

B2B VOC skills

Research linking
12 VOC skills to
new product
success

A RESEARCH REPORT FROM THE AIM INSTITUTE

January, 2022

*Successful new product development starts with understanding market needs. Here are the **B2B VOC skills that matter most.***

B2B VOC skills



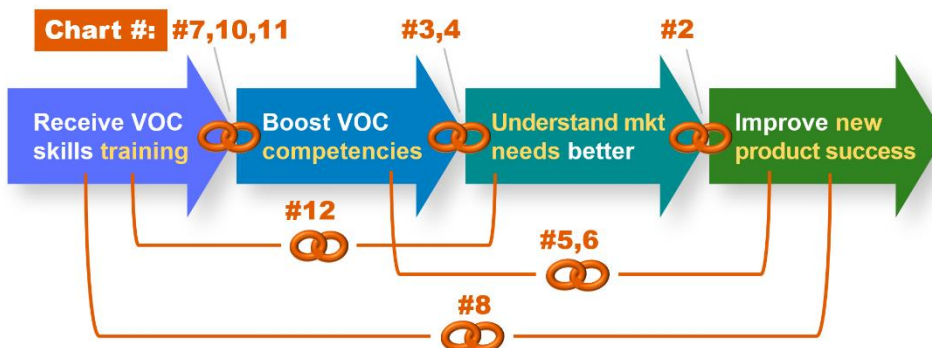
Want to boost your new product success rate? This research reveals a strong correlation to voice-of-customer competencies. See which of 12 skills have the greatest impact on B2B new product success.

If you're unhappy with your organic growth from new products, you *could* increase R&D spending or try to hire brighter R&D staff. But there's a much easier way: Train your market-facing organization in strong voice-of-customer (VOC) skills.

We surveyed 311 B2B professionals with nearly 5,000 years of combined experience, and here's what the data strongly support: Training in VOC skills boosts VOC competencies... which improves understanding of market needs... which leads to higher new product success rates.

This illustration can help you make sense of the charts in this report: The orange "link" icons denote data correlations that are displayed in these charts (as numbered in orange).

Charts in this report suggesting strong correlations (🔗)



Key findings

In this report, we're claiming correlation—not causation—between 1) VOC training, 2) VOC competencies, 3) market needs understanding, and 4) new product success. The strength of these correlations and their underlying logic are compelling. We believe they're compelling enough to encourage growth-seekers to aggressively strengthen their B2B VOC skills.

After a brief description of our survey methodology, we'll explore seven key findings:

1. Understanding market needs correlates with new product success.
2. Strong VOC skills equate to understanding market needs & new product success.
3. The biggest VOC differentiator in new product success is prioritizing customer needs.
4. VOC skills & new product success are impacted by VOC training.
5. Training in New Product Blueprinting improves VOC skills more than other methods.
6. VOC skills & attitudes are impacted by a company's use of VOC.
7. Most B2B companies have similar VOC behaviors.

**Training in New Product
Blueprinting improves VOC
skills more than other methods.**

Survey methodology

We compiled 12 VOC skills that could help new product development teams understand customer needs in a target market. We gave each VOC skill a name and description, such as...

- VOC skill name: *Secure Interviews*
- VOC skill description: *Convince customers to let you interview them in order to understand their needs*

For each of these skills (described on the next page), we asked survey respondents to answer two questions:

- How IMPORTANT is it that you are able to... (*competency description here*) on a scale of 1-to-10?
- How SATISFIED are you with your ability to... (*competency description here*) on a scale of 1-to-10?

Both the Importance (IMP) and Satisfaction (SAT) 1-to-10 scales were anchored with well-established text descriptions. This approach allowed us to investigate *attitude*, *competency*, and *eagerness* (to improve) for various sub-groups, e.g. well-trained respondents vs. untrained respondents, large companies vs. small companies, companies that offer services vs. physical products, etc.

12 VOC skills examined in this survey



1. Secure Interviews

Convince customers to let you interview them in order to understand their needs.



2. Proper Interviewees

Secure interviews with the *right* company decision-makers and influencers.



3. Impress Customers

Engage and impress customers within voice of the customer sessions.



4. Uncover all Needs

Uncover a wide range of customer desired outcomes during an interview, even if not typically articulated.



5. Probe for Meaning

Probe to understand *why* customers want their stated desired outcomes.



6. Probe for Value

Gather customer economic data that can be used for new product pricing.



7. Quantitative VOC

Prioritize desired outcomes with customers using quantitative (numerical) scoring.



8. Virtual VOC

Conduct customer interviews remotely via web conference.



