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KENSO RESEARCH · METHODOLOGY

# When do startups hire customer success? Alongside the first AE

The data, the methods, every number and every limitation behind the study.

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### ABOUT THE DATA

This study uses Kenso internal data: the company, people and web records Kenso uses for sales and outreach, reused by Cristian Frunze for this study.

Aggregates only. Any group smaller than 50 people is suppressed, and no individual is named.

Figures 1 to 4 are the study page's charts, drawn from the same numbers. The methodology after them keeps the full tables.

SUMMARY

# When do startups hire customer success? Alongside the first AE

**Startups that grew past 100 people made their first customer success hire at 38 months, 9 months sooner than those that stayed small, with 35 people on the team, not 11.**

## 9 months

sooner: companies that passed 100 made their first CS hire at a median 38 months, against 47 for those that stayed under 100 (interval 7 to 11).

## 35 vs 11

people on the team when the first customer success hire started, at companies that passed 100 against companies that stayed smaller.

## 0 months

median gap between the first AE and the first CS hire at companies that passed 100. We had expected CS to come after the first seller.

## 63.6%

of the companies that stayed under 100 never made a customer success hire, against 21.7% of the companies that passed 100.

### Data and method

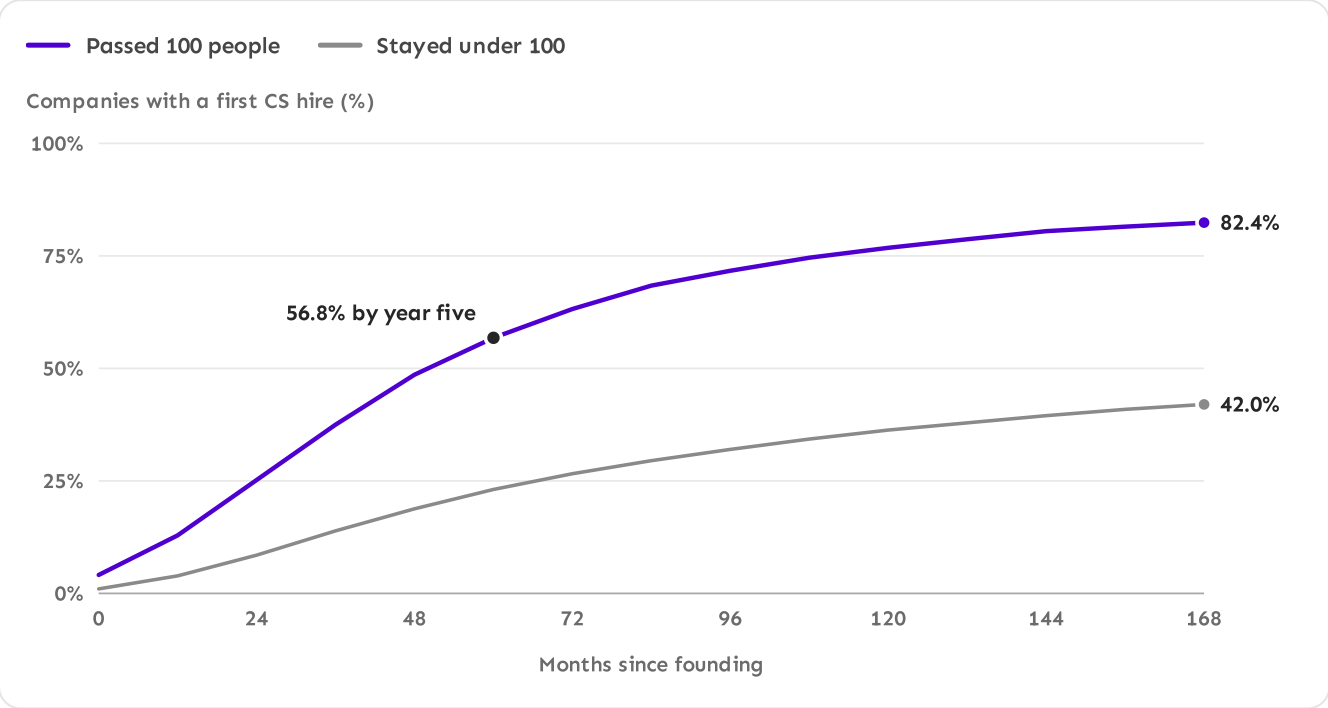
| | |
|---|---|
| **Data** | Kenso internal data: the public work histories and company records Kenso uses for sales and outreach, reused by Cristian Frunze for this study. Work histories cover people currently in six English-speaking countries. |
| **Sample** | 26,001 software companies whose rebuilt headcount reached 10 people: 2,037 later passed 100 and 23,964 did not. |
| **Date range** | Companies founded 2010 to 2020, followed to March 2026. |
| **Method** | Pre-registered comparison of medians with bootstrap 95% intervals, and a survival curve of the first CS hire by company age. A separate analysis recomputed 61 values, and all matched. |
| **Excluded** | • Account management, customer support, customer experience and onboarding titles, and the bare abbreviation CSM<br>• Founders and interns<br>• Roles with no start date, or starting before the founding year or after March 2026 |
| **Privacy** | Aggregates only. Any group smaller than 50 people is suppressed, and no individual is named. |

