



CaptivateIQ

STATE OF SALES REPORT 2026

The Confidence Gap:
Sales Feels Ready.
The Data Says Otherwise.

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Executive *Summary*

Your reps aren't struggling because they can't sell.
They're struggling because your systems won't let them.

CaptivateIQ surveyed 500 full-time, U.S.-based sales professionals across industries, including software, technology/IT, manufacturing, automotive, and financial services, to understand how market shifts are impacting sales cycles, planning, and compensation. The survey was conducted in December 2025 via Pollfish, an online survey platform. A concerning pattern emerged.

Late quotas.
Wrong paychecks.
Targets that shift without explanation.

Top performers are pushing through friction rather than being supported by the system around them. That isn't momentum. It's strain.

This report examines where revenue systems are breaking down — and why RevOps is the only function positioned to restore execution.

Key Findings

Confidence is rising faster *than capability*.

Here's a stat revenue leaders should look at more closely:



At face value, that sounds like progress. In practice, it's a warning sign.

Sales confidence remains high as execution systems come under strain — widening the gap between belief and reality.

The market is getting harder, *and execution isn't keeping pace*.

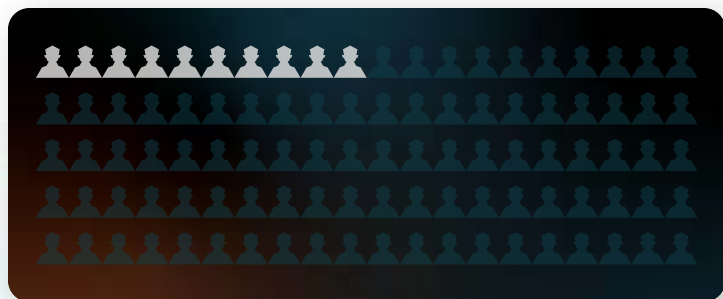


90% faced at least one major obstacle to hitting targets, including:

- **52%** economic shifts
- **39%** customer-side changes
- **38%** market or competitor moves
- **31%** internal reorganizations

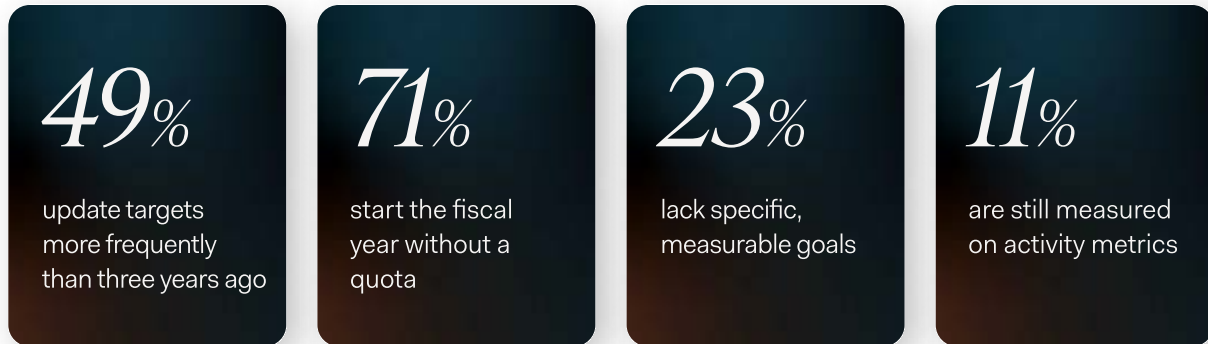
Under those conditions, clarity becomes critical. When markets tighten and obstacles multiply, execution depends on knowing exactly where to focus.

But only 10% of salespeople report having a clear path to quota.



