FREE HIRING GUIDE · 2026 EDITION

The Account Executive Hiring Guide

A professional guide to hiring Account Executives by segment — the three archetypes and why they are not interchangeable, what to screen for in each, interview banks, a copy-paste job description, and 2026 compensation, quota and ramp benchmarks.

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What's inside

INTRODUCTION

Before you start

> Most companies do not have an AE hiring problem. They have an AE *definition* problem — one scorecard, one interview loop, and one job description used to hire three fundamentally different sellers.

An SMB rep closing 40 deals a year on a three-week cycle and an enterprise rep closing six on a nine-month cycle share a job title and almost nothing else. They are screened for different instincts, ramped on different timelines, and paid on different math. Interview one the way you would interview the other and you will reliably hire the wrong person — then read it as a performance problem eleven months later.

This guide separates the three. Use it end to end, or jump to what you need:

If you're scoping the role

Start with chapters 1–4: the market, the three archetypes, what to screen for in each, and the ramp and quota math.

If you're ready to interview

Go to chapters 5–8: the question banks, the JD template, 2026 pay by segment, and reference checks.

CHAPTER 01

The State of AE Hiring in 2026

> The AE market has quietly become harder on both sides of the table. Quotas are up, attainment is down, ramp is the longest it has ever been measured, and the experience bar at hire has climbed by a full year since 2022. Every one of those numbers makes the cost of hiring the wrong archetype higher than it was two years ago.

48%
Of reps hit annual quota in 2026, down from 51% in 2024

6.2
Months median AE ramp — the highest in the research's history

3.7 yrs
Average experience required at hire, up from 2.7 in 2022

4.6×
Median quota-to-OTE ratio, up from 4.2× in 2024

Four shifts that changed the hire

The quota went up, the hit rate went down

Median quota is now $960k against a median AE OTE of $200k. Carrying more while fewer people clear it means a mis-hire is discovered later and costs more.

Ramp is at a record

Median AE ramp reached 6.2 months, the longest since this research began. You are underwriting roughly half a year of salary before you learn whether the hire works.

Buying committees grew

The average B2B deal now involves 6.8 stakeholders, up from 5.4 in 2020, and cycles have stretched 22% since 2022. Multi-threading stopped being an enterprise-only skill.

AI fluency now splits the field

At organizations with the highest AI engagement, 57% of reps hit quota. At the lowest, 39%. That is an 18-point spread on the same underlying job.

Quota is up, attainment is down, and ramp is the longest on record — the margin for a mis-hire has narrowed.

The mistake this guide is built to fix. Almost every failed AE hire we are asked to replace was a competent seller placed against the wrong motion — a velocity closer handed a nine-month enterprise cycle, or a relationship seller asked to run 40 transactions a quarter. The résumé said "Account Executive." The job was a different job.

CHAPTER 02

The Three AE Archetypes

> Segment is not a seniority ladder. SMB, mid-market and enterprise are three distinct crafts, and moving between them is a genuine career change — not a promotion. Hire against the motion your deals actually run, not against the most impressive logo on the résumé.

ARCHETYPE

SMB / Velocity AE

Wins on volume, pace and discipline. Deals under roughly $15k ACV close in 14–30 days, often with a single decision-maker. The job is throughput: many at-bats, fast qualification, ruthless disqualification.

ARCHETYPE

Mid-Market AE

Wins on process and consistency. Deals from $15k to $100k run 30–90 days with a small committee forming. The job is running a repeatable multi-stakeholder cycle without losing momentum in legal or security review.

ARCHETYPE

Enterprise AE

Wins on orchestration and patience. Deals above $100k run 90–180+ days across a full buying committee. The job is navigating an organization — building consensus, managing procurement, and surviving slippage.

How they actually differ

	SMB / Velocity	Mid-Market	Enterprise
Typical ACV	Under $15k	$15k–$100k	$100k+
Sales cycle	14–30 days	30–90 days	90–180+ days
Buying committee	1–2 people	3–5 people	Full committee, often 7+
Ramp to baseline	4.5–5 months	4.5–5 months	7–9 months
First closed deal	Months 2–3	Months 3–4	Months 4–6
The core skill	Throughput and disqualification	Process control across a small committee	Orchestration, consensus, procurement
Fails when	They over-invest in dead deals	They lose the thread between stages	They cannot access power

> An enterprise logo on a résumé tells you the size of the deals someone sat near. It does not tell you whether they ran them.

