ARTICLE

THE FUTURE OF SALES

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XANT

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> "There's no going back to the future and no new normal. This is a watershed moment. B2B sales leaders must embrace change and plan for a very different buying and selling landscape."[1]
>
> Mary Shea, PhD. | **Forrester**

If you run a B2B business, ask yourself:

"Does my sales operation look more like 1990s Oracle or more like Crowdstrike, the fastest-growing SaaS company to IPO last year?"

If you are like 1990s Oracle, you probably have:

- A large and well-paid field sales force
- Large average initial deal sizes (>$100K)
- 9-12 month sales cycles
- Lumpy bookings on a quarterly basis
- Poor bookings forecast accuracy
- Difficulty knowing what each rep is doing on any given day / week

If you are like 2020 Crowdstrike, you probably have:

- A large remote sales team, complemented with field sales
- Highly active marketing and demand generation
- Smaller average initial deal sizes (<$50K)
- 3-6 month sales cycles
- High expansion rates
- Smooth bookings growth, quarter to quarter
- Consistent bookings forecast accuracy
- Complete visibility into daily and weekly sales activity

Illustration: Peter Slattery

"Outdated?!"

The world has moved on.

Modern B2B companies are maintaining growth rates of 40% and higher (Crowdstrike was 107% in their IPO quarter), and the modern engine room of growth is:

- Demand generation
- Inbound and outbound prospecting
- Remote sales
- Customer success

Many companies have laid off or "retired" large portions of their field sales forces (monitor this here), in favor of inside sales.

If you think the world will return to field selling after the 2020 pandemic subsides, you will be waiting a long time.

Sales is never going back.

[1] Mary Shea, Forrester: "The Democratization of B2B Sales," Aug 3, 2020

Modern Selling

To understand the future of sales, let's look at a modern B2B seller's daily life.

Angela wakes up where she lives--not necessarily co-located with her company's headquarters. She chooses where to live based on personal preference. She sets up shop in her home office and goes to work.

Angela logs into her systems, which track all her pursuits--top of funnel, mid-funnel, and bottom-of-funnel. Angela has blocked out her day to focus specifically on different parts of her business. Scheduled meetings take priority, but Angela concentrates these in the afternoon where possible. Her team meetings are in the afternoon too. Why? Her team has studied the data, and they know contact rates for prospecting are 15% higher before noon.

- **Mornings**
  - **Sales Development Rep (SDR) coordination —** At the beginning of each day, Angela speaks with her SDR, reviewing yesterday's activity and prioritizing today. The SDR does most of the prospecting for Angela and alerts her when new appointments have been set with specific, targeted customers.
  - **Prospecting —** The bulk of Angela's mornings are dedicated to phone calls. She finds if she doesn't spend specific time prospecting each day, her funnel will empty out. And for some of her accounts, Angela would rather make the approach vs. letting her SDR do it--this is all planned in advance. Angela, her manager and her SDR have all studied the data and they know the time before noon is best for calling, reserving afternoons for meetings.
- **Afternoons**
  - **Scheduled sales meetings**
  - **Scheduled team meetings**
  - **Meeting Prep —** Angela makes sure each meeting has an agenda and an objective. Her systems prompt her to send emails with this information in advance of her meetings to ensure expectations are aligned.
  - **Territory management —** This time is used to plan how she will hit her number, research her accounts, add contacts to her lists, etc.
  - **Follow-up —** After each meeting, Angela's systems prompt her to do the follow-up work: re-listen to the call, write the follow-up emails, assign the tasks, etc.

In order to break up each day and week, Angela schedules time for herself--she goes to the gym and she hikes in the hills near her house with her dog.

> "The AE-SDR relationship is the most important partnership in modern sales. When it's working right, they can finish each other's sentences. Strategy is defined by the AE, tactics are programmed by the AE, and then the SDR does as much as possible before teeing up the AE to step in and take charge. Does this mean the AE doesn't prospect? No. Does this mean the AE isn't full-funnel? Definitely not. What it does mean is that the team of AE-SDR works seamlessly to provide as much value to the customer and as much leverage to the AE as possible."
>
> Lars Nilsson, Global VP Sales Development **Snowflake**

Angela and her SDR rely on 4 main systems to help stay on top of their business:

