MarketStar

Equip Your Sales Teams For Times Of Economic Change And Uncertainty With Arup Chakravarti

Introduction

[0:17] Joy Dumandan: Hello, everyone, and welcome to the CXO Masterclass, Future-Proof Your Sales Organization: Preparing for Change and Uncertainty.

In today's episode, we're focusing on how organizations can equip their sales teams to succeed during periods of economic change and uncertainty.

Joining us is Arup Chakravarti, Director of Sales Excellence at Equifax UK.

[0:35] Joy: Hi, Arup. Welcome.

[0:37] Arup Chakravarti: Thank you very much, Joy. It's a pleasure to be here.

[0:39] Joy: Let's begin with Equifax and how the company has adapted its business model in the post-pandemic world. Can you tell us a little about that?

Section 1: Equifax's Post-Pandemic Evolution: Growth, Cloud Transformation, and New Markets

[0:46] Arup: Equifax is a credit reference agency that has been operating since the late 1800s. Our core business is providing financial institutions with the information they need to make lending decisions. Whether someone is applying for a car loan, a mortgage, or a credit card, lenders rely on agencies like Equifax to assess creditworthiness before extending credit.

Throughout the pandemic, our core business model remained unchanged. Like every organization, we've experienced the impact of broader economic cycles, but our role in supporting lending decisions has stayed consistent. Rather than reinventing our business, we've focused on strengthening our position through strategic growth initiatives, including mergers and acquisitions, while continuing to invest in the areas where we're most competitive.

We've also expanded into adjacent markets. In addition to consumer credit information, we're growing our commercial information services to help financial institutions make lending decisions for businesses. At the same time, we're investing in identity verification and fraud prevention, reflecting the rapid shift to digital transactions and the growing need to verify consumer identities in an increasingly online world.

One of our biggest transformations has been on the technology side. Since 2019, Equifax has invested $1.5 billion to migrate our capabilities to Google Cloud. It's a significant undertaking, but moving to a cloud-native platform will make us more agile, scalable, and easier to integrate with modern financial services organizations—particularly fintech companies that expect seamless, plug-and-play digital partnerships.

[4:12] Joy: How are your clients responding to this transformation? Are they expecting it, or are they cautious about what moving to the cloud means?

[4:22] Arup: There's definitely a degree of caution, particularly among our largest financial institution customers. Any major technology transformation naturally raises questions about security, reliability, and continuity.

A significant part of our work has been partnering closely with our clients' information security teams to ensure they have confidence in the transition. Our priority is to demonstrate that moving to the cloud won't disrupt their operations and that they'll continue to receive the same secure, seamless integration they rely on today.

Section 2: Leading Sales Through Uncertainty: Navigating a Prolonged VUCA Environment

[5:19] Joy: Can you talk a little about the process and people challenges organizations need to prepare for during times like these?

[5:27] Arup: Absolutely. One concept that's really shaped my thinking comes from one of my business school professors, who described the world we're living in as an extended VUCA environment—Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous.

When you operate in prolonged uncertainty, I believe there are three forces that leaders and sales teams need to understand.

The first is the external environment itself. Across many markets, we're dealing with persistent macroeconomic challenges. While conditions may differ by region, the UK and much of Europe continue to face inflation, rising living costs, and broader economic uncertainty. Those external pressures inevitably influence customer behavior and business confidence.

The second force is the human impact of uncertainty. Extended periods of stress create a constant background level of anxiety, which affects decision-making. People aren't always operating at their best because they're managing ongoing uncertainty both professionally and personally.

The third force is how buyer expectations change during difficult economic conditions. Research from Rain Group highlighted that buyers expect sales professionals to excel in four key areas:

- Conduct thorough discovery.
- Listen carefully to customer challenges.
- Recommend solutions that genuinely fit those needs.
- Build a compelling, relevant return-on-investment case.

When you combine economic uncertainty, heightened stress, and rising buyer expectations, it's easy for performance to drift. Individuals may struggle to operate at their full potential and, as a result, miss opportunities that still exist in challenging markets.

At the same time, economic disruption also creates new opportunities. As customer priorities shift, sellers need to reposition their solutions accordingly. Instead of focusing solely on growth, organizations may need help improving customer retention, reducing attrition, or solving entirely new business challenges. The most successful sales teams adapt their messaging to match those evolving priorities.