FIGURES

# The study's charts

FIGURE 1

## By year five, 56.8% of fast growers had a CS hire, against 23.1%

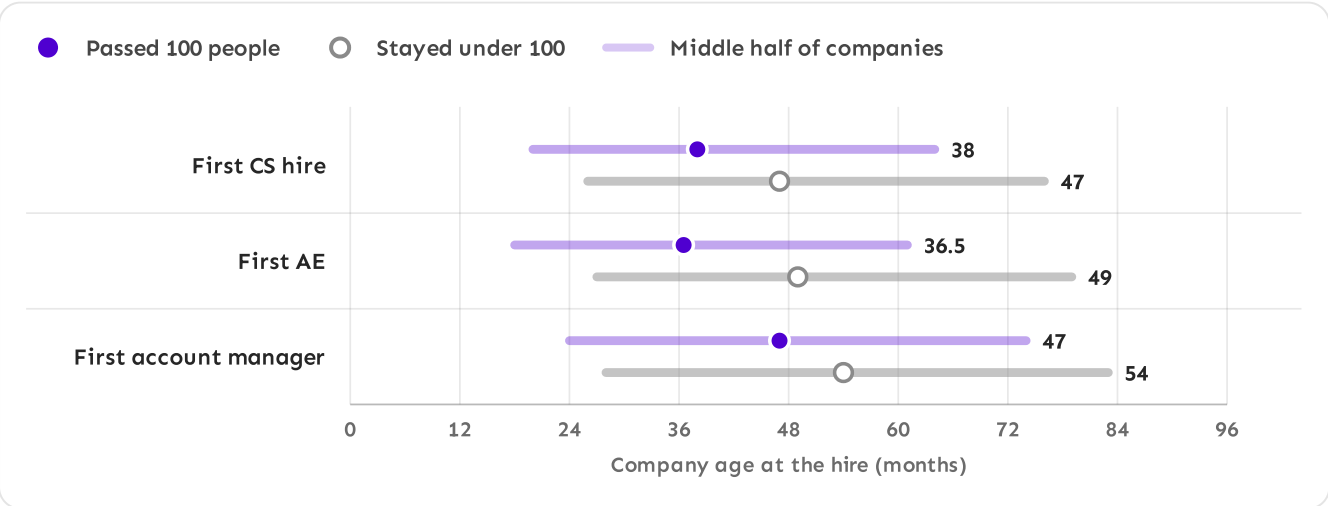



Share of companies with a first customer success hire by months since founding, estimated with a survival curve so that every company counts while it is observed. Companies that later passed 100 people against those that stayed under 100.

Source: Kenso internal data (company and career records Kenso uses for sales and outreach), analysed by Cristian Frunze.

