



FREE HIRING GUIDE • 2026 EDITION

The SDR Hiring Guide

A professional guide to hiring SDRs and BDRs: the three versions of the seat, what to screen for in each, interview banks and work samples, a copy-paste job description, and 2026 pay, ramp, quota and attrition benchmarks.

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Sloane Staffing

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INTRODUCTION

Before you start

The SDR is the most-hired and least-examined seat in sales. Companies fill it fast and fill it often, and they usually run the same generic loop for all of those hires: can they talk, do they seem hungry, will they take rejection.

That loop was built for a job that no longer exists. In 2026 the seat carries more pipeline per rep, fewer meetings per month, and a lot less of the research and drafting work, because software now does most of it. Teams are smaller, attrition is still around 40% a year, and a bad hire now costs you more pipeline than it did three years ago.

This guide is the hiring standard for the modern seat. 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 SDR hires, what to screen for, and the ramp, quota and attrition math.

If you're ready to interview

Go to chapters 5–8: the question banks and work samples, the JD template, 2026 pay and the promotion path, and reference checks.

CHAPTER 01

The State of SDR Hiring in 2026

Sales development took the deepest headcount cuts in sales last year. The SDRs who stayed now carry more pipeline and fewer meetings than any cohort before them. Pay has not moved since 2022, and fewer reps are hitting quota than at any point on record.

\$80k

Median SDR OTE —
unchanged since
2022

40%

Median annual SDR
attrition

60%

Of SDRs at quota —
the lowest in the
study's history

36%

Of B2B companies
cut SDR/BDR
headcount last
year

Four shifts that changed the hire

Fewer seats, more pipeline per seat

36% of venture-backed B2B companies cut SDR/BDR headcount, against 19% that grew it. Meanwhile pipeline generated per SDR rose to \$3.78M a year, up from \$2.83M in 2022. Each seat is worth more, so each mis-hire costs more.

The quota moved from volume to quality

The median monthly quota is now 10 Stage 0 meetings held, down 40% since 2018. The job is fewer, better conversations. Many interview loops are still built to find people who can grind out activity.

Software absorbed the busywork

Sellers expect AI agents to cut prospect research time by 34% and email drafting by 36%. Those are the activities SDRs were historically measured on. What's left is judgment: who to call, what to say, and when to stop.

People stay longer, and ramp faster

Average SDR tenure is 1.9 years, the longest since the early 2010s. Average ramp is 3.0 months, the shortest since 2010. The seat is more stable than its reputation, so hiring for the full tenure now pays off.



Smaller teams, more pipeline per rep, and a quota measured in meetings held, not activity logged.

The mistake this guide is built to fix. Most SDR hiring loops test for confidence and grit, then hand the new hire a job built on research, judgment and written clarity. The candidates who interview best in a volume loop are rarely the ones who build the most pipeline in a quality-first seat.

CHAPTER 02

The Three SDR Hires

Titles are inconsistent. Most companies use "SDR" for inbound and "BDR" for outbound, and plenty use them interchangeably. Ignore the title and hire against the work the seat actually does. There are three versions, and they need different people.

HIRE**Inbound SDR**

Wins on speed and qualification. Works leads who raised their hand — demo requests, trials, content downloads — and decides fast who is real. The job is response time, sharp discovery and clean handoffs to an AE.

HIRE**Outbound BDR**

Wins on research and resilience. Creates pipeline from accounts that never asked to hear from you, across phone, email and LinkedIn. The job is picking the right accounts, writing a reason to talk, and staying consistent through a lot of silence.

HIRE**Founding SDR**

Wins on self-direction. The first one or two SDRs at an early-stage company, with no playbook, no enablement and often no manager who has run sales development. The job is building the motion while running it.

