Sales Team Hiring Order for Founders

For: Founders of AI product companies who are hiring their first sales team

As of October 26, 2026

This guide gives you the order to hire in, the test for each hire, and the tools, pay and workdays that go with it. The headcounts and workdays are Doug's recommendation. The ratios cite their sources in the Research part.

What You Need

Work through this part before you hire. It covers your inputs, the team you're building toward, and the tools.

Inputs and Time

- **Your own numbers.** Your conversion rates, your deal size and your sales cycle length (the time from first contact to a signed deal). Set headcount from these, not from the starting points below.
- **A written account of what's worked.** Who bought, what problem they had, and why they said yes.
- **Time.** The rollout in Step 8 runs 12 weeks, to day 90. A new enterprise seller takes 6 to 9 months to ramp, meaning to reach full output.
- **A system of record.** This is the one tool where the official version of each account, contact and deal lives. Most teams use a CRM (customer relationship management software) such as Salesforce or HubSpot. Step 8 covers choosing it.

The Team You're Building Toward

Stage 1 is the first sales hires, after the founders stop closing every deal. Stage 2 is about 25 quota-carrying sellers (sellers with a sales target) with a full management layer. These are starting points for an enterprise AI product. Set your own numbers from your conversion rates, deal size and cycle length. SDRs (sales development reps) are also called pipeline builders. They book first meetings.

Seat	Stage 1: first sales hires	Stage 2: about 25 sellers	What the seat owns
Head of sales	The founder sells and coaches. Hire a VP once the founder can't sell, coach and forecast at the same time.	VP of Sales	The number, the hiring plan, the forecast, and executive contact on the biggest deals.
Sales managers	None. The founder or VP coaches until the team reaches about five sellers.	5 managers, one per 5 to 6 sellers	Coaching, deal reviews, hiring, ramp.

Seat	Stage 1: first sales hires	Stage 2: about 25 sellers	What the seat owns
Enterprise sellers	2 to 4 sellers who have closed long, multi-party deals	About 25	Pipeline through signed pilot to production contract. A pilot is a limited trial of your product inside the buyer's company.
Sales engineers	1, shared across sellers	About 8, one per 3 sellers	Technical discovery, pilot design, security answers. A sales engineer is a technical expert who supports sellers.
Pipeline builders (SDRs)	None yet. Sellers and AI tools do the prospecting.	About 6, one per 4 sellers, with AI doing the research	Meetings with the right accounts.
Forward-deployed or onboarding engineers	1, often from the founding team	3 to 4	Getting the pilot running and moving it to production. They work inside the customer's setup.
RevOps and GTM engineering	1, part-time is fine	2 to 3	The tools, the data, the handoffs between them, and the forecast. RevOps is revenue operations. GTM is go-to-market. A handoff is where work or data passes from one person or tool to another. A forecast predicts what will close.
Enablement	A manager or the founder	1	Onboarding, the call library, playbooks. Enablement means training and materials for sellers.
Deal desk and pricing	The founder with finance	1	Quotes for seat, usage and outcome pricing. A deal desk prices and approves custom deals.
Customer success and renewals	The founder and the onboarding engineer	About 3	Usage, renewals, expansion.

Tools, Layer by Layer

Every layer has a handoff to the next. Most deals slow down at a handoff, not inside a tool. Tools named are examples, not endorsements. The last column is where a stack gap review starts. A stack is the set of tools your team uses.

Layer	The job	Who uses it	Examples	Where it usually breaks
System of record	One source of truth for accounts, contacts and deals.	Everyone	Salesforce, HubSpot	Teams define fields differently, and data is re-keyed from other tools.
Signals and research	Finds accounts and the trigger to call them.	Sellers, SDRs	Clay, Apollo, ZoomInfo	Signals never reach the CRM, so sellers work from stale lists.
Call capture and coaching	Records, transcribes and tags calls.	Sellers, managers	Gong, Fireflies	Notes do not reach CRM fields, and clips are not tied to a skill.
Outreach and sequencing	Drafts and sends outreach.	Sellers, SDRs	Outreach, Salesloft	Sequences keep running after the deal is already active.

