# The 2024 Sales Engineer

*Walking someone across a bridge takes them further than pushing them off a cliff*

In a few recent keynotes, I have spoken about the future of Sales Engineering and taken the audience on a walk into a potential future for our profession. So – will the role of the Sales Engineer still exist in 2024, and if so, how will it have changed from today? What will some of the new responsibilities, and which ones will be delegated, outdated, outsourced, or automated?

*Why 2024? It is a personal thing. I started as a Sales Engineer in 1984, back in days of clunky IBM PC-XT's, 9-inch magnetic tapes; 35mm slide decks; floppy disks; traditional mainframes and incredibly slow modems. By 1994 I was an SE Manager, dealing with portable PCs; overhead transparencies; TK-50s, microcomputers; client-server systems and still pretty slow modems. In 2004, I was an SE Director, looking at a highly portable laptop; virtualized demos; HTML front-ends and all things internet. Fortunately, by 2014 I was running the MTS business, watching other SE leaders deal with EaaS (Everything as a Service), even larger laptops (far more powerful than the 1984 mainframes), massive demo environments, downloadable software and even more things internet. At least the connection speeds have become faster. What does 2024 hold for us?*

## Will You Still Have A Job?

Looking at the trends over the past few years, there has been an amazing push for SE's to become more consultative. I loosely translate that as a significant ability to conduct business value discovery and then link the technology to the customer's business problem. We're still expected to have deep technical knowledge, or at least be able to bring that to bear on the customers problem by marshalling the skills of others. Yet there are also the requirements to understand the customer's business and then to craft innovative and efficient solutions to their problems. Throw in effective and clear communications – the jobs not getting any easier.

## Will You Still Have A Job?

YES. Let's look at what is unique about the SE and what differentiates us from all other positions in the vendor space:

1. SE's possess a curious blend of technology and business acumen.
2. SE's are pleasers and fixers. We like to make people happy.
3. SE's have history – we know the customer and probably have a 3x longer relationship than the salesrep does. It's hard to automate history and relationships.
4. SE's make intuitive leaps to connect problems, technology and even people.
5. SE's like to do the right thing for the customer. It's "customer before commission."
6. SE's are pack animals and mostly work better as a team.

I believe there are many more – but that's a solid half-dozen to get started.

Will you still have a job? Well – If you are a highly technical sales engineer, who'd rather touch the technology than speak with people, your prospects will be limited. Small startups will still need you, and every organization will still have a SWAT team and Subject Matter Experts, but you won't be mainstream.

## What will be different?

Here are some predictions.

1. The role of the Account Manager (AM/salesrep) and Sales Engineer will start to overlap even more than they do now. Companies will start to create hybrid roles, especially around specialty or acquired products. This was tried by numerous large enterprise software companies around 2006-2009 and failed miserably. Mainly because they gave SE's individual quotas and asked them to prospect. Better luck second time around.
2. The "low-end" part of the job will be (further) automated. RFI/RFPs are well on their way, but this will affect standard out-of-the-box demonstrations and even allow customers to design their own lightly customized demo.
3. The demo (and eventually presentation) will be experiential. Using Virtual Reality linked with Artificial Intelligence the customer will see, feel and hear (possibly touch and smell?) themselves using your stuff in their environment.
4. More software and hardware will be trialed/evaluated with no human sales interaction at all. The cloud is already driving this. If customers are 60% of the way through the sales cycle when then initiate contact with you now – that is going to climb towards 75% over the next few years.
5. Therefore, more software and hardware is sold with no human sales interaction across the web. More items will be a commodity.  It is easy for your product to become a commodity if no-one ever sees it – particularly hardware.
6. Companies will invest even more in "knowing the customer" and that personalization will start to be the difference in commodity sales situations.
7. SE's will climb the corporate ladder and develop more relationships with mid and senior level managers than ever before. The old "SE's talk to techs and AM talks to executives" is dying.

8. Personal and Business Data will drive everything and security will be even more of a nightmare. Great opportunities for the SE!
9. Although Larry Ellison once said, "*losers compete on architecture*(*)", more and more SE's will become technology architects as systems and interfaces will become increasingly complex. Since major corporations don't "share their toys" in terms of environments, experiences and engineering – that has to be performed in the brain of the SE (as the correlation data doesn't yet exist for a machine to do it.)
10. We'll stop carrying laptops, and will instead use devices that holographically project and render information in bite-sized, ADD-proof, chunks.
11. The last COBOL programmer will be charging $2,000 / hour and cold (phone) calling will die.

## What Should You Do?

I would suggest that the next time you get together with a bunch of your SE colleagues talk about the "Next Generation" Sales Engineer and see what everyone thinks. One thing I can guarantee is that you will need to change and to adapt your skills sets over the next 7 years. Talk that walk into the future, be proactive, and cause change, instead of reacting to change.

## What Do You Think?

*"Prediction is very difficult, especially about the future."*
　　*Robert Storm Petersen, Danish Cartoonist & Writer*

**Talking Points is a monthly column authored by John Care, Managing Director of Mastering Technical Sales. For more information on this and other Sales Engineering topics visit the website at www.masteringtechnicalsales.com.**

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**(*) Yes, he said it many times, and I was in the room and heard it live.**