Episode Book

EPISODE #6477

Finding a Technical Evaluation Job Without the Sales Quota

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SYNOPSIS

B2B tech buyers and technical sellers often perform the exact same work from opposite sides of the table. From sales engineers and solutions consultants to enterprise category managers, this breakdown explores what it takes to own technical evaluation and product discovery without doing traditional closing. Learn how presales roles structure quotas, why title inflation masks identical daily duties, and how reporting lines dictate whether an advisory role can actually remain an honest counsel.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Daniel has a buying process he swears by, and honestly the record supports him. Define the spec, let the AI chew through the spec sheets, buy the best thing you can afford. He says he hasn't made a bad purchase since he adopted it. And then the twist — he's spent his career in marketing comms and tech documentation, he's always found sales attractive for the money and the demand, but the quota, the small talk, the closing have kept him away. What he wants to know is whether there's a selling-side role that works the way he buys: sitting close to a buyer on a serious procurement, helping them make a good decision instead of talking them into one. Or whether that skill set really belongs on the buying side.



Herman

The voice headset episodes, the whole series we did on how he researches a product category — this is the natural end of that thread. He's realized the part of the process he loves might be somebody's actual job.



Corn

He's not asking whether he'd be good at sales. He's asking whether the job he'd be good at exists, and which side of the table it sits on.



Herman

And the short answer is yes, it exists, and the job title tells you almost nothing. The family of roles is called PreSales. In most B2B software companies, sales engineer, solutions engineer, solutions consultant, presales consultant — those are different names for the same job. The US Bureau of Labor Statistics files the whole occupation under one label: sales engineers.



Corn

Five names, one job. Very efficient industry.



Herman

What actually differs between companies is three things: who you report to, how you're paid, and what happens after the deal signs. Everything else is branding.



Corn

Walk me through the names anyway, because Daniel's going to be reading job ads.



Herman

Sales engineer is the long-standing default, especially in US software and hardware-heritage companies. Solutions engineer is what platform SaaS companies call it — often literally the same team, renamed. Solutions consultant shows up in ERP and CRM, where the audience is a finance director rather than IT, so the emphasis is business process. Presales consultant is the European enterprise flavor, often sitting inside consulting. Then the outliers. Solutions architect is the one title that differs — that person designs how the solution gets built and integrated, and often stays involved after signature. Demo engineer builds demo environments rather than running deals. And value engineer owns the quantified business case — that one matters, we'll come back to it.



Corn

Forward deployed engineer too, which sounds like a military posting.



Herman

SE Rockstars calls it, quote, a well-paid rebrand of work PreSales already does. Most sales engineering leaders they surveyed consider the FDE the same job with better branding. Which is not nothing — the rebrand came with better pay, and we'll get there.



Corn

The thing that actually separates this from the account executive, though — the thing Daniel's really asking about — is what the role owns.



Herman

Right. PreSales owns the technical win. The account executive owns price and contract. The PreSales person's job is to understand the customer's problem, prove the product solves it, and build the case. Sales owns the commercial outcome. PreSales owns the customer's confidence that the solution will work.



Corn

Which is structurally the same work Daniel does at his kitchen table. Define what good means, evaluate options, prove the choice holds up. Except someone else has the awkward money conversation.



Herman

And the misconception worth killing right here: people assume the sales engineer is the account executive's assistant. A junior sidekick who sets up the projector. In reality it's a peer role, and at many companies it carries the same quota as the seller. Sometimes literally the same number.



Corn

So the quota fear follows him into this role too.



Herman

Mostly yes, and I don't want to soften that. The Consensus SE Report from a couple of years back — about a thousand respondents — found roughly two-thirds of individual contributors carried some form of quota. And the way it's set is mechanical: if an SE is paired one-to-one with an account executive, the SE typically carries the same quota as that AE. If the SE supports any seller in the company, the quota is the company's new-business number.



Corn

Your quota is decided by your seating chart.



Herman

Pretty much. But then there's the day-to-day, and this is where I think Daniel's going to recognize himself. Erik Abderhalden is a Lead Solutions Engineer at Salesforce, and he wrote up a day in his life for the PreSales Collective. The day starts with dashboards — how's the team doing, anything popped overnight. Then one-on-ones with the account executives he supports. Customer meetings are, in his words, the majority of my time, the lifeblood of the role.