That's the framework we've adopted internally. We encourage our sales teams to stay aware of these three forces, recognize how uncertainty affects both themselves and their customers, and build solutions that address what buyers need most in the current environment.

[10:52] Joy: Buyers naturally become more cautious during periods of economic uncertainty. How does that influence your sales, customer success, and marketing strategies?

[11:02] Arup: From a sales perspective, we're already anticipating where demand will soften. For example, we expect fewer mortgage applications and fewer credit applications across traditional financial services. As lending activity slows, our customers' businesses are affected, which naturally impacts ours as well.

Section 3: Turning Economic Cycles into Revenue Opportunities

[11:36] Arup: One advantage we have in the UK is that our business is positioned to support customers through different stages of the economic cycle.

Equifax UK owns TDX, a wholly owned subsidiary that specializes in debt collection, debt recovery, and debt portfolio sales.

When the economy is strong, consumer confidence increases. People apply for more loans and credit products, financial institutions lend more readily, and our credit reference business naturally grows alongside that demand.

When the economy slows, however, our debt services business becomes increasingly important. As consumers face financial pressure and defaults rise, organizations need support with debt recovery and portfolio management. That gives us a complementary revenue stream that helps balance changing market conditions.

From a sales perspective, this also presents a significant go-to-market opportunity that we're still working to unlock.

Today, our credit reference business and our debt services business operate with separate sales teams. That means we're not fully capitalizing on opportunities to cross-sell across the two portfolios.

The first step is getting back to fundamentals. Salespeople who specialize in credit products need a stronger understanding of our debt services offering, and vice versa. That requires better internal education, clearer product knowledge, and stronger discovery conversations so teams can identify opportunities that might otherwise be missed.

There's a tremendous opportunity to help our sales teams ask better questions, uncover broader customer needs, and connect clients with solutions from across the entire business—not just the products they're already familiar with.

Section 4: Retaining Customers Through Proactive Sales Excellence

[13:54] Joy: Do you focus more heavily on existing customers during periods like this? Everyone wants to win new business, but is there an even greater emphasis on reassuring current customers that you're there to support them?

Arup: Absolutely. Customer retention has to be the first priority.

One area we're working to improve is our renewal strategy. Like many organizations, we can be much more proactive when it comes to customer renewals. We have several large enterprise customers, so it's critical that we know exactly when contracts are ending and begin those conversations well before renewal dates.

Some of this comes down to basic sales hygiene. For example, we don't yet have all contract end dates consolidated in one place. Improving visibility into those milestones allows us to engage customers early, demonstrate ongoing value, and ideally renew partnerships before they even consider launching a competitive tender process.

In the private sector especially, the goal should be to build relationships so strong that customers don't feel the need to go to market. While that may be an ambitious target, it's the standard we're aiming for because it drives the right behaviors and processes across the sales organization.

Beyond the current economic climate, we've also found that our highest-performing salespeople consistently invest in existing customer relationships. They regularly introduce new products or reposition existing solutions around emerging customer needs and use cases. They're constantly asking questions, uncovering challenges, and identifying opportunities to deliver additional value.

We're certainly not walking away from new business. That will always remain important. However, acquiring new customers is likely to become more difficult while many financial institutions slow investment during economic uncertainty.

That's why our biggest opportunity is to strengthen relationships with existing customers, deepen our understanding of their evolving needs, and focus on cross-sell and upsell opportunities. That approach creates value for customers while also providing more resilient growth for the business.

Section 5: Balancing Quarterly Targets with Long-Term Pipeline Growth

[18:00] Joy: When you advise your sales teams, do you encourage them to maximize sales today, or are you preparing them for future growth? How do you balance immediate performance with building new business for the future?

Arup: It's a balancing act.

As a publicly traded company, we're accountable for delivering accurate quarterly forecasts and meeting our financial commitments. Naturally, there's significant focus on hitting quarterly targets, particularly at the end of the fiscal year.

The challenge is that when teams become overly focused on closing the current quarter, they often neglect the prospecting and business development activities that create success in the next one. I've seen this firsthand. We invested a tremendous amount of energy into finishing Q4 strongly, but that meant we entered Q1 without the volume of qualified opportunities I'd like to see in our CRM.

There's also a data discipline challenge. Deals sometimes get pushed into the next quarter instead of being accurately qualified or removed from the pipeline. That creates an inflated view of future performance and delays the difficult—but necessary—conversations about pipeline quality.

The bigger issue, though, is mindset.

