



# SELL. DO. WIN BUSINESS.

A REPORT ON HOW A/E/C FIRMS ARE  
USING STAFF TO WIN MORE WORK.

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Foundation



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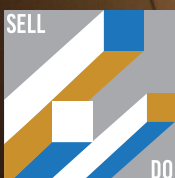
Author: Scott D. Butcher, FSMPS, CPSM

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“ The business development model within A/E/C firms continues to evolve, engaging more staff as firms seek to transform their cultures. This research found that companies have robust roles for both dedicated business developers as well as technical professionals in seller-doer roles, even though the ‘traditional’ responsibilities may be changing. ”

—Scott D. Butcher, FSMPS, CPSM







Research and data  
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▼ **TABLE OF  
CONTENTS**

01	The Changing Marketplace
02	How Are A/E/C Firms Handling Business Development?
04	Business Developers
07	Seller-Doers
12	Roles and Responsibilities
18	Goals, Incentives, and Training
23	The Future of Business Development
26	Project Leadership
27	Additional Resources

# The Changing Marketplace

## INTRODUCTION BY:

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The SMPS Foundation is partnering with the Society for Marketing Professional Services (SMPS) to discover what makes architecture, engineering, and construction (A/E/C) organizations successful in marketing and business development. Our goal has always been to provide SMPS members and their firms a way to build business through networking, business intelligence, and industry research.

## AND

HOLLY R. BOLTON, FSMPS, CPSM  
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In line with this goal, the SMPS Foundation—alongside SMPS—has made it a priority to research the latest industry and professional-related topics and trends. We're exploring a continually relevant and often-discussed theme in the A/E/C space: how firms approach business development. Realizing that everyone contributes to bringing in work in different ways, when it comes to specific business development activities, who takes on those responsibilities and what they include can vary.

This report provides a snapshot of key findings and lay-of-the-land statistics of how firms approach, structure, and support business development efforts. Other publications by SMPS and the SMPS Foundation will present additional research outcomes from this project and provide takeaways you can apply to help build business for your firm.

## HIGHLIGHTS

92%

Percentage of firms with 500 or more employees reported having business developers on staff.

57%

Percentage who indicated that more than 75 percent of their firms' technical staff have BD responsibilities.

81%

Percentage of firms with 1-4 employees that reported no full-time business developers.



## BD

Business  
Development

Author:  
Scott D. Butcher,  
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### HOW ARE A/E/C FIRMS HANDLING BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT?

In many ways, business development is the lifeline of any professional services organization. You can't do what you don't sell. But "sell" is often treated as a four-letter word in architectural, engineering, and construction (A/E/C) firms—a necessary evil that gobbles up billable hours and creates too much overhead. In fact, sales often isn't even called sales; the industry prefers business development, which is apparently much more palatable.

But how are firms handling business development? Who is responsible for it? What are they doing with their time? Are they properly trained? These are the questions that the Society for Marketing Professional Services (SMPS) and the SMPS Foundation set out to answer.

The genesis of the project was a 2013 research effort of the SMPS Foundation that resulted in the book *A/E/C Business Development—The Decade Ahead*.

In that research initiative, the SMPS Foundation interviewed 100 sellers and buyers of design and construction services to get a handle on current trends and future directions of sales—that is, business development—in the A/E/C industry. The sellers (design and construction firms) noted that they were integrating technical people into the selling process earlier and earlier. The buyers (clients and owners) in certain market sectors noted a strong preference for meeting with the people who would be involved with their project(s)—not someone who just opened the door and came back a month later with project team members.



ABOUT SCOTT

Principal  
aecumen



Are A/E/C firms doing away with their dedicated sales professionals and replacing them with technical staff members who split their duties between sales and billable work? Is the business development model changing? Or is it all much ado about nothing: firms talking the talk, but not walking the walk?

To answer these questions and gain better insight into business development trends and forthcoming changes, SMPS and the SMPS Foundation teamed up to take a deeper look into the status of business development in the A/E/C industry.

Using a research template originally developed by SMPS Foundation Trustees William R. Long, PE, LEED AP, FSMPS, CPSM, and Scott D. Butcher, FSMPS, CPSM, for their personal research, the organizations commissioned McKinley Advisors to conduct a nationwide survey of design and construction firms, reaching out to several partner organizations to engage their members in the research.

#### PROJECT OBJECTIVE

The project objective was to better understand current business development practices within A/E/C firms and explore the anticipated changes in roles and responsibilities for new business development in the future.

#### PROJECT OVERVIEW

Planning for the Business Development Survey began in March 2015, with an electronic survey distributed to members of the Society for Marketing Professional Services (SMPS), American Institute of Architects (AIA), Associated General Contractors of America (AGC), and National Council of Structural Engineering Associations (NCSEA) late spring through early summer 2015. An open survey, promoted through social media, was also posted online. Upon completion of the quantitative portion of the study, an initial analysis was performed in July 2015. In August, the qualitative survey rolled out with a series of telephone interviews performed over a two-month period. Final analysis was completed in autumn 2015.



In total, 1,372 electronic survey responses were received, with about two-thirds of respondents being members of SMPS and one-third being members of either AIA, AGC, or NCSEA. An additional 41 qualitative interviews were completed, with 21 participants describing themselves as seller-doers and 19 describing themselves as dedicated business developers.



## BUSINESS DEVELOPERS

**BUSINESS DEVELOPERS** are dedicated employees who secure contracts or projects for their respective firms, either through repeat clients or fostering relationships with new clients.



### KEY FINDING

Larger firms and construction firms are more likely to employ business developers.





## BD

Business  
Developers

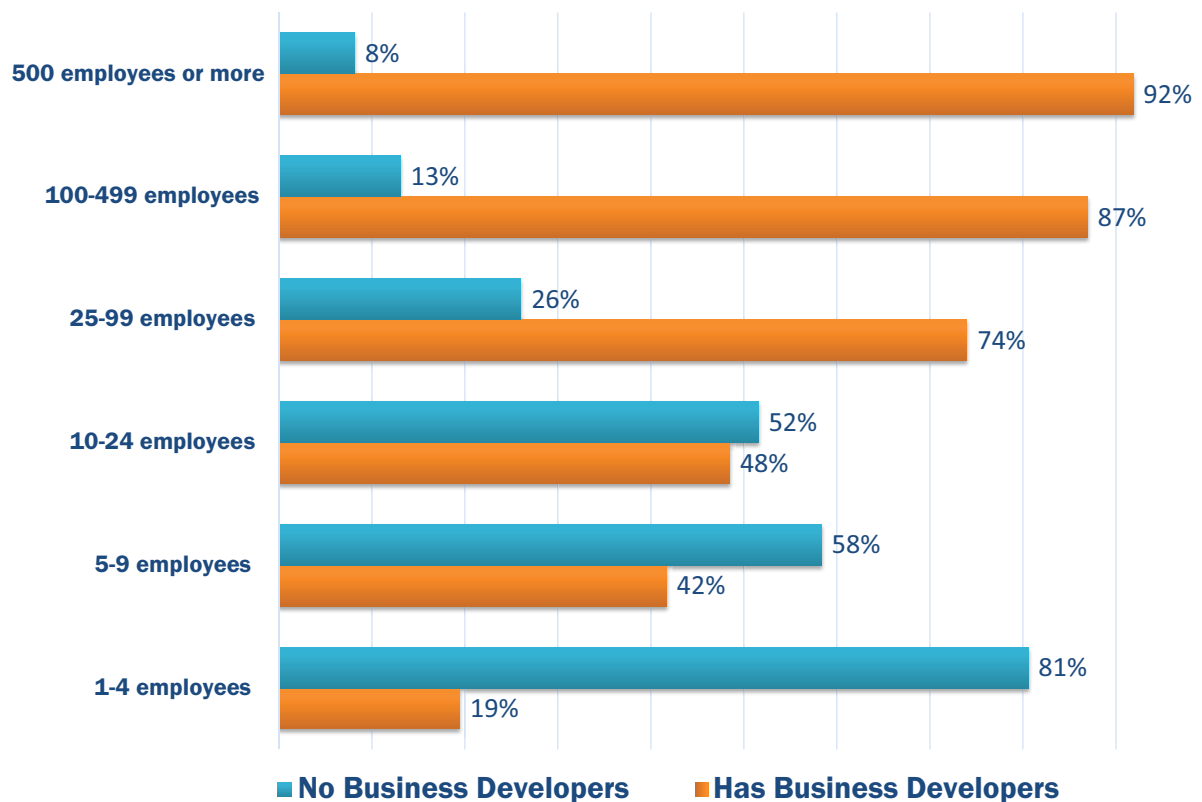
Business Developers are dedicated employees who secure contracts or projects for their respective firms, either through repeat clients or fostering relationships with new clients. Their knowledge of the industry is primarily based on their experience and not necessarily from technical education.

