CHORUS



Navigating Deal Risk



Risk is not a foreign element in sales. In some ways, sales *is* risk. And there's something exciting about the chase, the back and forth that leads to an eventual closed won or closed lost.

As a sales manager, you're wearing many hats. Two responsibilities in particular are essential to keeping a well-oiled sales engine running:

- 1. Equip your reps with the confidence, enthusiasm, and support to win as many deals as possible
- 2. Identify and creatively work through objections and risks that could hold those deals up

Heading off risks in a deal before they come up is

easier said than done. That's before you account for the increasingly lengthening sales cycles - our research suggests 96 days, on average - creating more opportunity for new objections to crop up. On top of that, the appearance of COVID-19 has put deals under more intense scrutiny and pressure than ever before. Sales cycles lengthen, new potential risk vectors are introduced, and it becomes ever more difficult to get deals across the line.

You can beat deal risk by doing two things well: gathering intel of what risks are showing up (and where they are showing up most), and sharing that intel across your organization. By doing these things well, even if an opportunity is lost, you can take those learnings to win more down the road.



What's Inside

- Why Deals Fail
- Deal Risks at Different Stages

Early Deal Risks

Mid- to Late-Stage Deal Risks

Combatting Risk

In Real Time

During Deal Review

Why Deals Fail

Let's start by understanding why deals fail in the first place. At its core, as with most challenges in sales, deal risk is a communication problem. Before we consider the forms in which deal risk manifests, let's look at some of the overarching causes.

Your Prospect Does Not Understand the Value of Your Product

Sales is a game of convincing a prospect of a product's worth to them, their company, and their future ambitions. When your prospect doesn't grasp the value of your product, deal risk is ever-present.

Deals are under more scrutiny than ever before. If you don't drive the immediate value home quickly, you will continue to stand on shaky ground.

C-level executives are joining more calls to ensure their priorities and spend are aligned. You should be able to





respond to questions like the following:

- How does your product affect their bottom-line?
- How does it impact their conversion rate?
- How will it impact the rest of their tech stack, workflow, or cross-functional alignment?

If you haven't adapted your pitch to sell directly into the ROI of your product, you will be at a disadvantage.

Your Reps Do Not Understand the Value of Your Product

The responsibility of communicating product value falls on your reps. If they fail to grasp your product's benefits, uses, or business case, they can't articulate that to your prospect.

Sales enablement as a field - and sales training as it was called before that - was born out of this need to ensure

company-wide adoption of a decided upon sales methodology, and also product familiarity.

Understanding your product's value also involves knowing how it performs compared to the competition and knowing, in detail, how it stands to make a difference to the prospect when compared to similar offerings.

This much broader knowledge of your product's value is what enables your reps to communicate it effectively. Our research shows that SaaS buyers are more educated about their market options than any other type of buyer, and that the more a prospect knows, the more buy-ready they are.

Your reps must be able to confidently and quickly articulate the value of what they're selling.



Common Deal Risks Before Approaching a Prospect

Before we get to finding out how deal risk manifests in the sales process itself, let's assess the types of risk present even before your sales rep has made that first phone call to the prospect.

Poor Targeting

Your approach to building your web presence - through content strategy, web seminars, video series, etc. - will determine what kind of potential buyers you attract.

If your SDRs consistently target the right buyer personas, your marketing department can create the kind of content that will interest them. In turn, you will find yourself with a higher volume of high-quality inbound leads that will be more straightforward to qualify, leading to reduced deal risk.

If you're not attracting the right kind of attention with your marketing because of inaccurate initial intelligence about who to target, you'll find a lower volume of leads that are lower overall quality. And more often than not, a lower conversion rate.

Similarly, if you're reaching out to decision-makers at companies that may be interested in your product, make sure they are:

- in a role that can directly benefit from what you have to offer professional
- in a position to authorize a deal or close to someone who can

When you initiate a conversation with the wrong person at a well-suited company, you incur a lot of unneeded deal risk. For all the work that you will do to uncover pain and provide solutions, negotiations can still stall when it's time to authorize a deal.



Although you can handle this type of objection effectively later in the sales process, heading off this common error early on can save your reps a lot of time and hassle.

Pipeline Velocity

If you understand your revenue organization's pipeline velocity, that can give you insight into where the buyer's journey is stalling. This lets you know when deal risk is highest for your product.