1. **Sales Engagement Platform —** Angela uses a Sales Engagement Platform (SEP) to manage all her top-of-funnel and mid-funnel activity. She programs her SEP to automatically enroll new leads into pre-built plays--some that she will run, some that her SDR will run, and some that will get handed-off mid-stream. This makes prospecting seamless. For scheduled meetings, Angela's SEP prompts her with pre-meeting tasks and post-meeting tasks, so execution is always flawless. The SEP also watches for updates or interactions and enrolls people or accounts into plays when certain behaviors are observed, like opening a marketing email or going 3 months without an interaction. This helps Angela stay on top of mid-funnel and dormant accounts. Angela's manager can see all customer engagement activities--as well as play utilization and success rates--because this data is logged automatically.
2. **Remote Meeting Software —** Angela uses a video conferencing service to deliver the meeting, manage a chat window during the meeting, and capture a transcript of the call for analysis afterwards. Angela's manager depends on this call analysis to identify sections of calls to listen to, as well as to identify coaching moments.
3. **Content Management —** Since Angela knows she has to add value in every interaction, she depends on having the best content at her fingertips--ready to refer to, display, and share. Content management is integrated seamlessly into the SEP.
4. **CRM —** This is the foundation and the system of record. This is where Angela's territory is defined, and this is where all notes, updates, and status changes are logged. It's also how she gets paid, so she wants it up to date. She does not, however, spend a lot of time in CRM--mostly she works in other systems that pull data from the CRM and push updates to the CRM.

Angela's scheduled meetings are not introductory meetings. Since her buyers are likely millennials or younger, they've already read up on her solution. They've read the website, checked online reviews, read analysts' opinions, and even pinged their network of peers for opinions on her solution.

Angela knows her buyer doesn't need a generic introductory pitch--what they need is expert advice. They need someone who understands their situation and use cases and then helps make sense of the various alternatives for solving issues.

This is where Angela enters the picture--the modern B2B seller. Call Angela a concierge, a consultant, an advisor, a coach--call her whatever you want, but this is the modern seller.

The modern seller more likely asks to see what's on the buyer's screen than shows their own screen. The modern seller wants to understand first, then recommend. The modern seller knows they are a "tenant at will" in the relationship, and they could be kicked out at the first sign of not adding value. So Angela adds value. She knows her stuff. She develops empathy and understanding for her customer's situation. If there is not a fit, she moves on.

The modern seller is:

- Fast
- Always online
- Customer-centric
- Content-rich
- Technology enabled

This is never going back to the old way. This is a durable shift for two permanent reasons:

1. Millennials are now in charge of buying
2. Remote buying is better for everyone

Digital Natives

Millennials now make up 50% of the workforce. Millennials, more than ever, are in positions of power both on the selling side, and on the buying side. They are digital natives, and as such they lean toward more technology, not less. The first place digital natives go for answers is online, and they may not even look for a keyboard--they may just ask Siri. Digital natives prefer collaboration, and they are comfortable collaborating online. Once they feel they know enough about a product category to begin asking questions, they hit up their peers. Millennials are quick to text or DM (direct message) a friend to see what they know about fill-in-the-blank.

With these proclivities in mind, it's no surprise digital natives are not interested in a protracted information exchange with a salesperson. And they are certainly not interested in spending social time with a corporate salesperson at a ball game or a golf course. Digital natives would rather find the information they need on the Internet. Modern manufacturers and vendors have put more and more product and how-to information online. And where the vendors themselves leave off, review sites, how-to sites, and the general public fill in information gaps, including reviews, suggestions, and guides.

It's been estimated a modern B2B buyer can complete 70-80% of her buying journey without ever talking to a salesperson.

None of this means a younger, faster, more digital buyer is less empathetic, relationship based, or interested in building trust--quite the opposite. More than any previous generation, millennials (and younger) care about ethics, trust, responsibility. And they are comfortable doing business with or without a personal relationship. But to build a true relationship with a digital native requires showing up, adding value, collaborating, and earning trust.

So the modern seller becomes less of a merchant and more of a concierge, a consultant, or a coach.

"Help me understand what you are doing today, and what about that is not working for you."

"Yes there is a lot of information out there--let me help you make sense of it."

"Depending on your specific need, you may want to consider a product from my competitor, or my product may be best. I'm happy to help you make that assessment."

