

The state of sales



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This report summarises key insights from The State of Sales Breakfast in November 2025, exploring how AI and modern sales practices are reshaping growth in professional services. It provides practical guidance for firms seeking to strengthen their commercial performance.



AI in professional services: Opportunity and risk



This report aims to help professional firms to:

- Understand the real state of sales and growth in the current market.
- Clarify where AI and automation can create value in the sales journey.
- Learn from live examples, client discussions, and panellist experience.
- Translate insight into practical actions.

This report summarises the key insights from The State of Sales Breakfast, held in London in November 2025 and co-hosted by AutomateNow and SBR Consulting, with contributions from senior leaders at EY, HubSpot, Scottish Business Network, and SBR.

Its purpose is to provide UK professional services firms with a clear and practical perspective on how AI, automation, and modern sales methodologies can drive sustainable growth while preserving the essential human element in client relationships.

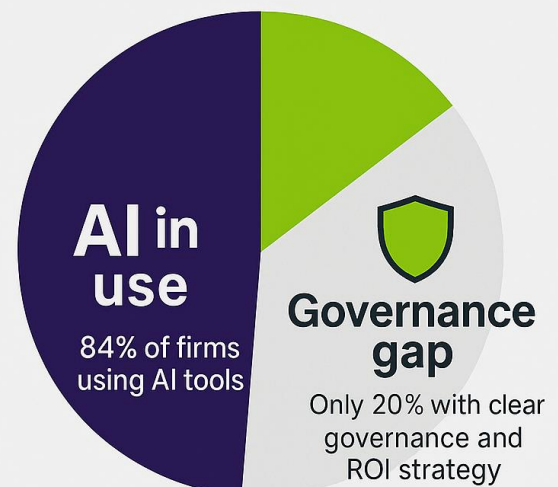
Context and purpose

Professional services firms are navigating a difficult balance:

- Economic conditions that constrain growth expectations.
- Clients are demanding greater value, transparency, and measurable outcomes.
- Rapid advances in AI and automation.

A need to professionalise sales and business development without undermining the existing culture. Research referenced during the event shows that around 84% of businesses are already using AI, yet few have a fully formed strategy, governance framework, or clear ROI model.

AI IS EVERYWHERE, BUT STRATEGY IS MISSING



The new buying journey: Why digital reputation matters



SUMMARY

Three major trends dominate the sales landscape: AI adoption is widespread but lacks clear governance and ROI.

- Buyers are 80–85% through their decision-making before engaging, making digital reputation critical.
- Sales cycles are lengthening, but trust-based approaches and clear positioning can reverse this trend.



Tim Hillier

Strategic implication

Tim Hillier stressed that too many organisations start with the technology rather than the problem.

The more effective approach is:

1. Define the commercial or operational challenge (e.g. “reduce proposal turnaround time by 40%”, “increase partner BD productivity”, “improve win-rates”).
2. Align commercial leaders and the CFO on target outcomes and acceptable risks.
3. Only then select and embed AI tools to support those outcomes.

AI should therefore be seen as a means to a clearly defined end, not an experiment in search of a justification.

What we heard

In the room, almost everyone raised their hand when asked if they were using AI in their business, typically tools such as ChatGPT, Copilot, or Gemini. This mirrored wider research suggesting that over 80% of organisations are now experimenting with AI.

However:

- Only a minority had an internal AI policy.
- Even fewer had updated client terms and conditions to reflect AI usage.
- Many were using AI primarily for content (emails, reports, proposals), with limited clarity on risks or quality control.

Why this matters for professional firms

For accountants, law firms, and consultancies, the stakes are high:

- You handle sensitive client data.
- Your output (advice, contracts, analysis, opinions) must meet regulatory and professional standards.
- Your reputation depends on reliability and rigour.

Without clear policies, governance and traceable workflows, firms risk:

- Inconsistent quality of client deliverables.
- Breaches of confidentiality or data-handling standards.
- An inability to demonstrate how AI supports, rather than undermines, professional judgement.

Insight 2: The buying journey has moved online – and ahead of you

The Modern Buying Journey Funnel



Prospects are 80–85% through decision-making before they speak to you

What we heard

Multiple examples from the panel and audience showed that buyers are significantly more informed by the time they speak to a firm. In many cases:

- Prospects are 80–85% through their decision-making process before they engage with a partner or BD professional.
- Website traffic is declining, but inbound leads convert at much higher rates, as buyers do more research before reaching out.

