



AI Adoption in Sales Performance Management

June 2026

Key Research Findings

This study of 98 SPM practitioners and leaders maps how AI is actually being adopted across incentive compensation, quota and territory planning, and forecasting. For an SPM practitioner, three questions frame the picture: what can you do with AI today, what is still out of reach, and where is it heading. The momentum is clear: AI is already in use across almost every SPM team (93%), and the work now is moving from selective use to embedded. What teams can do today is concentrated in forecasting and performance analytics (90%). What is still out of reach is embedding AI into the compensation and quota decisions at the core of SPM, held back not by capability but by confidence: trust, explainability, and validation are the single biggest barrier (47%), and 63% want a claim validated on real or their own data before they believe it. Where it is heading is planning, quota, and territory optimization (68%), with decisions staying firmly human-led for now (86%). Across every theme, one signal stands out: buyers increasingly want AI they can connect to their own systems, train on their own data, and extend, and the practical on-ramp most describe is to start with packaged, pre-built capability and customize from there.

93%

AI is already in nearly every SPM team; embedding is next

93% have deployed AI in some SPM workflow, so adoption is near-universal. No team has fully embedded it across the function yet, which makes the move from selective use to embedded the clear next step.

47%

Trust, not technology, sets the pace

Trust, explainability, and validation are the biggest barrier to going further (47%), ahead of data quality (32%) and change management (21%).

63%

Credibility is a proof problem, not a branding one

63% need transparent proof and validation on real or their own data before trusting an AI claim, and many are openly skeptical of 'AI-washing.'

90%

Value is proven in forecasting today, planning next

90% point to forecasting and analytics as today's biggest AI value, while 68% expect the next wave to come from quota, territory, and planning optimization.

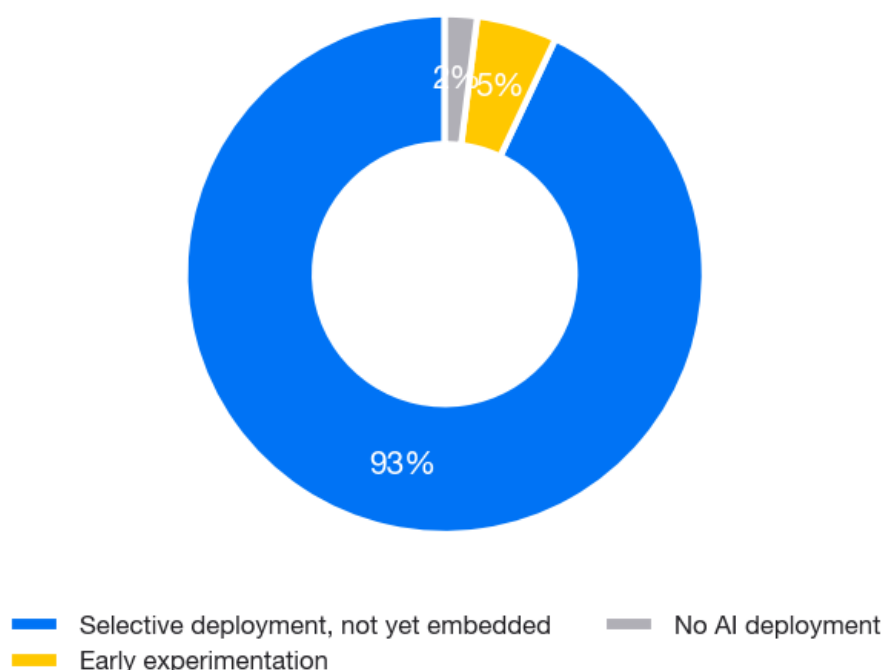
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AI is already in nearly every SPM team; the next step is embedding it

AI is already part of almost every SPM team's toolkit. 93% of respondents use it in some SPM workflow and another 5% are experimenting, leaving only 2% with no AI at all. What no team has done yet is embed it across the function. AI runs today in a few high-confidence workflows, usually where the risk is low and outputs are easy to check, like forecasting and pipeline visibility, but it has not been woven through compensation, quota, and the core of sales performance management. That is the open opportunity, not a shortfall: adoption is essentially universal, so the work now is depth, not entry. What pulls teams in is provable value in those low-risk areas, often prompted by leadership and competitive pressure. The strategic question is no longer whether to adopt AI in SPM, but what it takes to move from selective use to fully embedded.