That distinction matters more than any other line on an AE résumé. Large organizations carry sellers who were genuinely orchestrating six-figure cycles and sellers who were one name on a pursuit team supported by solutions engineers, a named-account list and inbound demand. Both come to you with the same logo. Only one of them has the skill you are buying.

> **Direction of travel matters.** Moving down-market — enterprise to SMB — fails more often than people expect, because the discipline of high-volume disqualification is a habit, not a downgrade in difficulty. Moving up-market fails when a rep has never had to build consensus among people who do not report to each other. Screen for the move, not just the destination.

CHAPTER 03

What to Look For by Archetype

> Same title, three different scorecards. The signals below are the ones that survive reference checks — and the ones that separate a rep who hit their number from a rep who was carried by their territory.

What good looks like

Archetype	Screen hardest for
SMB / Velocity	Activity discipline and fast, unsentimental qualification. Can they describe how they decide to walk away in week one? Volume without a disqualification framework is just noise.
Mid-Market	Process control. Can they narrate a deal stage by stage, name who they multi-threaded to and when, and explain how they kept security review from eating a month?
Enterprise	Access to power and orchestration. Who did they reach above their champion, how did they get there, and how did they manage procurement and legal without losing the quarter?
All three	Attainment in context. "120% of quota" means nothing without the quota number, the territory, the ACV and how many reps on the team also hit.

The stack they should be fluent in

- Salesforce / HubSpot
- Outreach / Salesloft
- Gong / Chorus
- Clay
- LinkedIn Sales Navigator
- ZoomInfo / Apollo
- MEDDPICC
- Command of the Message

> **Ask about AI directly — it is now a performance variable.** Reps at the highest-AI-engagement organizations hit quota at 57% versus 39% at the lowest. Ask what a candidate has automated in their own workflow, what they still do by hand and why. The strong answers are specific and unglamorous: research, account planning, call follow-up, CRM hygiene. The weak answer is that they "use ChatGPT sometimes."

Red flags, whatever the segment

Attainment with no denominator

Quotes a percentage but cannot state the quota, the ACV or how the rest of the team did.

Deals in the passive voice

"The deal got signed." Push until you hear what they personally did that moved it.

Inherited pipeline

Every named win came inbound or from a house account, and they cannot describe one they sourced themselves.

No loss they own

Every loss is pricing, product or marketing. A seller who has never diagnosed their own loss has not learned from one.

CHAPTER 04

Quota, Ramp & Attainment Benchmarks

> These are the numbers to set expectations against — both when you write the comp plan and when you decide how long to give a new hire before you call it.

$960k
Median AE quota

$200k
Median AE OTE, up from $167k in 2022

1.5–2×
Annual salary — the cost of a mis-hire

Ramp by segment

Role	Ramp to baseline quota	Typical range	First closed deal
SDR / BDR	3.2 months	2–5 months	—
SMB / Mid-Market AE	4.5–5 months	3–7 months	Months 2–4
Enterprise AE	7–9 months	6–12 months	Months 4–6

Ramp has lengthened roughly 32% since 2020, and the median across all AEs now sits at 6.2 months — the highest figure in the decade this research has been running. Read that against annual sales rep churn of about 35% and the arithmetic gets uncomfortable: a meaningful share of every enterprise AE you hire is spent getting them productive, and a meaningful share of those never reach full attainment before they leave.

The one lever that is actually in your control. Companies with structured onboarding see about 27% higher early-tenure win rates. Ramp length is largely set by your deal cycle — you cannot compress a nine-month enterprise cycle by wanting to. What you can change is whether month one is a structured plan or a laptop and a login.

What a mis-hire costs

A wrong hire runs 1.5–2× annual salary once you count recruiting, onboarding, ramp, manager time and the pipeline that never got built. For an enterprise AE, the salary is only the visible part — the larger loss is a territory that sat unworked for three quarters and a set of accounts that now need to be re-approached by someone new.

Set the review gate at the right month

Judging an enterprise AE at 90 days is judging them before their first deal is statistically likely to have closed. Judging an SMB AE at 90 days is entirely fair. Use the ramp table above to set the gate, and write the gate into the comp plan and the first-90-days document so the standard is explicit on both sides.

CHAPTER 05

Interview Questions by Archetype

> Anchor every question in a specific deal. You are testing whether the candidate can narrate their own work at the level of detail that only comes from having actually done it.