> "Buyers don't care how your internal organization is structured or what type of seller is assigned to their account. They expect every interaction to bring them value, relevancy, and continuity."[3]
>
> Mary Shea, PhD. | **Forrester**

> "In an attention-competitive environment memory decay is your enemy. You need new ways to connect emotionally, embed precise memories, and motivate action in your favor in a selling environment where the buyer is in complete control of when, where and how they give attention. At the same time, they are overwhelmed and confused by all of their options and need your help."
>
> Tim Riesterer, Chief Strategy Officer
> **Corporate Visions**

(For more on this topic, see The Future of Buying)

[2] Mary Shea et. al., The Democratization of B2B Sales, Based on Forrester's Q1 2017 International B2B Marketing Panel Online Survey

[3] Mary Shea, Forrester Blog

Remote Selling

Gone are the days of the onsite sales meeting. Remote video conferences have all but taken over corporate life, and every selling interaction can and will happen remotely from this point forward.

Screen sharing obviates the need to present materials in person. Multi-participant video conferencing obviates the need to assemble a large group in person. Call recordings, auto-transcriptions, call summaries and task capture--all make online meetings faster, more convenient, and in many cases more effective. The salesperson may still want to be in person to better read body language and group dynamics. But the buyer does not want this, and the technology facilitates a reasonable alternative, so our new reality is largely remote.

> "Because you are no longer in the room with your buyers, you need to find ways to be more unique, memorable and convincing. You need better stories and fresh skills to deliver conversations that win in both the digital self-serve dialogue and the virtual sales-led experience."
>
> Tim Riesterer, Chief Strategy Officer
> **Corporate Visions**

Building Your Sales Future

Let's return to our earlier question: does your sales team look more like 1990s Oracle or 2020 Crowdstrike? (Hint: Crowdstrike is configured for the future.)

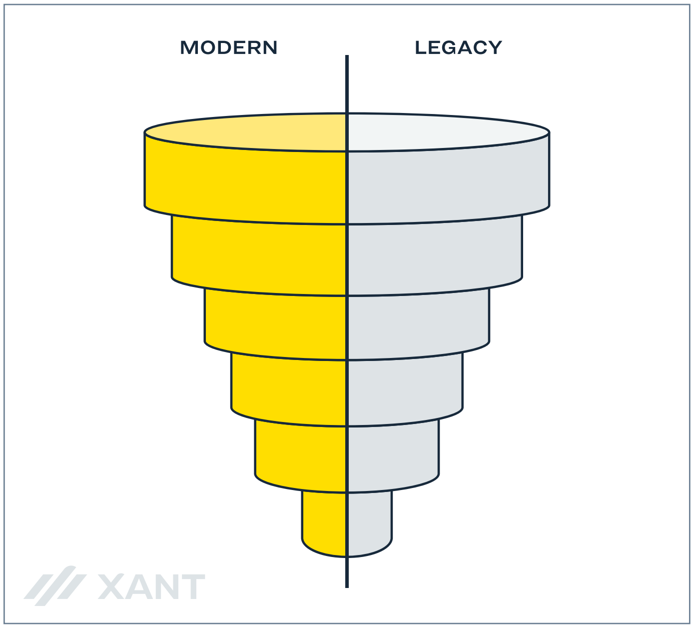
If you don't like the answer, now is the time to change. Under the cover of COVID, we recommend the following:

- **Examine all sales personnel** — keep the ones who are producing
- **Examine all sales processes** — keep the ones that are:
  - Fast
  - Always-online
  - Customer-centric
  - Content-rich
  - Technology-enabled
- **Examine demand generation** — Look specifically at how an inquiry turns into a lead, then an opportunity, then a deal. How much volume does this demand generation engine produce? Is it fully technology-enabled? Can it feed your entire sales team?

> "A modern sales process depends on tight coordination all the way to the top of the funnel. Marketing focuses almost all their energy on specific demand generation feeding qualified leads into the funnel (you can't brand your way to greatness). And sales pays acute attention to top-of-funnel activity, taking responsibility early and often to engage with leads as soon as they show interest."
>
> Richard Sgro | **Modern Sales Pros**