FIGURE 2

## Fast growers made the first CS hire sooner, as with the first AE

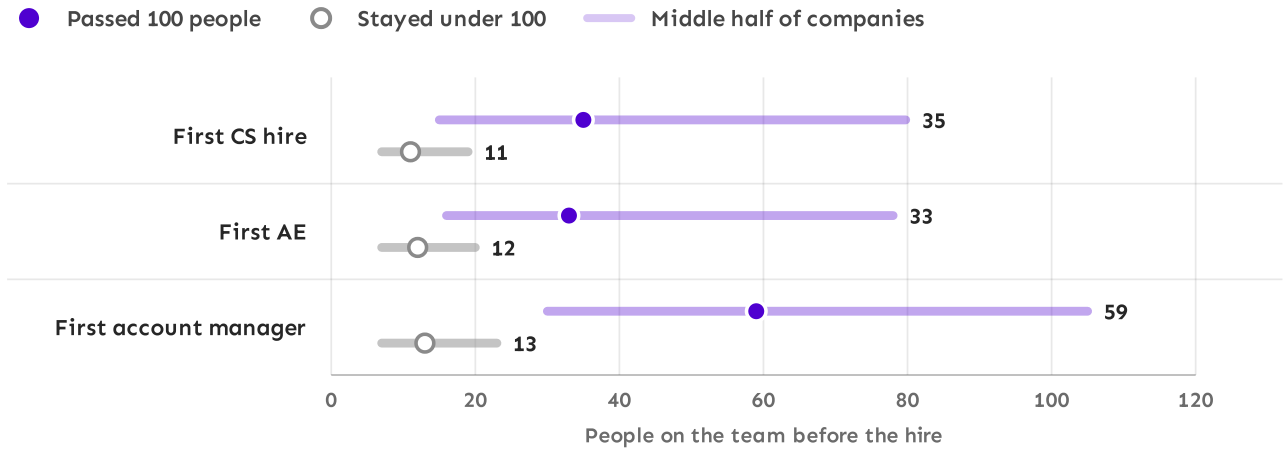



Company age when each first hire started, in months since the middle of the founding year, among companies that made the hire. Dots are medians; lines span the middle half of companies (25th to 75th percentile). The first AE and first account manager are shown for reference.

Source: Kenso internal data (company and career records Kenso uses for sales and outreach), analysed by Cristian Frunze.

FIGURE 3

## Fast growers had 35 people at the first CS hire, small ones 11

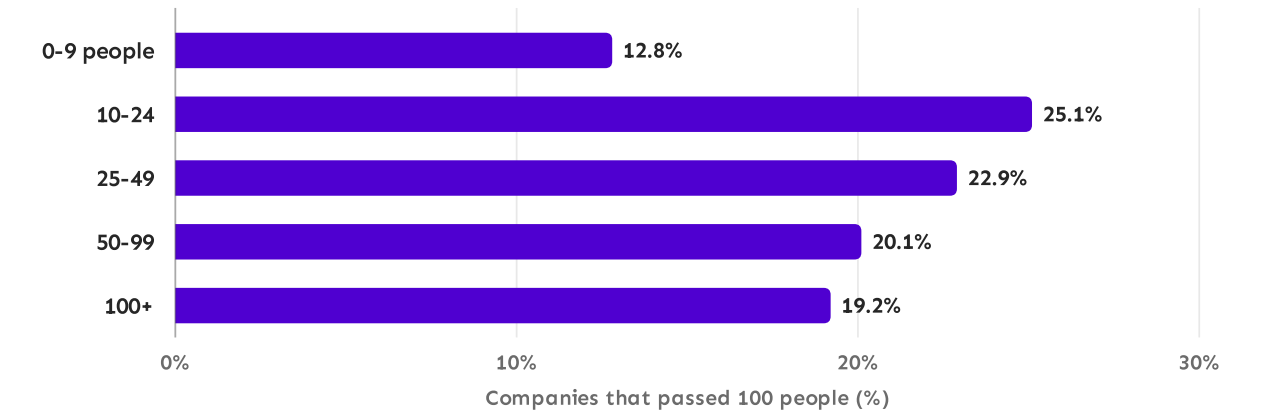



Rebuilt headcount at the last quarter end before each first hire, for hires from April 2015 on. Dots are medians; lines span the middle half of companies (25th to 75th percentile).

Source: Kenso internal data (company and career records Kenso uses for sales and outreach), analysed by Cristian Frunze.

FIGURE 4

## Among fast growers, the first CS hire lands at every team size




Team size at the first customer success hire, for the 1,330 companies that later passed 100 people and made the hire from April 2015 on. Share of companies in each headcount band.

Source: Kenso internal data (company and career records Kenso uses for sales and outreach), analysed by Cristian Frunze.

FULL METHODOLOGY

# The data, the methods and every number

Data: Kenso internal data (Kenso's dataset of public professional profiles, work histories and company records). Version of 2026-10-19.