How they actually differ

	Inbound SDR	Outbound BDR	Founding SDR
Where pipeline comes from	Leads who came to you	Accounts you chose	Both, with no system yet
Core skill	Fast qualification and discovery	Account research and a reason to talk	Building the playbook while using it
Rhythm	Reactive; minutes matter	Planned; sequences over weeks	Unstructured; sets their own
Typical background	Entry-level, customer-facing	Entry-level to 1–2 years in sales	2+ years, ideally in sales development
Fails when	They pass on every lead to hit a number	They mistake volume for strategy	They need someone to tell them what to do

An inbound SDR who has never been ignored for three weeks straight has not yet done the outbound job, whatever their title says.

Do not hire a founding SDR on an entry-level profile. A first-time SDR learns the job from the system around them — the sequences, the talk tracks, the manager, the peers. The founding SDR has none of that. Hire someone who has already run the motion elsewhere and can describe what a good one looks like, or plan for the founder to be their manager in practice.

CHAPTER 03

What to Look For

Most SDR candidates have little or no sales track record, so you are hiring on evidence of how they learn and how they work. The signals below predict performance better than confidence in an interview.

Five traits that predict pipeline

Trait	How it shows up in an interview
Coachability	They change their approach when you give feedback mid-role-play, instead of defending the first attempt.
Curiosity	They researched your company, your buyer and the role, and they ask questions about who buys and why.
Written clarity	Their follow-up email is short, specific and has a clear ask. Outbound is mostly writing now.
Resilience with a method	They can describe a stretch of rejection and what they changed because of it, not just that they kept going.
Self-organization	They can explain how they plan a day, track follow-ups and decide what to do first.

The stack they should be able to learn fast

Salesforce / HubSpot

Outreach / Salesloft

Apollo / ZoomInfo

LinkedIn Sales Navigator

Clay

Gong

ChatGPT / Claude

Ask about AI directly. Research and first drafts are now largely automated, so the question is what the candidate does with the time that frees up. Strong answers are specific: how they use AI to research an account, what they check before sending AI-drafted copy, and what they would never automate. The weak answer is that they "use ChatGPT for emails."

Red flags

Activity as the whole story

They lead with dials and emails per day but cannot say how many turned into meetings.

No research on you

A candidate who did not look into your company before the interview will not look into prospects either.

Only wants the next job

Every answer is about becoming an AE. Ambition is good, but a candidate who sees the seat as a waiting room will treat it like one.

Can't take the note

Feedback in the role-play changes nothing in the second attempt. That is how they will respond to their manager, too.

CHAPTER 04

Ramp, Quota & Attrition Benchmarks

Use these to set the quota, the ramp gate and the hiring plan. They are medians, so treat them as a starting point for your own data, not a target.

3.0 mo

Average SDR ramp — the fastest since 2010

1.9 yrs

Average SDR tenure

\$3.78M

Annual pipeline per SDR, up from \$2.83M in 2022

The benchmarks that matter

Metric	2025 median	What to do with it
Monthly quota	10 Stage 0 meetings held	Set quota on meetings held, not booked or activity logged
SDRs at quota	60%	If yours is well below, check quota-setting before you blame hiring
Annual attrition	40% (middle half: 21–57%)	Plan backfills into the headcount model before they are needed
SDR-to-AE ratio	1 : 2.4	1 : 2 is the most common single model, at 31% of companies
SDRs per manager	6.4	Past about seven, coaching time per rep drops fast
Aligned to AE territories	82%	Pair each SDR with named AEs rather than a shared pool

What an empty seat costs

At \$3.78M of pipeline a year, one SDR produces roughly \$315k of pipeline a month. Every month a seat sits open, or a new hire sits in ramp, that pipeline is not being built. With 40% annual attrition, a ten-person team should expect to replace about four SDRs a year. Treat SDR hiring as a continuous process, not a one-off project.

Use the ramp gate you can defend. A three-month average ramp means a 90-day review is fair for an SDR in a way it is not for an enterprise AE. Write the gate down before the start date — meetings held in month three, at a reduced quota — so the new hire and the manager are working to the same standard.

Hire in cohorts where you can

Two or three SDRs starting together share training, compare notes and give the manager a baseline to judge each hire against. A single hire ramping alone has no comparison, which makes a slow start hard to read: is it the person, the territory or the onboarding?