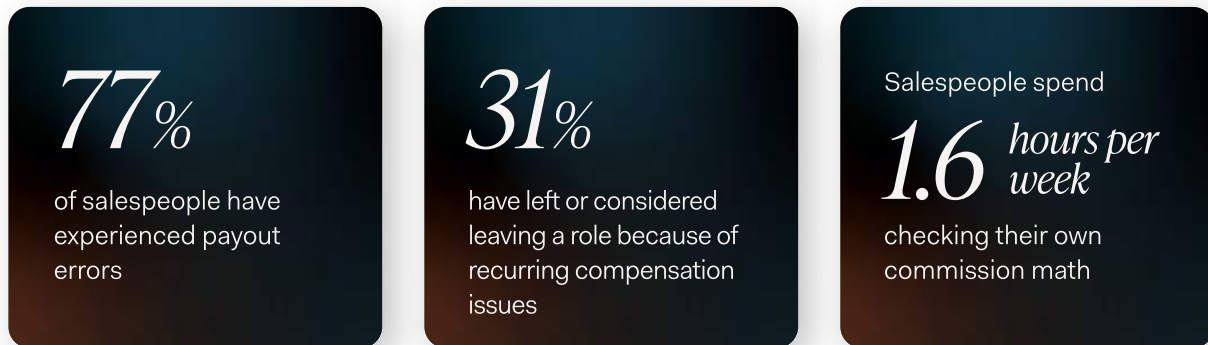
Every major obstacle on this list sits outside a rep's control. What remains within control is whether the system around them can absorb change, or whether execution slows just as pressure rises.

Planning is evolving. *Execution is not.*



When targets shift quarterly but don't arrive until week three, **25% of the quarter is already gone** — before the first meaningful deal is worked.

Where execution slips, *trust pays the price.*



On a 500-person sales team, **that's the equivalent of 20 full-time employees validating pay instead of selling.**

While shadow accounting shows up at the rep level, it originates in operations. Every unresolved error erodes the trust that keeps top performers from quietly updating their resumes.

Change doesn't slow teams. *Confusion does.*

70%
of salespeople are motivated by target changes when goals feel realistic

67%
say motivation stays high regardless of how often goals change — as long as expectations are clear

Sales teams can handle volatility. What they can't operate with is ambiguity. The fix isn't fewer changes or simpler plans — it's clarity.

AI adoption is high — *but shallow.*

81%
of salespeople use AI for some sales activities

Adoption concentrates in research (43%), email drafting (39%), and call summaries (35%)

But only 28% use AI for forecasting — the work that actually reallocates effort

Top complaint: tools are too basic to deliver real value (26%)

AI has increased velocity, but its influence on prioritization and outcomes remains limited.

The Confidence Gap

Sales confidence looks reassuring on the surface. Underneath, the system tells a different story.

When salespeople say they feel ready for the future, they're not talking about infrastructure. They're reflecting lived experience — deals closed, targets hit, obstacles navigated.

That's exactly what makes this gap dangerous.

The data shows what's happening beneath that confidence:



Two-thirds of salespeople believe planning, compensation, and adaptation are “handled.”

The lived experience says otherwise.

The people are doing the work. The system is falling behind.

That's the confidence gap: belief propped up by effort rather than infrastructure — and it only holds for so long.

The Squeeze

The market isn't easing up — and the margin for operational error is shrinking. Ask sales what's changed over the past year, and the answers are consistent.

Deals take longer to close.

Approvals require more steps.

Buyers hesitate where they once moved quickly.

What used to close in six weeks now stretches to ten. The data confirms what teams are feeling day to day.

What got in the way	How common
Economic Shifts (Inflation, Downturn)	52%
Customer-Side Changes (Budget Cuts, M&A)	39%
Market Or Competitor Changes	38%
Internal Changes (Budget Cuts, Headcount)	31%
Product Or Service Changes	24%
Unrealistic Targets	19%
Sales Cycle Length	18%
No Challenges (Lucky Them)	10%

These obstacles don't just create friction — they extend timelines.

49% of salespeople report that sales cycles have lengthened over the past year — a downstream effect of tightening conditions across the board.

But take note. Every major blocker on this list sits outside a rep's control.

