



What Does AI Mean for First Line Sales Managers?

Managers are drowning in data as the growth engine stalls

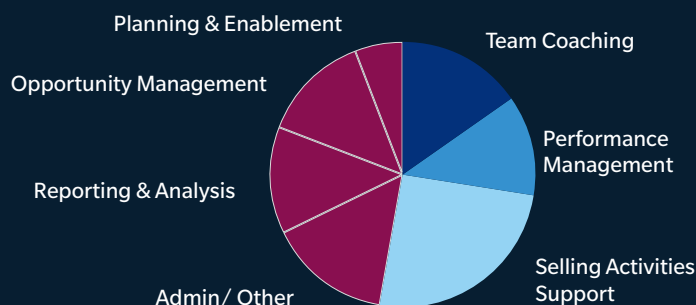
Over the last four years, revenue growth collapsed from 22% in 2021 to an estimated 5% in 2025. EBITDA barely moved, inching from 10% to 12%. Companies work harder, add headcount, invest in tools, but growth rates continue to decline.

The problem isn't lack of discipline. For decades, sales leaders have fixated on process rigor, creating frameworks, qualification criteria, and dashboards to monitor activity levels. The frontline manager role evolved accordingly, with days consumed by pipeline reviews, forecast calls, and CRM oversight. But in building these growth engines, organizations disconnected managers from the work that actually drives performance, developing their people.

SBI analyzed how 515 frontline sales managers spend their time. Forty-seven percent goes to administrative tasks, reporting, and opportunity management. Just 15% goes to coaching. Today's managers are so buried in reviewing what happened, they have limited time to influence what happens next.

This lack of coaching capacity is particularly damaging now. The average buyer experiences seven change events during a purchase, forcing constant reevaluation of how the purchase aligns with updated needs. Sellers must help buyers navigate this complexity, connecting decisions made months ago to business needs that evolved last week. Developing these strategic problem-solving skills requires intensive coaching, precisely what managers no longer have time to provide.

Average Sales Manager Time Distribution



n=515 frontline sales managers
Source: SBI Time Spend Assessment

47%
of Manager's
Time is Spent
on Required
Activities

AI redistributes managers' time, making the role more human-centric

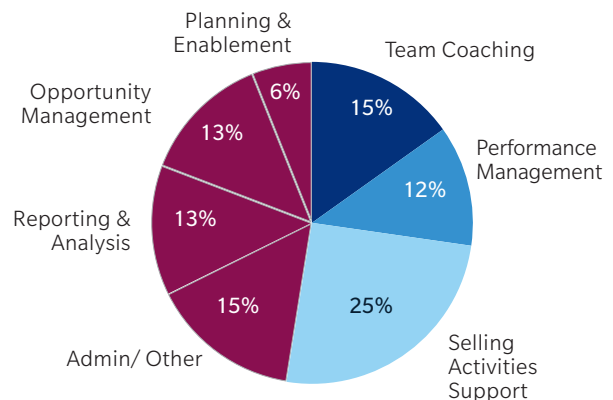
A convergence of technologies offers a way forward. Predictive analytics can forecast deal outcomes, generative AI can draft communications, and conversational agents can handle common inquiries. These tools promise to automate many of the necessary but time-consuming tasks that prevent managers from focusing on their teams.

The potential impact is profound. We project time spent on required activities will drop from 47% to just 26%. Coaching time will more than double, rising from 15% to 32%, making it the manager's single biggest activity. The job transforms from analyzing data about the past to helping sellers shape the future. AI promises to make sales management more human, not less.

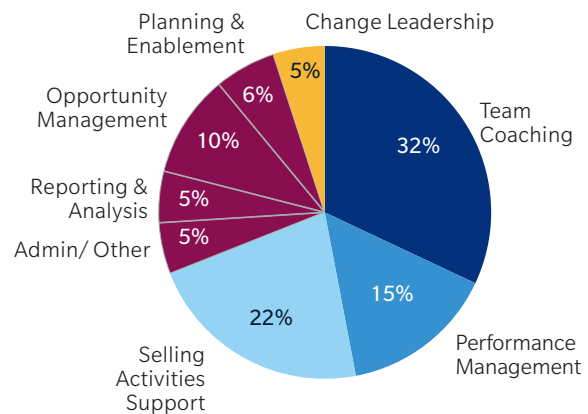
Managers are optimistic about spending more time developing their teams, but they've heard these promises before. CRM was meant to improve visibility and forecast accuracy but often became another administrative burden. Sales enablement platforms would streamline content delivery but required constant curation. Each wave of technology promised efficiency and too often delivered more work. Their skepticism is warranted.