As expected among all types, firms with fewer than five employees were unlikely to have dedicated business developers; however, 19 percent of firms in this size range reported that they have engaged in business development. Conversely, 92 percent of firms with 500 or more employees reported having business developers on their payroll. A/E/C firms with fewer than 500 employees are most likely to have 1-4 dedicated business developers on staff, while firms with 500 or more employees are most likely to have 15 or more dedicated business developers.

Interestingly, the 100-499 employee category still reveals that 13 percent of firms have no business developers, 58 percent have 1-4 business developers, and 25 percent have 5-14 business developers, so it really isn't until the 500+ employee size that there is a significant jump in the number of business developers that a firm employs on staff.

Architectural firms are most likely to have no business developers, with a full 40 percent of participants reporting that they do not employ dedicated business developers. Contractors are the most likely to have this position on staff, with only 13 percent reporting that they don't employ business developers. For engineering firms, 18 percent reported that they do not employ business developers.

### Full-Time Business Developers by Firm Size



**KEY FINDING**

**Large engineering firms and construction firms are more likely to report that the number of business developers employed at their firm has increased over the past 10 years.**



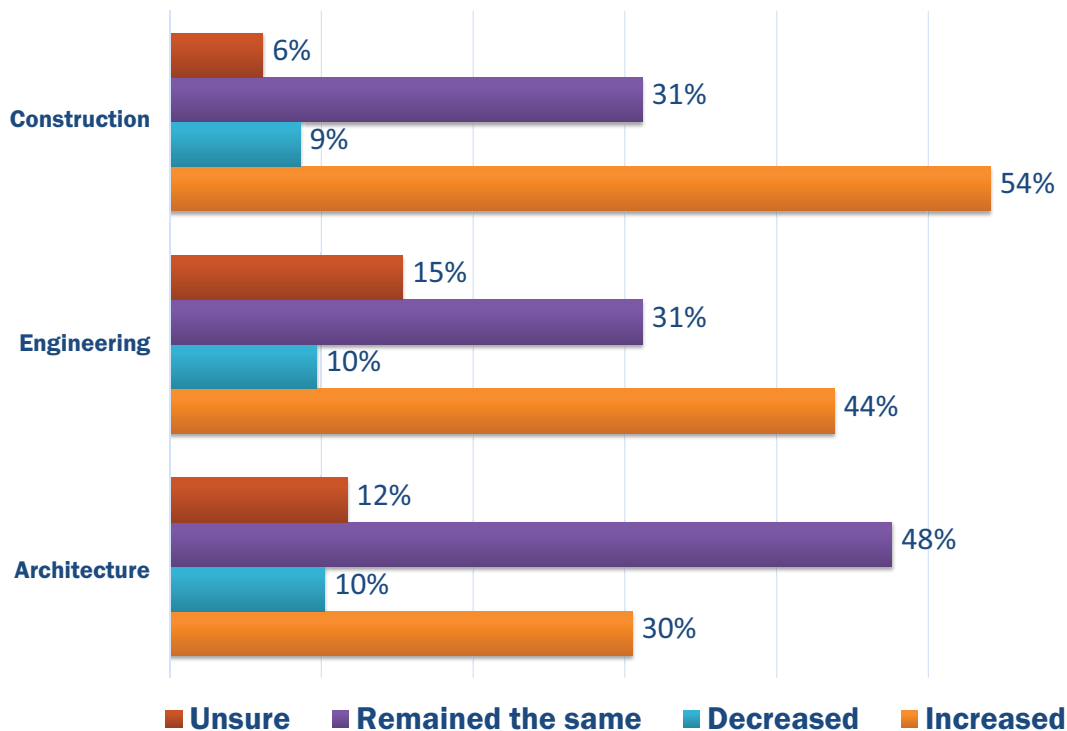
When asked about the change in number of business developers over the past decade, the majority of firms with fewer than 25 employees reported that there was no change in the number of business developers compared with 10 years ago.

However, slightly more than half of firms in the 100-499 and 500+ employee categories reported increasing the number of business developers over the past decade.

Across the board, no matter the size of firm, between the 6 and 11 percent of A/E/C firms indicated that they decreased the number of business developers over the past 10 years.

When broken down by firm type, architects were most likely to keep the same number of business developers as a decade earlier, engineers were most likely to increase the number of business developers, and construction firms were by far most likely to increase the number of business developers.

**Ten-Year Change in the Number of Business Developers by Firm Type**





## SELLER-DOERS

**Seller-doers** are technical staff who are also responsible for billable hours and, to some degree, for securing contracts or projects for their respective firms, either through repeat clients or fostering relationships with new clients.



### KEY FINDING

The majority of survey respondents indicated that their firm utilizes the seller-doer model with participants from smaller firms more likely to identify as seller-doers.



**SD**  
Seller-Doers



The seller-doer model is common within the A/E/C industry as indicated by the breakdown of firms using the model:

**Architecture firms = 70 percent**

**Engineering firms = 84 percent**

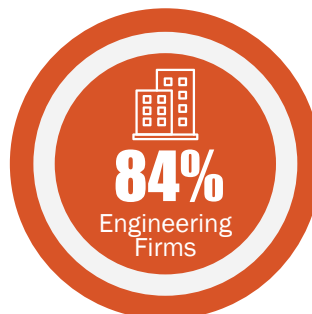
**Construction firms = 66 percent**

Interestingly, there was a bit of a variation with how smaller firms were reporting whether or not their firm used the seller-doer model. While only 52 percent of firms with 1-4 employees reported that they use seller-doer, 98 percent of respondents from firms in that size category reported that they themselves are seller-doer.

The delta was significant, but not as large, with firms in the 5-9 employee range. Fifty-three percent of firms reported that they utilize seller-doers, yet 67 percent of survey participants from firms that size indicated that they, themselves, are seller-doer.