9. VOC Debriefing

Produce voice of the customer session notes that can be easily understood by others.



10. Prioritize Needs

Determine which desired outcomes are most critical to your target market.



11. Segment Market

Create market segments using quantitative interview data.



12. Business Case

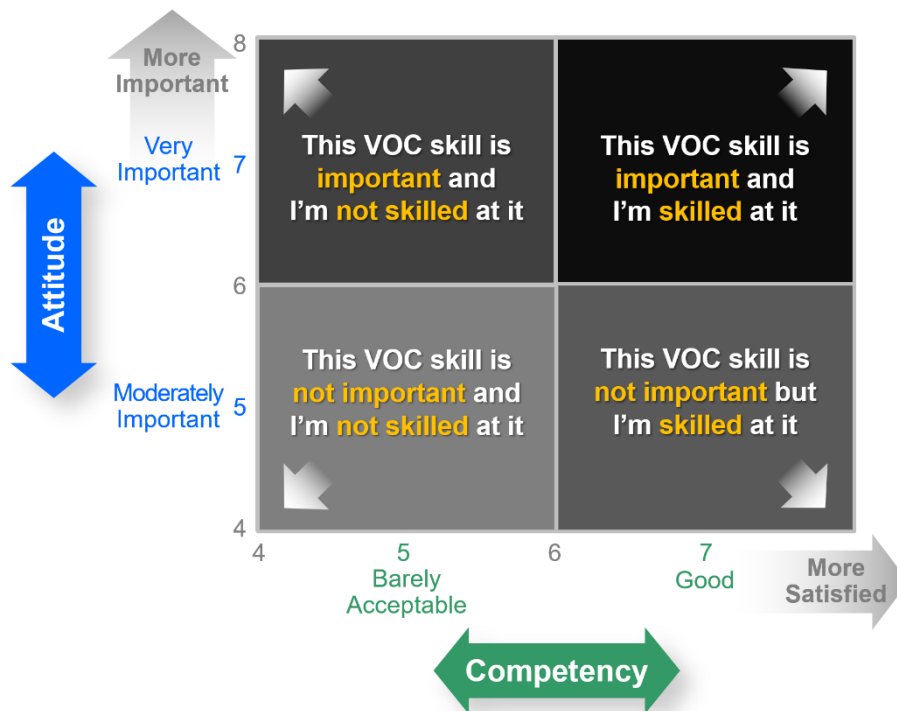
Present a compelling story to management with results from a voice of the customer initiative.

Here's how we gauged respondents' attitude, competency, and eagerness to improve VOC skills:

- *Attitude*: We compared *Importance* scores to see how sub-groups viewed the usefulness or value of each VOC skill.
- *Competency*: We assumed those more *Satisfied* with their skills had higher competency levels.
- *Eagerness*: The more *Important* and *Unsatisfied* a respondent was with a VOC skill, the more eager we assumed he or she was to improve it. For this we used a long-standing AIM Institute metric called Market Satisfaction Gap (described later).

In this report, we'll often display data in charts showing *Importance* vs. *Satisfaction* (aka *Competency*). The chart below shows how to interpret the survey data you'll see.

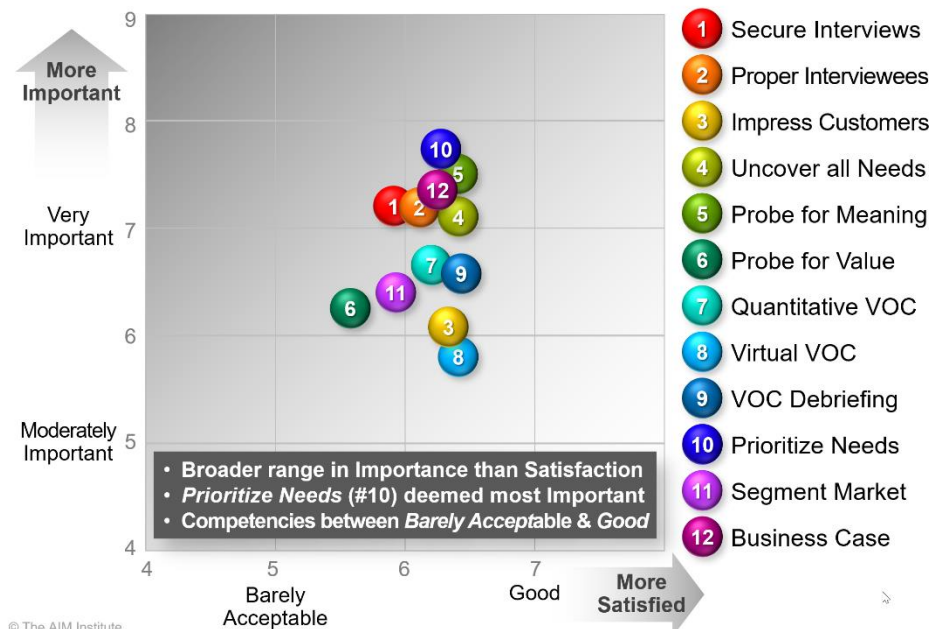
How to interpret survey responses in these charts