High-performing sales organizations maintain consistent prospecting and opportunity generation throughout the year. They're continuously identifying new opportunities, engaging existing customers, and building pipeline one or two quarters ahead rather than reacting when targets become urgent.

When I analyze our data, I see opportunity creation spike near the end of a quarter before dropping off again. That's not how sustainable pipeline generation should work. Our top performers show a much steadier pattern because they're consistently investing in future opportunities.

I recently listened to Olympian Dame Kelly Holmes talk about high performance. Her message was that success comes from disciplined habits repeated every day—sleeping well, training consistently, recovering properly, and maintaining routines.

Sales is no different.

High performance comes from consistently making prospecting calls, sending emails, engaging buyers, speaking with existing customers, uncovering challenges, and creating opportunities every day. Those small, disciplined actions build a healthy pipeline over time instead of relying on last-minute surges.

So yes, we absolutely have to deliver each quarter. That's especially important during uncertain economic conditions when forecasting comes under greater scrutiny. But we can't allow quarterly pressure to distract us from building the pipeline that will drive future success. The organizations that maintain a consistent cadence of opportunity generation are the ones best positioned to perform quarter after quarter.

Section 6: Building the Sales Enablement Foundation for Long-Term Success

[23:17] Joy: What role does sales enablement play during periods of change, especially when organizations are managing tighter budgets and adapting to new market conditions?

Arup: For me, it starts with building the right sales enablement strategy.

When I joined the business, I spent my first few months assessing where we stood across training, tools, and sales processes. It quickly became clear that we had significant opportunities for improvement.

For example, we didn't have a modern CRM platform in place, so one of our first priorities has been implementing Salesforce. Without a consistent CRM, it's difficult to standardize sales processes or generate reliable insights from pipeline data. Although we have a documented sales process, everyone interprets it differently, which makes coaching, forecasting, and performance analysis much more difficult.

Training was another major gap. Some team members told me they hadn't received formal sales training since 2017.

The challenge wasn't identifying what needed to be done—it was deciding what to prioritize. With a small enablement team, we simply couldn't tackle every initiative at once. So we worked closely with senior leadership to align on the highest-impact priorities and build a realistic roadmap.

Our immediate focus is training.

The first priority is product enablement. Rather than rebuilding existing product content, we're bringing everything together into a single, easy-to-navigate location. With more than 70 B2B products, new salespeople can easily become overwhelmed if information isn't organized clearly.

Our goal is to create a simple learning experience where sellers can quickly find the right product information, start with the fundamentals, and explore more technical details when needed. Eventually, we'd like to build structured onboarding paths that guide new hires through their first 30, 60, and 90 days, but right now our priority is making information accessible and easy to navigate.

Alongside product training, we're standardizing the sales process by implementing Salesforce, aligning sales leaders around a common methodology, and building consistent execution across the organization. Once those foundations are in place, we can expand into areas like account planning, strategic account management, and more advanced sales skills.

Many organizations already have mature sales enablement functions. We're still building ours.

Fortunately, we have strong executive sponsorship and broad support for investing in sales enablement. While our initial priorities may seem basic, establishing consistent processes, effective training, and the right technology creates the foundation that every successful sales organization needs before it can scale.

Section 7: Why Go-to-Market Orchestration Is Becoming a Competitive Advantage

[28:36] Joy: Go-to-market strategies have evolved significantly over the past few years. What changes have stood out to you, and how important is go-to-market orchestration today?

Arup: The shift toward orchestrated go-to-market execution has been one of the most significant changes I've seen. Organizations that coordinate their sales, marketing, customer success, and enablement functions effectively are consistently outperforming those that operate in silos.

It's also been a difficult environment for many B2B SaaS companies. Quota attainment has remained relatively low across the industry, with many organizations seeing fewer than half of their salespeople achieve quota. While economic conditions certainly play a role, I believe there are also operational improvements organizations can make.

One challenge is that everyone defines "go-to-market" differently. Depending on who you ask, it may mean marketing, sales, customer success, or product strategy. As a result, responsibility often becomes fragmented across multiple teams without a single owner coordinating the overall strategy.

I've seen this challenge in previous organizations, and I see the same opportunity at Equifax.

Successful go-to-market execution requires one coordinating function that brings every team together around a common strategy. Sales, marketing, customer services, and enablement all generate valuable ideas and customer insights, but those inputs need to be aligned into a unified execution plan.

