THE STATE OF PRESALES

The 2024 Report

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE EDITION

vivun.

Contents

AI in Sales Engineering:
The Current and Future State

> **Meta description:** Sales engineers are implementing AI in their daily workflows, and the technology is poised to transform every aspect of their work. Learn from 500+ sales engineering leaders about their current AI priorities and what's coming next.

Sales engineering is as demanding as ever. Is it any wonder that SE teams are increasingly relying on artificial intelligence to do their jobs both faster and better? **Eight out of 10 sales engineering leaders already use AI tools at least weekly in their activities.** They can't get enough of the efficiency and improved workflows AI promises to deliver.

Meanwhile, technical validation is now front and center in the buyer's journey—prospects do as much of 70% of their own research prior to the first sales call.

This state of affairs puts presales squarely in the spotlight. As sales engineers face high demands and a relentless pace of change, they're looking to AI as an assistant and guide to help them navigate the daily chaos of client demands, product complexities, and emerging technologies.

How is SE using AI now, and what challenges are they running into? Most importantly, how can they leverage AI for both a better internal collaboration and a better buying experience?

> **"** Supplying an AI agent is not only going to make every sales engineer who uses it much, much better. It's also going to allow us to take the work that sales engineers do and give it more broadly across the team."
>
> **Matt Darrow,** Co-Founder and CEO, Vivun

We surveyed more than 500 sales engineering leaders to find out. In this report, we'll dive into AI adoption among sales engineers and explore their experiences, challenges, and perspectives of AI today and in the future.

The sales engineering crossroads

Today, technical sales consumes as much as 80% of the sales cycle. Once prospects do hop on a call with sales, they're more interested in talking to a technical expert than anyone else.

This places enormous pressure on sales engineers to collaborate with product, sales, and marketing to build sandboxes and proofs of concept, put together business cases, and ensure that they can make the technical sale based on customer needs. These are make-or-break assets and internal partnerships because a technical win results in a closed-won deal 90% of the time.

But there's a problem. Enterprise software investments and resources are still out of sync with reality: **less than 10% of sales and revenue tech investments go toward the technical sales process.**

AI offers the solution that sales engineering leaders desperately need to address their biggest challenges, and they're already adopting AI in droves. Nearly half (46%) use

AI tools daily, and 36% use them weekly. But widespread usage doesn't guarantee strategic AI usage. In these early stages of adoption, many sales engineers are using AI tools for one-off use cases or on a task-by-task basis. How do leaders make sure their teams are getting the most out of AI?
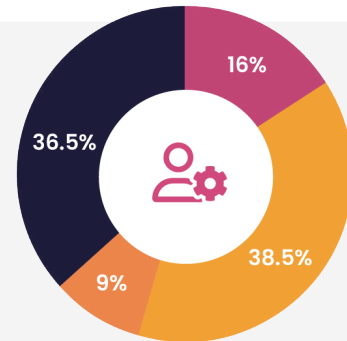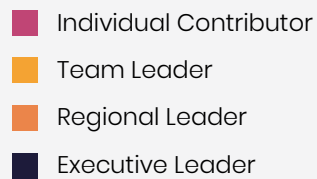
The vast majority (86%) are involved or very involved in the integration and use of AI tools in sales engineering. They have a vested interest in making sure presales uses AI to transform the technical sales process and unlock more value from their entire tech stack. Leaders need to prioritize alignment with the go-to-market organization (within and beyond sales engineering), plan their strategy for AI, and ensure the team follows it.

AI advancement is just getting started— which means the best is yet to come for technical sales.
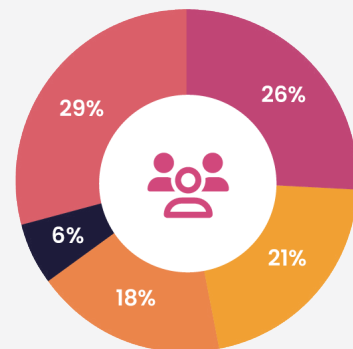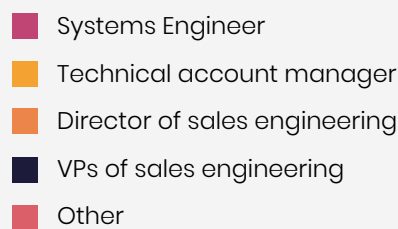
Methodology and respondent profile

We collected the data for this report in partnership with independent research platform UserEvidence. We surveyed more than 500 respondents to find out how they're using AI in sales engineering now, the challenges they're facing, and their future hopes for AI-powered sales engineering.