Changing discovery patterns

Traditional SEO is no longer enough. Peter Lorant noted:

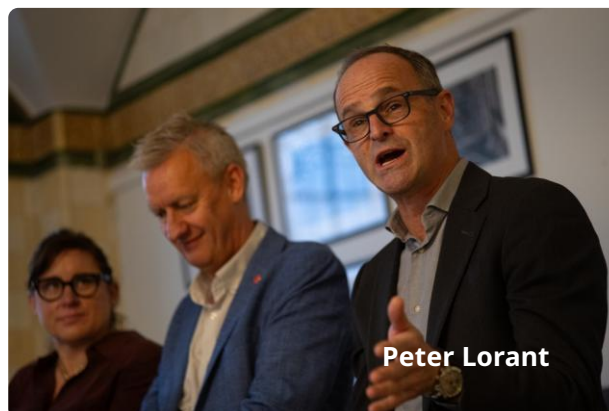
- Search behaviour is shifting towards AI assistants and generative engines.
- AI systems increasingly answer questions directly rather than sending users to websites.
- Content from social platforms, communities, thought leaders, and Q&A sites is being surfaced and aggregated by these engines.

In other words, a prospective client might ask: “Who are the leading mid-market professional services firms in London specialising in X?” ...and receive a curated answer without ever seeing your homepage.

Why this matters for professional firms

- Your digital reputation is now formed across many touchpoints: LinkedIn posts, event appearances, interviews, webinars, niche forums, and client comments - not just your website.
- If you are not visible in those places, you may be filtered out before any conversation starts.
- Thought leadership and clear positioning (“what you want to be famous for”) are now central to demand generation, not optional marketing extras.

Firms that still rely on occasional blog posts and basic SEO risk becoming invisible in this new landscape.



Peter Lorant

Insight 3: Sales cycles are lengthening, but trust and focus can reverse the trend

What we heard

Many attendees reported that sales cycles have either doubled or tripled compared with previous years. Complex governance, risk aversion, and discussions about outcome-based pricing all slow decision-making.

Yet alongside this, we heard:

- Some firms convert more than 90% of opportunities once a live conversation is underway.
- Others have moved to “help first” models, offering early value (introductions, diagnostics, or limited scope work) to build trust before pushing for large contracts.
- Buyers are often keen on outcome-based or value-based pricing in principle, but internal finance and risk teams struggle to measure or accept variable outcomes.

Why this matters for professional firms

- A longer sales cycle ties up partner time and increases acquisition costs.
- Inconsistent approaches make forecasting difficult and put pressure on utilisation.
- If fee models are not carefully designed, firms either carry too much downside risk or fail to differentiate on value.

What makes the difference

The discussion highlighted that firms that are succeeding in this environment tend to:

- Be ruthlessly focused on where they play and what they are famous for, instead of “taking any work the client wants”.
- Use early, low-risk engagements to build trust and prove value.
- Align pricing conversations with measurable outcomes that both sides understand and can track.
- Treat sales not as an adversarial negotiation but as a structured process of value discovery and co-design.

Russell Dalgleish captured it succinctly: business is done at the speed of trust. Firms that build trust intentionally - through networks, communities, and authentic personal brands - see shorter cycles and higher win-rates.



Russell Dalgleish

“Excellent panel, first-rate discussion, plenty of actionable takeaways. Really enjoyed it.”



Patrick
Sales Manager

Recommendation 1: Establish clear AI governance and client-facing transparency

From insight to action: Practical recommendations



SUMMARY

Four priority actions for firms:

1. Establish AI governance and client transparency.
2. Optimise for AI-driven discovery, not just SEO.
3. Build a data-driven sales journey across marketing, BD, and delivery.
4. Professionalise and elevate the sales role with clear competencies and “help first” principles.



What to do

Create an internal AI policy that covers:

- Acceptable and prohibited use cases.
- Treatment of client data and confidentiality;
- Human review requirements for AI-generated content.
- Responsibilities of partners, fee-earners, and support teams.

Update engagement terms to reflect AI-enabled delivery:

- Clarify that AI may be used as a supporting tool.
- Reassure clients about quality controls and professional oversight.
- Address data usage, storage, and third-party tools where relevant.

Provide training and guidance:

- Use live examples from your own work (proposals, reports, pitches).
- Show what “good” and “unacceptable” AI-assisted output looks like.
- Help teams understand where AI can save time, and where it must not replace judgement.

Why it matters

- Reduces regulatory, contractual, and reputational risks
- Builds client confidence that AI is used responsibly and professionally.
- Gives your people confidence to experiment within clear boundaries, rather than avoiding or misusing the tools.
- This is a foundational step: without it, further AI investments will be difficult to scale.

Recommendation 2: Optimise for AI-Driven discovery, not just traditional SEO

What to do

Clarify your positioning

- Decide what you want to be known for (sector, problem, outcome, or domain);
- Align leadership, marketing, and BD teams around that focus.