Foundations (all archetypes)

- What was your quota, what was your attainment, and how many people on your team also hit it?
- Walk me through your best deal from first touch to signature. What did you personally do at each stage?
- Tell me about a deal you lost that you should have won. What was your part in it?
- Where did your pipeline come from — inbound, SDR, or self-sourced? What was the split?
- What have you automated in your own workflow, and what do you still do by hand?

SMB / Velocity AE

- How many deals did you carry at once, and how did you decide what to touch each day?
- What is your disqualification rule? Tell me about a deal you killed early that a colleague would have kept.
- Your close rate drops 20% in a month. What do you look at first?
- How do you run discovery when you have fifteen minutes, not an hour?

Mid-Market AE

- Take me through a $50k deal stage by stage. Who did you meet, in what order, and why that order?
- When did you first multi-thread beyond your champion, and what triggered it?
- How have you kept a security or legal review from adding a month to a cycle?
- Tell me about a deal where your champion left mid-cycle. What did you do?

Enterprise AE

- Describe an account where you got above your champion. How did you earn that meeting?
- Map the buying committee on your last six-figure win — every role, and what each one needed.
- How do you manage a deal that slips two quarters without losing the account?
- Walk me through a procurement negotiation you ran. Where did you concede and where did you hold?
- What does your account plan look like, and who else at your company reads it?

> **Run the role-play, and run it for the right motion.** A 15-minute discovery role-play tells you more than a fourth behavioral round — but only if the scenario matches the job. Give an enterprise candidate a multi-stakeholder discovery with a hostile CFO. Give an SMB candidate a fast qualification call where the right answer is to disqualify.

CHAPTER 06

Job-Description Template (Copy-Paste)

> Written for a mid-market AE; swap the bracketed sections for the segment you are actually hiring. Naming the segment, the ACV and the cycle length in the posting is the cheapest filter you have.

Title
Account Executive — [SMB / Mid-Market / Enterprise]

About the role
You will own new business across [segment], carrying a quota of [$X] against an average deal size of [$Y] and a typical cycle of [Z] days. This is a [full-cycle / SDR-supported] role: you will [source your own pipeline / partner with an SDR on outbound] and run deals from first conversation through procurement and signature.

What you'll own

- A quota of [$X] across [named accounts / an inbound-plus-outbound territory]
- Full-cycle selling from discovery through close, including [security review / procurement / legal]
- Multi-threading across a typical buying committee of [N] stakeholders
- Accurate forecasting and CRM hygiene in [Salesforce / HubSpot]

Must-have

- [3+] years closing [segment] B2B deals at a comparable ACV and cycle length
- Documented quota attainment you can speak to in specifics — the number, the territory, and how the team performed
- Evidence of self-sourced pipeline, not solely inbound or SDR-fed
- Fluency with a modern sales stack and a working use of AI tooling in your own process

Nice-to-have

- Experience selling into [vertical / persona]
- Formal methodology training — MEDDPICC, Command of the Message, or similar
- Experience in a company at our stage, where process is still being built

Compensation

[$X] base / [$X] OTE, 50/50 split, [uncapped] commission. Ramp: [N] months with a [reduced / guaranteed] quota through month [N].

> **Publish the pay.** AE candidates screen on OTE and pay mix before they screen on anything else. A posting without a range is filtered out by exactly the passive, currently-employed candidates you most want — the ones with no reason to spend a first call finding out.

CHAPTER 07

2026 Compensation by Segment

> US ranges. The pay mix is remarkably consistent across AE segments — it is the quota and the OTE that move, not the split.

OTE and pay mix

Segment	Typical OTE (US)	Pay mix (base/variable)
SMB / Velocity AE	$110k–$160k	50 / 50
Mid-Market AE	$160k–$220k	50 / 50
Enterprise AE	$230k–$270k+	50 / 50
Median across all AEs: $200k OTE, up from $190k in 2024 and $167k in 2022.		

For reference: adjacent roles

Role	Typical pay mix
SDR / BDR	70 / 30
Account Executive	50 / 50
Customer Success, Sales Engineering	80 / 20

> **Check your quota-to-OTE ratio before you check your OTE.** The median sits at 4.6×, up from 4.2× in 2024 — reps are being asked to carry more per dollar of pay than they were two years ago. If your ratio is well above 4.6×, a competitive OTE on paper is still a below-market offer in practice, and your attainment will tell you so about three quarters later.

Sources: The Bridge Group, 2026 AE Compensation & Quota research, 10th biennial edition (n=158 B2B companies); Optymyze sales compensation benchmarks (2026); Optifai B2B Pipeline Study 2026 (n=939); published sales ramp-time benchmarks (2026). US figures, blended. Accessed August 2026.