The vast majority of respondents hold sales engineering leadership positions:

- Individual Contributor
- Team Leader
- Regional Leader
- Executive Leader

16%
38.5%
9%
36.5%

Respondents have job titles like:

- Systems Engineer
- Technical account manager
- Director of sales engineering
- VPs of sales engineering
- Other

26%
21%
18%
6%
29%

These are the big-picture thinkers in sales engineering—they're responsible for budgets and looking at the horizon to assess how they can move the needle and help the entire sales org accomplish more. They're the ones actively thinking about how best to leverage AI.

All respondents work within either the information technology or computer software industry. Their organizations ranged from midsize to enterprise:

- Less than 100
- 100–500
- 500–1000
- 1000–5000
- More than 5000

33%
28%
24%
15%
0%
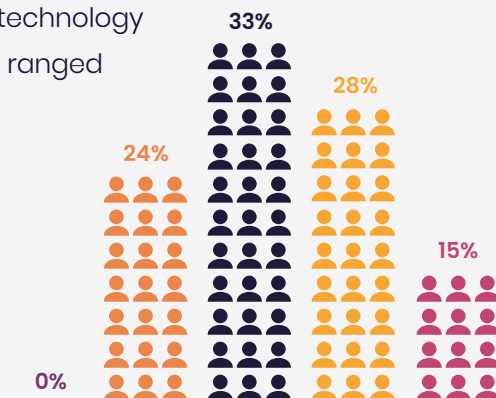
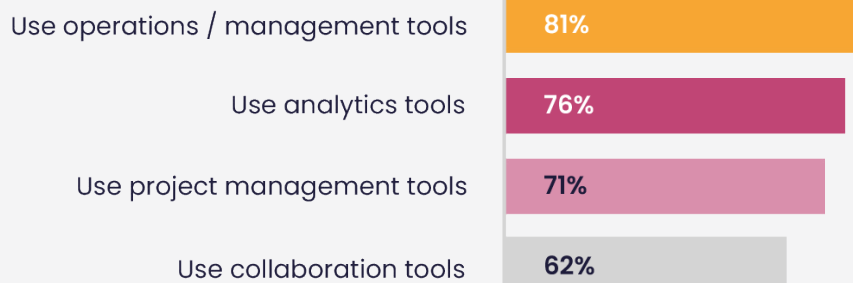# The presence and role of AI in sales engineering

As we saw above, most sales engineering teams use AI regularly and they want AI to help them get more out of their entire tech stack. So what tools are they using?

Respondents say that they rely on the following for sales engineering today:

Use operations / management tools	81%
Use analytics tools	76%
Use project management tools	71%
Use collaboration tools	62%

The typical sales engineering tech stack reveals that SEs want tools that help them:

1. Accomplish more (areas like operations, project management, and collaboration)
2. Better understand market and customer needs (through analytics)

While existing tools can catalyze those efforts, AI is perfectly positioned to take their capabilities to all new levels with its powers of automation and analysis.

Many, if not most, existing software tools use some form of AI, and they did so even before the current generative AI wave.

Although most sales engineering leaders use AI consciously at least weekly (via major players like ChatGPT, for instance), the number of sales engineers who regularly tap into AI capabilities is likely a lot closer to 100%.

Okay, so we've established that presales is using AI. How are they benefiting, and what challenges are they encountering?

How AI supports sales engineers

To help their product team build the best software solution on the market, sales engineers spend their days performing discovery, preparing for meetings, delivering product demos, and drawing a line from the current product to future features.

> **"** Sales engineers build solutions for customers by deeply understanding their goals and problems, and then aligning those to the capabilities that they can do better than any other alternative."
>
> **Matt Darrow,** Co-Founder and CEO, Vivun

Sales engineering leaders already look to AI to drive some of those business-critical workflows forward.

What challenges do sales engineers look to AI to solve for them?