Corn

And what does he do inside a first customer call? Because that's the moment Daniel fears, the rapport thing.



Herman

He says on a new-customer call he's trying to learn who the customer is, what they're trying to do, and how we can help — while furiously capturing notes, because, quote, I may not get a second call with this customer, so I need to make this count.



Corn

That's not small talk. That's discovery. That's Daniel's spec definition, done live, against a person.



Herman

And the demo build is where his methodical streak would shine. Abderhalden wants two hours or more of uninterrupted time to build a demo, and he writes the talk track out word for word so, in his words, everything I say ties back to value. His first demo build took him eight hours. Then rehearsals — a solo run-through, then an internal run-through with the account team, then more solo passes, in his words, finessing my talk track, memorizing where to click.



Corn

Eight hours. That's a man who has never made a bad purchase either.



Herman

Then the presentation itself, which he describes as simultaneously thrilling and exhausting — and usually when the meeting ends, he collapses in his chair for a breather.



Corn

So the emotional texture is: deep preparation, performance, exhaustion. Not cold calls. Not schmoozing. But also not sitting quietly with a spec sheet — it is a room, and there is a performance in it.



Herman

The technical bar is real too. This is not a role where you glide in on communication skills. Teleport's guidance for aspiring SEs is blunt — you still need to be able to do deep technical work. Kubernetes, Terraform, Ansible, some Go. Familiarity with a terminal is huge, their words. Prolifiq's compensation guide lists what the SE owns: discovery of technical requirements, demos, proof-of-concept builds, RFP responses, security and architecture reviews, and answering the deep questions that make or break enterprise deals.



Corn

Daniel's done RFP-style evaluation from the other side his whole career. Answering the RFP is the mirror of writing it.



Herman

He'd also be entering through a documented door. BLS explicitly says candidates without a degree sometimes qualify with sales experience plus technical training, and that software SEs often came from development or systems analysis. And the coursework BLS calls out as helpful? Marketing and communications.



Corn

His exact CV. The thing everyone assumes disqualifies him from anything technical.



Herman

BLS's own list of important qualities for the occupation leads with analytical skills — evaluate the products, determine how they suit the customer's needs. Persuasion is on the list too, we should be honest about that. But the Consensus report argues that from the buyer's side, the SE is, quote, the key to superior buying experiences — a trusted advisor who focuses not on selling products but on solving customer problems. The persuasion in this job looks like building a demo that proves a claim. It's closer to technical argument than closing.



Corn

I'd still want Daniel to walk in knowing it's a performance. Rehearsed, word for word, in front of a room. That's persuasion wearing a lab coat.



Herman

Fair. And the quota-free version does exist — but as an employer choice, not a job category. There's a SAP partner called Sybit whose entire PreSales team carries no sales quota. Their lead, Saskia Cempel, argues that if her people had the same commission structure as sales reps, advisory quality would eventually suffer, because you start pushing for the close instead of giving honest counsel. The team sits organizationally inside consulting, not sales. Their targets mirror solution consultants rather than revenue numbers. And externally they don't even call the team PreSales — they brand them Solution Advisors, to reinforce a trusted-advisor role rather than a sales-adjacent one.



Corn

She's right, and she's also describing the diagnostic for reading any job ad in this space. Ignore the title. Read who the role reports to, how it's paid, and what it owns.



Herman

SE Rockstars says almost exactly that, word for word. And the follow-on line is the one I'd underline for Daniel: a title that promises advice while the comp plan rewards the close is a contradiction customers eventually notice.



Corn

So the answer to his quota fear isn't which title he takes. It's which employer. The quota is set at the company level, and no individual negotiation moves it.



Herman

Now the buying side, because Daniel framed it as either-or and the comparison is where it gets interesting. ASCM's career outlook draws the line cleanly: a buyer executes against a decision already made; a sourcing or category professional makes the decision and lives with it for the length of the contract. Argentus is blunter — a buyer is not tasked with figuring out what to buy or who to buy it from. They handle the how, not the what or the who.



Corn

And we've covered this ground before — the tiers, the sourcing analyst, the category manager tracks. The new question is which side suits Daniel, not what procurement is.