Markets move.

Budgets freeze.

Competitors adjust.

Customers slow decisions or disappear entirely.

Sales teams are operating in an environment where the finish line keeps shifting. That's no longer unusual — it's the baseline. The difference isn't whether your team faces volatility. It's whether your systems let them absorb it and adapt, or whether every shift creates drag that compounds through the quarter.

This is the terrain RevOps has to navigate.

Volatility isn't something you can eliminate, and market conditions won't stabilize on command. What can be controlled is whether revenue systems are built to absorb pressure — or whether execution starts to fracture as conditions tighten.

As external pressure rises, the cost of internal friction compounds. In a tightening market, lagging systems don't just slow performance — they turn small delays into missed quarters and minor errors into lost reps.



Flying Blind

This is where speed turns into risk. Most organizations aren't standing still.

Planning cycles are faster than they used to be. Targets are revisited more often.

Annual plans are giving way to quarterly — even monthly — adjustments meant to keep pace with changing conditions.

The intent is sound. The breakdown happens in delivery.

71% of salespeople enter the fiscal year without an assigned quota.

Only 20% receive targets before the year begins. The rest spend weeks selling without direction. Not because they lack urgency, but because the system hasn't caught up. Reps are ready to move, but the direction arrives late. Targets are still being finalized, territories are still shifting, and compensation logic is still settling — leaving sales teams to operate on assumptions instead of clarity.

When quotas arrive

Percentage

Before Fiscal Year Begins

20%

Within The First Week

29%

Within The First Month

27%

More Than A Month In

10%

More Than Two Months In

5%

The irony is hard to miss. Planning cycles are accelerating, but delivery is lagging behind.

Today, 55% of salespeople operate under monthly or quarterly target updates.

When quotas shift that frequently, starting the year without one isn't a minor delay — it's misalignment at scale. Time is lost, effort is misdirected, and recovery becomes harder with each passing week.



This is where confidence starts to work against the system.

Leadership sees quarterly agility. Reps see January without a target, and February spent scrambling to recover lost ground.

Same system. Two very different experiences.

And when direction arrives late, it doesn't just slow execution — it quietly tests patience. In an environment where pressure is already rising, weeks without clarity become weeks spent deciding whether it's worth staying.

When direction is delayed, measurement becomes the substitute. What gets tracked starts to stand in for what matters.

The Signal Problem

Measurement is meant to guide focus. In practice, it often creates noise.

Across sales organizations, performance is still frequently assessed through activity metrics — emails sent, calls made, meetings booked.

One in nine are still measured this way.

As automation accelerates outreach and follow-ups, those metrics say less about progress and more about volume.

The picture becomes less clear when the goals themselves are undefined.

23% of salespeople report having no specific, measurable targets at all.

Effort is tracked, but direction is implied rather than explicit.

When outcomes aren't clearly defined, effort spreads thin. Reps stay active, but prioritization weakens. Pipeline reflects the ambiguity.

The issue surfaces in day-to-day execution, but its source is structural. Measurement systems shape behavior long before results appear. When signals are misaligned or outdated, execution becomes inconsistent. Progress begins to depend more on individual judgment than shared direction.

That strain compounds quickly. Late quotas consume time. Inaccurate pay erodes trust. When measurement loses clarity, both costs rise together.

Time is lost as focus blurs. Reps spend hours guessing priorities, chasing the wrong deals, double-checking numbers, or optimizing for metrics that don't actually move revenue.

At the same time, trust weakens. Outcomes start to feel unpredictable. When goals are unclear, or metrics drift away from results, confidence in the system fades — particularly when pay, quotas, or forecasts fail to align.

The Trust Tax

Trust rarely disappears all at once. It erodes quietly. There's one question every salesperson should be able to answer without hesitation:

"If I close this deal today, what happens to my paycheck?" For many, that answer isn't clear.

77% of salespeople report having experienced errors in their incentive compensation.