Challenge	Benefit
The most common one is complex data analysis (64%).	AI's analytical skills are primed to help them connect the dots between market needs and the product roadmap.
AI is also helping them save time and streamlining processes.	Five out of 10 presales leaders are using it to personalize customer interactions, complete time-consuming admin tasks, and manage product knowledge.
Leaders are already seeing results from AI adoption:	Nearly seven out of 10 said they've seen both improved productivity and better insights or analysis.
Close to half of respondents also report benefits like accelerated decision -making (48%) and more accurate sales or technical forecasting (45%),	Both of which pull on AI's analytical strengths.

The current challenges of AI for PreSales

So far, sales engineering leaders like what they've seen from AI. More than three-quarters (77%) rate their current AI tools as effective or very effective at addressing sales engineering challenges.

Yet even though AI tools are working for them, most sales engineering teams still struggle to use the technology as part of scalable, repeatable workflows. Again, they're not using AI **strategically.**

77%
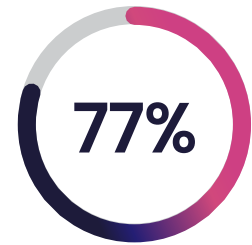
> " There's so much uncertainty—they're unsure of what to use and how to use it in an efficient, effective, and consistent way. They come back to the same workflows because people don't know exactly how to apply it today."
>
> **Brett Crane,** Vice President of Solutions, Vivun

Early-stage hurdles are to be expected, especially with a technological transition as major as AI. Sales engineering leaders face both limitations in planning for long-term strategic use and current challenges in AI adoption within their stack.

The biggest limitations of AI for SE

Early-stage hurdles are to be expected, especially with a technological transition as major as AI. According to respondents, **a major current limitation of AI tools for sales engineering is the complexity of the underlying technology.** This response reflects the steep learning curve that can come with industry-transforming tools like AI. Sales engineers aren't AI domain experts. So without established standards, quality control can be difficult to establish, which stands as a barrier in the way of widespread adoption.

A lack of customization is the third biggest AI limitation presales leaders reported. This reveals some of the difficulties sales engineering teams are finding in understanding how to integrate AI into their existing tech stack. For instance, a sales engineer might use ChatGPT to create a demo script, but that step alone doesn't guarantee ease when customizing their broader workflow or the technical sales process as a whole.

Presales leaders also reported that **a lack of internal knowledge limits strategic AI usage** at their company. The missing ingredient here is alignment. Sales engineering need to get on the same page with the rest of the GTM organization about how they use AI and how other teams can do the same.
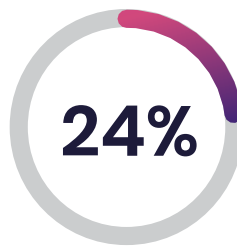
The toughest challenges of AI for SE

Along with the limitations of the technology itself, presales leaders are also facing operational hurdles as they use the tools today.
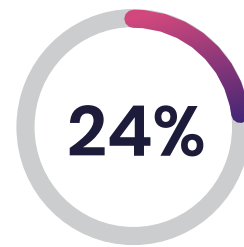
We asked respondents the single biggest challenge they face with their current AI tools, and most were evenly split among three responses:

26%
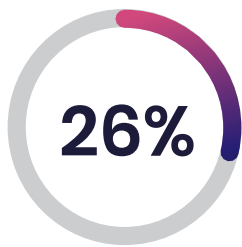
Security or privacy issues

24%

Limited functionality

24%

Third-party integration

Sales engineering leaders will need to be the catalysts for a proactive approach to addressing these challenges. By pursuing cross-functional alignment about essential AI functionality and integrations and working together to embrace a more secure approach to AI, presales can lead the way through these growing pains.

The current-day shortcomings and challenges of AI are valid and frustrating. But top-notch sales engineering leaders are doing something about them. Next, we'll dig into some of the solutions they're embracing.

The domino effect: How AI drives alignment

AI's strongest suit won't be the decks it creates or even the insights it produces—it will be the cross-functional alignment it drives across the entire GTM function. Beyond helping sales engineers do their jobs, AI will assist other teams that would normally have to rely on and wait for sales engineers for deliverables.

Once sales engineers equip AI with insider knowledge, sales reps and customer success managers can use AI for themselves, becoming more self-sufficient in the process. They'll be able to get instant answers to sales engineering questions, straight from an AI agent.

> **"** Sales reps will say to sales engineering, 'If AI works for you, it can work for me, so give it to me, too.' Once that domino falls, then the rest of it sort of cascades beyond. We need these SEs to embrace it, to help train it and enable it."