Layer	The job	Who uses it	Examples	Where it usually breaks
Pipeline and forecast	Inspects deals and rolls up the number.	Managers, VP	Clari, the CRM's own forecast tools	The forecast disagrees with billing and usage data.
Deal room and action plan	A shared plan with the buyer.	Sellers, buyers	A shared document, or a deal room tool	The plan lives in the seller's head and in the buyer's inbox.
Pilot and usage data	Shows whether the pilot is meeting its metrics.	Sellers, engineers	The product's own analytics, a data warehouse	Usage never reaches the seller, so renewals surprise everyone.
Quotes and billing	Quotes custom pricing and bills for usage.	Deal desk, finance	A billing system such as Chargebee or Stripe	The quote does not match the invoice.
Approved answer library	Security and legal answers sellers can reuse.	Sellers, engineers	A knowledge base	Answers go stale, so sellers write their own.
Enablement	Onboarding and the call library.	Managers, new hires	A learning tool, or the call library itself	It lives in a folder nobody opens.

Research

Every number below comes from the source named next to it. Check the sources. Two are vendor blogs, one is a secondary compilation, and one is an opinion, and the table says which.

What the source says	Source and how far to trust it
About 38% fewer go-to-market staff at companies under $25M in annual recurring revenue (ARR) that lean heavily on AI in their own selling. RevOps share of staff is 17% against 12%. Quota attainment is 61% against 56%. The gap shrank past $50M ARR.	ICONIQ, State of Go-to-Market 2025, via SaaStr. Survey of 205 B2B software executives. These are software companies using AI to sell, not necessarily AI products. Read it as a signal, not a rule.
57.31% of reps missed quota. Average attainment was 42.69%. About 47,000 reps at 246 cloud companies.	RepVue, Q2 2025, via QuotaPath.
First-line sales managers average about 8.5 reports, with smaller spans for complex selling. Managers spend 16% of their time coaching, against 28% in best practice.	Alexander Group.
Enterprise manager span: median 5.5 (healthy 4 to 7). Sellers per sales engineer: 2 (healthy 1.5 to 3). Sellers per SDR: 2, and 4 or more where AI is adopted.	knowledgelib, sales team structure benchmarks 2026. A secondary source that cites Bridge Group and Ebsta.
Enterprise sellers with 6 to 12 month cycles need 6 to 9 months to ramp fully. No real progress after about 1.5 sales cycles is a warning sign.	Jason Lemkin, SaaStr, on account executive ramp.
Paid pilots convert better than free ones, because payment forces a sign-off and points to a real champion, someone inside the buyer's company who pushes your deal forward. Agree success metrics first. Reward winning the logo, meaning the customer's name, for the first 20 to 30 enterprise customers.	TinyFish, enterprise sales for AI startups. A vendor's CRO describing her own view. Her opinion, not a study.
Custom AI pricing mixes seats, usage, outcomes and credits. Pilots need talks on data access, APIs and security before the buyer sees value.	Chargebee, how AI-native companies rewrite go-to-market. A vendor blog.

Numbers to Watch, by Level

Level	The few numbers that matter	Why
Seller	Decision makers met. Pilots with written success metrics. Pilot to production rate. Deals with a dated next step.	These show whether a deal is real before the forecast does.
Manager	Share of time spent coaching. Ramp milestones met. Forecast accuracy by seller.	Managers average 16% of their time on coaching against 28% in best practice. (Alexander Group)
VP	Coverage from your own conversion rates. Forecast against actual. Pilot to production rate. Cost to win a customer. Ramp by hiring cohort.	Rules of thumb for coverage are no substitute for your own stage conversion.
Whole team	Time from first signal to first call. Data errors at handoffs between tools.	This is the gap analysis. It shows where deals wait.

Sources

- Alexander Group: www.alexandergroup.com
- knowledgelib, sales team structure benchmarks 2026: knowledgelib.io

- SaaStr on ICONIQ, State of Go-to-Market 2025: www.saastr.com
- SaaStr, Jason Lemkin on AE ramp: www.saastr.com
- QuotaPath, citing RepVue Q2 2025: www.quotapath.com
- TinyFish, enterprise sales for AI startups: www.tinyfish.ai
- Chargebee, how AI-native companies rewrite go-to-market: blog.chargebee.com

Step by Step

Seven hires, then a 12 week rollout. Each step has a one-line instruction, the detail, and a test that says you're ready.