AI is already in nearly every SPM team; the next step is embedding it



% of respondents by AI adoption stage in SPM (n=98)

INSIGHT 1, CONTINUED

AI is already in nearly every SPM team; the next step is embedding it

KEY FINDINGS

Most teams run AI only where the risk is low: AI shows up first in forecasting and pipeline visibility, where outputs are easy to validate, and stays out of compensation and quota processes where mistakes are costly and visible.

The gap is selective-to-embedded, not adopt-or-not: With only 2% not using AI at all, the real opportunity is helping the 93% in selective use reach the next stage, rather than convincing non-adopters to start.

AI is being layered onto mostly manual foundations: Many still run compensation and quota on spreadsheets, reporting tools, and homegrown systems, so AI is being added to a largely manual base rather than a modern, connected platform. Moving from selective use to embedded is as much about modernizing that foundation as about the AI itself.

Strategic Implication

Adoption is essentially won; the opportunity now is depth. The market has said yes to AI in principle, and the growth is in helping teams move from selective use to embedded. Meet buyers where they already work, in low-risk workflows like forecasting, and give them a clear, low-risk path to embed AI into the compensation and quota work they currently hold back.

VOICE OF THE RESPONDENT



I would say we are in selective deployment. We have moved beyond pilots, and we are using AI in a few key workflows, but not yet embedded across every aspect of sales performance management.

— Revenue Operations Leader

on where most teams sit on the adoption curve



AI is actively used in forecasting and pipeline visibility, but only in specific parts of the workflow where the risk is low and the outputs are easy to validate. It's not embedded into compensation or quota processes in any meaningful way yet.

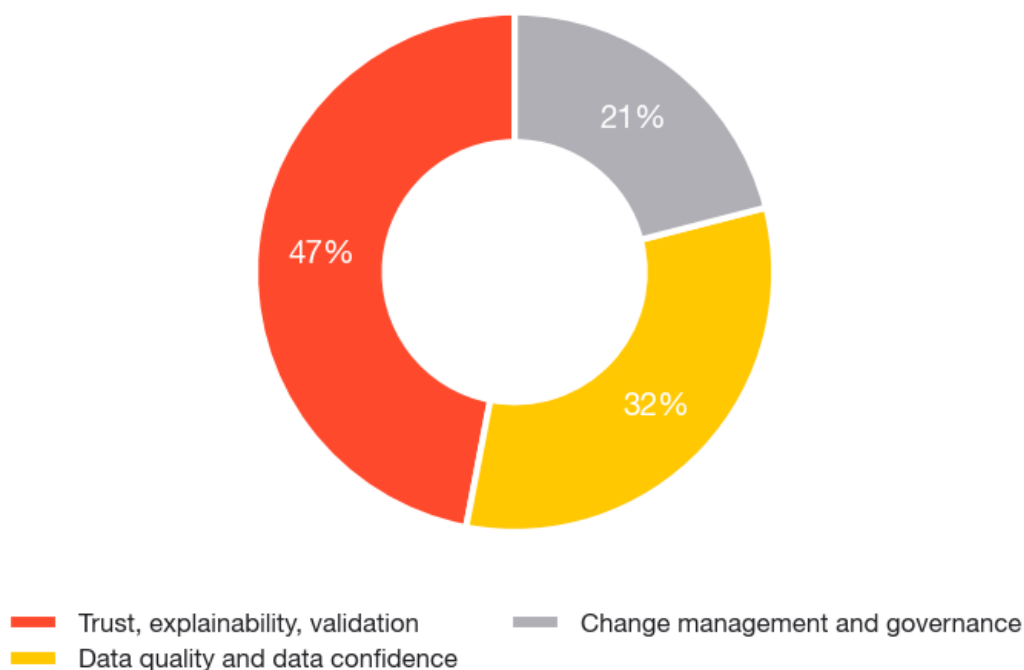
— Sales Operations Director

on why AI stops at the low-risk edge

Trust, not technology, sets the pace of adoption

What keeps a team from handing AI more of the work is confidence, not capability. Trust, explainability, and validation are the single biggest barrier at 47%, ahead of data quality at 32% and change management or governance at 21%. These concerns surfaced across nearly every interview, which shows the issue is not awareness but operational confidence. The concern sharpens wherever AI touches money: when an output influences a forecast or anything tied to compensation, leaders want to understand exactly why the model made its recommendation, and they want that explanation in terms they can defend to a rep in a dispute. Until AI can show its reasoning, it stays in the low-stakes corner of the workflow.