Matt Darrow, Co-Founder and CEO, Vivun

AI will also boost collaboration through its analytical capabilities. Here's an example: Where a sales engineer might incompletely summarize a customer conversation, AI objectively surfaces insights from the entire conversation to get everyone on the same page. This means understanding the full scope of customer needs, so product managers can rest assured that the data set hasn't been manipulated or biased.

When it's time for product launches, AI can take over much of the "grunt work" sales engineers currently carry. Instead of translating marketing collateral into a demo script, sales engineers and reps can prompt a tool to do it. Well-trained AI lets you manipulate style without losing message or brand voice.

Best of all, when sales engineers train AI with domain knowledge, they unlock proactivity from their AI tools. Vivun has already uncovered these kinds of outcomes with Ava – an AI Sales Engineer that provides on-demand technical expertise to your revenue team.

Like an employee, Ava acquires knowledge over time—it grows and learns through experience, by "listening" to customer conversations, and from observing your team. Evolving domain expertise, combined with a proactive and iterative user experience, differentiates specialized AI tools from many of the current solutions and sets up your entire team for success.

What's next for SE: AI's impact moving forward

Thanks to the new capabilities that AI tools bring to the table, the day-to-day of a sales engineer will look very different in the coming years. AI will make them more efficient—saving time and taking over tasks—and more effective by connecting the analytical dots better than an SE could on their own.

While we don't know every detail of the coming changes, it's clear that AI will greatly amplify the outcomes of the sales engineering org and force a shift in responsibilities.

The vast majority of sales engineering leaders are optimistic: 85% of respondents perceive the impact of AI on the future of sales engineering in a positive or very positive light. This signals high levels of excitement about moving through the technical sales more quickly and successfully going forward.

85%
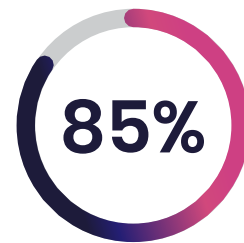
With the help of AI, sales engineering will gain a greater capacity to match customer needs with product capabilities. Here's how we believe that will unfold.

AI will empower but not eliminate sales engineers

If AI tools are becoming this high-powered and knowledgeable, where do these operational changes leave sales engineers? Won't AI make the SE role obsolete? We don't believe so.

AI **will** change everything sales engineers do. It will take over a significant portion of their current workload, but it won't eliminate their roles. Most presales leaders agree—only 38% believe that AI could replace their sales engineer role in the future.

38%
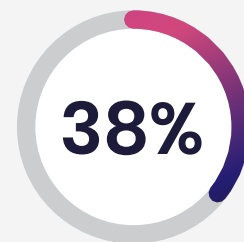
This finding should also prompt a moment for reflection:
If AI could complete all of the work that an SE does in a day, what more strategic work could that employee be doing instead?

Every computational, administrative, or generative task that AI will perform in the future represents time that sales engineers currently spend doing that work. When they no longer spend time on those tasks (or spend only the time it takes for fine-tuning and quality control), sales engineers can spend their days in different, more business-critical ways.

Instead of spending their time **building** decks, they'll focus on making sure the right inputs go into those presentations. Rather than conducting analysis on their own, they'll kick those tasks over to an AI assistant. Their time will be better spent applying those insights and consulting with product to drive the best solution on the market.

The sales engineer role is primed to transition to an enabler and trainer for AI.

> **"** If you fast forward three years, your job probably does not look anything like it does today—it might be something different and still very impactful and strategic."

Brett Crane, Vice President of Solutions, Vivun

Sales engineers as AI trainers

To date, sales engineers primarily rely on foundational LLMs to make their everyday tasks more efficient. But an LLM has limited capabilities to assist with business-critical sales engineering processes like demo script creation, product tour personalization, or customer insights. These tasks require specialized product expertise and sales engineering domain knowledge, which LLMs don't have.

> **"** LLMs relate things by co-occurrence of speaking on them. If people talk about them in the same paragraph, those things are related to each other. That's not a very useful form of knowledge, which is why LLMs can't be used out of the box to do the job of the SE. You need domain knowledge."