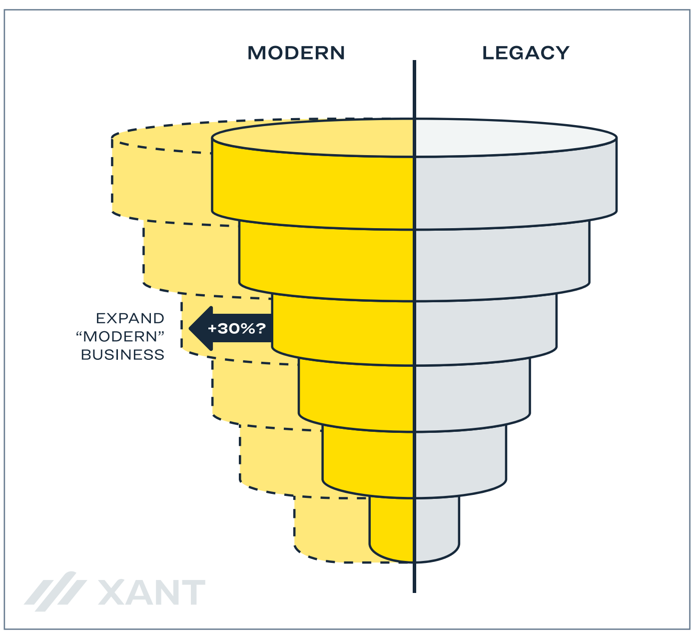
After this introspection, how much of your business looks modern? Is it enough to reach your growth objectives? If not, now is the time to start building in place of anything you may have eliminated.

Consider the following methodology for this introspection / reinvention:



Step 1: Evaluate

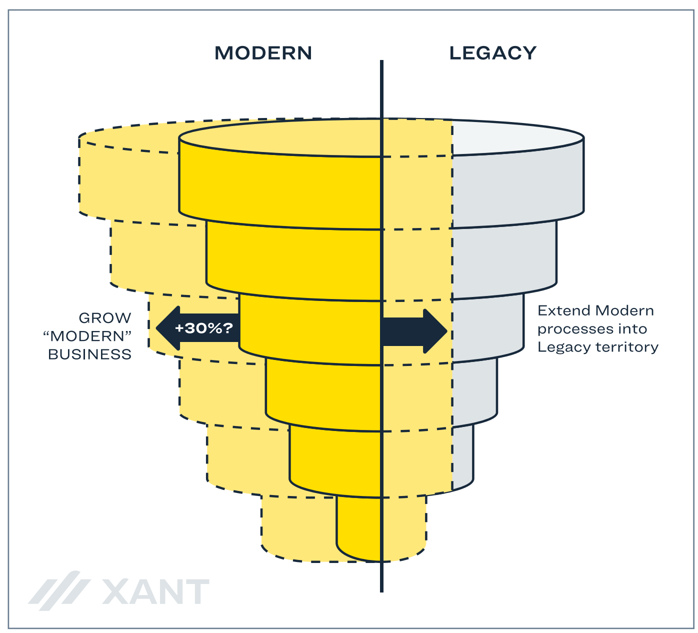
Divide your go-to-market motion into two halves--one that is modern (follows the principles of modern sales outlined above), and one that is legacy.



Step 2: Expand

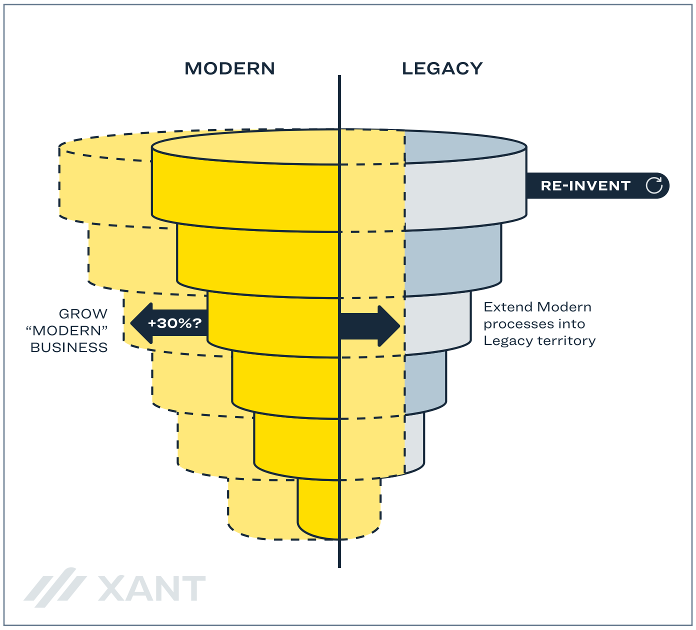
By how much could you expand the modern portions of your business? Could you hire more reps? Could you keep them fed with demand generation? Will your target markets support expansion? Theoretically, the only limit to growing the modern portion of your go-to-market motion is your ability to cost effectively generate leads to keep that team fed. Could you expand that team by 20%? 30%? 50%? Do it.