CHAPTER 05

Interview Questions & Work Samples

With little sales history to go on, the work samples matter more than the questions. Use the questions to learn how a candidate thinks, then watch them do the job.

Foundations (every SDR hire)

- What do you know about who buys from us, and why do you think they buy?
- Tell me about a time you were rejected over and over. What did you change?
- Walk me through how you would plan your first day in this job.
- What is the best feedback you have received, and what did you do with it?
- How do you use AI tools today, and where would you not trust them?

Inbound SDR

- A lead downloads an ebook and has a title that fits our buyer. What do you do in the next hour?
- How do you decide a lead is not worth passing to an AE?
- An AE tells you your last three handoffs were a waste of time. How do you respond?

Outbound BDR

- Pick a company you would target for us. Why them, why now, and who would you contact first?
- Your sequence has a 1% reply rate after 200 sends. What do you change first?
- How do you split your time between phone, email and LinkedIn, and why?

Founding SDR

- You start on Monday with a CRM, a list of target accounts and nothing else. What does your first month look like?
- What would you need from the founders, and what would you build yourself?
- Tell me about something in a previous sales process you changed because it was not working.

Two work samples that predict performance

1 The written outreach exercise

Give the candidate a real target account and an hour. Ask for a first-touch email and a LinkedIn message. You are grading research, relevance and brevity. Anything that could have been sent to any company fails.

2 The cold-call role-play with feedback

Run a five-minute cold call with an interviewer playing a busy, skeptical buyer. Give one piece of specific feedback, then run it again. The second attempt tells you more than the first, because it shows coachability.

Match the role-play to the seat. For an inbound SDR, role-play a qualification call where the right answer is to disqualify politely. For an outbound BDR, role-play a cold call to someone who did not ask to hear from you. A candidate who is strong at one is not automatically strong at the other.

CHAPTER 06

Job-Description Template (Copy-Paste)

Written for an outbound BDR. Swap the bracketed sections for the seat you are actually hiring. Naming the motion, the quota and the promotion path in the posting filters for the right candidates before the first call.

Title

[Sales / Business] Development Representative — [Inbound / Outbound]

About the role

You will create pipeline for [N] Account Executives selling [product] to [buyer persona] at [company size / industry]. This is an [inbound / outbound / blended] role: you will [qualify inbound demand / research and open new accounts] across phone, email and LinkedIn, and hand qualified meetings to your AEs.

What you'll own

- A monthly quota of [N] qualified meetings held
- Account and contact research for [named accounts / a territory]
- Multi-channel outreach in [Outreach / Salesloft / HubSpot]
- Clean handoffs and accurate records in [Salesforce / HubSpot]

Must-have

- [0–2] years in a customer-facing or sales role
- Clear, concise writing — you will send a lot of it
- A track record of learning fast from feedback
- Comfort using AI tools for research and drafting, and judgment about when not to

Nice-to-have

- Experience selling to [persona / industry]

- Prior SDR or BDR experience at a B2B company

Compensation and growth

[\$X] base / [\$X] OTE, [70/30] split, paid [monthly] on meetings held. Ramp: [N] months at reduced quota. Promotion path: [describe the stages and typical timeline to AE, e.g. 18–24 months].

Publish the pay and the path. SDR candidates compare two things: OTE and how long it takes to get promoted. A posting that names both gets applications from people who have already decided the deal works for them.

CHAPTER 07

2026 Compensation & the Promotion Path

US medians. SDR pay has been flat since 2022, which makes the rest of the offer, including the promotion path, carry more of the weight.

Pay across the sales development ladder

Role	Median OTE (US)	Notes
SDR / BDR	\$80k	\$55k base / \$25k variable (68/32). Unchanged since 2022
SDR Manager	\$146k	Up from \$127k in 2018
Director of Sales Development	\$189k	Down from \$193k in 2022
VP of Sales Development	\$240k	Down from \$243k in 2022

The promotion path that works

Promotion now accounts for just 16% of SDR turnover, down from 34% in 2020. The bar at AE hire has risen to 3.7 years of experience, up from 2.7 in 2022. A 12-month SDR does not clear that bar. An SDR who has closed revenue under supervision can.