Joseph Miller, Co-Founder and Chief Data Scientist, Vivun

Our respondents echoed this sentiment: **83% said that it's important or very important for an AI tool to have domain-specific knowledge in sales engineering.** That's why AI tools will need both specialized models and the guidance and training of a sales engineer.

Very unimportant **6%**

Unimportant **2%**

Neutral **10%**

Very Important **41%**

Important **41%**
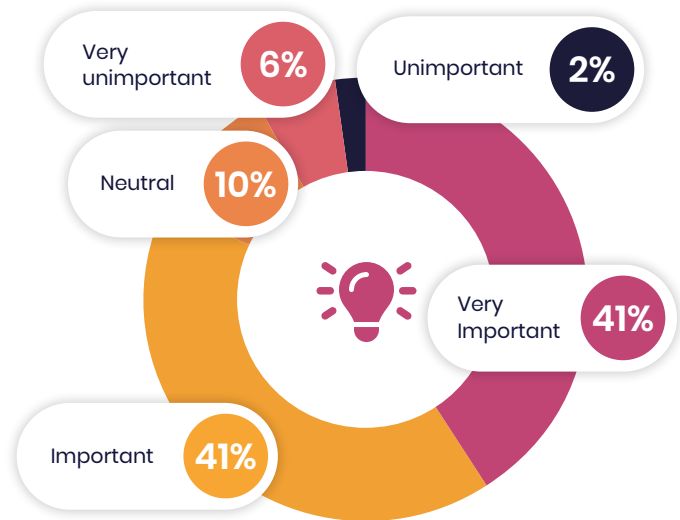
The sales engineer role will evolve to become a trainer for the AI assistant that serves the sales organization. As they guide and equip the AI agent with inside expertise (much like training a junior hire), AI will take over many of sales engineers' daily tasks. They'll save hours of their workday that they would otherwise spend writing scripts, creating demos, and summarizing product feedback, which they can invest back into training AI and collaborating with other teams.

" Foundational models have great intrinsic knowledge, but they don't know anything about doing the job of a sales engineer at your organization. SEs need an AI tool that actually resembles working with a direct report."

Matt Darrow, Co-Founder and CEO, Vivun

In the process, AI will enable and transform technical sales, helping organizations stay aligned, ensure their solution is the best one, and close the deal, all without breaking a sweat.

Focus on the right tools

Technical validation is the most critical phase of the sales process.

Highly skilled sales engineers connect the dots between customer and product, tell the right stories, and fill essential product gaps. AI elevates their outcomes even further, transforming technical sales into a strategic partner for the entire org. From automating time-consuming tasks to uncovering customer and product insights, generative AI enhances sales capabilities and strengthens the entire technical sales process.

If you're playing the long game, it's time to turn your attention to the right AI tools—those with the product-specific domain knowledge needed to support technical validation.

AI-powered enablement that helps you win

When you invest in AI tools to help your sales engineers close the gap for your customers, these are the goals you should strive for:

1. **Build the best products.** When you're trying to create the go-to solution for your ICP, customer feedback is everything. AI-supported sales engineering connects the dots by synthesizing insights from customer conversations and turning them into the knowledge your product team needs to build the most impactful roadmap possible.

2. **Deliver and scale the best demos.** The days of cookie-cutter demos are long gone—to win at technical sales, you need to customize your product tours on an individual and audience level. AI tools let you zero in on what you need to highlight and how to position your product's features and functionalities. Use them to create scripts and step-by-step guides through your product to tell prospects the story they need to hear.

3. **Run the best technical sales process.** AI-powered sales engineering lets you optimize your department's resources so your sales engineers can spend their time on what's most important. To build the optimal start-to-finish technical sales process, you need an AI agent that's a full-fledged member of your team: working cross-functionally, connecting to your calendar, and proactively surfacing high-value insights.

Secure the technical win faster and with fewer resources with AI tools like VivunOne, the AI-powered technical sales execution platform that increases technical selling capacity.

About Vivun

Gen AI for sales engineering is just getting started, and at Vivun, we're leading the way forward. Technical sales is the best revtech investment for your business, and AI is the no-longer-missing piece.

Meet Ava, an AI Sales Engineer that provides on-demand technical expertise to your entire revenue team, empowering them to sell more independently and effectively.

For more information on Sales Engineering, AI and Vivun, visit vivun.com/aise

THE STATE OF PRESALES

vivun.