

5 Ways to Improve B2B Sales Productivity in the Midst of a Labour Shortage

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[London, UK] [May 2022]— Even as sales volumes return to pre-pandemic levels – and in some cases, above – distributors and manufacturers are struggling to find enough qualified labour to meet that demand. In fact, many report that the challenge today is greater than it was pre-pandemic.

According to the Workforce Institute at UKG, 54% of hiring decision-makers for U.S. manufacturers and multinational manufacturers report that finding talent with the right skills has been difficult – whereas only 38% reported facing this challenge pre-pandemic.

And this issue doesn't show signs of stopping.

A mere 6% of business economists surveyed believe labour shortages will ease by the end of the year, according to a National Association for Business Economics Report. A third of the respondents weren't sure what to expect.

Considering how far-reaching this issue is for many businesses, it's time to get intentional in other areas where you can have greater control. Business leaders often overlook the unrealized potential for productivity improvements in their organizations.

To help leaders prioritize their next steps, we're providing a three-part series covering top areas where distributors and manufacturers can improve productivity and counteract the impact of the labour shortage. Here, we'll cover the first: sales productivity.

Why sales is primed for productivity improvements

If you can get customer service reps and salespeople out of the trenches of performing needlessly time-consuming tasks, and provide them with tools that help them do their jobs better and faster, you free them to do more with their skills. That "more" translates to gains for your business, including increased revenue and better customer experiences.

If you're short-staffed and running a too-lean ship already, your CSRs and salespeople might be struggling just to meet the bare minimum for productivity. In this instance, "more" will help you stabilize your business so you can support future gains and growth. And the processes and tools you put in place to improve productivity can help you seamlessly manage demand spikes as they come, without adding extra staff or resources.

It's not just about unrealized opportunities; it's also the cost in time and money that you face if you don't implement productivity-focused strategies.

How to improve sales force productivity

Any company can benefit from improved productivity in the sales process. Here are five strategies to help your CSRs and salespeople be more productive, even without adding staff.

1 Embrace hybrid selling

Many distributors and manufacturers discovered efficiency gains from virtual selling during the pandemic. Being able to reach customers where they were made it easier to reach them in a timely manner, deliver resources and demonstrations, and be more available as needed. Cutting back on travel also saved time and money. Some companies were even able to reach more existing and potential customers using a virtual model than they did when they targeted customers almost exclusively in person.

Though there will always be a place for face-to-face, examine your selling processes and identify where you might be able to maintain virtual options without losing the benefits of in-person selling. Consider a sales program that's a hybrid of both to help your sales team get more done.

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2 Optimize needlessly time-intensive tasks

Depending on the study, CSRs and salespeople spend one-third to half of each workday turning purchase orders into sales orders. They might spend two to three hours each day rekeying purchase orders, with each order taking up to 30 minutes. They also spend a significant amount of time fixing errors each day. The cost of manual order entry, according to The Hackett Group, can be as much as \$26 per order.

It's clear that this is a valuable focus area for productivity improvements in sales. Automating this and other time-intensive manual processes can reduce costs by as much as 80%.

Tasks that have better solutions today include:

- Answering emails one by one.
- Having unnecessary meetings that "could've been an email."
- Travelling to customer sites when virtual visits will suffice.
- Frequently searching for information that could be made more readily accessible.
- Manually pulling together quotes.
- Manually processing and submitting orders.

Solutions include:

- Providing easy-to-access digital materials for frequently searched information and/or implementing an analytics solution with user-friendly dashboards.
- Adopting hybrid selling to reduce on-site visits but maintain customer engagement.
- Reducing the number of unnecessary meetings and encouraging the use of collaborative tools instead.
- Automating time-wasting manual processes where it is most cost-effective, such as answering emails, processing sales orders and responding to RFQs.

For example, a top electrical distributor in North America automated its sales order process with [the Conexiom Platform for Sales](#) and eliminated \$3.3 million in costs associated with manual entry annually.

3 Decrease errors

Fixing errors is like going into a negative productivity zone – and a money pit. The work has already been done and now must be revisited by expert CSRs or salespeople who could otherwise be performing value-add tasks.

For many businesses, fixing errors absorbs hours of time each day, particularly when it comes to sales order processing. Additionally, fixing errors means added labour costs and potential interruptions and processing delays, added fees, wasted materials, write-offs and more.

[Upgrading to an automated, intelligent solution](#) reduces the likelihood of errors, among other benefits. However, before you implement technology to solve the problem, first analyze where errors happen most frequently and assess how you might adjust your current processes to reduce them.

4 Reallocate human capital to value-add activities

Automation gives your CSRs and salespeople hours of their day back to apply more sophisticated selling strategies and provide better customer experiences, all of which lead to greater profitability for your business. Your CSRs and salespeople are on the front lines in terms of revenue generation. Keeping them bogged down in non-value-add tasks that can be otherwise streamlined, optimized and even automated is like keeping your revenue faucet at a drip.

Plan for strategic reallocation to value-add activities, working with your employees and requesting their insights as to how best to redirect them.

- If your organization is struggling to meet existing demand, this frees them up to better perform their immediate sales and service activities, helping with overall recovery.
- If you're in a place where you're recovered, it enables them to apply their skills to sophisticated selling, such as cross-selling and upselling, and to better nurture existing relationships.

- If you're ready to grow, your staff can now use this time to acquire new customers.

Essentially, you're "redeploying" those wasted hours toward business-sustaining and -building activities. And you're empowering your CSRs and salespeople to truly fulfill – and exceed – their potential. They have room to be more proactive versus reactive, assess opportunities for growth with customers, quickly address customer concerns and more.

"Our CSR team used to spend 80% of their time on order entry, and 20% of their time on customers. Now, it's 80% on customers and 20% on order entry."

Darlene Bardin, Director of Customer Service, [Genpak](#)

5 Be prepared for future productivity and growth

The technologies and processes you implement to support productivity at your organization can also help buffer you against – and capture – spikes in demand. They enable you to scale as needed without adding resources, so you can pursue growth opportunities. Sales order automation, for instance, can help you scale to process a surge in orders without adding staff.

Beat the labour shortage – empower your existing staff

These are just a few strategies manufacturers and distributors can apply to their sales processes today to maintain and improve productivity, even as the labour shortage continues. Implementing technologies that automate and simplify processes, such as [touchless order processing](#), will help you do more with less and optimize your existing staff's productivity. You'll empower your CSRs and salespeople to develop stronger customer relationships and pursue new revenue opportunities.

Company Contact:

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Conexiom

T. +44 07968 939 627

E. info@conexiom.com

W. <https://conexiom.com/>

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