According to the results of this survey, the larger a firm the more likely it is to use the seller-doer model, with 79 percent of firms with 25-99 employees using seller-doer and 83 percent of firms with 500+ employees using seller-doer.

#### Percentage of Firms Using Seller-Doers







**Technical staff at firms with fewer than five employees are much more likely to have business development responsibilities than technical staff at larger firms.**

This also shows a variation in the way that survey participants from smaller firms responded to the question about whether or not their firm uses seller-doers. When asked about the percentage of technical staff with business development responsibilities, 57 percent of respondents indicated that more than three-quarters of their firms' technical staff have business development responsibilities. For firms with 1-4 employees, 20 percent of respondents indicated that less than a quarter of their staff members have sales responsibilities.

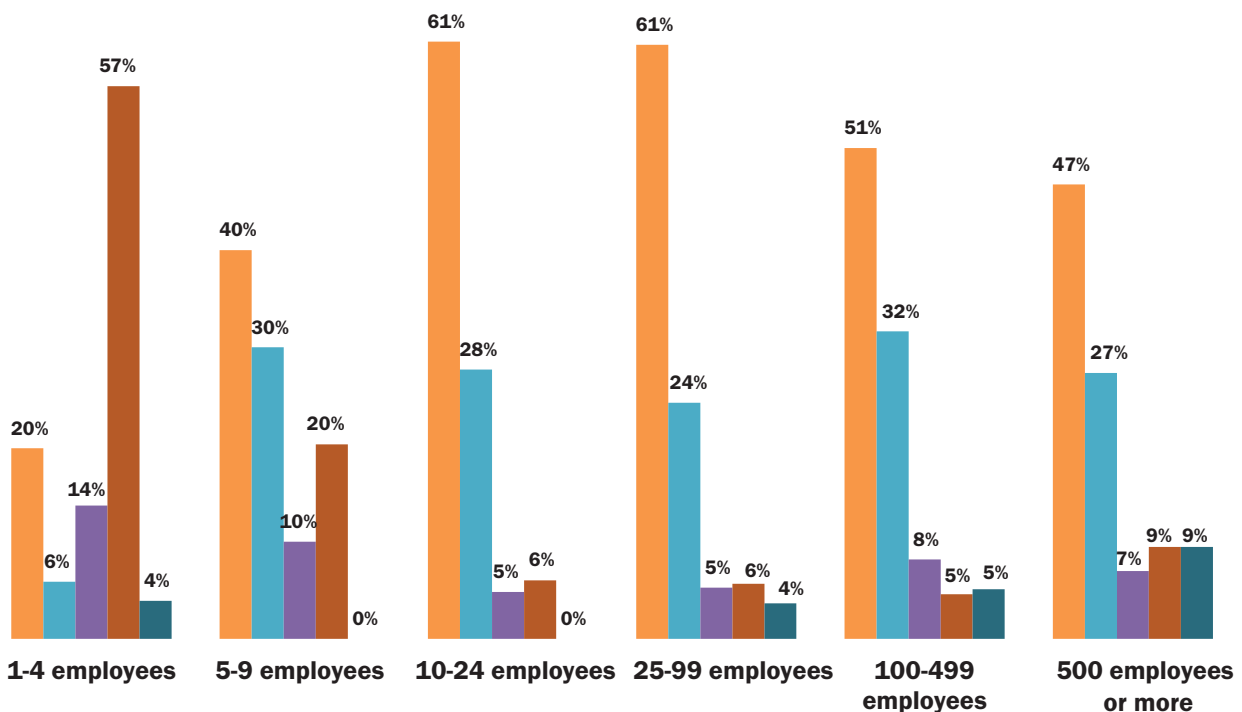
For all firms with more than 4 employees, roughly a quarter to a third indicated that 25 to 50 percent of their technical staff members have business development responsibilities.

Firms between 10 and 99 employees are most likely to have fewer than 25 percent of technical staff members engaged in business development.

When broken out by type of firm, roughly one-third of engineering firms reported that 25 to 50 percent of technical staff members have business development responsibilities, while approximately a quarter of architecture and construction firms indicated that 25 percent to 50 percent of their technical staff members are tasked with business development.

**Percentage of Technical Staff with Business Development Responsibilities by Firm Size**

■ Less than 25% ■ 25% - 50% ■ 51% - 75% ■ More than 75% ■ Unsure





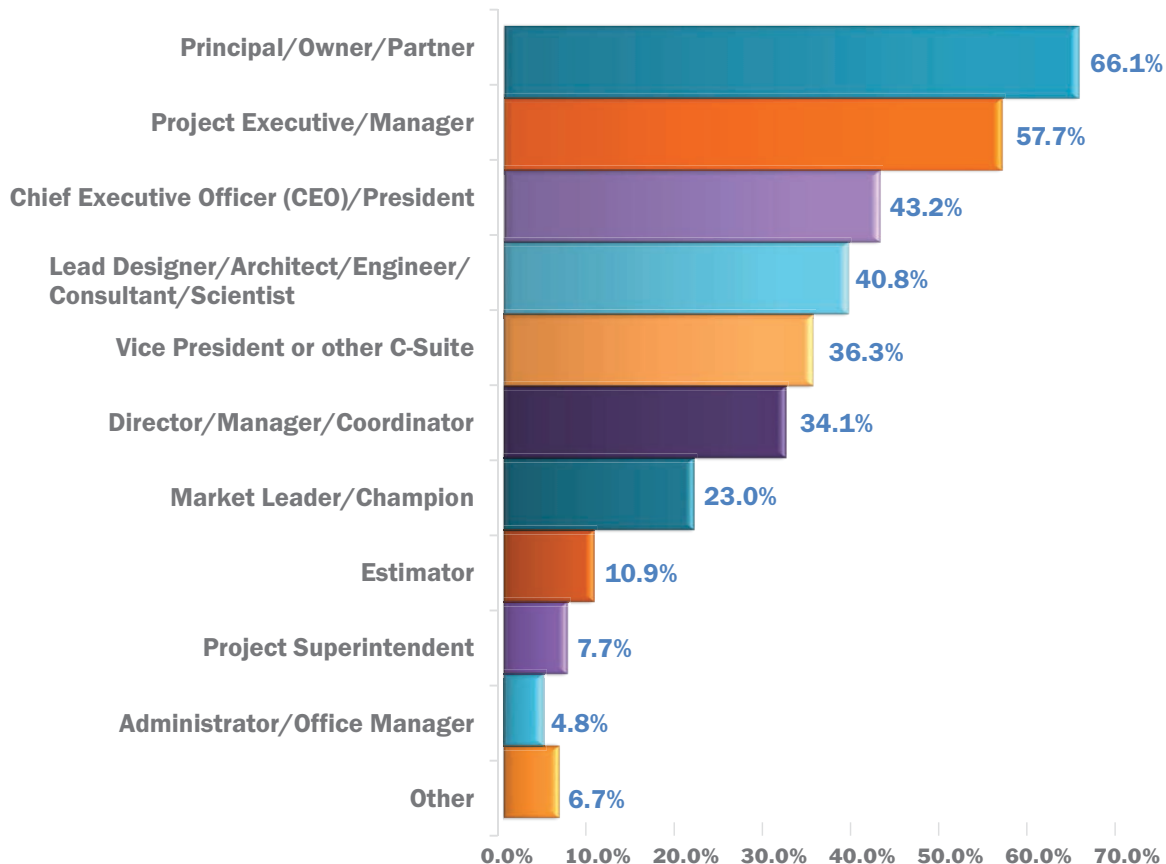
## KEY FINDING

Seventy-seven percent of seller-doers interviewed know the term seller-doer. However, all use it internally and none of the seller-doers used the term outside of their firms and particularly not with clients. When interacting with clients, seller-doers use their corporate titles, project-based titles, or refer to themselves by their technical area of expertise, such as architect or engineer.