Trust, not technology, sets the pace of adoption



% of respondents by biggest adoption barrier (n=98)

INSIGHT 2, CONTINUED

Trust, not technology, sets the pace of adoption

KEY FINDINGS

Explainability is the price of trust: Buyers will not act on an output they cannot explain. Anything that influences pay or forecasts has to come with reasoning a person can follow and defend, not a black-box score.

Data quality is the foundation beneath it: A third name data quality and confidence in the underlying information as the gating issue. Reliable, integrated data is the precondition that makes everything downstream trustworthy.

Change management is the operational roadblock: 21% name change management and governance as their single biggest barrier, but the friction is more widespread than that: 71% report workflow inertia and resistance to new ways of working as AI enters compensation and quota processes. Automating how people are paid changes habits and trust, not just systems.

Strategic Implication

Trust is the product decision, not a marketing afterthought. The fastest way to move buyers up the curve is to make AI explainable where it matters most: show the reasoning behind every recommendation that touches compensation or forecasts, in language a leader can use in a dispute. Win the explainability argument and the rest of adoption follows.

VOICE OF THE RESPONDENT



It's trust in the outputs, especially around explainability. If an AI model influences forecasts or anything indirectly tied to compensation, people need to understand exactly why it made that recommendation.

— Revenue Operations Leader
on why explainability gates adoption



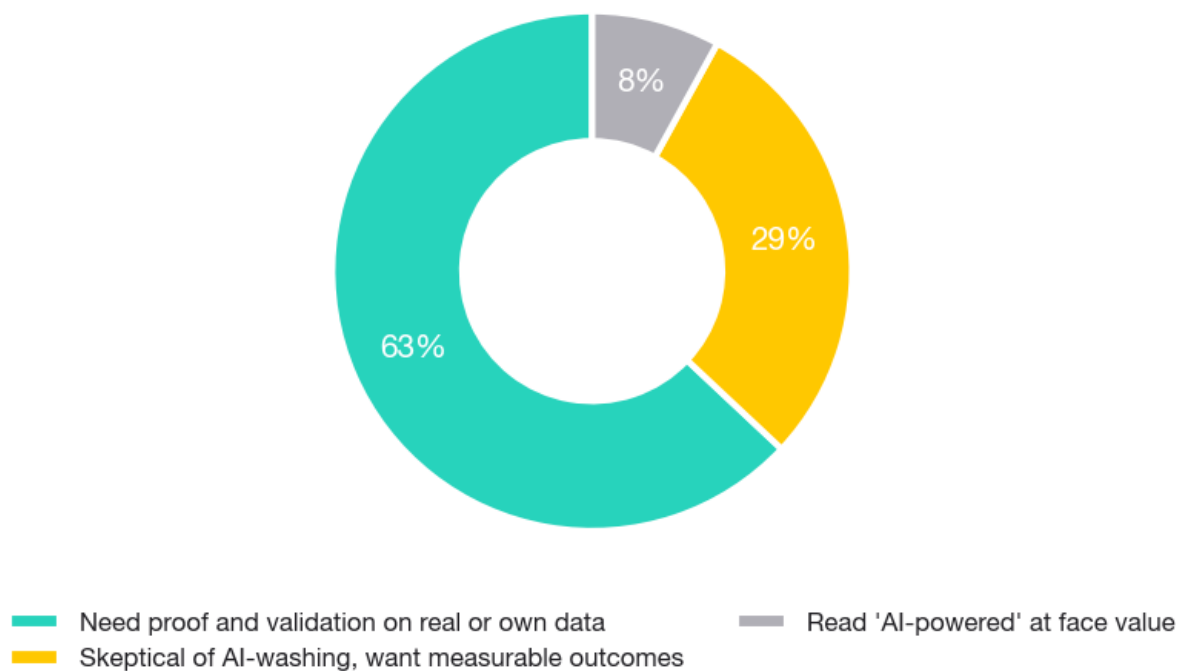
Ultimately, if I had to choose one thing, it would be data quality and trust in the underlying information. Once that foundation is in place, adoption becomes much, much easier.