Pipeline velocity is the amount of money you have coming through your business per sales cycle length. Begin your measurement of pipeline velocity using ththe formula below.

By observing the rate of change in your overall pipeline velocity, as well as its constituent metrics, you can learn about the general efficiency of your sales organization. However, for learning about deal risk, you want to inspect how your pipeline velocity aligns with the stages of your sales funnel.

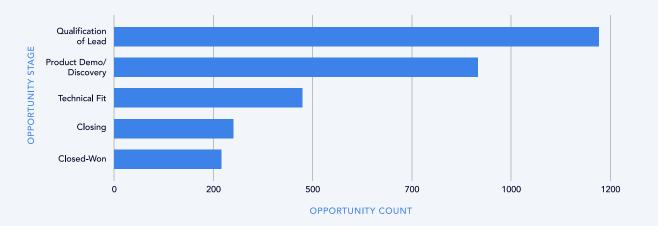
Draw out the separate stages of the sales funnel your prospects move through. Observe how your pipeline breaks down into the conversion rates for each of those stages. You can do so by adjusting the "length of your sales cycle" to the average length of each cycle stage, and substitute win rate for the conversion rate from that stage.

Pipeline Velocity = Qualified Oppurtunities × Win Rate × Deal Size

Length of Sales Cycle

Source: Sales Analytics: 10 Types of Sales Data Growing Sales Teams Need to Track

Conversion Rates for Sales Funnel Stages



You can see something similar represented on the graph above.

From this graph, we can see that the company's ability to qualify leads is fairly strong. There is a notable dropoff between that initial qualifying stage and getting the prospects onto discovery calls. We see a much more notable drop-off after that, with a lower conversion rate from discovery phase to evaluation of the technical fit of the product with the prospect's needs. The conversion rate is relatively good, though, and this company's sales department is evidently very effective at getting deals over the line when a closed-won outcome is in sight.

A company evaluating this information would conclude that their own deal risk is strongest at the qualification and discovery phases. They're losing a lot of potential customers at the qualification phase, possibly owing to poor representation of your product in promotional materials (leading to leads being qualified when they shouldn't be) or owing to poor/inefficient outreach. They're also losing potential customers at the discovery phase. This could be because their discovery call and presentation planning are ineffective or because reps are poorly coached on what makes for a great discovery call.

As we can see here, you can encounter deal risk even before deals begin, as well as after your initial approach.



Common Deal Risks After First Approach

Have we gathered enough of the right market intelligence

You've made your first approach, and it's good news: your prospect proved to be well chosen, they're in the market, and they're keen to know more about what you have to offer. A few new forms of deal risk are native to this initial approach following qualification.

Poor Pricing

Are your price points effectively tailored to market rates? How about what you can guess about your customers' budget constraints? There is no objection more fundamental than a price that's simply out of the bounds of what your prospect can afford.

In order to preemptively deal with this kind of objection, ask yourself, as a sales organization, the following questions:

- to determine assessed industry benchmarks?
- about the product features they value most highly and their willingness-to-pay for them?
- to have well-built-out buyer personas that include reference to those personas' price sensitivities?

Leverage your grasp of industry benchmarks for pricing among competing services and combine that with bespoke data from your market segment to come up with reliable pricing points.

A subsequent objection involves the arrangement of your features within pricing tiers. It's no good for your typical prospects if they can afford the basic package you offer, but all of the features they most need are in the executive tier that's out of their reach.

Of course, pricing isn't just a case of keeping costs as low as possible in order to minimize the chance of alienating a more price-sensitive prospect. The flip side of deal risk where pricing is concerned is lackluster lifetime value (LTV) from each successfully signed customer. Greasing the wheels for deal success can often be done hastily by undervaluing a product to close deals more quickly.

Undervaluing your product not only has an obvious negative impact on your bottom line but also has a reputational component. If you don't value your product accurately, neither will future prospects. Underpricing, while it might reduce immediate deal risk, still represents a future source of deal risk.

Deal Delays

An increasingly prominent risk in deals, a deal delay is exactly what it sounds like: A prospective buyer chooses to put the deal off for a while.





This can be because of any one or more factors attributed to recent market turbulence. Anything from reductions in force, changes to sales goals, budget cuts or redistributions can lead to a deal stalling.

As circumstances change, even promising-looking deals can fall subject to relays. The key is to maintain consistent, empathetic communication with your prospect.