On the vertical Importance scale, a rating of “7” means “Very Important” and a “5” means “Moderately Important.” This is a measure of respondents' *attitude* regarding the value or usefulness they see in each VOC skill. On the horizontal Satisfaction scale, a “5” means “Barely Acceptable,” a “7” means “Good,” and a “10” means “Totally Satisfied.” This is a self-assessment of respondents' *competency* in each VOC skill.

We'll start with a chart showing the results for *all* respondents. Chart #1 doesn't offer too much insight because so many different types of respondents have been grouped together: different types of companies, different levels of training, different job functions, and so on.

1. B2B VOC skills for all respondents



Here's what we can glean from this "overall" chart:

- There's a broader range in perceived VOC skill *Importance* (vertical scale) than in *Satisfaction* (horizontal scale).
- *Prioritizing market needs* (#10) is seen as the most important VOC skill.
- Overall, VOC competencies fall between *Barely Acceptable* & *Good*.

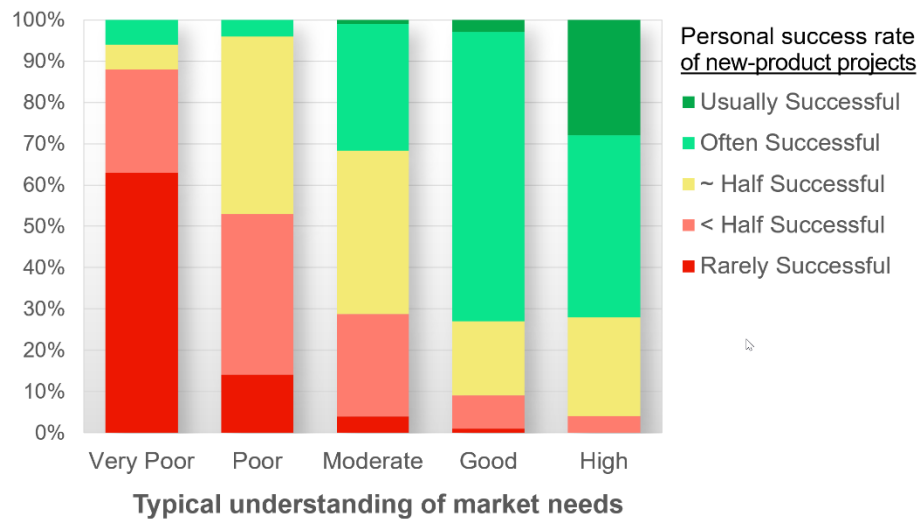
With this background, let's take a deeper dive into the data, exploring various sub-groups and correlations. We'll capture these insights in seven findings.

Finding #1: Understanding market needs correlates with new product success

At the beginning of this report we suggested a relationship between four factors: from 1) VOC training... to 2) VOC competencies... to 3) understanding market needs... to 4) new product success. We'll begin by looking for a correlation between the last two: understanding market needs and the successful introduction of new products into these markets.

After all, if understanding market needs doesn't help new product success, what's the point of developing strong VOC skills? This would be a very short report titled, "VOC skills don't matter." But as it turns out, Chart #2 suggests this will be a longer report.

2. Relationship of understanding market needs to new product success



- >70% of those with Good/High understanding had winning NPD success rates (green)
- ~5% of those with Poor/Very Poor understanding had winning NPD success rates (green)

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In Chart #2, the color zones represent self-reported personal success rates in new product development (NPD) projects... from “Rarely Successful” (deep red) to “Usually Successful” (deep green). We weren’t surprised by the trend, but we were by the strength of the correlation:

- Over 70% of those with self-rated “Good” or “High” understanding of market needs said their new products were successful over half the time (light and deep green).
- But only about 5% of those with “Very Poor” or “Poor” market needs understanding said their new product introductions were more often successful than not (green).