These aren't edge cases or one-time glitches. They're recurring issues that force reps to double-check outcomes that should be automatic. The impact shows up quickly:

How payout errors affected people

Percentage

Left A Role Because Of Recurring Errors

8%

Considered Leaving Because Of Errors

23%

Stayed, But Motivation And Trust Took A Hit

21%

Minor Errors, Resolved Quickly

26%

Rarely Or Never Experienced Errors

23%

When pay can't be trusted, verification becomes routine. Salespeople spend an average of **1.6 hours per week** checking commission math. That's not diligence. That's defensive labor. Reps are validating outcomes that no longer feel reliable.

Payout errors carry a deeper cost than lost time. They weaken the link between effort and reward. When that link feels uncertain, motivation becomes conditional. Performance follows.

The Clarity Equation

Salespeople don't require a static environment. They require clarity.

The data reflects that distinction:

70%

say target changes increase motivation when goals feel realistic and aligned with market conditions

67%

report staying motivated regardless of how often targets change, **as long as expectations are clear**

Change itself isn't destabilizing. Ambiguity is.

This pattern aligns with well-established research on motivation. [Victor Vroom's Expectancy Theory](#) describes performance as the result of three connected beliefs: effort leads to outcomes, outcomes lead to rewards, and rewards are worth pursuing. When any part of that chain weakens, performance degrades.

Compensation errors disrupt that chain at the most visible point. The issue isn't the size of the payout. It's the uncertainty around how actions translate into outcomes.

Sales teams feel this immediately. When asked about incentive plans, a common response emerges: *"I'll know at the end of the year."* That uncertainty shapes behavior long before year-end arrives.

The solution doesn't come from reducing change or simplifying plans. It comes from making cause-and-effect visible.

Salespeople need to understand, in real time, how today's actions influence tomorrow's results — without relying on spreadsheets or side calculations. That visibility changes how effort is applied, how deals are prioritized, and how trust is sustained.

For RevOps leaders, this reframes the role. The responsibility extends beyond plan design into signal delivery — ensuring that the connection between action and reward remains visible, timely, and credible as conditions change.

Which leads to the next question: if clarity is what execution requires, why isn't technology providing it?

Activity, Not Outcomes

AI is now embedded across sales workflows. Its presence is widespread, but its impact varies sharply by use case.

81% of salespeople report using AI for at least some sales activities.

On its own, that suggests progress. The details tell a more uneven story. Usage concentrates in tasks that reduce friction rather than reshape decisions:

What AI is being used for

Adoption

Customer Research (News, Competitor Intel)

43%

Content Creation (Emails, Proposals)

39%

Call/Meeting Analysis (Transcripts, Summaries)

35%

Administrative Tasks (CRM, Scheduling)