AI can be different, but only if managers actively lead their teams through adoption. If tools aren't seamlessly integrated into workflows, or if they face significant human resistance, AI will underwhelm, managers will continue focusing on required activities, and AI will become another failed technological investment.

Current Manager Time Distribution



AI-Supported Manager Time Distribution



- **Time spent on required activities falls to 26%**
- **Change leadership becomes a core responsibility**
- **Coaching time doubles to become biggest activity**

Note: AI Supported Time Disruption based on secondary sources showing estimated time savings by early adopters; does not equal 100% due to rounding
n=515 frontline sales managers
Source: SBI Time Spend Assessment

Realizing AI's Promise Requires Managers' Support

Develop Strategic Judgement

Manager Actions:

- Deep debrief on unusual deals to build pattern recognition
- Teach when to trust AI vs when context overrides data

Team Impact: Win complex deals standard approaches can't

Support Creative Problem Solving

Manager Actions:

- Present real customer problems and how they evolved over time
- Explicitly reward innovative thinking, even failures

Team Impact: Differentiation competitors can't match

Build Trust and Psychological Safety

Manager Actions:

- Highlight each seller's unique strengths AI cannot replicate
- Create spaces to experiment and model AI's limits on real deals

Team Impact: Adoption without fear of replacement

Provide Oversight and Accountability

Manager Actions:

- Identify warning signs the algorithm is missing context
- Ensure "the system recommended it" isn't an excuse

Team Impact: Customer trust protected from AI errors



Change management elevates from a side project to a core mandate

To realize AI's promise, managers must master four change leadership skills.

1. Trust-building moves from passive assumption to active intervention

When AI tools arrive, sellers wonder if they're being replaced. If AI can analyze deals, recommend next steps, and handle routine buyer interactions, what's left?

Managers must address this through specific conversations about each seller's irreplaceable human strengths. This requires managers to:

- Have specific discussions about each seller's distinctive capabilities
- Create spaces to experiment with AI tools without fear of judgment
- Share examples when the algorithm got it wrong
- Reward sellers who thoughtfully override AI recommendations

3. Problem-solving pivots from standardization to creativity

AI optimizes for known patterns but struggles with novel situations. Because AI recommendations work well for standard deals, teams naturally gravitate toward standardization. But complex B2B sales increasingly require creativity. Differentiation comes from understanding and tailoring approaches to each buying group's unique needs.

Managers must actively cultivate creative problem-solving. Without this, AI adoption can inadvertently destroy the adaptability sales teams need to help buyers and create differentiation.

2. Strategic judgement evolves from following algorithms to questioning them

Teaching sellers when to trust AI and when to override it requires managers to help teams balance an AI-first mindset with their own judgment. AI recommendations carry an aura of authority. They're data-driven, pattern-based, backed by analysis of thousands of deals. But they often lack context.

Managers must help teams evaluate algorithmic recommendations against situational reality through deep debriefs of actual deals, especially unusual ones. These conversations develop the pattern recognition sellers need to know when AI insights are valuable and when they're misleading.

4. Accountability expands from process compliance to human ownership

As AI becomes more prevalent in customer interactions, managers face a new responsibility: maintaining integrity. AI makes mistakes. It misinterprets data, misreads context, and sometimes hallucinates. Managers must ensure that sellers remain accountable for outcomes rather than hiding behind algorithmic recommendations.

This requires discussing boundary cases with teams. When should AI guidance be questioned? What are the warning signs an algorithm is missing something important? How should conflicts between AI recommendations and customer knowledge be escalated? These conversations establish clear ownership. The seller, not the system, owns the customer relationship and bears responsibility for decisions.

Without this oversight, AI adoption erodes customer trust rather than enhancing it. In B2B sales, where trust determines success, that tradeoff defeats the purpose of the technology.