Although the term seller-doer was known by more than three-quarters of survey participants, it is only an internal designation. When asked which titles or functions best represented their firms' seller-doers, respondents overwhelmingly identified higher-level positions in their organizations, with principal/owner/partner being the most common position. However, project executive or project manager ranked second, with almost 58 percent of participants indicating that these positions serve as seller-doers within their firms.

Forty-three percent of firms have presidents or CEOs that act as seller-doers, demonstrating that the top executive is less likely to be involved with business development than other principals or partners. Slightly more than 40 percent of participants noted that the lead person within technical disciplines (lead designer, lead architect, lead engineer, consultant, scientist) also serves as a seller-doer for their firm. Within construction firms, estimators and project superintendents were fairly unlikely to take on seller-doer roles.

## Titles or Functions of Firms' Seller-Doers





**KEY FINDING**

**In general, business developers are responsible for identifying and securing potential clients and seller-doers are responsible for maintaining existing client relationships. Seller-doers in smaller firms are more likely to focus on both new and existing clients.**

Only 4 percent of survey participants reported that their firms' seller-doers solely focus on existing clients. Conversely, no respondents indicated that their seller-doers focus exclusively on new clients. The vast majority of respondents (51 percent) indicated that the primary focus of their firms' seller-doers is a heavy emphasis on existing clients with some new clients. However, a significant percentage of respondents (39 percent) indicated that their firms' seller-doers focus equally on new and existing clients.

When broken out by firm size, 65 percent of firms in the 1-4 employee range indicated that their seller-doers focus equally on new and existing clients, which is not a surprise.

However, in the 500+ employee range, 43 percent of firms indicated that their seller-doers focus equally on new and existing clients. Approximately half of seller-doers in firms with five or more employees have a heavy emphasis on existing clients with some new clients.

Seller-doers within architecture firms are more likely to focus equally on existing and new clients, with 43 percent of respondents indicating this area of focus. Seller-doers within engineering firms are most likely to have a heavy emphasis on existing clients, with some emphasis on new clients, with 55 percent of respondents selecting this area of focus.



# ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

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# RR

Roles and Responsibilities



When asked about the differences between dedicated business developers and technical seller-doers, survey participants noted the following:



### Business Developers

- Identify and secure new business
- Train seller-doers on how to build relationships and communicate with clients
- Incorporate strategic plans into the selling process
- Are more common in larger firms



### Seller-Doers

- Typically are not trained in sales techniques
- Manage client relationships and drive new business from existing clients
- Balance billable work with sales responsibilities, which could fluctuate between 10 percent and 50 percent of their time
- Often are the only business developer in smaller or specialized firms

Based on the research, the top five tasks of business developers and seller-doers are as follows (with percent of respondents selecting this responsibility in parentheses):

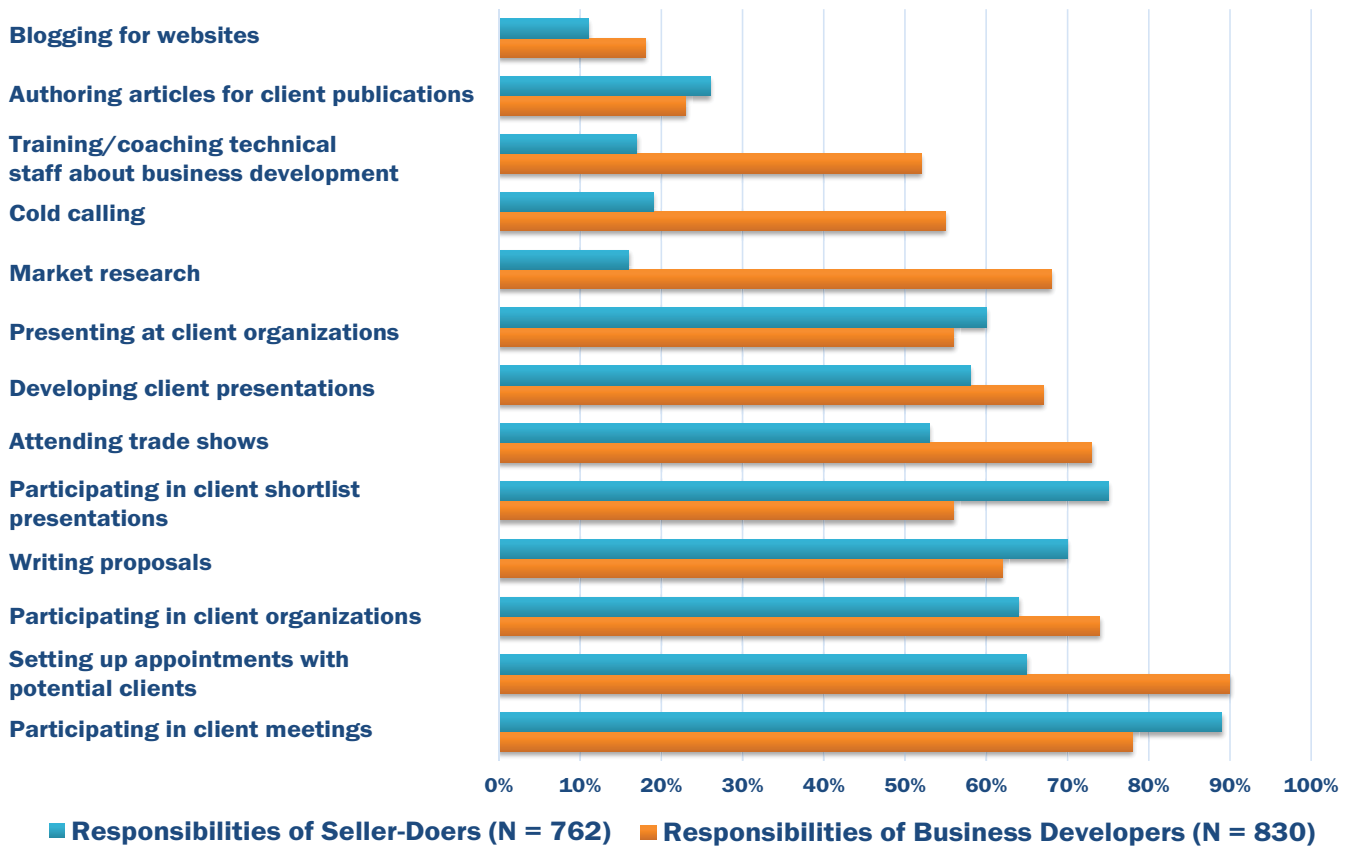
### Business Developers

- Arrange meetings with potential clients (90 percent)
- Participate in client meetings (78 percent)
- Participate in client organizations (74 percent)
- Attend trade shows (73 percent)
- Conduct market research (68 percent)

### Seller-Doers

- Participate in client meetings (89 percent)
- Participate in client short-list presentations (75 percent)
- Write proposals (70 percent)
- Set up appointments with potential clients (65 percent)
- Participate in client organizations (64 percent)

## Responsibilities of Business Developers and Seller-Doers



### KEY FINDING

Potential clients have developed a preference for meeting with the individuals who will be working on their projects. This dynamic has created a need for business developers and seller-doers to work together to advance new business goals and sustain lasting business.