30%

Prospecting And Lead Generation

29%

Forecasting And Pipeline Analysis

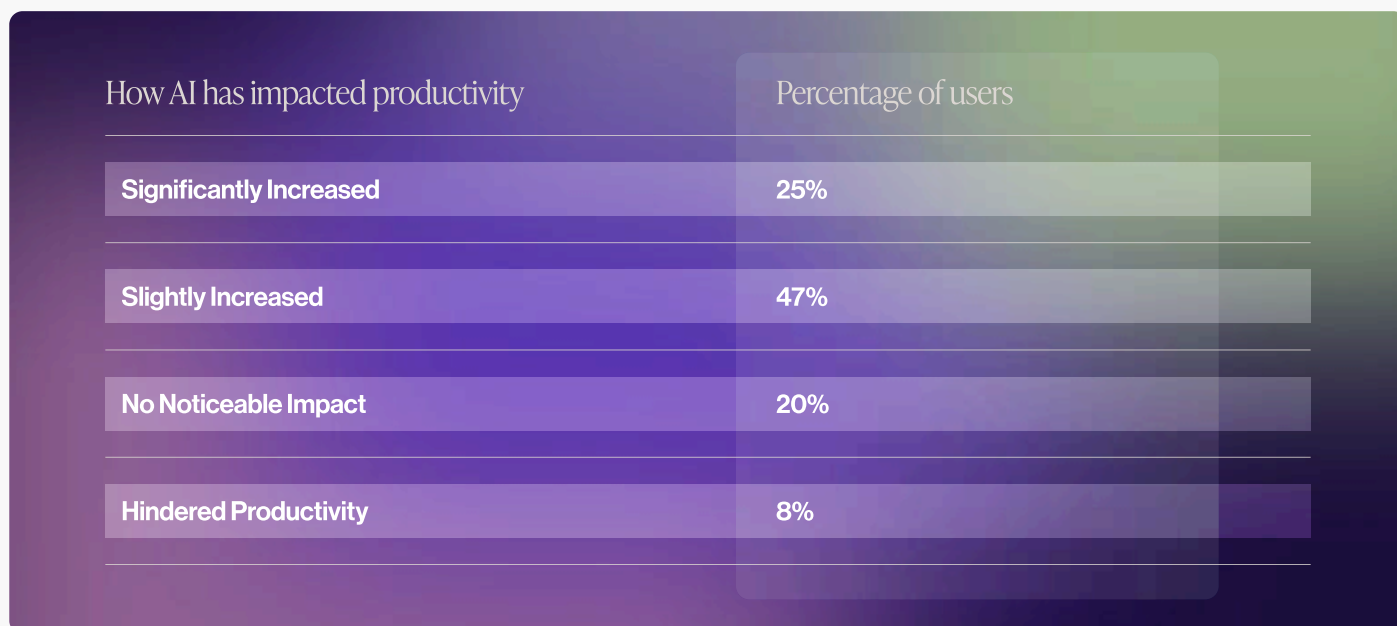
28%

The highest adoption appears in research and writing. The lowest appears in forecasting — the work that determines where effort should be applied and which deals deserve attention.

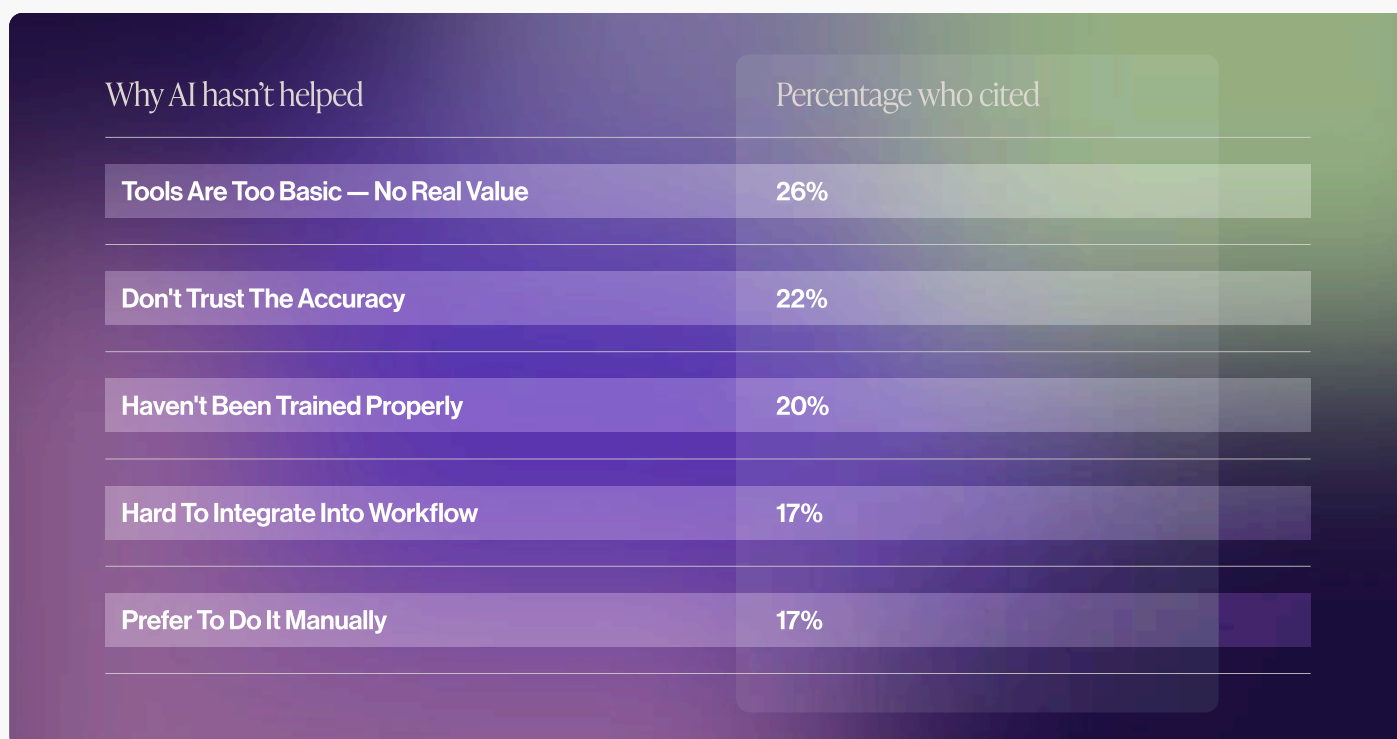
The pattern is consistent: AI is speeding up preparation and follow-through. Its influence on prioritization and pipeline judgment is far less common.