Herman

What the category role owns is the specification of the deal itself: which suppliers get invited to compete, what commercial construct is used — fixed price, indexed to a raw material, cost-plus — how long the agreement runs, how volume is split, what happens to price when the underlying index moves. Those are decisions made once that then govern thousands of transactions.



Corn

So the category manager is the buying-side mirror of the solutions engineer. Define what good means before anyone negotiates price.



Herman

ASCM says the category professional's most valuable move is reaching the specification conversation early, rather than being handed a part number and told to find it cheaper. And the solutions engineer's whole job is being in the spec conversation. Same skill, opposite sides of the table. The difference is who signs the cheque and who carries the savings number — sourcing's headline metric is savings, and ASCM notes it's the most contested number in the building, because sourcing counts the negotiated reduction and finance counts what reaches the profit and loss.



Corn

Two sides, one conversation, and both are fighting with their own finance department about who gets credit. Daniel should feel at home already.

I

Ivan

Call sign Amber Lantern. Groups: four seven, two nine. The second oven is cold. The second oven is cold. Nine one, three six. The rye is counted twice. The baker sleeps with the ledger open.

I

Ivan

Six two, eight eight. The crumb is not for the crust. The third shelf remembers. Close on Marzipan.



Herman

Noted. Anyway — the savings metric.



Corn

Herman. What the hell was that.



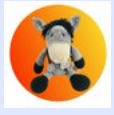
Herman

So the savings metric, and then the role I actually think is the answer to Daniel's prompt.



Corn

You're just going to keep going?



Herman

The savings number follows the category manager the way quota follows the seller — it's the pressure the role is built around. If Daniel wants the evaluation work without a number hanging over it, the buying side doesn't automatically give him that. It gives him a different number.



Corn

A savings target instead of a quota. Cheaper therapy, same anxiety.



Herman

But here's the role I keep landing on as the actual bridge: the value engineer. It's the most procurement-shaped job in sales, and it's booming right now. OpenAI is hiring a Value Engineer in San Francisco to articulate and quantify the business value of the technology across enterprise, education and government customers. Decagon wants a Business Value Consultant to build and scale their value engineering function, sitting at the center of go-to-market, bridging product, sales and finance, working with CFOs and COOs. Rogo is hiring its first Business Value Consultant, and their posting says enterprise deals are won on quantified value, not features — the buyers are CFOs and heads of technology at large banks and asset managers.



Corn

The seller who writes the CFO's spreadsheet for them.



Herman

Which is the exact document a procurement category manager reads across the table. Trackunit's version of the role is an individual contributor solely focused on value engineering in high-complexity enterprise deals — they want eight to twelve years' experience. And the detail I find most telling: Rogo's role reports into Revenue Operations, not sales. No quota that I can see stated, though none of these postings say no quota outright — I wouldn't promise Daniel that.



Corn

So a person whose job is to quantify whether the deal is actually good for the buyer. That's... suspiciously close to Daniel's whole buying process, weaponized for the seller.



Herman

Then the quota-free extreme on the selling side is the forward deployed engineer. Most FDEs carry no quota — pay is base, equity and bonus, and the median US total comp is around two hundred ten thousand. A fully loaded FDE costs an employer somewhere between two-twenty and four hundred thousand a year. The model is one or two accounts, deeply embedded. OpenAI's FDEs, per the Pragmatic Engineer's write-up, embed with



Herman (continued)

customers, understand their domain, co-develop solutions — the team went from two people to more than ten across eight cities in a few years. Palantir pioneered it; they call theirs Deltas, with the mandate to achieve technical outcomes for customers, one customer, many capabilities.



Corn

Co-developing solutions with the customer. No quota, no close, no small talk — the account executive isn't even in the room half the time.



Herman

The trade is travel. Palantir's posting asks up to twenty-five percent, OpenAI's up to fifty.



Corn

Fifty. Daniel has a young family in Jerusalem.



Herman

Worth saying plainly, though — that's the one role where the money and the quota freedom are unambiguous, and it's the one where the lifestyle cost is unambiguous too.