There continues to be a major misperception in the A/E/C industry that selling means cold-calling, but only 55 percent of business developers cold call and it is merely the ninth most common responsibility, while only 19 percent of seller-doers cold call.

Slightly more than half of business developers train or coach technical staff about business development, while only 17 percent of seller-doers do this. Seller-doers are more likely than business developers to present at client organizations and author articles for publication, although business developers are more likely to blog than seller-doers.

You will often hear business developers described as openers (as in they open doors for technical staff) and seller-doers described as closers (as in once the door is open, they go in and close the sale). This research reinforces that belief. However, it is notable that more seller-doers participate in client meetings than business developers, and approximately two-thirds of seller-doers set up appointments with potential clients.



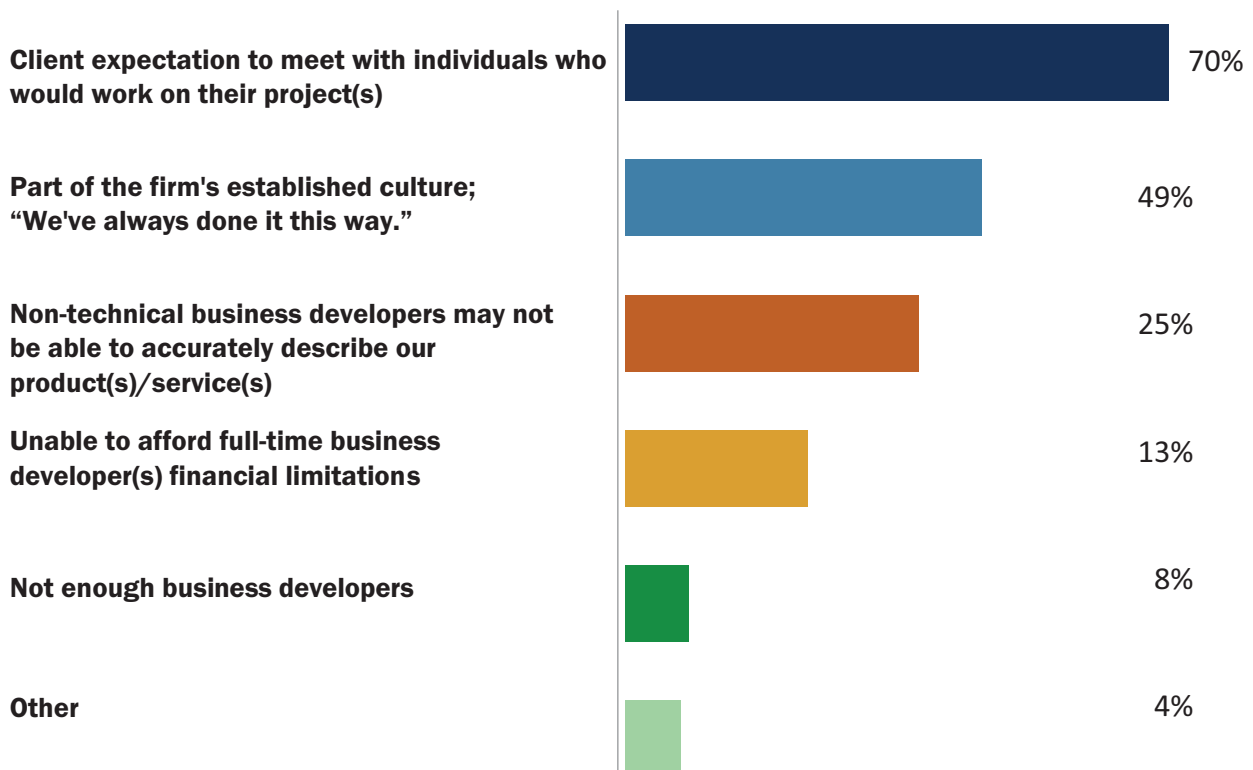
Smaller firms are less likely than larger firms to indicate that both their seller-doer and business developers are successful in their position. Respondents who identify as a seller-doer are more likely to note that the seller-doers at their firm are successful.

By a significant margin, the primary reason that A/E/C firms use the seller-doer model is due to client expectations to meet with individuals who would be working on their project(s), with 70 percent of survey respondents indicating this. Forty-nine percent of respondents indicated that the seller-doer model is part of the firm's established culture or they've always done it this way.

Notably, a quarter of respondents indicated that they use the seller-doer model because non-technical business developers may not be able to accurately describe their firms' products or services. Only 13 percent of respondents indicated that they cannot afford dedicated business developers.

## Primary Reasons to Use Seller-Doer Model

*N = 673*







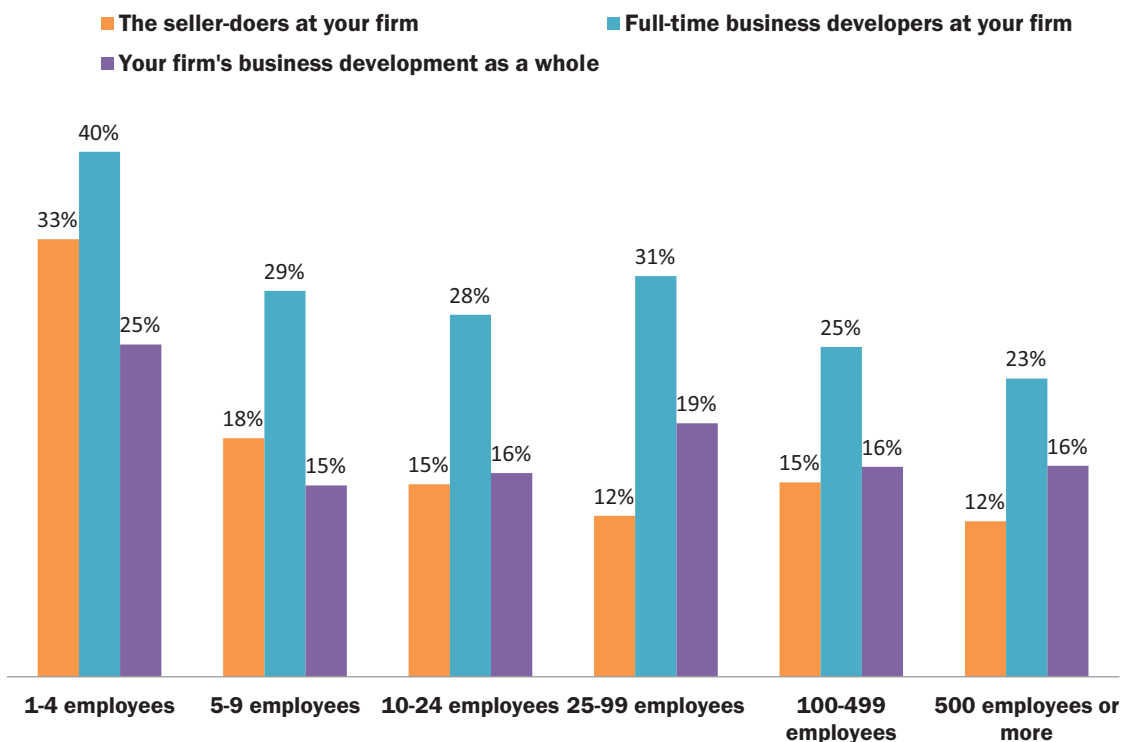
Survey participants from smaller firms are more likely to consider their business development practices to be highly successful compared to their counterparts at larger firms. In every size category, respondents indicated that their full-time business developers were extremely successful compared to their seller-doers. However, as a whole, only a quarter or fewer of respondents indicated that their firm's business development was extremely successful, and for firms with five or more employees, the number of respondents indicating that their business development program is extremely successful was less than 20 percent.