No need to be over-eager with your follow-up, but continue to check in with value. Provide content that's relevant to them and their situation. Share industry advice you heard recently that would directly relate back to your conversation with them. Frustrating as it can seem, beating delays largely involves being good at the waiting game.

Timing of Approach

Before your rep first reaches out, you need to consider whether you're targeting companies that are at a point where your product can be of real use to them. An inbound prospect could be timing qualified by asking these questions:

- Has your prospect registered interest in your product through your site? For instance, have they signed up for your newsletter? Have they attended online seminars or downloaded white papers?
- Are they visiting you frequently?
- Have they downloaded the freemium tier of your product

Then you can assume that it won't be an unwelcome call when your rep finally dials their number.

Being mindful of your timing is relevant to wider market trends, too. If you deal with a lot of small businesses, are they able to or looking to invest into their tech stack at this time? Is the service you provide particularly essential in the current climate?



Poor Pacing in the Sales Funnel

The amount of time in the sales cycle, the length of the funnel, and the amount of time between account actions mean there's a lot of room for risk to surface.

Your sales reps must manage the pacing of your sales funnel by timing their outreach well, establishing contact, and creating next steps at the right time without allowing the trail to go cold.

Give your leads enough time to review the content or offers you're sending them before initiating follow-up contact. Create standardized sequences, and adjust them based on client feedback. For example, you may create a standard that reps are to give prospects one week to inspect materials generally, or two weeks if the client suggests they're in a busy period.

On the other hand, your reps may be leaving too much time between follow-ups, resulting in a loss of momentum. You can eliminate this kind of delinquent deal risk with tools that make next-step suggestions to your reps and help your reps automate follow-up emails.

As with the timing of approach, your quality of outreach, your follow-up, and your establishment of next steps are all paramount to minimizing deal risk on the long road to closing.



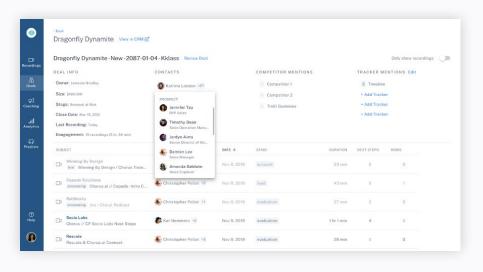
Decision Makers

Threading to power is essential in every deal. This has gotten even more colorful thanks to the new normal we find ourselves in. It can sometimes be the case that the most accessible point-of-contact at a prospective buyer does not hold the responsibility of making decisions when it comes to approving new services or stack items. In which case, you can find yourself building momentum towards a deal only for it to stall at the last, and most key, hurdle. When you resume conversations with an actual decision maker, you may find that what previously looked like a certain deal is one no more.

In the current climate, we see this risk manifest itself in two ways: Champion Churn and CFO Scrutiny.

Champion Churn

Potential deal risks with decision makers have broadened with COVID, as decision makers are liable to change rapidly and without warning, as employees at prospect companies have changes made to their responsibilities, or even leave their companies altogether. Particularly



Chorus.ai's Conversation Intelligence/Salesforce integration in action, helping to summarize a sales call and automate next-step creation.

if you're talking to individual contributors, you need to take care to multi-thread your deal. If your POC will be the one using your product, but cannot sign-off on a purchase, that means looping in people who can make the decisions or who have the budget.



CFO Scrutiny

On the other hand, for better or worse, buying-side executives are joining more calls as well. So you will likely have access to a decision maker, but you had better come prepared to speak directly to the extreme ROI of your product. You may also want to ensure that your reps are confident talking about revenue impact and the general financial costs and benefits of using your product.

Lowered Demand

Even if it begins strongly, demand is not necessarily constant throughout the sales process. Lowered demand is a more unpredictable kind of deal risk, and it's certainly one your reps need to deal with more aggressively. That said, it's not a death sentence for your deal.

Lowered demand can happen for a host of internally or externally motivated reasons.

For example:

- A change in company circumstances
- Are they now scaling up and not looking to integrate new tech stack items?
- Are they undergoing a department reshuffle, with a change of decision-maker and new management looking to bring their own setup with them?
- Change in market circumstances
- Has something happened in the market to make your prospective buyer alter their budgeting/ business model?

