REVENUE OPERATIONS & AI

Salesforce control is a blend, not a commission plan

A commission plan is one control element: design behavior and outcome controls around observability, product complexity, turbulence, support, and review.

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PUBLISHED
1 September 2026

READING TIME
6 min

WORDS
1,417

https://isoglu.com/insights/journal/salesforce-control-is-a-blend-not-a-commission-plan/

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MANAGEMENT SUMMARY

A commission plan cannot tell a manager whether the selling work was well controlled. Cravens, Ingram, LaForge, and Young study behavior-based and outcome-based control in 144 sales organizations and place incentive compensation inside a wider control system. de Oliveira Santini and colleagues synthesize 104 studies and report relationships with product complexity, bonuses, financial performance, sales innovation, organizational support, and supervisor satisfaction. Their results differ by context, with behavior control associated with effectiveness in turbulent markets and outcome control efficient for complex products in the reported evidence. This article builds a control-blend matrix. It does not prescribe a commission rate, rank one control as universally superior, or diagnose a current salesforce.

Keywords: Salesforce control systems · Behavior-based control · Outcome-based control · Sales compensation

A commission plan is one control element, not the salesforce control system.

The short answer is that a manager needs to decide what can be observed, coached, supported, and rewarded before choosing how strongly compensation should vary with an outcome. Cravens, Ingram, LaForge, and Young study behavior-based and outcome-based control in 144 sales organizations and place incentive compensation inside a wider system. de Oliveira Santini and colleagues synthesize 104 studies and show that the reported relationships differ with product complexity, market turbulence, bonuses, financial performance, sales innovation, organizational support, and supervisor satisfaction.

The sources do not supply an optimal commission rate. They support a more useful design object: a control blend that matches the selling work and its evidence boundary.

Why is salesforce control a multi-faceted governance blend rather than a commission plan?

A sales number can be easy to see and still be too late to explain the work that produced it. Behavior-based control focuses on activities or behaviors that can be observed, directed, and coached. Outcome-based control focuses on results. The two are not necessarily opposing plans. They can be combined with supervision, training, territory design, information, and compensation.

Table 1 Why is salesforce control a multi-faceted governance blend rather than a commission plan?

Control object	Question	What it does not prove
Behavior	Which selling activity can be observed or coached?	That activity guarantees revenue.
Outcome	Which result is measured and on what horizon?	That the seller controlled every driver.
Supervision	Who interprets, supports, and reviews the work?	That more monitoring is automatically better.
Compensation	Which outcome or behavior changes pay?	That incentive intensity creates durable performance.
Context	What do product complexity and market conditions change?	That one blend transfers unchanged.

Table from this essay. Sources and interpretation are given in the article.

The control system is the combination and the review logic. The commission plan is only one signal inside it.

Figure 1 The salesforce control-blend matrix

Design field	If it is visible	If it is not visible	Review question
Selling behavior	Activities can be coached or audited	Output is the only signal	What work should management support?
Outcome	Result and horizon are declared	Timing and attribution are unclear	Which outcome is actually being protected?
Product complexity	The difficulty of the offer is explicit	A complex sale is treated like a simple one	What can the seller reasonably control?
Market turbulence	Conditions can change the work	A historical plan becomes a permanent rule	Which control needs faster review?
Incentive	Pay signal and calculation base are visible	Compensation carries the whole system	What behavior or outcome is being encouraged?
Support and supervision	Coaching, training, and expectations are recorded	Control is confused with surveillance	Who helps the work improve?

Author's diagnostic framework grounded in Cravens, Ingram, LaForge, and Young (1993) and de Oliveira Santini et al. (2019). The matrix is synthetic and does not prescribe a compensation plan.

The original control-system boundary

Cravens et al. examine relationships between behavior-based control, salesforce characteristics, performance dimensions, and sales-organization effectiveness in 144 sales organizations. The study's contribution is not a binary choice between activity and result. It treats control as a management system in which field management and compensation have different roles.

That distinction changes a familiar question. Instead of asking, "Should we pay for behavior or revenue?" ask which part of the selling process is observable, which outcome is exposed to external conditions, which work needs coaching, and which result should carry an incentive signal.

An outcome can be easy to record and hard to attribute. A behavior can be visible and still poorly chosen. The control design has to state which problem it is solving. If the objective is capability development, the manager may need information, training, and feedback. If the objective is a measurable result over a defined horizon, an outcome signal may have a role. The evidence does not make either choice automatic.