Stage	Months	Owns	Evidence for promotion
Pipeline generation	0–6	Outbound sourcing, qualification	Consistent quota attainment, call quality
Discovery apprentice	6–12	Runs discovery with an AE shadowing	Discovery-to-opportunity conversion
Deal co-pilot	12–18	Multi-threading on live deals	Named influence on closed-won deals
Closing under supervision	18–24	Small-ACV deals with a real quota	Closed revenue at reduced quota

Promoting early is the expensive mistake. In the Bridge Group's analysis of SDR-to-AE promotions, 55% of SDRs promoted with 11 or fewer months of experience failed in the AE seat, against 6% of those with 16+ months. The data is from 2017, but it is the clearest evidence available, and the AE bar has only risen since.

Sources: The Bridge Group, SDR Models, Motions & Metrics 2025 (n=351 B2B companies, February 2025); The Bridge Group, 2026 AE Compensation & Quota research; The Bridge Group, failure rate of SDR-to-AE promotions (2017, n≈205); Emergence Capital, Beyond Benchmarks, via SaaStr (n=560+ venture-backed B2B software companies, 2025); Salesforce, State of Sales (2026). US figures. Accessed September 2026.

CHAPTER 08

Reference Checks for Early-Career Hires

Many SDR candidates have one or two jobs behind them, and some have none in sales. Their references will rarely speak to quota. Use them to learn how the candidate works and how they take coaching.

- 1 Ask for the person who managed their day**
A shift manager, a team lead, a coach. Someone who saw how they worked week to week is more useful than a professor or a family friend.
- 2 Ask about feedback, specifically**
"Tell me about a time you gave them hard feedback. What happened next?" The answer is the closest thing you will get to seeing them with their future manager.
- 3 For experienced SDRs, get the context**
If they have SDR experience, ask what the quota was, how it was measured (meetings booked or held) and how the rest of the team did. 120% of a booked-meetings quota and 90% of a held-meetings quota are not comparable.

Four questions and what you are listening for

Ask	Listen for
"How did they respond when something wasn't working?"	A specific change they made, not "they worked harder."
"How did they organize their work without being told?"	Evidence of self-direction. Essential for a founding SDR.
"How did they get on with the people they handed work to?"	Whether they will build trust with AEs, or blame them.
"Would you hire them again?"	An immediate yes. A pause is an answer.

CHAPTER 09

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the difference between an SDR and a BDR?

It depends on the company. The most common split is that SDRs work inbound leads and BDRs create outbound pipeline, but many companies use the titles interchangeably. Define the seat by where its pipeline comes from, and hire for that.

What should an SDR cost in 2026?

The median SDR OTE is \$80k, split roughly 68/32 between a \$55k base and \$25k variable. That figure has not moved since 2022. Founding SDRs and SDRs in high-cost markets typically sit above the median, because the role asks for more experience.

How long does it take an SDR to ramp?

The average is 3.0 months, the fastest since 2010. That makes a 90-day review gate fair, as long as it is set at a reduced quota and written down before the start date.

Has AI replaced SDRs?

Not in the data. The most common model is still one SDR to two AEs, and "AI SDRs" showed up as a category for just 1% of companies in 2025. What AI has changed is the work: research and first drafts are largely automated, so the seat now rewards judgment and writing over raw activity.

How fast can you introduce qualified SDRs?

In days, not weeks. We keep live pipelines of SDRs and BDRs by motion — inbound, outbound and founding — and screen them on writing, coachability and, where they have it, attainment in context.

Who can we introduce you to today? Whether you are hiring your first SDR, backfilling a seat or building a team, book a consultation at sloane-staffing.com/contact — we will tell you which version of the seat you actually need 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.