— Executive Director of Finance and Innovation
on the foundation trust depends on

The credibility test: what it takes to beat 'AI-washing'

Before an SPM team will trust AI with more, it has to be proven on their terms, and they treat AI credibility as a proof problem, not a branding one. 63% need transparent proof and validation on real or their own data before they trust an AI claim, and another 29% are openly skeptical of 'AI-washing,' wanting to see measurable business outcomes rather than a label. The bar is specific and consistent: show how it works on my data, not a demo dataset; give me explainability I can use in a dispute; share accuracy and failure modes, not just averages; and let me validate the results myself. Buyers can tell when a vendor has bolted 'AI' onto an unchanged product, and it actively erodes trust. The takeaway for any vendor making an AI claim is blunt: proof, on the buyer's terms, is the cost of being believed.

The credibility test: what it takes to beat 'AI-washing'



% of respondents by what makes an AI claim credible (n=98)

INSIGHT 3, CONTINUED

The credibility test: what it takes to beat 'AI-washing'

KEY FINDINGS

Proof on the buyer's own data is the standard: The credible vendor shows results on the buyer's real data and workflows, explains how the model works, and lets the buyer validate the outcome. A polished demo on a vendor dataset does not clear the bar.

'AI-washing' is recognized and penalized: Buyers notice when a label is added without a real change to the underlying product, and they treat it as a reason to distrust rather than a reason to buy.

Strategic Implication

Lead with proof, not positioning. The vendors that win this market show measurable outcomes on the buyer's own data, expose how the model reasons, and publish accuracy and failure modes openly. In a market this skeptical, transparency is the differentiator, and a credible proof beats any 'AI-native' claim.

VOICE OF THE RESPONDENT



For me to take an AI claim seriously, a vendor needs to show three things in the context of my actual SPM work: how it works on my data, not a demo dataset; explainability I can use in disputes; and accuracy and failure modes, not just averages.

— **Revenue Operations Manager**
on the bar an AI claim has to clear



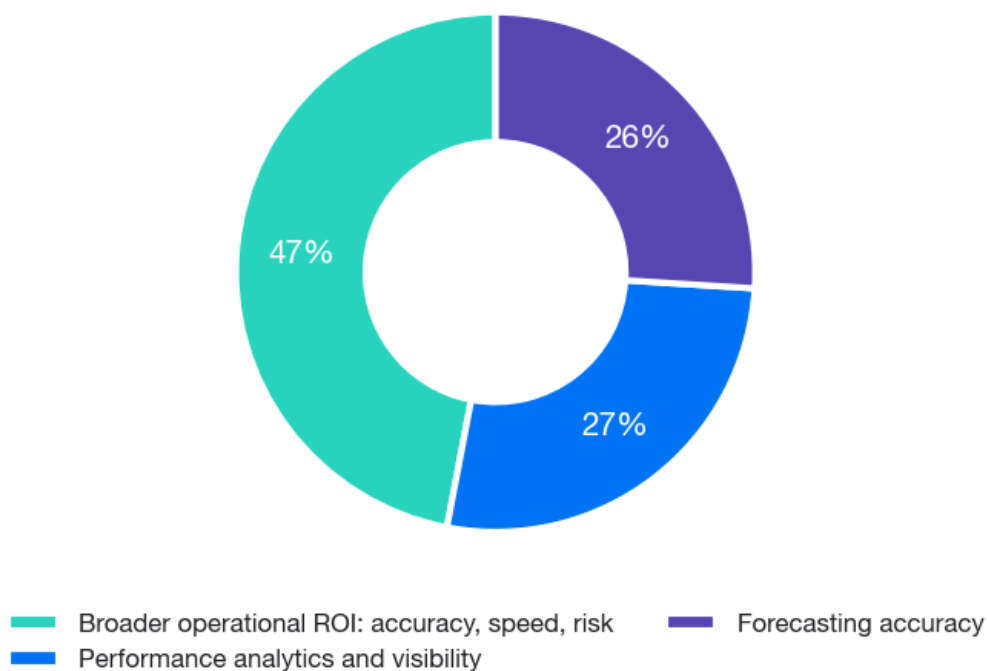
A lot of these companies haven't changed the actual architecture, and they're just saying AI because they feel like they have to, which is not the right way to go about it and build trust.