Ultimately, this means that the vast majority of respondents believe that there is room for improvement when it comes to their firms' business development practice—for both dedicated business developers as well as seller-doer.

When broken out by firm type, respondents from architectural and engineering firms didn't view their business development program as being as successful as participants from construction firms. In all three firm categories, dedicated business developers were viewed as being more successful than seller-doer, with roughly a third of construction firms ranking their full-time business development professionals as extremely successful.

## Success of Business Development Practices by Firm Size

*% rated as extremely successful*





## KEY FINDING

Very large firms (500 or more employees) and very small firms (fewer than 10 employees) are most likely to indicate that their firm has an incentive program for seller-doers.



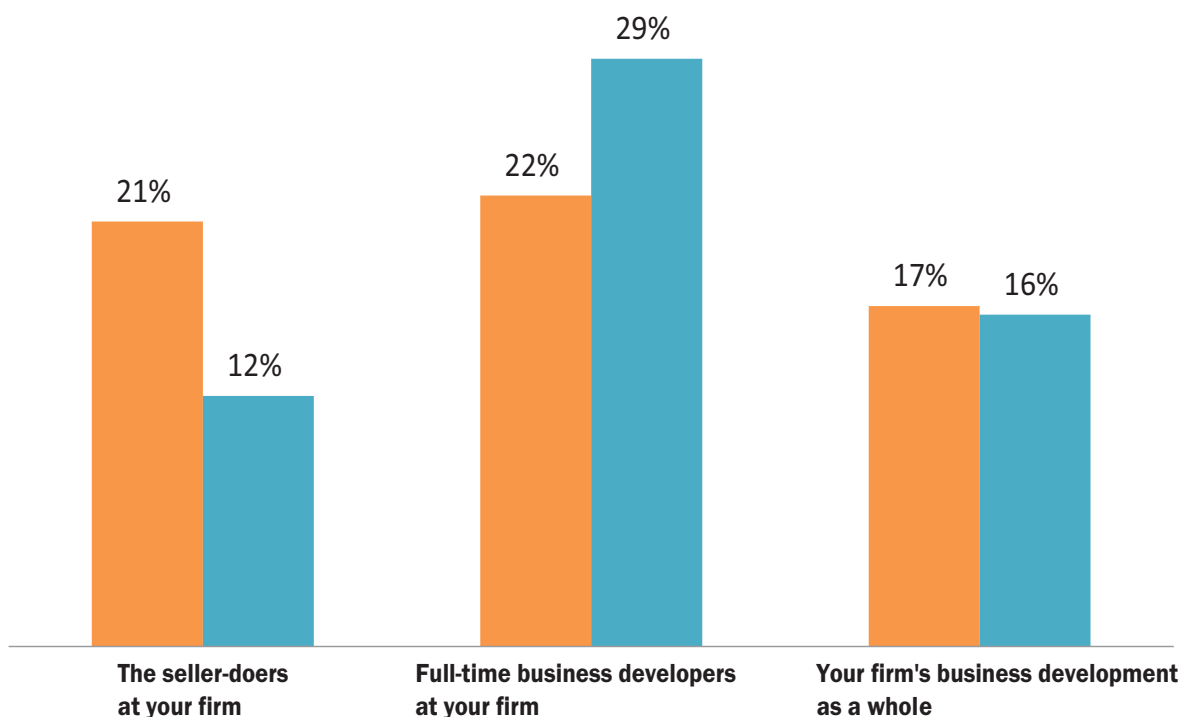
However, when breaking the data out by type of respondent, those who indicated that they are seller-doers believed that the seller-doers at their firms were more successful than those who indicated that they were not seller-doers (e.g., dedicated business developers, and marketers).

Likewise, the non-seller-doers ranked the performance of seller-doers lower than the performance of non-seller-doers. However, when viewing their firm's business development practices as a whole, only 16 and 17 percent of respondents from both categories indicated that their firm's program is extremely successful.

## Success of Business Development Practices by Seller-Doer Status

*% rated as extremely successful*

■ Seller-Doers ■ Non Seller-Doers





# GOALS, INCENTIVES, AND TRAINING

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**Only 35 percent of respondents indicated that their firm provides training for seller-doers. Overall, participants from larger firms and engineering and construction firms were more likely to indicate that their firm provides such training.**

Survey participants were asked to indicate which positions within their firm have personal goals for business development. Forty-four percent of staff with the title of principal, owner, or partner have personal business development goals, while 35 percent each of CEO/president and business development director positions have personal goals for business development.

Twenty-nine percent of employees with the title of project executive or project manager have personal business development goals. Those positions least likely to have personal business development goals include project superintendent, estimator, administrator/office manager, and chief marketing officer (CMO).