The manager role progresses through three accelerating phases

When managers successfully lead AI adoption, their role changes from reactive monitor to strategic partner. Understanding how this evolution unfolds helps leaders set realistic expectations and prepare for what’s next. We see three distinct phases

	How Work Gets Done	Key Skills	Success Metrics
Today Team and Activity Monitor	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 47% of time spent on required activities• Reactive coaching after issues observed	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Data analysis and CRM proficiency• People development (time-constrained)• Strategic forecasting with incomplete data	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Team quota attainment• Forecast accuracy
18 Months The AI-Human Orchestrator	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• AI tools reduce prep time• Predictive analytics surface deal risks proactively	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• AI agent management: configure, deploy, optimize• Strategic coaching on complex situations• Change leadership: drive adoption, address resistance	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Coaching impact through skill improvement• Higher forecast accuracy via AI-augmented intelligence• Team quota attainment and ROI from AI investments
3 Years The GTM Systems Architect	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• AI-generated briefings replace meetings• Autonomous agents handle routine work	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Lead hybrid teams with sellers and AI agents• Systems thinking: redesign workflows around AI• Heightened people skills: psychological safety in AI era• Strategic business architecture: evaluate capabilities, model economics	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Team performance and quota attainment• Scale capacity without linear cost increases• ROI of AI agents across the team

Today: The Team and Activity Monitor

Today's managers are often forced to act as reactive monitors. Their work is dictated by reporting cycles, with days spent chasing information and inspecting CRM data. Their success is measured by team quota attainment and forecast accuracy, meaning activities that promote long-term success, like coaching, often fall by the wayside for immediate needs.

Today's profile is effective at enforcing known processes, but it's ill-equipped for a world demanding adaptability where AI automates routine tasks. For today's managers, people development efforts are severely time-constrained and almost always reactive. They occur only after problems have been observed, not because that is what managers want, but because that is the system they operate.

Next 18 Months: The AI-Human Orchestrator

As AI tools are adopted, the manager's role shifts. The focus becomes blending AI insights with team capabilities to improve execution and performance.

Instead of building pipeline reports each morning, managers receive AI-generated briefings identifying critical deal risks and coaching opportunities. Predictive analytics reduces prep time, and conversations shift from deal status to deal strategy.

New competencies become critical. AI sales management: the ability to leverage AI for coaching, performance improvement, and strategic forecasting. Change leadership: Driving behavior change, adoption, and psychological safety around AI tools.

This phase represents the bridge between old and new. Managers must develop their team's ability to work in an AI-augmented environment while maintaining performance.

Three Years: The GTM Systems Architect

As AI becomes more autonomous, managers become GTM Systems Architects, designing and optimizing hybrid commercial engines of sellers and AI agents. Agents handle routine interactions—qualification, scheduling, and basic inquiries. Managers shift from direct intervention to system governance and design.

This role requires task-switching between technical and human-centric responsibilities. Managers must know when to deploy humans versus agents, demonstrating systems thinking to redesign workflows around AI capabilities.

Combine managers' experience and AI insights across key responsibilities

As AI adoption increases, successful managers blend their experience and judgment with AI's data and pattern recognition across core responsibilities. For example:

1. Coaching transforms from reactive to precision at scale. AI analyzes every customer interaction, automatically identifies skill gaps, and scores sellers against methodology. But managers provide what AI cannot: deal-specific context, role-played responses to difficult situations, and confidence-building on weak areas.
2. Deal support moves from pipeline inspection to strategic intervention. AI continuously monitors engagement, flags at-risk opportunities with confidence scores, and compares deals against historical win/loss patterns. Managers validate these signals against relationship knowledge and apply experience to complex situations.
3. Administration shifts from enforcement to governance. AI transcribes calls, logs activities automatically, assembles forecasts from real-time data, and generates reports instantly. Managers focus on driving adoption, building team trust in the technology, and discussing the why behind the numbers rather than chasing CRM updates.

Critical leadership actions to transform the manager role

For CEOs and sales leaders implementing AI tools, success requires more than adding new capabilities to existing workflows. It demands fundamentally rethinking how sales management works.

1. Diagnose where and which managers need support. Assess how managers currently spend time and which activities AI could automate within 18 months. Identify which activities require human judgment and should receive more attention. Be realistic about how much time can redirect to change management.
2. Reevaluate what you measure and reward. If coaching time doubles but your performance management metrics focus primarily on forecast accuracy you create conflicting incentives. Consider metrics like team adoption rates, seller confidence with AI, quality of human judgment in overriding recommendations, and skill development velocity. The metrics must align with the behaviors the new model requires.
3. Build capability before you scale. Most sales managers weren't hired or trained for change leadership. Partner them with organizational change resources, create peer learning cohorts, and bring in external trainers to build necessary skills. Start with pilots using managers who demonstrate both strong performance and change management aptitude. Learn from their experiences and document what works.

The Stakes

Organizations that simply layer AI onto existing workflows will see it become another failed technology investment. Building high-performing sales teams is no longer just about hiring the best reps or spending the most on new technology. The future belongs to organizations cultivating leaders capable of architecting systems, coaching strategic thinking, and multiplying team talent in an automated world.

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