> "Modern demand generation techniques can increase the flow of qualified leads by up to 100% if you know how to implement and have the patience to tune the engine. Between intent detection / attribution, website tracking, and marketing automation--both inbound and outbound--we've seen many clients completely scrap prior notions of how much demand is available to harvest digitally. The marriage of modern demand generation and modern sales engagement is a match made for this moment in time."
>
> Steve Gustafson, COO | **Search Discovery Inc.**



Step 3: Extend

The next step is to look at your legacy territories and evaluate how much of those historically "field-based" territories could be effectively served by exactly the same modern processes as have historically served other segments. If there were ever a time to re-evaluate your go-to-market motions, it is now. And if you have in-house, modern processes that could serve other segments, again: do it.



Step 4: Re-Invent

You are now left with the segment of your business that is the "most legacy" of all. This segment likely contains your most expensive and most productive field sellers--let's call them your "Enterprise Team." They've historically landed your largest deals. They take care of your most important customers. Their art and magic lies in their ability to work face-to-face with customers, on-site, tackling enterprise-size problems and opportunities. Since enterprise reps will not be welcome onsite at their customers for the foreseeable future, we must reinvent.

Let's acknowledge this segment cannot and should not go away. The reason you didn't roll existing processes over this segment is because you didn't think it would work. The reason you didn't fire these enterprise reps is because they are experienced and productive.

So how do we reinvent and retool in this segment to continue taking advantage of your enterprise team's unique skills?

This reinvention will fall into three categories: Skills, Processes, Tools.

1. **Skills**

There is no getting around the evolution of the B2B buyer. Her preferences have evolved as outlined above, and we must meet her where she is. Therefore, we must be:

- Fast
- Always-online
- Customer-centric
- Content-rich
- Technology-enabled

To the extent your enterprise team can use skills training here, do it:

- Training on the millennial mindset
- Training on the speed of millennial communication
- Business writing skills work
- Training on the details of your product, your competitors' products, use case fits, case studies, value calculations—if your team needs to be content-rich, let's get them the content!

2. **Processes**

Examine all your processes and make every single check and balance fight for its existence. Millennial buyers are not patient, and the speed of modern selling doesn't want to wait for approvals or sign-offs. If you can speed up your processes by eliminating steps, automating approvals, streamlining pricing, etc.-- do it.

Here are some examples:

- Can you record and transcribe calls so your reps don't have to type up notes?
- Can you use a quote-to-cash process that simplifies approvals? (Or alternatively, can you kill your quote-to-cash process because it's created too much overhead?)
- Can you automatically log calls, emails, meetings into CRM to save reps time?
- Can you document processes and handoffs so collaborators (sales engineers, management, products specialists) know exactly where to find things and what to expect?

Even though "enterprise" is the least automatable segment of your business, you do not want every deal to be a special snowflake that requires customized process and attention. Look for every opportunity to define, document, and template processes. And that leads to the third category:

3. Tools

Much of what you reinvent in 1) skills and 2) processes will be facilitated by tools--tools that need to be implemented, configured, trained on, and adopted. We mentioned the modern sales stack earlier, and although the motions for your enterprise team may be different from the other parts of your business, the tools remain the same:

1. **Sales Engagement Platform** — SEPs got their start with sales development teams, and they have extended to inside sales teams and customer success teams. But innovative managers have also configured SEPs to facilitate enterprise sales motions for their enterprise sellers who are now working from home. Some cutting-edge uses for SEPs in an enterprise motion include:
   - **Pre-Call Preparation** — Enterprise reps can benefit from a checklist of what to do before a call: Templated emails / agendas for the customer. Standardized call prep docs. Served-up research on the account. SDR call recordings to review. SEPs have been configured to facilitate all of this.
   - **Buying Committee Identification** — In almost no case do we start out on an opportunity with all the relevant actors identified. The typical way an enterprise rep works to identify additional approvers, influencers, and buying committee members is by walking the halls, having informal conversations over lunch, and asking tons and tons of questions. Much of this can be replicated via remote and digital communication, but SEPs can also be helpful. Some SEPs can literally tell you who else matters to a buying decision at that company, based on collective intelligence. Some can tell you which roles are still missing on your buying committee and guide you to find them. But even if you don't have a prescriptive SEP, you can still enroll multiple people into plays that "warm up" influencers and approvers and ensure you have each member of the buying committee actively engaged.
   - **Post-call Follow-Up** — Once you hang up a call, much of the work starts. SEPs can be used to help you keep track of and manage that work. What notes get sent to whom? What recordings? What to-dos get logged and distributed? What follow-up emails get sent to the customer?
2. **Remote Meeting Software** — This is the most obvious category of software for erstwhile field

enterprise teams. We are all remote sellers now.