### Positions with Individual/Personal Business Development Goals



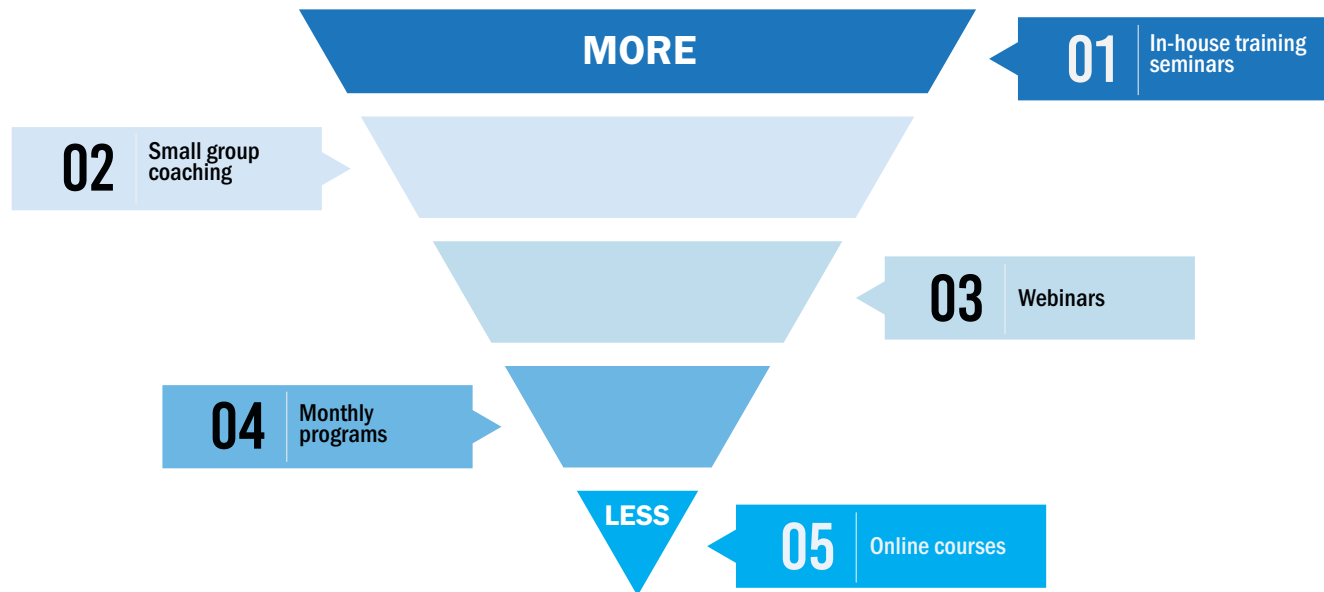


In general, incentive programs for seller-doers are not common in the A/E/C industry, with slightly less than one-quarter of firms indicating that they have an incentive program. Within the 10-24, 25-99, and 100-499 employee size categories, fewer than 21 percent of firms have such a program. However, firms with 500+ employees are most likely to have an incentive program for seller-doers, with 38 percent of respondents indicating that a program exists in their firms.

The vast majority of incentive programs are based around year-end bonuses, with 65 percent of respondents indicating this structure. Seventeen percent of firms rely on spot bonuses, while 14 percent pay a commission on the value of work contracted.

Larger firms are more likely to provide training to seller-doers, with roughly half of engineering and construction firms indicating that some training is provided. Thirty-eight percent of architecture firms indicated that training is provided. For those firms that do provide training, roughly one quarter provide internal training only, one-quarter provide external training only, and half provide both.

Internal training is most often provided by principals (41 percent of firms), with business developers the second-most likely to provide sales training to seller-doers (21 percent of firms). For external training, professional associations or industry organizations are the most frequent source (43 percent of firms), with education/training vendors the second most common source (39 percent of firms).



For those firms sending seller-doers for external training, these are the preferred training formats.



### KEY FINDING

Half of respondents who noted that their firm provides internal training to seller-doers also reported that business development or marketing staff are responsible for providing training and education for the firm's seller-doers.

The most common internal training formats and topics include (with percent of respondents indicating this method in parenthesis):

#### FORMATS

- Utilize dedicated business development / marketing staff (50 percent)
- Webinars (40 percent)
- Internal communications such as email (37 percent)
- Annual workshops/meetings (37 percent)

#### TOPICS

For those firms providing internal training, here are the most common topics (with percent of respondents indicating this topic in parentheses):

- Delivering presentations/public speaking (62 percent)
- Networking best practices (55 percent)
- Developing presentations (52 percent)
- Writing proposals (47 percent)
- Starting conversations (41 percent)

Approximately a third of respondents indicated they utilize membership in the Society for Marketing Professional Services (SMPS) for providing training to seller-doers.





Interview participants noted that certain types of education and training should be provided to both seller-doers and business developers to ensure the success of their firm's business development practices in the future. The top three categories identified were:

- Technology
- Communication and networking
- Business operations



Technology includes training on business development and marketing technology advancements such as business development and marketing applications, social media, and new communications technologies.

Communications and networking includes train-the-trainer programs (prepares seller-doers and business developers to present information effectively), as well as general interpersonal and relationship-building skills.

Business operations includes finance and operations, particularly so business developers can better understand their firm's services or products.





# THE FUTURE OF BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT







Survey respondents were more likely to note that the percentage of time that seller-doers spend on business development activities has increased over the past 10 years and that it will continue to increase over the next 10 years.

As evidenced by this chart, application of the seller-doer model has grown significantly when compared to a decade ago, with firms increasing both the number of seller-doers on staff as well as the percent of time that seller-doers spend in business development activities.

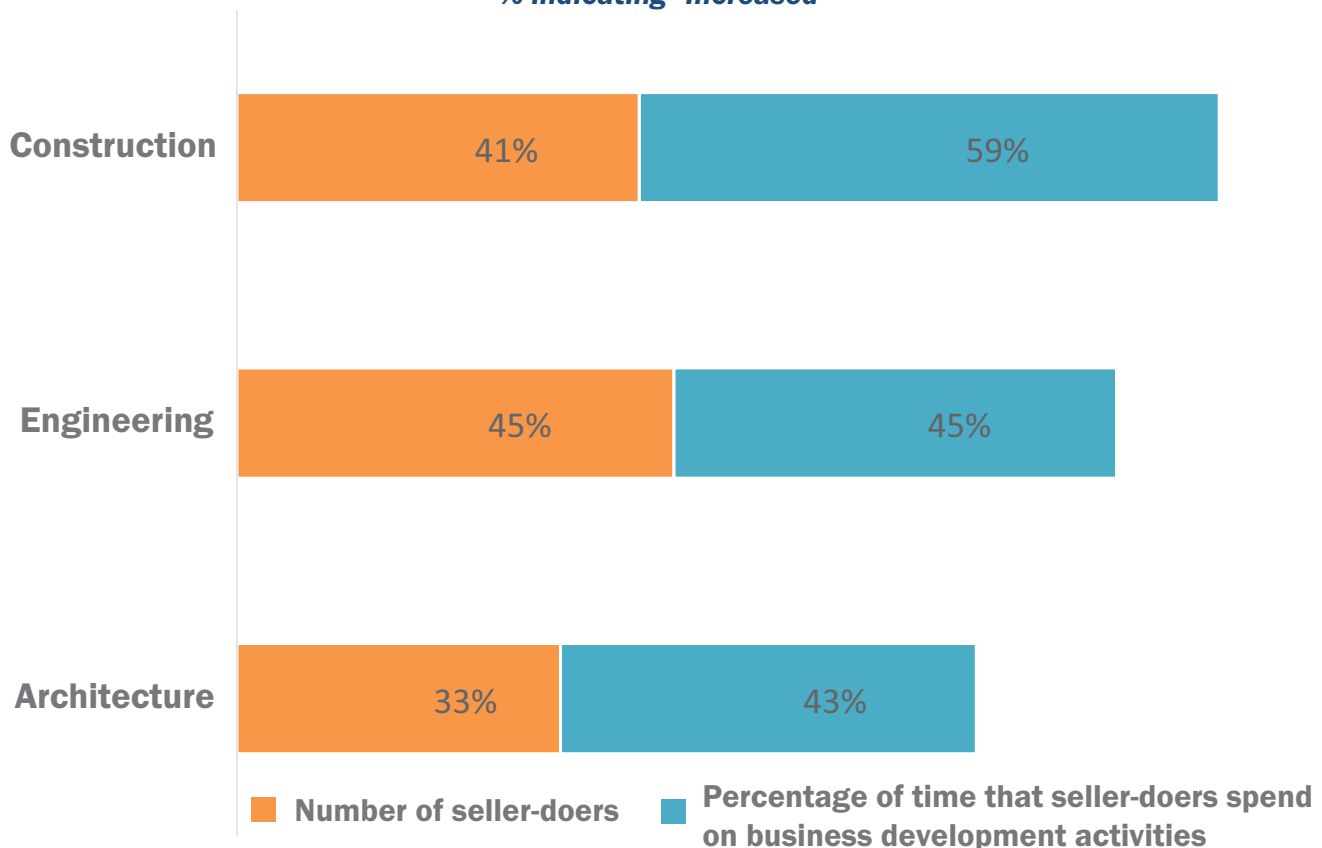
When it comes to increases in the number of seller-doers, size matters. As expected, only 7 percent of firms with fewer than five employees increased the number of seller-doers, although a quarter of firms in that category indicated an increase in the amount of time spent in business development when compared with 10 years ago.