Faster — Not Better

So is AI actually helping? For most, yes — but not as much as the hype suggests.



About 72% report some improvement. Much of that gain sits in the “slight” category — faster drafts, quicker summaries, less manual work. For the **remaining 28%**, the constraints become clear:





The limiting factor isn't complexity. It's depth.

Most tools are accelerating work salespeople already know how to do. They reduce friction, but they rarely change direction. Drafting an email faster or summarizing a call more cleanly doesn't alter which opportunity to pursue or when to shift focus.

Until AI is tied directly to target-setting, pipeline evaluation, and prioritization, its impact will show up as speed – not sustained performance.

Why Optimism is a Liability

Here's the finding that underpins this entire report:

69% believe their organization is well-equipped to handle future market changes

Almost seven in ten salespeople look at their company's planning process and say, "Yeah, we've got this."

And yet:

- **71%** start the year without quotas
- **77%** have been paid incorrectly
- **90%** faced obstacles hitting targets last year
- **49%** are watching sales cycles stretch longer

These aren't edge cases. They're patterns. The confidence makes sense. Salespeople spend their days in motion — chasing the next deal, the next quarter, the next call. From that vantage point, problems appear isolated.

A delayed quota eventually arrives.

A payout error gets corrected.

A long sales cycle feels like a tough customer rather than a systemic shift.

Each issue feels manageable in the moment. Over time, those moments accumulate into the operating environment.

When late quotas, unreliable pay, unclear signals, and longer cycles pile on, they stop being exceptions. They become the operating environment. And confidence begins to rest on individual effort rather than system reliability. **That's where the risk lives.**

The most dangerous systems don't fail loudly. They fail quietly — in ways that allow performance to continue just long enough for high performers to absorb the strain themselves. By the time the system's limits become apparent, the people best equipped to succeed within it are already considering their options.

Optimism, in that context, doesn't signal readiness. It delays recognition. And when problems go unaddressed, the people carrying the load are the first to leave.

From Insight to Action

The annual sales plan, set once and revisited months later, no longer reflects how revenue teams operate. What replaces it has to do more than move faster. It has to hold up under change.

The challenges outlined in this report persist less because they are complex and more because ownership is fragmented. Planning, compensation, enablement, and execution evolve on different timelines, across various tools, and under different mandates. **That fragmentation shows up in predictable ways:**



Planning

Quotas arrive late, even as targets change more frequently



RevOps

Market shifts are reflected on paper, but not always clearly communicated to the field



Finance and Compensation

Payout accuracy requires verification instead of trust



Enablement and Operations

Technology accelerates activity without consistently guiding decisions

Each gap carries a cost. Together, they compound.