— **Go-to-Market Leader, Clinical Research**
on recognizing 'AI-washing'

ROI and time-to-value: the measurable case

Start with what teams can already get from AI today: where it is deployed, the returns are concrete, but they are concentrated in singular, workflow-level wins. The clearest gains show up in the parts of SPM that are easy to measure: comp anomaly detection and error catching, forecasting accuracy, and pipeline risk visibility. One team that put AI on comp anomaly detection reported 40% less time spent on validation and 25% fewer disputes per cycle, with faster payouts because they were no longer firefighting last-minute issues. The appetite reaches further than the wins: teams see value across more of the lifecycle than they have implemented, and what holds them back is the foundation underneath. Many still run compensation and quota on spreadsheets and homegrown systems, and one team described 40 to 50% of its time going to operational firefighting, fixing data gaps and manual adjustments, leaving only the remainder for forward-looking strategy. That is the real ROI story: proven returns in isolated workflows today, a lifecycle-wide ambition tomorrow, and a manual foundation standing in between.

ROI and time-to-value: the measurable case



% of respondents by where AI's measurable value shows up (n=98)

INSIGHT 4, CONTINUED

ROI and time-to-value: the measurable case

KEY FINDINGS

Reported gains where AI is deployed: A team using AI for comp anomaly detection reported 40% less time on validation and 25% fewer disputes per cycle. Beyond comp, 47% point to broader operational ROI from accuracy, speed, and risk detection.

The ceiling is the foundation, not the appetite: Teams see value across more of the lifecycle than they have implemented, but many still run comp and quota on spreadsheets and homegrown systems. One team described losing 40 to 50% of its time to operational firefighting, fixing data gaps and manual adjustments, capacity that never reaches strategy, planning, or growth.

Strategic Implication

Sell the measurable case, then sell the foundation that scales it. The strongest argument is not that AI is powerful. It is that teams reclaim large blocks of time and cut disputes wherever it is deployed, while a manual, fragmented foundation caps how far those wins can spread. Lead with the time-to-value math, then show the connected foundation that turns isolated wins into lifecycle-wide ROI.

VOICE OF THE RESPONDENT



We are using AI to improve forecast accuracy, identify pipeline risks, and highlight performance trends across systems. Most of the usage today is focused on analytics and decision support rather than process automation.

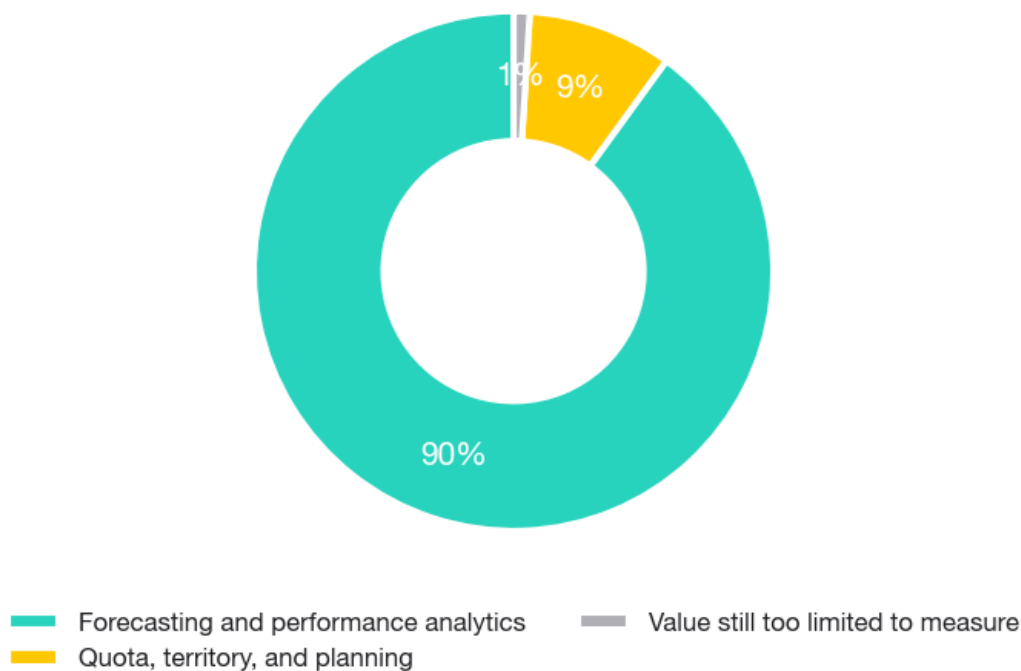
— VP of Sales Operations

on where measurable value shows up first

Where AI delivers value today: forecasting and analytics lead

Today, the value teams can actually capture is concentrated, not spread evenly across the SPM lifecycle. 90% of respondents name forecasting and performance analytics as the biggest current value hotspot, while just 9% point to quota, territory, and broader planning optimization, and only 1% say value is still too limited to measure. The reason is the same one that shapes the adoption curve: forecasting and analytics are where outputs are easy to validate and the risk of being wrong is low, so trust forms there first. The tangible wins buyers describe are earlier visibility into at-risk deals, cleaner pipeline signals, and faster, more consistent decisions. Value, in other words, concentrates exactly where outcomes are visible, which tells vendors where to meet buyers now and where value goes next.