Step 1: The Founder Sells the First Deals

Sell the first deals yourself, and write down what you learn.

Write down what worked, who bought, and why. In Stage 1 you also cover the seats that come later: head of sales, enablement, pricing with finance, and customer success with the onboarding engineer. You coach too. There are no managers yet.

The reason: the first sellers you hire have no proven playbook to follow. What you write now becomes their playbook.

> **Ready when:** You've written down what worked, who bought and why.

Step 2: Hire Two Enterprise Sellers

Hire two enterprise sellers who have closed long, multi-party deals.

Hire for judgment. There is no proven playbook yet to hand them. The seat owns pipeline through signed pilot to production contract. Plan for 2 to 4 sellers in Stage 1.

Ramp and Milestones

Full ramp takes 6 to 9 months on sales cycles of 6 to 12 months (Jason Lemkin, SaaStr). Set milestones early. If a seller shows no real progress after about one and a half sales cycles, make the call. The milestones are Doug's recommendation.

Day	A seller can say
Day 30	Can run a discovery call in front of the manager. Knows the buyer, the product and the pilot template.
Day 60	Has qualified opportunities, each with a named champion.
Day 90	Has sent a first pilot proposal with written success metrics.

Plan for reality. In RepVue's Q2 2025 data, 57.31% of reps missed quota and average attainment was 42.69%. Don't build a hiring plan that needs every seller to hit 100%.

Pay and Quota

No dollar figures are given here. They depend on your deal size, margins and market.

- Pay on production, not on signed pilots. Credit part of the commission when the pilot converts.
- For the first 20 to 30 enterprise customers, reward winning the logo as well as contract value. (TinyFish CRO)
- Lower the quota during the ramp, and raise it in steps. Match the ramp to the cycle: 6 to 9 months for enterprise.
- Set quota from the capacity you've seen your own sellers deliver, not from the board's target.
- Keep the plan simple. A seller should be able to work out their own commission on paper.

- Pay managers on team results and on how well new hires ramp, not only on their own deals.

A Day in the Seat: Enterprise Seller

A seller with about eight live deals. AI does the research and the paperwork. The seller does the selling.

Time	The work	AI does	The seller does
7:30 am	Pick the day's accounts	Ranks accounts by signals: new hires, funding, leadership changes, pilot usage.	Chooses three to work. Overrules the ranking when you know the buyer.
8:15 am	Prepare for the first call	Builds a one-page brief from the CRM, past calls, news and the org chart.	Reads it. Writes the one question that could change the call.
9:00 am	Discovery call with the buyer team	Records, transcribes, and tags the stated problem, budget and timeline.	Runs the call. Listens for the one or two outcomes the buyer must deliver this year.
10:30 am	Follow up within the hour	Drafts the recap, the next steps and a shared action plan from the transcript.	Rewrites it in your own voice. Sends it. Puts a date on every next step.
11:15 am	Add people to the deal	Suggests who else sits on the buying team and who can make an introduction.	Decides who to approach. Writes the first message by hand.
1:00 pm	Work the pilot	Pulls pilot usage and compares it with the agreed success metrics.	Meets the champion. Clears what blocks use. Opens the pricing talk once the metrics are met.
2:30 pm	Security and procurement	Drafts answers to questionnaires from an approved answer library.	Sends them to the engineer and to legal. Never sends an AI answer unchecked.
3:30 pm	Check every deal	Flags deals with one contact, no dated next step, or a close date that slipped.	Fixes the plan. Calls the executive sponsor on the deals that need one.
4:30 pm	Update the forecast and plan tomorrow	Writes the CRM updates from the day's calls for review.	Confirms or corrects each one. Commits only deals with a dated path to signature.

What stays human: The buyer relationship, the call on whether a deal is real, and every message sent under your name.
Numbers to watch: Decision makers met, pilots with written success metrics, pilot to production rate, and deals with a dated next step.