Corn

The other thing worth naming for Daniel, whichever side he picks: his background is a documented path, not a liability. BLS calls marketing and communications coursework helpful. On the buying side, Langley Search's transition guide is about leveraging analytical abilities, negotiation skills and project management, with certifications like CIPS or CPSM. And Una's piece on transferable skills is almost comically direct — procurement needs, quote, marketers who know how to persuade, writers who can communicate.



Herman

TrinityP3 looked at where the best marketing procurement people come from, and their conclusion was that both camps are right and both are wrong — some of the best are marketers who learned procurement, others are procurement people who learned marketing. The traits that predicted it were curiosity and data analysis.



Corn

Both routes in, same destination. For once, an industry that can't decide which prejudice to hold.



Herman

Which is why I'd tell Daniel the either-or in his prompt is slightly false. The two sides are converging on the same skill from opposite directions — both sides now compete to be in the specification conversation earliest. His methodical evaluation process isn't a reason to pick a side. It's the asset both sides are hiring for.



Hilbert

My cousin does this for a pump company.



Corn

Does what?



Hilbert

The sales engineer job. They don't call it that. He's an application engineer. The company moved the role out of the sales department and into engineering, which killed the commission and killed the quota with it. He says the title change alone was worth five figures a year to him and he'd never go back.



Herman

What does he actually do all day?



Hilbert

Sits in a room with a clipboard while the customer's engineer argues with his own boss about whether they need the bigger model. He carries an actual clipboard, not a laptop. Says the customers are pump people, not software people, and a clipboard says you're taking this seriously.



Corn

And you know this how.



Hilbert

He tells it at every family thing. Herman, the thing you said about the comp plan being the tell — he says the same thing in different words. The day the quota went, he says, he started telling people not to buy things.



Herman

The honest sentence. That's exactly what the quota-free argument is — an SE paid less on any single deal can afford the honest sentence.



Corn

You've been carrying a clipboard yourself for three weeks, haven't you.



Hilbert

That's unrelated. There's a hardware store near me where it helps.



Herman

Unrelated.



Hilbert

The pencil behind the ear is what does it. Without the pencil it's nothing.



Corn

Noted. Herman, the clipboard economy is apparently thriving.



Herman

The part of that I'd actually take seriously is the engineering-department move. That's Sybit's structure in miniature — physically relocating the role out of the sales org is a stronger signal than any title, and it's checkable from a job ad. You look at where the team sits and who the manager reports to.



Corn

And the customer noticing the clipboard is the same point from the other end. The buyer can tell which side of the comp plan you're on.



Herman

Cutting-room floor before we close — one detail from the BLS numbers I couldn't fit in. Sales engineers as an occupation: about fifty-one thousand jobs in this country, growing to maybe fifty-three thousand over the next decade. Three percent growth, as fast as average. But the interesting number is openings — about thirty-eight hundred a year, almost all of them replacement needs. Meaning most people who get in, stay in.



Corn

Not a revolving door. For a job adjacent to sales, that says something.



Herman

And the wage spread is wide. Tenth percentile around seventy-four thousand, ninetieth around one-ninety-five, median one-twenty-five. The ceiling in this occupation is very much an employer-specific thing, same as the quota.



Corn

One thing left open for Daniel, and I'd leave it open rather than close it: no standard role exists that is structurally, by name, the selling side of procurement with no quota and no persuasion. It exists as employer choices — Sybit's model, most FDE roles, an application engineer at a pump company sitting in engineering. So the search isn't for a job title to type into a listings site. It's for the right employer and the right comp plan, and the value-engineering postings are the closest thing to his process that's hiring right now.



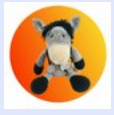
Herman

If he wants the buying side instead, the category manager is the mirror — same work, savings number instead of quota, and he walks in with the persuasion skills Una says procurement is short of. Either way the skill is identical: define what good means before anyone talks about price.



Corn

Producer credit to Hilbert Flumingtop, who did not invent the clipboard but has certainly advanced it. If you enjoyed this one, try episode thirty-six fifty-six, From Spec Sheets to Career; and episode ninety-one, The Story Behind the Show. This has been My Weird Prompts. Everything we've ever done lives at my weird prompts dot com, and if today's episode found you the right role, the review button finds us.



Herman

We'll be back soon. Corn, the pencil behind the ear.



Corn

Herman, no.



Herman

See you tomorrow.

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