Sometimes, lowered demand represents too categorical a deal risk to implement a work-around. In such cases, savvy sales reps may suggest a cooling-off period



and offer to check back in when things have settled down in the prospect's field.

In other cases, reps can manage this kind of deal risk. For instance, a company offering high-end content services may find themselves dealing with a buyer looking to cease negotiations on a deal. The would-be buyer may no longer be convinced that, given the current market downturn, content represents a sound investment.

In such a case, the rep may use their knowledge of the product and market to advise the would-be buyer that continuing with the plan may result in a market advantage further down the line, when economic conditions have stabilized. In such a way, the deal risk is subverted, and the likelihood of closed-won has actually increased.

Poor Onboarding

23% of all customer churn occurs during the onboarding phase. Poor onboarding becomes even more of a haven for deal risk the more a given company prioritizes minimizing deal risk elsewhere in the sales funnel.

Without a robust system to teach customers how your product works and how to extract value from it, the customer is prone to thinking they just made a terrible mistake and churning instantly. How's that for deal risk?

Solid NUX is therefore key to avoiding early churn risk. Assign account executives, or reps themselves if your model allows for it, to act as an overseer to your customer's onboarding period. Supplement this with automated chatbots and a responsive customer support team to ensure that you minimize post-closed-won deal risk.



How to Combat These Common Deal Risks Throughout the Sales Process

We've now gone into some detail about the varieties of deal risk that a sales rep can look forward to encountering in the funnel. With that review under our belts, let's look at the most frequently cited reasons behind deal breakdown. We'll do so from the point of view of the prospective buyer and discuss how sales teams can combat these risks.

Budget

From the buyer's perspective, budget is likely to be all but nonnegotiable, unless there is considerable appetite at their company for the service your product is providing. Hearing words to the effect of "We don't have the budget for this" is common in the sales

Reasons Stated by Prospects on Lost Deals

Source: Sales Analytics: 10 Types of Sales Data Growing Sales Teams Need to Track





process. In fact, as we can see in the graph above, it's by far the most common reason stated for lost deals.

Your sales reps should seek to mitigate against this risk by pointing your customer toward a different deal tier. If they're concerned about the ROI they can expect from one of the higher-priced tiers, advise them to consider a lower-end option or even just a free trial. Where viable for you, offer to create a customized package; if the prospect in question is likely to provide particularly high LTV or grant you gateway access into a new market segment, the custom package option could be very wise.

Done right, budget deal risk can actually be worked to establish a positive pathway of upsell. Even if your prospect can't pay for a pricier option now, work on establishing a relationship with them anyway through a lower pricing tier. Then, plan to ramp them up as they become accustomed to your product's benefits (and, hopefully, to using some of the additional cash your product has helped them make!).

Not Now

Encountering the "Not Now" deal risk can be as frustrating for a sales professional as coming up against "Lowered Demand" deal risk, if not more so. "Not now" is a vague statement and can equate to a number of issues. Understanding your prospect's position is key to mitigating against this kind of deal risk, to the maximum extent possible.

Establish as detailed an understanding of client context as possible. If your prospect is still willing to go into detail about their present situation, this in and of itself suggests that they have a serious interest in your product.

Create a timeline and sketch out long-term nextsteps to check in down the road, when a deal might seem more suitable. You might arrange to get in touch again after your prospective buyer's scaling process has finished, or after the present market downturn has stabilized.

Decision Maker

Decision-making responsibilities can shift within teams across the scope of a deal. Team reshuffles may occur, and new hires can be made. If the terms of your deal have increased through the sales funnel, then you may have to go over the head of your original decision-maker to secure a team.

While finding out that you've been speaking to someone unequipped to authorize a deal can represent deal risk, using next step management can turn this to an advantage. For example: Suggest a group-call with a cross-functional team from both your own company and your prospective buyer's. This can offer a space to clear up all stray questions about your product, introduce the prospective buyers to their counterparts at your company, and strengthen resolution for a deal.

If this is not possible, you can still marginalize the deal risk simply by requesting that your current POC refer you to a decision-maker in a position to authorize the deal. This may prolong the sales cycle, but can help you avoid authority-related deal risk.





No Time to Review

Speaking of complications that elongate the sales cycle, "No Time to Review" is another form of deal risk that can leave you in limbo. If you've approached a well-qualified prospect only to find that they're in the middle of a busy period, it's common for your decision-maker to say that they've had no time to review the materials you've sent.