> **Ready when:** The ideal buyer, the pilot template and the exit criteria for each deal stage are written down. Exit criteria are the facts that must be true before a deal moves to the next stage.

Step 3: Add a Sales Engineer Before the Third Seller

Hire one sales engineer, or a forward-deployed engineer, before the third seller.

Pilots need talks about data access, APIs (the connections between software systems) and security before the buyer sees any value. So the first engineer arrives early, not late. (Chargebee) The seat owns technical discovery, pilot design and security answers.

In Stage 1 you need one sales engineer shared across sellers, and one onboarding engineer, often from the founding team. At about 25 sellers, plan for about 8 sales engineers (one per 3 sellers) and 3 to 4 onboarding engineers.

> **Ready when:** A pilot needs technical hands for data access, APIs and security answers.

Step 4: Add RevOps Before the Fourth Seller

Hire a GTM engineer or RevOps lead before the fourth seller. Part-time is fine.

Fix the handoffs while there are few of them. The seat owns the tools, the data, the handoffs between them, and the forecast. In Stage 1 you need one person. At about 25 sellers, plan for 2 to 3.

In ICONIQ's 2025 survey, companies under $25M ARR that leaned on AI in their own selling put 17% of go-to-market staff in RevOps, against 12%. (Via SaaStr.)

> **Ready when:** You've mapped the tools and the handoffs between them.

Step 5: Add the First Manager at About Five Sellers

Hire a first sales manager when your team reaches about five sellers.

The founder or VP coaches until then. The manager owns coaching, deal reviews, hiring and ramp. The enterprise median span is about 5.5 sellers per manager (knowledgelib, 2026). Alexander Group finds first-line managers average about 8.5 reports, with smaller spans for complex selling. At about 25 sellers, plan for 5 managers, one per 5 to 6 sellers.

Alexander Group also finds managers spend 16% of their time coaching, against 28% in best practice. Protect your manager's coaching time.

A Day in the Seat: Sales Manager

A first-line manager with five or six sellers. The job is coaching, not reviewing spreadsheets.

Time	The work	AI does	The manager does
7:45 am	Read the risk list	Lists deals gone quiet, deals with one contact, deals past their close date, and calls that drifted from the method.	Picks the three that need action today.
8:30 am	Coaching one-on-one	Surfaces two call clips tied to a single skill and summarizes the seller's open deals.	Coaches that one skill. Agrees one thing to try before the next meeting.
10:00 am	Join a high-stakes call	Prepares the brief and tracks who said what.	Takes a defined role. Does not run the call.
11:30 am	Deal review	Scores each deal against the stage exit criteria you set.	Asks what the score cannot. Decides to advance, fix or drop the deal.
1:00 pm	Hiring and ramp	Screens applications and compares each new hire with the ramp plan.	Interviews and decides. Resets milestones when a seller is ramping slowly.
2:30 pm	Roll up the forecast	Combines each seller's call with deal signals and past accuracy.	Overrules where judgment differs. Writes the commit with reasons.
3:30 pm	Teach the team	Finds patterns across calls: new objections, competitor mentions, where deals are lost.	Turns one pattern into a short lesson for the team.
4:30 pm	Check the tools	Reports who is not using which tool and which fields are empty.	Fixes the cause. Usually it is a bad process, not a bad seller.

What stays human: Coaching, hire and fire decisions, and the forecast call.
Numbers to watch: Share of time spent coaching, ramp milestones met, and forecast accuracy by seller.

Ready when: Your team has about five sellers.

Step 6: Add SDRs Only After the List Converts

Hire SDRs once your account list turns into meetings at a rate you trust.

Until then, AI tools and your sellers do the prospecting. The seat owns meetings with the right accounts. At about 25 sellers, plan for about 6 SDRs, one per 4 sellers, with AI doing the research. (knowledgelib's benchmark is 4 or more sellers per SDR where AI is adopted.)

Ready when: Your account list turns into meetings at a rate you trust.

Step 7: Hire a VP of Sales

Hire a VP of Sales when you can't sell, coach and forecast at the same time.

