracts around 95% faster yielding 20% higher customer satisfaction
CLM	Generate custom contracts with a click, speed through legal approvals and complex negotiations with real-time collaboration tools	Business value: Forrester estimates an enterprise will see 356% ROI and \$6M net present value
Insight & Analyzer	Use AI to automatically identify and analyze risks and value opportunities across existing contracts and incoming contracts and redlines	Faster, more compliant sales: Global telco and IT provider now analyzes sales contracts 83% faster with 6% higher accuracy

The data in this report shows that 2020 was a wake-up call for many sales teams and the shift to remote selling is here to stay. Many companies finally jumped into action with a focus on digital transformation in order to improve the customer experience, perform more efficiently and prepare for whatever unexpected changes the future may hold.

Learn more about how the DocuSign Agreement Cloud can help your sales team handle disruption and win at www.docusign.com.au/sales or [contact us directly](#).

About DocuSign
 DocuSign helps organisations connect and automate how they prepare, sign, act on and manage agreements. As part of the DocuSign Agreement Cloud, DocuSign offers eSignature: the world's #1 way to sign electronically on practically any device, from almost anywhere, at any time. Today, more than 750,000 customers and hundreds of millions of users in over 180 countries use DocuSign to accelerate the process of doing business and to simplify people's lives.

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