When your reps encounter this kind of deal risk, have them refrain from pushing too hard for next steps. Snowed-under prospects will appreciate that you've giving them space; instead, double down on careful follow-up. Don't badger the prospect for a follow-up call, but provide them with curated social proof and well-presented statistics that re-affirm the value of your product.

This follow-up should be sent at a cadence (once per two weeks or so, or bi-monthly if the prospect has indicated that their busy period will be longer-lasting) that prevents the trail from going cold.

Occasionally add an invite to an online seminar, or

new announcements about products, special offers, or new pricing tiers. Your rep's objective here, to prevent this deal risk from becoming delinquent, is to subtly appeal to your prospect's fear of missing out on the value your product can bring them. Doing so sensitively can help fortify their resolve to pick things up again when they're able.

Not a Priority

Without question, the type of deal risk that all sales reps fear the most — the simple statement that your product is not a priority for them at the moment. It is a more categorical variant of the "Not Now"/"No Time" deal risks.

It is difficult to mitigate against this, and there are few, if any, workarounds that are effective against it. Instead of trying to bargain at all costs — which can hurt your reputation — coach your reps to use the opportunity instead to find out why there wasn't a match, and relay this information to sales development. There's probably a reason why this prospect has proven unsuitable that the team might've anticipated earlier.

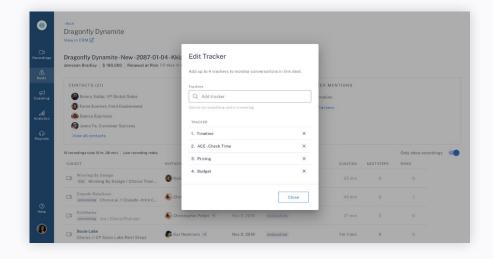


How to Lower Deal Risk On-Call

Appraising and handling deal risk identifiers on-call was previously difficult. Generally speaking, you would task sales reps with taking notes during sales calls. Given the amount of attention required to excel on-call, trying to multitask would generally result either in notes that were incomplete or in a subpar selling performance as the rep attempted to juggle multiple responsibilities.

This was particularly unfortunate, given that most types of deal risk can be recognized on-call, and many of them even mitigated then and there, particularly with the help of solutions like <u>Conversation Intelligence</u>.

As you can see from the graphic, Conversation Intelligence flags words that commonly represent a prospect's misgivings or concerns about the value or likelihood of a deal and makes them visible and accessible for sales reps.



Conversation Intelligence also reduces the need for next-step planning and note-taking on-call by automatically transcribing calls, allowing your reps to focus the conversation in follow-up on those deal-risk-related elements and discuss them.



How to Lower Deal Risk During Reviews

of reasons. But you can overcome these obstacles with a few strategic solutions:

Even having equipped your team with a tool like Conversation Intelligence, the majority of deal risk aversion is going to be accomplished during deal reviews. Deal reviews are fundamental to SaaS sales success, primarily because they allow you to establish an accurate view of current deal risk and plot the best course of advancing those high-quality deals.

But their impact runs deeper than that. Deal risk helps to drive forecasting by allowing your revenue organization to assess which deals are likely to resolve in the coming period, and to what value. They have a correspondingly strong effect on quota setting and, owing to what they say about where deal risk is persistently getting the better of your team, on coaching as well.

However, running a comprehensive deal review has historically been hard to do well, for a number

Compile Your Deal Data in One, Accessible Place

Information that is pertinent to deal review, and, by extension, pertinent to assessing deal risk, is absolutely everywhere in your revenue organization. You'll find that needed info and metrics are scattered throughout both the CRMs (Salesforce, Zendesk Sell) and more tailored sales software that your sales team uses. You might think about initially using a company wiki as a hub for deal review information. However, not all internal wiki platforms are well-suited to representing numerical data and cannot be automatically updated with new information, qualitative or quantitative, either.

The fragmenting of tools and information goes deeper than this. A lot of information that may be very pertinent to deal risk or customer roadblocks may be unique to those reps in possession of it and not recorded anywhere.

Compiling all information from these disparate sources is time-consuming, and you risk error during compilation, as well as inconclusiveness

Create a Cohesive Sales Analytics Setup

A cogent sales analytics setup is fundamental to managing all aspects of your revenue organization to optimal efficiency, and that includes deal review.