Not before, and not much later. The VP owns the number, the hiring plan, the forecast, and executive contact on the biggest deals. Enablement, deal desk and customer success fill in as the team grows. The team table in What You Need shows who covers each seat at each stage.

A Day in the Seat: VP of Sales

The VP owns the number and the system behind it. AI makes the view faster. It doesn't make the decisions.

Time	The work	AI does	The VP does
7:30 am	Read the one-page pipeline brief	Summarizes coverage by segment, movement since yesterday, and why deals moved or died.	Decides where to spend the day.
8:30 am	Executive sponsor calls	Prepares the account brief and the history of the relationship.	Calls the buyer's executive on the biggest deals. Only the VP can do this one.
10:00 am	Forecast and board numbers	Reconciles CRM, billing and usage data and flags mismatches.	Owns the number. Says what is firm and what is not.
11:30 am	Capacity and hiring plan	Models quota, ramp and attrition against the target.	Decides who to hire next and where.
1:00 pm	Work with product, finance and success	Pulls win and loss reasons, product requests and pricing exceptions.	Takes each to the right team with one clear ask.
2:30 pm	Review the tools and the data rules	Lists tool use, cost and overlap across the team.	Cuts or fixes tools. Sets the rule for what data AI tools may touch.
3:30 pm	Hiring and leadership	Screens manager and seller candidates.	Interviews the finalists. Coaches managers on how they coach.
4:30 pm	Study one deal in full	Builds the timeline of one won deal or one lost deal.	Picks the lesson. Changes one process because of it.

What stays human: The number, the executive relationships, who is hired and promoted, and what data AI may use.
Numbers to watch: Coverage built from your own conversion rates, forecast against actual, pilot to production rate, cost to win a customer, and ramp by hiring cohort.

Ready when: You can't sell, coach and forecast at the same time.

Step 8: Run the First 90 Days

Follow the 12 week plan, then decide the next hire on day 90.

When	What you do
Weeks 1 to 2	Write down the ideal buyer, the pilot template and the exit criteria for each deal stage. Map the tools and the handoffs between them.
Weeks 3 to 4	Choose the system of record. Connect signals and call capture to it. Draft the approved answer library.
Weeks 5 to 8	Bring in the first two sellers and the engineer. Run onboarding from recorded calls.
Weeks 9 to 12	Run the first paid pilots with written success metrics. Hold the first deal reviews and forecast call. Fix the top two gaps.
Day 90	Decide on the first manager, the next hire, and which tools stay.

Ready when: On day 90 you can decide on the first manager, the next hire and which tools stay.

Troubleshooting

Problem	Likely cause	Fix
Deals slow down between tools	Handoffs have no owner. Teams define fields differently and data is re-keyed.	Name one owner for each handoff. Start the review at the last column of the tools table.
Sellers work from stale lists	Signals never reach the CRM.	Connect signals and call capture to the system of record (weeks 3 to 4).
Call notes are missing from the CRM	Notes don't reach CRM fields, and clips aren't tied to a skill.	Connect call capture to the CRM. Tie each clip to one skill when you coach.
Outreach keeps going on an active deal	Sequences keep running after the deal is active.	Check this layer first. Stop outreach on deals that are already active.
The forecast disagrees with billing and usage	CRM, billing and usage data aren't reconciled.	Have the VP's weekly review reconcile the three and flag mismatches.
A renewal comes as a surprise	Usage never reaches the seller.	Pull pilot usage to the seller and compare it with the agreed success metrics.
The quote doesn't match the invoice	Quotes and billing don't talk to each other.	Give the deal desk and finance one owner for both.
Sellers write their own security answers	The approved answer library went stale.	Draft the library in weeks 3 to 4. Send answers to the engineer and to legal before they go out.
New hires don't use the playbook	Enablement lives in a folder nobody opens.	Run onboarding from recorded calls (weeks 5 to 8).
A seller isn't making progress	The seller is past one and a half sales cycles with no real progress.	Check the day 30, 60 and 90 milestones, then make the call.
Managers aren't coaching	Coaching gets about 16% of their time against 28% in best practice.	Protect coaching time. Pay managers on team results and on new hire ramp.

Doug can set this up with you. Book a discovery call at mayberryadvisory.com.