## 1. Question and pre-registration

Question: at what company age and headcount do B2B software companies make their first customer success (CS) hire, and how does that differ between companies that later pass 100 people and companies that stay smaller?

The hypotheses, plan and falsification rules were written before any data was read and pre-registered on 2026-10-19. The study's data reads started after that.

Pre-registered hypotheses:

1. Companies that later pass 100 make their first CS hire earlier in company age. Wrong if the difference in medians is 3 months or less, or its 95% interval includes 0.
2. They make it at a larger headcount. Wrong if the difference is 5 people or less, or its interval includes 0.
3. In both groups the first CS hire usually follows the first account executive (AE), and the gap is shorter for companies that pass 100. Wrong if the median gap is 0 or below in either group, or the passed-100 gap is not shorter.
4. The share of companies that never hire CS is at least twice as high among companies that stay smaller. Wrong if it is less than twice as high.

## 2. Data

All inputs come from two extracts of Kenso internal data that other studies built and that this study reused unchanged.

- **Role histories.** Every role ("spell") of every person with at least one sales or marketing title: title, normalized title, function and level labels, company, start month. 136,156,211 spells. People enter the extract if any title contains a sales or marketing word or phrase; "customer success" and "client success" are among those phrases, so every person who ever held a CS title with one of those phrases is in it.
- **Quarterly headcount history.** For every company and quarter end from 2015 Q1 to 2026 Q1, the number of distinct people whose role there covered that date, rebuilt from role start and end dates. Plus one record per company with industry, founding year and headquarters country.

No new data was pulled from any index, and no web data was used.

## 3. Sample

| Step | Companies |
|---|---|
| Software-industry company records founded 2010-2020 | 238,190 |
| With any rebuilt headcount 2015 Q1-2026 Q1 | 145,117 |
| Rebuilt headcount reached 10 in some quarter (sample) | 26,001 |
| Later passed 100 people | 2,037 |
| Stayed under 100 | 23,964 |

Software industries (same set as the Kenso Research study
*When should you hire your first salesperson?*
): software development; IT services and IT consulting; technology, information and internet; computer and network security; data infrastructure and analytics; IT system custom software development; embedded, mobile and desktop computing software products; business intelligence platforms.

"Passed 100" means the rebuilt headcount reached 100 or more in at least one quarter up to 2026 Q1. Every sample company was founded by 2020, so each had at least five years (68 months from mid-2020 to March 2026) to make a CS hire.

25,952 of the 26,001 companies have headquarters in the six countries the profile data covers (US, UK, Canada, Australia, Ireland, New Zealand).

## 4. Definitions

**CS hire (tight dictionary).** A role counts as CS when the shared taxonomy labels its function customer success **and** the normalized title contains "customer success" or "client success". Examples of the most common included titles (each held by 50 or more people at sample companies): customer success manager, senior customer success manager, client success manager, enterprise customer success manager, director of customer success, customer success specialist, head of customer success, customer success associate, customer success engineer.

**Excluded, and reported (Table 4):**

- titles the taxonomy calls customer success only because of the bare abbreviation "CSM" (it also means Certified ScrumMaster, and the extract does not search for it, so coverage would be partial);
- titles matched only by "customer onboarding" (implementation work);
- titles that contain the CS phrase but that an earlier taxonomy rule files under another function (for example sales engineering, revenue operations or recruiting);
- founder and intern roles;
- roles with no start date, starting before 1 January of the founding year, or starting after March 2026.

Account management, customer support and customer experience titles are not CS in the main analysis. Account management enters one sensitivity check.

**First hire.** The earliest start month of a qualifying role at the company. The same rule gives the first AE (account executive function).

**Company age.** Months from 1 July of the founding year (records hold the year only, so the error is at most 6 months either way). A hire in the founding year before July has a negative age.

**Headcount at the hire.** The rebuilt headcount at the last quarter end before the hire month. The table starts at 2015 Q1, so the headcount is undefined for hires before April 2015: 1,330 of 1,595 hires in the passed-100 group and 8,236 of 8,722 in the stayed-smaller group have it.

## 5. Methods

- Medians and interquartile ranges per group.
- Difference in medians (passed 100 minus stayed smaller), with a 95% percentile interval from 2,000 company-level bootstrap resamples within each group (seed 222). Medians of whole months move in steps, so intervals can sit on the point estimate.
- Never-hired share: companies with no qualifying CS role started by March 2026.