- Make sure your teams are using video tools and not just resorting to cell phones.
- Train reps on how to encourage prospects to engage over video and turn cameras on. This allows enterprise reps to build more personal relationships and use their powers of perception to read body language.
- Winning by Design has great tips for how to manage remote meetings and get even more out of a remote meeting than an in-person meeting. Top tips include using the chat window strategically, using the white board, and assigning roles on your side of the call.
- We've incorporated call recording software into this category--whether you are recording using native or third-party tools. Call recordings, transcriptions, and analysis can be very useful:
    - Saves time for reps
    - Allows reps to review calls prior to engaging in subsequent calls—good for strategic deal management
    - Great for coaching

3. Content Management

- Since we are moving quickly, we do not want to create custom content for every deal--this is where content management comes in.
- The best sales content management systems curate *current* and *relevant* content and make it easily accessible to reps.
- Be sure your content management system not only allows seamless attachments to SEP-generated emails, but also tracks customer access to that content.
- Ensure your SEP triggers are set to fire off additional communication when a prospect accesses a piece of content, a proposal, or even a straight-text email.

4. CRM

- CRM is the backbone of everything, and historically it has been the only way to monitor the activities and progress of your enterprise team.

DO NOT SACRIFICE THIS

- Everything from your SEP, your remote meeting software, and your content management systems should write back to your CRM.
- This is how you run reports, combine data from across your enterprise, and stay on top of enterprise selling activities.

> "It's not enough for systems to be siloed and passive in the era of the empowered buyer. A seller of the future is able to lean on a blended tech stack to be prescient, to predict what the customer will need, to personalize the buying interaction, to surprise and delight. If you can perfect selling interactions with automation, ML, and AI empowered data, you will stand out. Standing out gives you a seat at the table. How you sell sets the tone for your CSM fulfillment models and ultimately the perception of what the customer experience will actually be like behind the veil."
>
> Justin Michael | **Sales Futurist**

In Summary

The question is not when will sales go back to "normal." Sales is Never Going Back. The question is, how quickly can you modernize so you can embrace the future of sales and come out of COVID ready to take on the new, fast, always-online, customer-centric, content-rich, and technology-enabled world of modern buying and selling:

- In place of field sales, remote sales.
- In place of ad hoc, technology-enabled processes.
- In place of "come one, come all," targeting.
- In place of manual, automated.
- In place of travel, videoconferencing.
- In place of everyone for themselves, a Sales Engagement Platform
- In place of "hope they're good at what they do," sales call recording and analysis
- In place of "custom presentations," content management
- In place of presentations at all, discovery sessions

Many advisory organizations know how to help you get from here to there. Some of our favorites are:

- Search Discovery, Inc.
- Vertical Relevance
- Winning by Design
- Boston Consulting Group
- Justin Michael Consulting
- Kraig Kleeman
- Flip the Script
- Sirius Decisions

Now is the time to retool your sales organization for the future. As you architect your sales model of the future, do not forget where the real work gets done.

> "The key role in any such change is middle management. This is who will drive the move from a 'manage by activities' to a 'coach on outcomes' approach."
>
> Jacco van der Kooij, co-CEO | **Winning by Design**

Here's to your success transforming and re-tooling to take the future head on. If you adopt Forrester's current watchword of "Bold at Work," you will succeed! If you come out of 2020 and still have a sales organization that looks like 1990s Oracle, you are 100% ready to take on 1990s buyers, if you can find them. But if you come out of 2020 ready to outpace your competition, meet buyers where they live, and leverage all the tools and techniques of modern selling, look out world!

Rock on,

Dave Boyce

Chris Harrington

Resources

- XANT Playbooks
- XANT: Sales is Never Going Back
- Winning by Design
  - Research
  - Webinar on Remote Selling
- Inc.: The (Millennial) Workplace of the Future is Almost Here
- Mary Shea et. al., The Democratization of B2B Sales, Based on Forrester's Q1 2017 International B2B Marketing Panel Online Survey
- XANT: The Future of Buying