RevOps sits in a unique position within the revenue organization. It has visibility into the whole system — planning delays, compensation errors, signal loss, and missed leverage — and increasing responsibility for how those pieces work together.

And yet, execution continues to stall.

Most revenue teams aren't short on data. They are constrained by structure. Planning, compensation, and execution often live in separate systems, owned by different teams and updated on different schedules. Over time, that separation shows up as late quotas, shadow accounting, and technology that accelerates tasks without improving outcomes. **This report describes a system-level problem. Addressing it requires system-level infrastructure.**

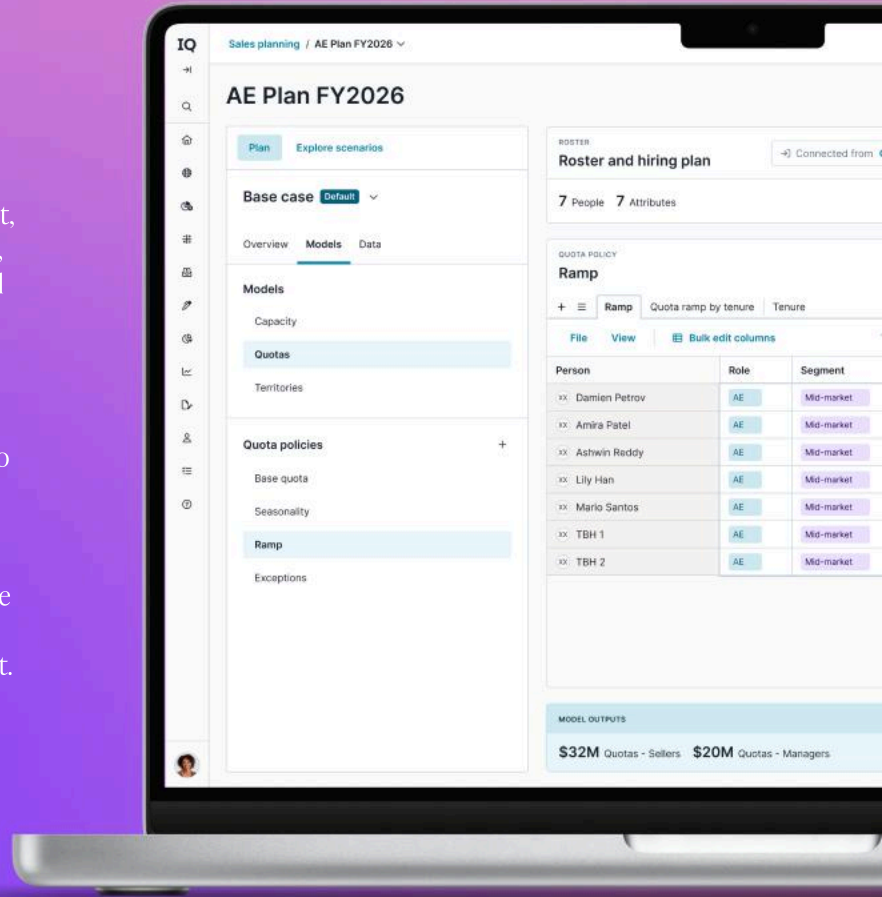
CaptivateIQ was built to close those gaps.

By unifying planning, quotas, territories, headcount, and incentive compensation into a single platform, CaptivateIQ gives RevOps the visibility and control needed to keep execution aligned as conditions change – without sacrificing trust.

Built by operators who understand the cost of disconnected systems. Designed for teams ready to replace workarounds with execution that holds up under pressure.

Explore how modern RevOps teams are closing the gap between planning, pay, and execution – and giving their teams a real reason to be confident.

[Earn their confidence](#)



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