What the 104-study meta-analysis adds

de Oliveira Santini and colleagues synthesize 104 studies on behavior-based and outcome-based control. Their reported relationships include product complexity, bonuses, financial performance, sales innovation, organizational support, and supervisor satisfaction. The range of outcomes matters because it prevents a single "control works" number from answering every management question.

The meta-analysis reports behavior control as effective in turbulent markets and for financial performance in the examined evidence, while outcome control is efficient for complex products. These are contextual findings, not a universal hierarchy. “Turbulent” and “complex” are not decorations around the same coefficient. They change what the seller can observe, influence, and learn.

The article should therefore preserve the association language. A meta-analysis summarizes relationships across studies; it does not turn every relationship into a causal prescription for a current salesforce. The manager still has to identify the object, context, unit, horizon, and review result.

Why a blend is more useful than a plan label

The label “commission plan” usually names the payment mechanism. It does not tell the organization whether the seller has the authority, information, skill, time, or market access needed to influence the paid outcome. It also does not say how a manager will respond when the outcome arrives too late to coach.

A blend can combine behavior observation with outcome accountability. It can use supervision to interpret the behavior, training to develop capability, and compensation to signal a declared result. It can also reduce the weight of one signal when the product, market, or selling cycle makes it noisy.

This is a design hypothesis, not a formula. The matrix is useful precisely because it can record a missing field. If a team cannot say what behavior is being coached, what outcome is being protected, or what context changes the signal, increasing incentive intensity is an unsupported response.

A synthetic control review

Imagine a sales organization with a long, complex selling cycle. Its revenue result is visible at the end, but the path includes discovery, technical design, multiple stakeholders, and implementation risk. A control review can ask:

1. Which behaviors are observable early enough to coach?
2. Which outcomes are measured, and over what horizon?
3. Which parts of the outcome are outside the seller’s control?
4. How does product complexity change the signal?
5. What does market turbulence change about the plan?
6. Which support and supervision make the desired work possible?
7. What exactly does the compensation rule encourage?
8. What result would cause the blend to be revised?

The example is synthetic. It does not produce a commission recommendation. It makes clear why a revenue number alone cannot describe the control system.

How should sales leadership implement a balanced control blend?

Before revising a salesforce control system, record:

1. the selling task, product complexity, and market condition;

2 the behavior that can be observed and coached;
3 the outcome, unit, horizon, and attribution boundary;
4 the supervision, training, information, and organizational support;
5 the compensation base, timing, and incentive signal;
6 the control mix that is currently in place;
7 the source evidence and its association or context boundary;
8 the result that would show the blend is not working for the declared purpose.

This sequence makes compensation part of management rather than a substitute for it. It also gives a manager a way to separate a weak incentive signal from a weak selling process.

What this review does not prescribe

Cravens et al. do not prescribe a current commission plan. When extending commercial execution to third-party distributors, remember that a channel needs governance before another partner, applying behavioral and output controls beyond direct employees. The meta-analysis does not establish one universal ranking of behavior and outcome control. The reported relationships belong to their studies, settings, and outcomes. Nothing here evaluates a named employer or salesforce.

The stopping rule is concrete. Do not respond to an unclear selling process by increasing commission intensity. First name the behavior, outcome, context, supervision, support, and calculation base. If the control object is still unclear, the plan is not ready to carry a stronger incentive signal.

The control blend connects to what sales managers can observe and the compensation plan that can reward a coverage problem.

Cravens, D. W., T. N. Ingram, R. W. LaForge, and C. E. Young. (1993). Behavior-Based and Outcome-Based Salesforce Control Systems. Journal of Marketing, 57(4), 47-59. DOI

de Oliveira Santini, F., V. A. Vieira, W. J. Ladeira, and C. H. Sampaio. (2019). Behaviour-Based and Outcome-Based Control Systems: A Meta-Analytic Study. Canadian Journal of Administrative Sciences, 36(2), 149-162. DOI

END OF ESSAY

HOW TO CITE THIS ESSAY

Isoglu, S. (2026, September 1). Salesforce control is a blend, not a commission plan. Sinan Isoglu. https://isoglu.com/insights/journal/salesforce-control-is-a-blend-not-a-commission-plan/

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