Where AI delivers value today: forecasting and analytics lead



% of respondents by biggest current AI value area (n=98)

INSIGHT 5, CONTINUED

Where AI delivers value today: forecasting and analytics lead

KEY FINDINGS

Trust forms where outputs are easy to check: Forecasting and analytics win first because a leader can see whether the call was right. That visibility is what lets trust, and adoption, take hold in these workflows before others.

A gap between where value is seen and where it is used: Buyers see potential across more of the lifecycle than they have implemented. The proven footprint is narrower than the perceived opportunity, which is the room left to grow.

Strategic Implication

Start expansion where value is already proven. Forecasting and analytics are the entry point, the place buyers already trust AI and can measure it. Land there, build the track record, then use that proof to extend into the quota, territory, and planning work that buyers see as valuable but have not yet implemented.

VOICE OF THE RESPONDENT



The most tangible impact has been in forecasting accuracy and pipeline risk visibility. AI has helped us identify at-risk deals earlier, things like stalled stage progression, inconsistent activity patterns, or deviations from historical norms.

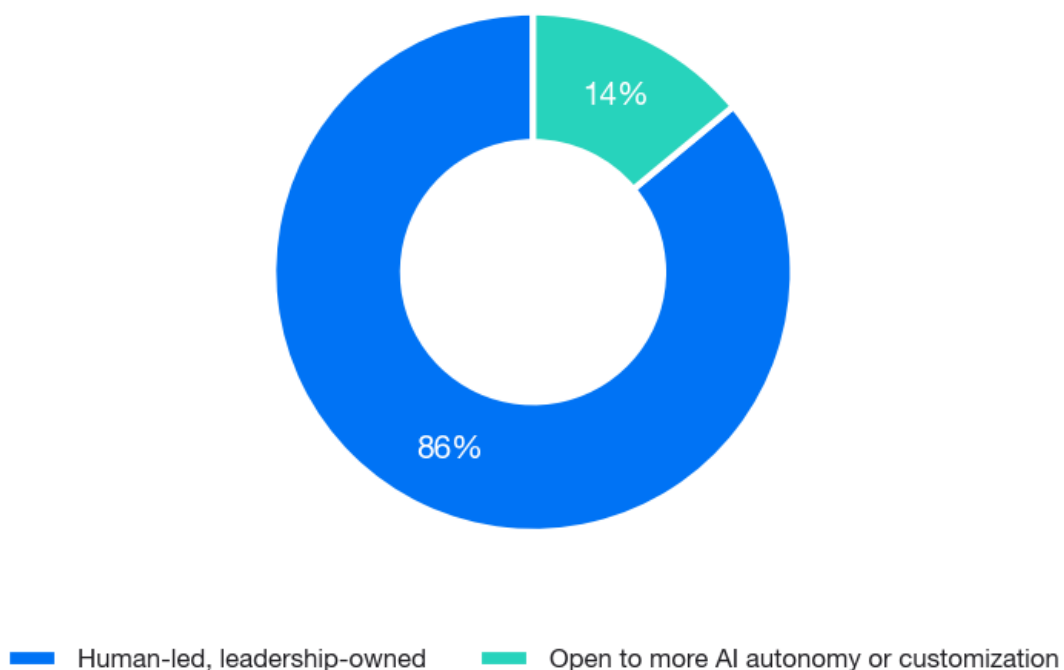
— Senior Director of Revenue Operations

on today's clearest value hotspot

Human-led governance is the design principle, and rep trust is earned, not given

There is one thing SPM leaders are deliberately not handing to AI: the decision itself, and even as adoption spreads, decision-making stays firmly human-led. 86% favor leadership-owned, human-in-the-loop governance, and most require cross-functional or leadership review before an AI-influenced decision is finalized, especially when it touches compensation, forecasting, or performance evaluation. This is not resistance to AI; it is responsible governance of decisions that affect people's pay. Frontline trust follows the same logic. Reps extend trust conditionally: they act on AI when its output matches their judgment and the reasoning is clear, and they override or ignore it when it is not. Trust is earned as the system proves itself, which is exactly why explainability and proof matter so much. The organizations that design for human-led governance first give AI the conditions it needs to earn a wider mandate over time. Human-led is not a passing phase to be automated away; it is the operating model buyers expect the next generation of AI to be built on.