For every campaign, someone should be responsible for coordinating ownership, messaging, training, sales collateral, customer personas, industry-specific content, communication channels, and execution timelines. Without that central coordination, it's easy for teams to work hard but move in different directions.

I believe there's a real opportunity to establish a dedicated go-to-market function—or at least a small team—that can orchestrate these activities, align stakeholders, and ensure every part of the organization is working toward the same objectives. Strong project management and cross-functional coordination are becoming just as important as the strategy itself.

Section 8: Lessons From Leading Through Crisis

[32:14] Joy: Looking back at your career, what changes or experiences have had the biggest impact on your growth as a sales leader, and what lessons are you carrying into your current role?

Arup: If we look back to the 2008–2009 financial crisis, it was another period of tremendous uncertainty, and it taught me lessons that have influenced my leadership ever since.

At the time, I was leading CRM product management for merchant services at American Express, deploying Salesforce capabilities across 21 international markets.

Like many people, I was concerned about job security. But that experience taught me two important lessons.

First, organizations need to continue investing through difficult periods so they're well positioned when the market recovers.

Second, it reinforced the importance of professionalism.

Because I was supporting internal stakeholders, every interaction mattered.

I wanted every conversation to be thoughtful, professional, and valuable. During a time when organizations were facing layoffs and significant pressure, it was important to demonstrate confidence while continuing to build something meaningful for the future.

That mindset has stayed with me ever since. It shaped how I approached leadership during the pandemic, and it's how I continue encouraging my team to lead through today's uncertainty.

Section 9: Building Sales Enablement That Drives Culture, Not Just Capability

[35:34] Joy: What advice would you give to someone building or leading a sales enablement function?

Arup: Regardless of whether you come from sales, learning and development, or HR, sales enablement starts with delivering a great service to your sales organization.

That begins with having a clear strategy.

Training, content, sales technology, and enablement tools are all critical, but the reality is that resources are always limited. Success comes from knowing what matters most at a given point in time, prioritizing accordingly, and maintaining focus.

Since joining Equifax, my perspective on sales enablement has evolved.

Too often, we talk about the individual components of enablement—the training programs, content, or technology. Those things matter, but they're only part of the picture.

What excites me most is using sales enablement to help shape organizational culture.

At Equifax, I've had the opportunity to contribute not only to capability development but also to broader conversations around what excellence looks like, how we build a high-performance culture, how we approach succession planning, career development, and long-term growth.

Many mature enablement organizations already have structured learning pathways and development programs. We're still building those foundations, but that's also what makes this opportunity so exciting.

Ultimately, sales enablement isn't just about delivering training or implementing tools.

It's about creating the environment, culture, and capabilities that enable people to consistently perform at a high level.

Section 10: The Future of Sales: Coaching, Culture, and Connected Go-to-Market Teams

[38:22] Joy: As we wrap up, what do you hope to see over the next two to five years in the world of selling?

Arup: The first priority is building a strong coaching culture.

For me, coaching has to be owned by sales leaders—not the enablement team. Sales enablement can provide the framework, but managers need to coach consistently through regular one-on-one conversations.

That will be critical for helping salespeople continue developing their skills, especially during more challenging economic periods.

The second priority is creating a culture of performance excellence.

Sales enablement should help employees understand where they fit within the organization, what growth opportunities are available to them, and how they can build a long-term career. That's especially important when organizations are focused on retaining top talent.

While employee turnover was exceptionally high during and immediately after the pandemic, I expect some stabilization as economic conditions evolve. Even so, organizations need to ensure employees have a great experience and clear opportunities for development if they want to retain their best people.

Finally, organizations need to get their operating model right.

That includes having the right CRM system, a consistent sales process, effective compensation plans, and clear go-to-market alignment across sales, marketing, customer success, and enablement.

The organizations that succeed will be the ones that operate as a connected go-to-market team—where sales surfaces customer opportunities, marketing develops targeted messaging and content, and every function works together in a coordinated way.

That level of alignment will be one of the biggest differentiators between organizations that thrive and those that struggle.

Joy: There's certainly a lot to look forward to. There may still be some uncertainty ahead, but as we've done before, we'll navigate through it and come out stronger.

Arup, thank you so much for joining us today and for sharing such thoughtful insights. There are so many valuable takeaways from our conversation.

Arup: Thank you, Joy. I really appreciate the opportunity. It was a pleasure to be here.

[END]