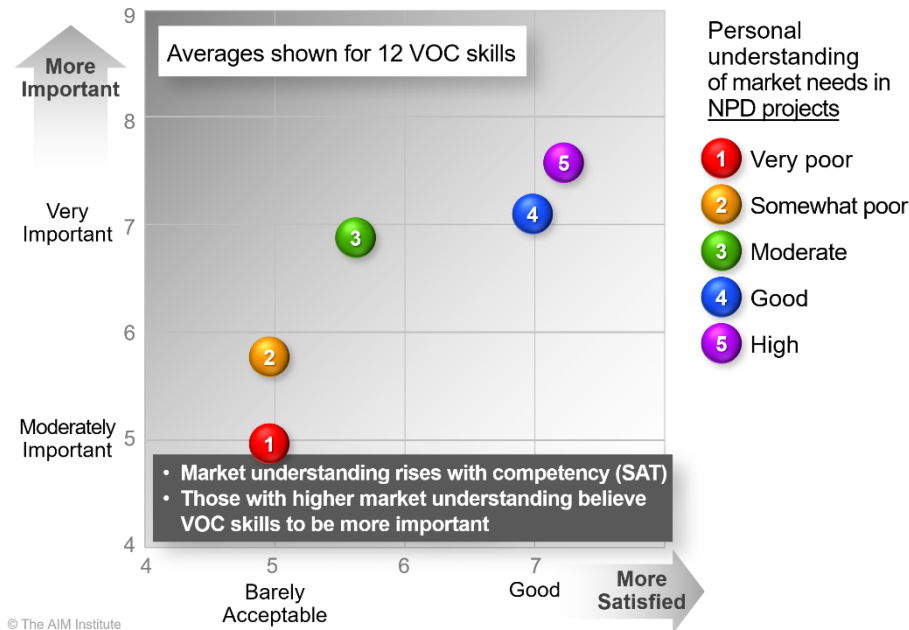
Imagine 5% of your people had winning NPD track records today and you wanted to boost this to 70%. How would you do it? Spend more on R&D? Hire smarter R&D? Work on easier projects? These results suggest you don’t have to spend more, hire brighter, or shoot lower. **You don’t have to spend more, hire smarter, or shoot lower. Just understand market needs better.**

Finding #2: Strong VOC skills equate to understanding market needs & new product success

If you’re comfortable that understanding market needs can lead to more successful new products, let’s see what could help you understand market needs better. There are many approaches we did *not* study: multi-client market studies, industry expert consultations,

ethnographic research, market satisfaction studies, and so on. In our experience, B2B markets beg for intelligent, peer-to-peer, “voice-of-customer” interviews... so that’s what we studied here.

3. Relationship of VOC competencies to understanding market needs



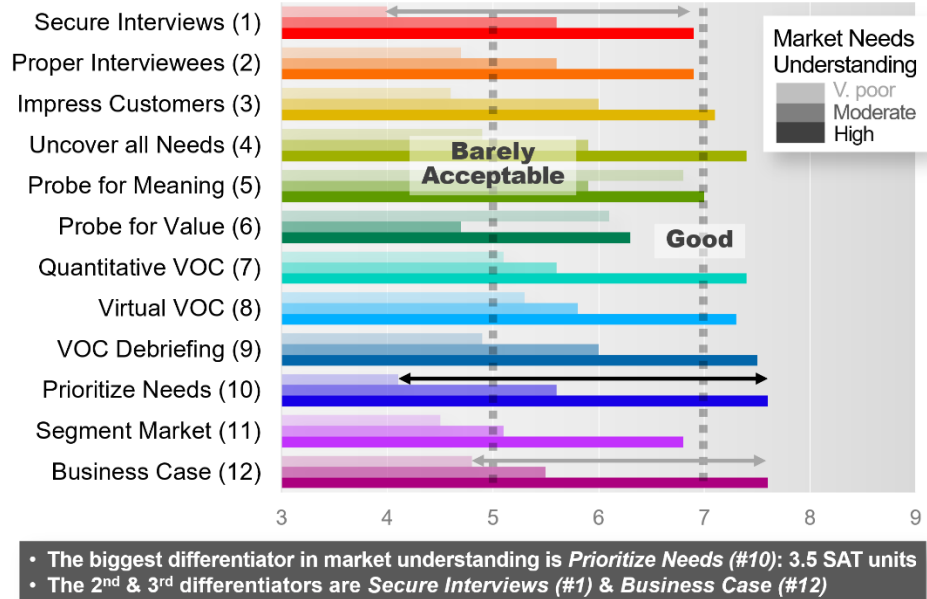
In Chart #3 we averaged IMP (*Importance*) and SAT (*Satisfaction*) 1-to-10 scores for all 12 VOC skills presented earlier. We did this for five groups of respondents that rated their personal understanding of market needs in their NPD projects from “Very poor” (red) to “High” (purple).