Human-led governance is the design principle, and rep trust is earned, not given



% of respondents by AI governance posture (n=98)

INSIGHT 6, CONTINUED

Human-led governance is the design principle, and rep trust is earned, not given

KEY FINDINGS

Humans own the decisions that touch pay: Leadership keeps the final call, with cross-functional review across RevOps, finance, and sales when there is disagreement. AI informs the decision; people own it.

Rep trust is conditional and grows with proof: Reps follow AI when it aligns with their intuition and shows its reasoning, and disregard it when it does not. Visible accuracy is what converts cautious trust into action.

Strategic Implication

Design for human-led governance first, and treat it as a feature, not a limitation. Buyers want AI that supports and explains decisions while keeping people in control. Build for review workflows, clear ownership across RevOps, finance, and sales, and rep-facing explanations, and AI earns the trust it needs to take on more over time. Carry the principle forward: the governance that guards today's decisions is the design spec for tomorrow's agents.

VOICE OF THE RESPONDENT



Most leaders are excited about AI's potential, but they still want human oversight, especially when decisions impact compensation, forecasting, or performance evaluations.

— **Executive Director of Finance and Innovation**

on why governance stays human-led



Right now, trust is still building. Some reps trust the AI when they see it aligned with their intuition, but others remain skeptical. If trust is low, they tend to ignore or override the AI.

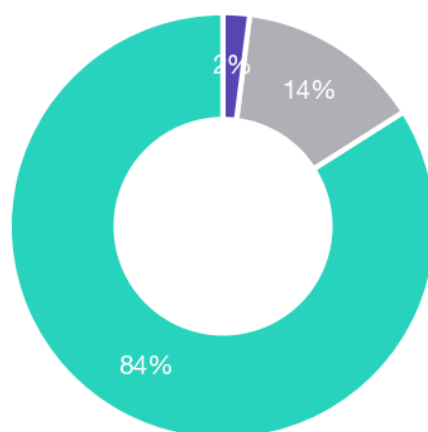
— **Marketing Operations Manager**

on how reps extend trust conditionally

What buyers want next: connected, agentic AI built on your own data

Ask practitioners where they want to take AI next, and a clear destination emerges: AI connected across the SPM lifecycle on a single foundation, not added to each workflow in isolation. Buyers want both halves of that: packaged AI that delivers value on day one, and the ability to build and extend on their own data as needs grow and trust deepens. 84% describe exactly that hybrid path. Few would go fully build-your-own from day one (2%), and 14% still hold low or unproven trust or have not formed a clear preference, but the hybrid path is clearly where buyers are heading. They increasingly want systems they can connect to their own tools, train on their own data, and extend to their own processes, because every team carries challenges packaged features alone do not fit. The direction of travel is orchestration: 68% expect the biggest AI value over the next two to three years to come from quota, territory, and planning optimization, with decision orchestration named as the biggest shift ahead. They expect to get there without giving up control: today's human-led governance is the operating model connected AI will run on. Packaged AI gets them moving; a connected foundation built on their own data is what they expect to carry long-term value.

What buyers want next: connected, agentic AI built on your own data



Conditional trust; prefer a hybrid (packaged AI, then extend on own data) High trust; want fully extensible own-data AI now
Low or unproven trust, or no clear preference

% of respondents by trust in AI and preference for extensible AI (n=98)

INSIGHT 7, CONTINUED

What buyers want next: connected, agentic AI built on your own data

KEY FINDINGS

Start packaged, then extend on your own data: 84% favor a hybrid path: pre-built AI for quick adoption, then customization and connection to their own systems and data as requirements get more complex. The on-ramp and the destination are both part of the ask.

The next wave is lifecycle-wide: planning and orchestration: 68% expect the biggest AI value over the next two to three years to come from quota, territory, and planning optimization, with decision orchestration named as the biggest shift ahead. The ask is not another point tool; it is AI that coordinates decisions across the lifecycle.

Strategic Implication

This is where a vendor can stand apart. Buyers want AI they can build on, connected to their systems and trained on their own data, with human-led governance designed in rather than bolted on. The winning posture meets both halves of the ask: pre-built agents that deliver value on day one, and an open path to extend across the lifecycle on one foundation as teams mature. Own the bridge from packaged to connected, agentic AI, and own where SPM value is heading next.