- Kaplan-Meier estimate of the share of companies with a first CS hire by company age. Companies with no hire are censored at March 2026. Hire ages below 0 are set to 0.
- Order: the share of companies with both hires whose first CS role started strictly before the first AE.
- Sensitivities (pre-registered): (a) founded 2015-2020; (b) headquarters in the six covered countries; (c) without IT services and consulting; (d) CS or account management; (e) CS at manager level or above. Reference rows: first AE and first account manager on the same sample, and the 2010-2014 founding cohort.
- Privacy: aggregates only. Every published cell rests on at least 50 companies and at least 50 people; smaller cells are blanked in the output files.

## 6. Results

### Table 1. First CS hire by outcome group (main analysis)

| | Passed 100 | Stayed under 100 |
|---|---|---|
| Companies | 2,037 | 23,964 |
| With a first CS hire | 1,595 | 8,722 |
| Never hired CS | 442 (21.7%) | 15,242 (63.6%) |
| Months from founding, median (IQR) | 38 (20-64) | 47 (26-76) |
| Headcount at hire, median (IQR) | 35 (15-79.75) | 11 (7-19) |
| Hires with a defined headcount | 1,330 | 8,236 |
| Months from first AE to first CS, median (IQR) | 0 (-14 to 16) | -2 (-21.25 to 16) |
| Companies with both CS and AE | 1,426 | 5,260 |
| CS strictly before first AE | 46.4% | 52.8% |
| No AE at all | 443 | 15,663 |

Distinct people behind the first CS hires: 1,581 (passed 100) and 8,620 (stayed under 100).

### Table 2. Differences in medians, passed 100 minus stayed under 100

| Metric | Difference | 95% interval |
|---|---|---|
| Months from founding | -9 | -11 to -7 |
| Headcount at hire | +24 | 21.5 to 27 |
| Months from first AE | +2 | 2 to 4 |

### Table 3. Share with a first CS hire by company age (Kaplan-Meier)

| Months since founding | Passed 100 | Stayed under 100 |
|---|---|---|
| 36 | 37.5% | 13.9% |
| 60 | 56.8% | 23.1% |
| 96 | 71.7% | 32.0% |

Headcount bands at the first CS hire (companies with a defined headcount): passed 100: 0-9 people 12.8%, 10-24 25.1%, 25-49 22.9%, 50-99 20.1%, 100 or more 19.2%. Stayed under 100: 0-9 42.3%, 10-24 41.5%, 25-49 13.6%, 50-99 2.6% (100 or more is below 50 companies and suppressed). Of the 1,330 passed-100 companies with a CS hire from April 2015 on, 279 (21.0%) made it only in a quarter after they first reached 100.

### Table 4. Dictionary exclusions (spells at sample companies; counts below 50 people or companies suppressed)

| Rule | Spells | People | Companies |
|---|---|---|---|
| Kept as CS hires | 90,957 | 63,023 | 10,317 |
| CS phrase, founder or intern | 941 | 924 | 572 |
| CS phrase, no start date | 564 | 564 | 478 |
| CS phrase, starts before founding year | 557 | 527 | 285 |
| CS phrase, starts after March 2026 | 375 | 375 | 282 |
| "CSM" only | 487 | 434 | 349 |
| "Customer onboarding" only | 895 | 722 | 365 |
| CS phrase filed under sales engineering | 301 | 287 | 244 |
| CS phrase filed under revenue operations | 149 | 139 | 130 |
| CS phrase filed under account executive | 109 | 106 | 97 |
| CS phrase filed under software engineering | 108 | 99 | 86 |
| CS phrase filed under recruiting | 90 | 86 | 62 |
| CS phrase filed under SDR/BDR | 58 | 58 | 52 |

The most common single excluded titles were customer success intern (476 people), customer onboarding manager (179) and customer onboarding specialist (149).