CHAPTER 08

Reference Checks That Surface Truth

> AE references are the most gameable part of the process and the most valuable when run properly. The candidate picks the referees, so your job is not to ask whether they were good — it is to establish the context their number was earned in.

1. **Ask for the manager, not the mentor**
   Request the direct sales manager from the period the candidate quoted their attainment for. A peer or a skip-level who liked them is not a reference on their number.

2. **Establish the denominator first**
   Before anything qualitative: what was the quota, the ACV, the territory, and how many reps on that team hit? A 120% in a team where everyone cleared is a different data point from a 95% in a team where two of eleven did.

3. **Separate sourced from served**
   Ask what proportion of the candidate's closed business they sourced themselves. This is the single question that most often changes a hiring decision, and it is rarely volunteered.

4. **Ask the ramp question**
   "How long until they closed their first deal, and was that fast, normal or slow for your team?" It calibrates what you should expect from your own ramp gate.

Four questions and what you are listening for

Ask	Listen for
"What was their quota and attainment, and how did the team do overall?"	Whether the candidate's number was exceptional or ordinary in that environment.
"How much of their pipeline did they build themselves?"	A specific proportion. Hesitation here is the answer.
"Which part of the cycle did they need the most help with?"	A real answer. "None" means the referee is managing you, not informing you.
"Would you hire them again for the same seat — or a different one?"	The pause before "the same one." A qualified yes usually names the right archetype for them.

> **Do a back-channel where you can.** The strongest reference is one the candidate did not select — a former colleague you reach through your own network. That is a large part of what a specialist recruiter is actually for: we already know the people who worked alongside your candidate, so the reference happens before the offer, not after the resignation.

CHAPTER 09

Frequently Asked Questions

Can an enterprise AE succeed in an SMB role?

Sometimes, but it is a genuine career change rather than a step down, and it fails more often than people expect. High-volume selling depends on fast, unsentimental disqualification — a habit enterprise reps spend years unlearning, because in a nine-month cycle patience is the correct instinct. Screen the move explicitly rather than assuming the more expensive résumé transfers downward.

How long should we give a new AE before we make a call?

Set the gate off the segment, not the calendar. Median ramp to baseline quota is 4.5–5 months for SMB and mid-market and 7–9 months for enterprise, with the first closed deal landing in months 2–4 and 4–6 respectively. Judging an enterprise AE at 90 days means judging them before their first deal was statistically likely to close.

What should an AE actually cost in 2026?

Median AE OTE is $200k, with SMB roles typically $110k–$160k, mid-market $160k–$220k, and enterprise $230k–$270k+, almost always on a 50/50 base-to-variable split. Check the quota-to-OTE ratio alongside the number — the median is 4.6×, and a competitive OTE attached to a 6× quota is not a competitive offer.

Is falling quota attainment a hiring problem or a market problem?

Both, and the split is diagnosable. Attainment fell to 48% in 2026 from 51% in 2024 while quotas rose — that is market. But at organizations with the highest AI engagement 57% of reps hit quota versus 39% at the lowest, which is a capability gap you hire and enable for. If your attainment is well below 48%, look at quota-setting and enablement before you conclude you have been hiring badly.

How fast can you introduce qualified AEs?

In days, not weeks. We maintain live pipelines of AEs segmented by motion — velocity, mid-market and enterprise — and qualify them on attainment in context, self-sourced pipeline and the specific cycle they have actually run, so you interview candidates matched to your motion rather than a stack of keyword-matched résumés.

Who can we introduce you to today? Whether you are replacing a seat, building a first sales team or scaling a segment, book a consultation at sloane-staffing.com/contact — we will tell you which archetype your motion actually needs and what it costs in your market.

ABOUT

About Sloane Staffing

> We're a go-to-market and technical recruiting firm that places the people who build and grow modern companies — from marketing, sales, and GTM engineering to the specialized data and AI talent behind them.

Specialist, not generalist

We recruit within focused practice areas and qualify candidates on the problems they've solved — not keyword-matched résumés.

We reach the people who aren't looking

We go outbound to pre-qualified, pre-interviewed candidates, so you typically see a vetted shortlist within days, not weeks.

Contract & permanent

One partner for both — whether you need a project-based resource or a long-term hire.

Founder-led expertise

Built by operators from the GTM and martech world who know these roles from the inside.

Let's find your next hire. Book a free consultation at **sloane-staffing.com/contact** — tell us who you need, and we'll show you how we'd source them.