VOICE OF THE RESPONDENT



I would give more weight to the platforms that let us build and customize AI. The ability to connect it to our own systems and train it on our data is crucial for a tailored solution.

— **Revenue Operations Leader, B2B SaaS**
on the appetite for buildable, connected AI



Packaged AI is important for quick adoption and ease of use, but the ability to customize models and leverage our own data would carry more weight for long-term value.

— **SPM Lead, Commercial Bank**
on the hybrid path from packaged to extensible

Strategic Takeaways

1. Lead with proof, not AI positioning

Critical

This is a proof market. Show measurable outcomes on the buyer's own data, expose how the model reasons, and publish accuracy and failure modes. In a market this skeptical of 'AI-washing,' a credible proof beats any 'AI-native' claim.

2. Start expansion in forecasting and analytics

High

Land where AI value is already proven and trusted (90% name it), build the track record, then use that proof to extend into the quota, territory, and planning work buyers see as valuable but have not yet implemented.

3. Reduce operational risk to move customers up the maturity curve

High

The market is stuck at selective use, not unconvinced. Lower the risk of embedding AI into compensation and quota work with explainability, validation on real data, and human review, so the 93% in selective use can move toward broader deployment.

4. Design for human-led governance first

Medium

86% want humans in the loop on decisions that touch pay. Treat that as a feature: build review workflows, clear ownership across RevOps, finance, and sales, and rep-facing explanations, so AI earns a wider mandate as it proves itself.

5. Differentiate with extensible, connected, agentic AI

Medium

Meet both halves of the ask: pre-built agents that deliver value on day one, plus an open path to connect and extend across the SPM lifecycle on the buyer's own data, with human-led governance designed in. Own the bridge from packaged to connected, agentic AI, and own where SPM value is heading next.

Conclusion

AI adoption in sales performance management has reached a clear turning point. Almost every team already uses AI in some SPM workflow, and the work now is moving from selective use to embedded. What holds the market at selective use is not capability but confidence: trust, explainability, and proof on the buyer's own data are the conditions for going deeper. Value has concentrated where outcomes are visible, in forecasting and analytics, and governance has stayed firmly human-led while reps extend trust as AI earns it.

Challenges

The work ahead is a trust problem before it is a technology problem. Buyers will not embed AI into compensation and quota decisions until they can explain its reasoning, validate it on their own data, and keep people in control of outcomes that affect pay. Vendors who lead with positioning rather than proof will keep running into the same skepticism.

Forward Looking

The value is moving toward planning and decision orchestration, and it rewards a different kind of AI. Read together, the findings point one step further, from insight to proactivity: AI that surfaces optimizations and outcomes ready for a person to act on, with the human still in the loop, rather than AI that only surfaces insights for someone to interpret. Buyers increasingly want systems they can connect to their own tools, train on their own data, and extend to their own processes, on one foundation rather than workflow by workflow. The practical path is hybrid: start with pre-built capability for quick value, then customize and extend as trust and complexity grow, with human-led governance carried forward as the operating model. The vendors who own that bridge, from packaged to connected, extensible, agentic AI, will own where SPM value is heading next.

AI in SPM is no longer a question of whether, but of how far. The teams that move from selective use to embedded, trusted, extensible AI will set the pace, and the vendors who earn that trust with proof and build on the customer's own data will lead the category.

Research Methodology

This study draws on 98 in-depth interviews with the practitioners and leaders responsible for sales performance management in large enterprise sales organizations.

Respondents were leaders in enterprise sales organizations of 500 or more quota-carrying sales reps, spanning revenue operations, finance, and sales at director level and above, and were screened as decision-makers or key influencers on sales performance management and incentive compensation technology.

Interviews ran 7 to 46 minutes and covered AI adoption maturity, adoption barriers, AI credibility, where AI delivers value across the SPM lifecycle, governance and rep trust, and appetite for extensible AI.

Respondents spanned software and technology, financial services, manufacturing, healthcare, and retail.

Percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number; where a chart shows a distribution, figures may be adjusted so they total 100%. Some figures reflect coded qualitative responses or individual reported examples rather than full-sample statistics.

Quality Assurance



Transcripts were analyzed using AI for semantic understanding, with multi-iteration validation and cross-verification to ensure analytical accuracy.

Thank you!