### Table 5. Sensitivities and reference rows

| Analysis | Months, passed / smaller | Difference (95% interval) | Headcount, passed / smaller | Difference (95% interval) | Never hired, passed / smaller |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Main | 38 / 47 | -9 (-11 to -7) | 35 / 11 | +24 (21.5 to 27) | 21.7% / 63.6% |
| (a) Founded 2015-2020 | 30 / 38 | -8 (-11 to -6) | 28 / 10 | +18 (15.5 to 22) | 22.8% / 62.4% |
| (b) HQ in six covered countries | 38 / 47 | -9 (-11 to -7) | 35 / 11 | +24 (21 to 27) | 21.8% / 63.6% |
| (c) Without IT services | 36 / 44 | -8 (-9 to -6) | 31 / 11 | +20 (18 to 23) | 14.6% / 55.0% |
| (d) CS or account management | 31 / 44 | -13 (-14 to -10) | 29 / 10 | +19 (16 to 21) | 11.3% / 49.0% |
| (e) CS at manager level or above | 48 / 54 | -6 (-8 to -3) | 53 / 14 | +39 (35 to 44) | 30.6% / 76.0% |
| Reference: first AE | 36.5 / 49 | -12.5 (-15 to -10) | 33 / 12 | +21 (19 to 25) | 21.7% / 65.4% |
| Reference: first account manager | 47 / 54 | -7 (-9 to -5) | 59 / 13 | +46 (43 to 51) | 21.1% / 69.1% |
| Cohort founded 2010-2014 | 48 / 71 | -23 (-26 to -19) | 45 / 12 | +33 (29 to 38) | 20.7% / 65.4% |

In sensitivity (a) the months-from-AE difference is +2 (0.5 to 4); in (c) +3 (2 to 4); in the 2010-2014 cohort +4 (1 to 6).

### Pre-registered verdicts

| Hypothesis | Result | Verdict |
|---|---|---|
| H1 earlier in age | -9 months (-11 to -7) | Supported |

| Hypothesis | Result | Verdict |
|---|---|---|
| H2 larger headcount | +24 people (21.5 to 27) | Supported |
| H3 CS after AE, shorter gap when passing 100 | median gap 0 and -2; passed-100 gap 2 months longer (2 to 4) | Not supported |
| H4 never-hired share at least twice as high | 63.6% vs 21.7%, 2.93 times | Supported |

## 7. Alternative explanations considered

1. **Growth drives the hire, not the reverse.** Groups are defined by a later outcome. Companies that find customers sooner need CS sooner. The design is a descriptive comparison and cannot separate the two directions. Results are stated as "linked with".
2. **Bigger teams show more of every title.** A company with more employees has more profiles in the data, so any given title is more likely to appear, and sooner. This inflates the gap in never-hired shares and in age. The first AE and first account manager show the same shape (Table 5), so the CS pattern is consistent with general early growth rather than something specific to CS.
3. **Headcount at the hire is mechanically higher for fast growers.** A hire at the same age lands on a bigger team. Age is the cleaner comparison; headcount is reported as a benchmark.
4. **Older years are undercounted.** Only currently active profiles exist and short early jobs are often left off, so early hires at older companies can be missing, which pushes first hires later. The 2015-2020 cohort, where most hires fall inside the headcount table, shows the same gaps.
5. **Industry mix.** IT services and consulting firms grow differently. Dropping them keeps the gaps (Table 5, row c).
6. **Title choice.** Small companies use loose titles; an early "customer success manager" may also sell, and account managers may do CS work. The tight dictionary and the CS-or-account-management sensitivity bracket this. The order result (CS about as early as the first AE) is sensitive to how companies name early sellers.
7. **Coverage outside six countries.** Headcount counts only people whose current profile is in the US, UK, Canada, Australia, Ireland or New Zealand. Nearly all sample companies are headquartered there, and restricting to them changes nothing.

## 8. Limitations

- Profiles are self-reported. People leave short jobs off, add new jobs late and sometimes rename an old role after a promotion, which can erase an early CS title.
- Only people with a current profile are counted, so headcount in earlier years is undercounted, and companies whose staff have all deleted their profiles are missing.
- Headcount history starts in 2015, so headcount at hires before April 2015 is unknown (265 passed-100 and 486 stayed-smaller hires).
- Founding year only, so company age has up to 6 months of error.
- "Passed 100" uses rebuilt headcount, which undercounts staff outside the six countries and people without profiles. Some companies that passed 100 in reality sit in the smaller group.
- The study does not use funding, revenue or product type.
- English titles are classified best.

## 9. Sources

- Kenso internal data: role histories and quarterly headcount history, as of the April 2026 profile snapshot.

- Software industry set and founding window follow the first sales hire study.

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