Invest in specialist thought leadership

- Develop a small number of recognisable experts who consistently publish and speak on defined topics.
- Use a mix of formats: articles, short videos, podcasts, event panels, and practical frameworks.

Distribute content where AI and buyers discover it

- LinkedIn (posts and long-form articles).
- Webinars and recorded sessions (hosted on accessible platforms).
- Niche communities and professional forums relevant to your target sectors.

Structure your website for comprehension, not just keywords.

- Clear service pages linked to problems and outcomes.
- FAQs that mirror real client questions.
- Case studies written in plain, specific language that AI tools can easily summarise.

Why it matters

- Positions your firm as a credible answer when AI engines and buyers look for “who can help with X?”;
- Reinforces your chosen specialisms and reduces dilution of your brand;
- Builds familiarity and trust long before a first meeting.





FROM DATA TO DECISIONS

PIPELINE COVERAGE

Target: 3×
revenue goal

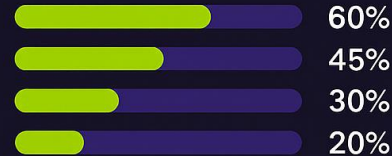


AVERAGE TIME IN STAGE

32 days



CONVERSION RATES BY STAGE



AI INSIGHTS

- Dormant contacts flagged
- Buying signals detected



What to do

Unify data into a single source of truth

- Implement or consolidate onto a CRM (e.g. HubSpot) that integrates marketing, sales, and key client delivery data.
- Standardise stages in the pipeline (lead, qualified, proposal, etc.) across the firm.

Define core commercial metrics:

- Conversion rates by stage.
- Average time in stage (to identify bottlenecks);
- Pipeline coverage (e.g. 3× revenue target);
- Meeting/activity benchmarks (e.g. 20 meaningful meetings/month per fee-earner or BD lead).

Leverage AI to surface insights and prompts:

- Identify dormant contacts or relationships that merit re-engagement.
- Highlight accounts with buying signals (content consumption, event attendance, or changes in engagement);
- Generate summaries and preparation briefs ahead of key client meetings.

Connect commercial outcomes with CFO priorities

- For each AI or automation initiative, quantify both efficiency gains (time saved, cost reduced) and growth potential (increased win-rates, higher average fees).
- Build joint business cases with finance rather than isolated “sales projects”.

Why it matters

- Enables consistent management of the sales journey, not just ad-hoc activity.
- Provides the data needed to prove AI ROI, rather than relying on assumptions.
- Helps reconcile the growth agenda of commercial leaders with the efficiency agenda of CFOs.

Recommendation 4: Professionalise and elevate the sales role in your firm

What to do

Define the competencies your growth function needs:

- Consultative selling and value creation
- Financial literacy (understanding pricing, margins, and ROI).
- Product/solution fluency.
- Stakeholder management and outcome-based conversations.

Segment and support your people:

- Identify your core “growth” roles (partners, directors, specialist BD teams, client managers).
- Tailor enablement programmes - including coaching, role-play and AI-based practice tools to each group.

Align incentives and expectations

- Set clear expectations for proactive activity (e.g. meetings, pipeline coverage).
- Align performance measures with both revenue and behaviours (relationship development, cross-selling, collaboration).

Use “help first” as a commercial principle:

- Encourage people to offer value before selling: introductions, insight sessions, diagnostics, or small-scope engagements.
- Use these as structured steps in the sales journey, not informal favours

Why it matters

- Elevates sales from a “necessary evil” to a respected professional discipline.
- Reduces over-reliance on a few rainmakers by building broader commercial capability.
- Supports sustainable revenue growth and a healthier internal culture around business development.



Conclusion & next steps



FOUR STEPS TO MODERNISE YOUR SALES ENGINE

AI GOVERNANCE & TRANSPARENCY



Establish clear guidelines
for responsible AI use

AI-DRIVEN DISCOVERY



Leverage AI to uncover
new sales opportunities

DATA-DRIVEN SALES JOURNEY



Use analytics to optimize every
stage of the sales process

PROFESSIONALISE SALES ROLE



Enhance skills and standards
for sales professionals

The state of sales in professional services is at a crossroads. AI, automation, and shifting client behaviour are transforming how work is sourced, shaped, and won.

Firms that respond thoughtfully, by clarifying their positioning, professionalising sales, establishing AI governance, and bringing data to the centre of the revenue function, will be best placed to thrive.

For professional firms looking to modernise their sales engine, reduce friction in the buying journey, and harness AI without losing the human element, AutomateNow and SBR Consulting can support with practical, real-world transformation programmes tailored to your context and growth ambition.