At the other end of the spectrum, almost half of firms with 500 or more employees have increased the number of seller-doers on staff while also increasing the amount of time that their seller-doers spend in business development activities.

Firms are projecting that this trend will continue in the forthcoming years; however, they also see an increased role for dedicated business developers. Fifty-four percent of survey participants are projecting an increase in the number of seller-doers at their firms, with 46 percent also projecting an increase in dedicated business developers.

## Ten-Year Change in Business Development Activities by Firm Type

*% indicating "Increased"*





Both architectural and engineering firms are projecting a greater increase in the use of seller-doers than business developers, with construction firms projecting a slightly greater increase in full-time business developers. However, the numbers are significant across all firm types, demonstrating that firms will need more business developers and more technical professionals with business development skills.

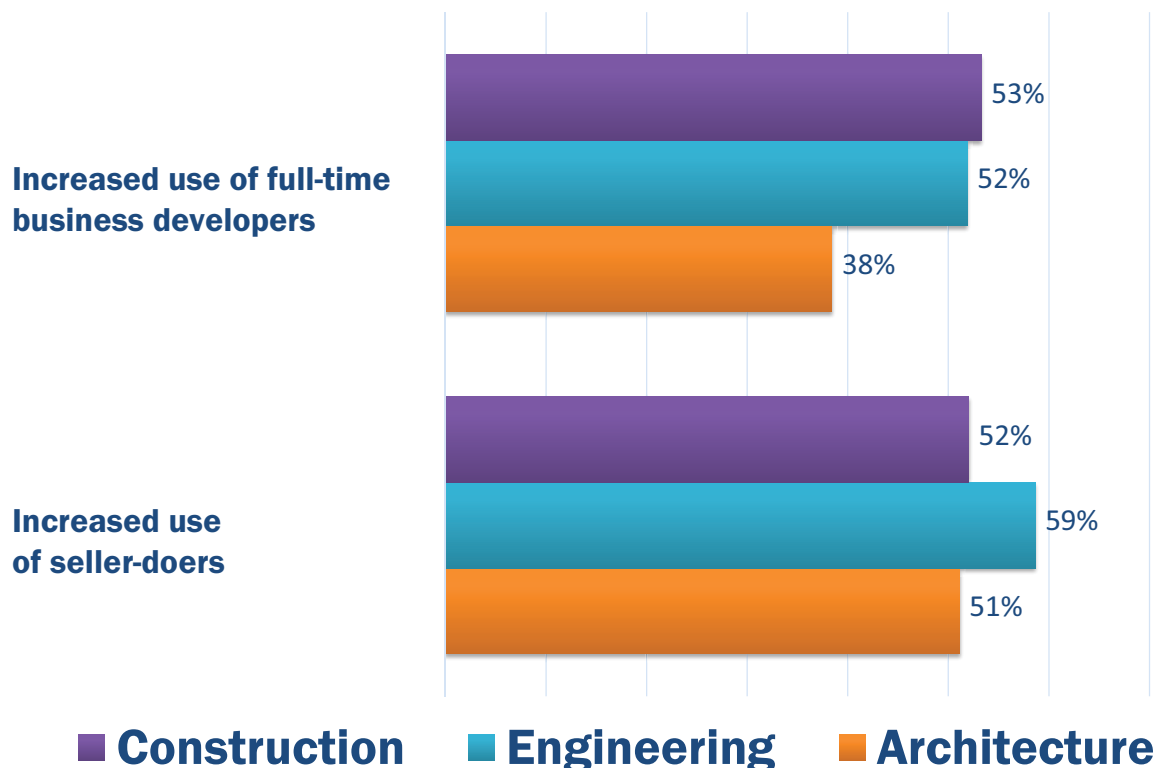
Firms in the 25-99 size category are projecting the greatest increase in the use of seller-doers, with 66 percent projecting an increase. Fifty-four percent of A/E/C firms with 500 or more employees are projecting an increase in the use of full-time business developers, the largest projected increase of any firm size.

One of the final questions asked on the quantitative survey was whether or not participants believe that their companies will evolve to a firm-wide business development culture with only seller-doers and no dedicated business developers over the next decade. Slightly more than half of respondents (53 percent) indicated that they will not go this route.

However, 24 percent of respondents believe that their firms will move exclusively to seller-doers during this period, with another 23 percent unsure of the direction of their firm's business development program.

Size really did not matter when responding to this question, with 22 percent of the smallest firms (1-4 employees) and 24 percent of the largest firms (500+ employees) indicating that they believe their firms will exclusively use seller-doers within the next 10 years.

### Anticipated Changes in Business Development Practices in the Next 10 Years by Firm Type



# Project Leadership

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## SMPS Project Staff

Tina M. Myers, CAE, Executive Deputy Director  
 Jaime Flores, Vice President, Marketing & Communications  
 Molly Dall'Erta, Foundation Project Manager



## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES



### Books ▶

*A/E/C Business Development—The Decade Ahead*

*The Basics of Business Development in the A/E/C Marketplace*

*MARKENDIUM: The SMPS Body of Knowledge*



### Training ▶

*BD for Technical Professionals: A Seller-Doer Workshop*



### Networking ▶

*SMPS Build Business, the annual conference*

**FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT SMPS AND SMPS FOUNDATION  
PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OFFERINGS, PLEASE VISIT:**

**[SMPS.ORG](http://SMPS.ORG)**



The logo for the Society for Marketing Professional Services (SMPS), featuring the lowercase letters "smps" in white with a registered trademark symbol, and a horizontal orange bar underneath.The logo for the SMPS Foundation, featuring the lowercase letters "smps" in white with a registered trademark symbol, and the word "Foundation" in a smaller font below it, with a horizontal orange bar underneath.

**BUSINESS TRANSFORMED THROUGH MARKETING LEADERSHIP:**

The Society for Marketing Professional Services (SMPS) is the only organization dedicated to creating business opportunities in the A/E/C industries. With more than 7,000 members, SMPS provides leadership and professional development programs, industry research, business-building events, and vital marketing resources. Through SMPS, A/E/C professionals in North America tap into powerful networks to form project teams, secure business referrals and intelligence, and benchmark performance. The Society is committed to validating the practice of marketing and business development as essential to the success of all professional services firms. To learn more, visit [smps.org](http://smps.org).

The SMPS Foundation is a not-for-profit 501(c)(3) organization established by SMPS in 1992 to develop a greater understanding of the role and value of marketing and business development in industries the Society serves. The SMPS Foundation is funded by donations and is underwritten by SMPS. Gifts by U.S. citizens may be tax-deductible for charitable purposes. To learn more, visit [smpsfoundation.org](http://smpsfoundation.org).



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