Effective deal review demands the following:

- Strong process creation (how reps obtain, store, access, and assess, share information about deal risk)
- Tools that enable the rigors of this process to be represented in data

Whether you're reviewing your pipeline velocity, conversion rates per buyer persona, or pricing





benchmarks, your data needs to be clean for patterns of deal risk to become apparent. Unclean or unanalyzed data, too much or too little data, and little idea of how it can be used can all make deal review functionally useless.

Which is where Deal Hub comes in.

Consolidate Deal Review Tools in One Place with Deal Hub

<u>Deal Hub</u> is Chorus's new solution for the simplification of deal review, with the aim of providing your sales team with complete deal visibility.

Deal Hub was conceived with the express intention of consolidating the many elements required for high-quality deal review into one place. The solution aggregates those tools and required data in such a way as to take an accurate measurement of and action against deal risk simple.

The features of the product include the following:

- Chronological feed of customer interactions, including meetings and email (which can be integrated with Conversation Intelligence), accessible and visible
- · Contextual filters, sort by stage, contacts, etc.
- Preview pane, giving greater visibility over historical email threads

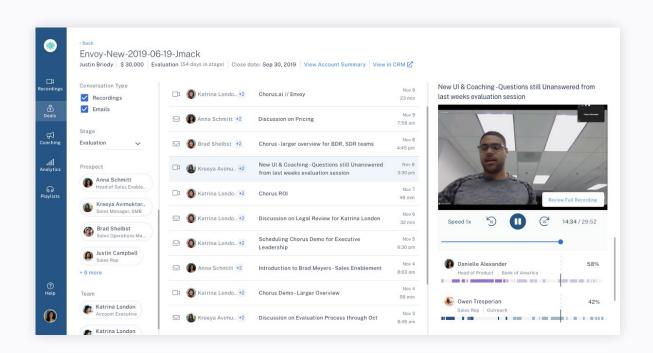
Deal Hub's chief utility is that it sharply reduces the need for independent information compilation. As a result, there is much-reduced scope for bias or ambiguity in reporting when approaching at-risk deals, and a similarly lower likelihood that key data will have been omitted from consideration.

With it, sales representatives can rapidly come to understand prospective clients' needs and priorities,



helping to emphasize those areas of product-prospect fit that can mitigate against deal risk. For instance, your reps may be alerted by Deal Hub to where a prospect's concern about the impact of your product on their conversion rate may be contributing to deal risk. From there, they are excellently well disposed to offer key information or a customer success story than can allay this doubt and mitigate against that deal risk.

Deal Hub is, furthermore, a dream for customer success managers because it is able to provide complete prior knowledge and relationship context for onboarding and kickoff. As we noted, onboarding and kickoff are an undernoted hotbed for churn/deal risk, and this frequently owes to awkwardness in the handover between a rep who has closed the deal and an account executive who is responsible for assuming the relationship. Deal Hub offers unprecedented deal visibility that mitigates against this previously common concern with ease.





The Many-Faced Challenge of Deal Risk

The best sales reps, managers, and revenue organizations all see deal risk as a challenge of their mettle as professionals. They also accept that, in SaaS, it comes naturally with the territory. You're not just selling a prospect your product—you're selling a relationship. That means bigger investment, less room for impulse purchasing decisions, smarter customers, and longer sales cycle times. That makes every deal riskier. It also makes every deal of a higher potential quality. The two are inextricable.

Not all deal risk can be mitigated against — sometimes your targeting will simply be off. Sometimes you'll catch the right prospect at the wrong time. Nevertheless,

while deal risk can complicate a deal, there are often opportunities within your prospect's concern to keep the opportunity alive.

Broadly speaking, it's a case of having your tools in the right place. Keeping track of the many strands of a deal that can end in risk is extremely hard going without the right software to guide you. Without it, deal risk can catch you unawares. With it, you can provide your entire revenue organization with the kind of farsightedness that can rescue even the most at-risk of deals.

CHORUS

Chorus is a Conversation Intelligence Platform that records, transcribes, and analyzes business conversations in real-time to coach reps on how to become top performers. With Chorus more reps meet quota, you ramp new hires faster, coach the existing team effectively, and everyone in the organization can collaborate over the actual voice of the customer.

Chorus is funded by Georgian Partners, Emergence Capital and Redpoint Ventures and is headquartered in San Francisco, US.

LEARN MORE ABOUT CHORUS