We were surprised by the strength of the correlation between understanding market needs and both *Importance* (a measure of respondent attitude) and *Satisfaction* (a measure of respondent competency):

- Those with a “Very poor” (red) or “Somewhat poor” (orange) understanding of market needs had an average VOC competency of “Barely Acceptable.”
- Those with a “Good” (blue) or “High” (purple) understanding of market needs had an average VOC competency of “Good.”
- Those with a better understanding of market needs also had a greater *appreciation* for the value of VOC skills, as indicated by higher average Importance ratings.

But Chart #3 just shows *average* VOC skills for these five groups of respondents. Surely all VOC skills aren’t “created equal.” To understand which of the 12 VOC skills has the greatest correlation with market understanding, let’s explore Chart #4.

4. Relationship of VOC competencies to understanding market needs



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Here we looked at VOC competency levels for each of the 12 VOC skills. We did this for three groups of respondents that had varying levels of market understanding: “Very poor” (light horizontal bar shading), “Moderate” (medium shading), and “High” (deep shading).

For those wishing to improve their understanding of market needs, this chart gives strong clues for what to focus on. How? It reveals which VOC skills the best “understanders of market needs” are doing well that the worst are not:

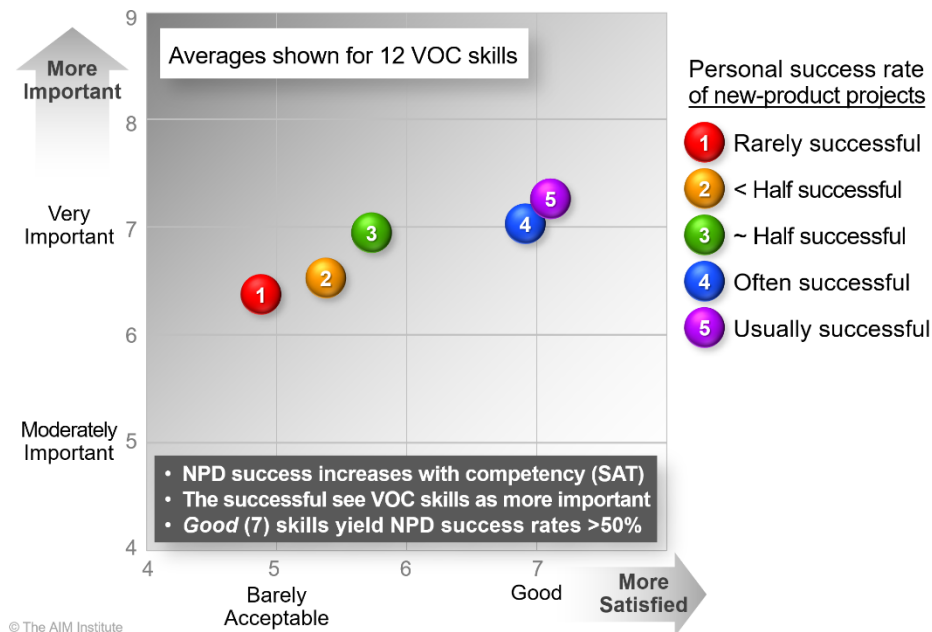
- The biggest differentiator for understanding market needs is *Prioritize Needs* (#10)
- The 2nd and 3rd differentiators are *Secure Interviews* (#1) and *Business Case* (#12)

That first point is a big one: prioritizing market needs. It’s come up in Chart #1—as the most *important* VOC skill overall—and it will stand out in future charts as well. It’s so important, in fact, that we’ll focus on it exclusively in Finding #3.

Remember the correlation linkages we introduced on page 2? So far, we’ve seen a correlation from VOC skills (#2) to market understanding (#3). And from market understanding (#3) to new product success (#4). Now let’s see if we can “leapfrog” all the way from VOC skills (#2) to new product success (#4). We’ll look at the impact of VOC training (#1) later.

We’ll use Chart #5 for this. Once again, we’re using *averages* of all 12 VOC skills. But this time, instead of each bubble representing respondents’ understanding of market needs (Chart #3), the bubbles represent *personal success rate in their NPD projects*.

5. Relationship of VOC competencies to new product success



This chart looks familiar, doesn't it? As with understanding market needs (Chart #3), both increasing *Importance* and *Competency* (satisfaction) correlate well with greater new product success.

Think of it this way: If your new product project teams have "Good" VOC skills, over half their projects would likely succeed (blue & purple bubbles). Conversely, if teams' VOC skills are "Barely Acceptable," don't be surprised if fewer than half their projects succeed (red & orange bubbles).

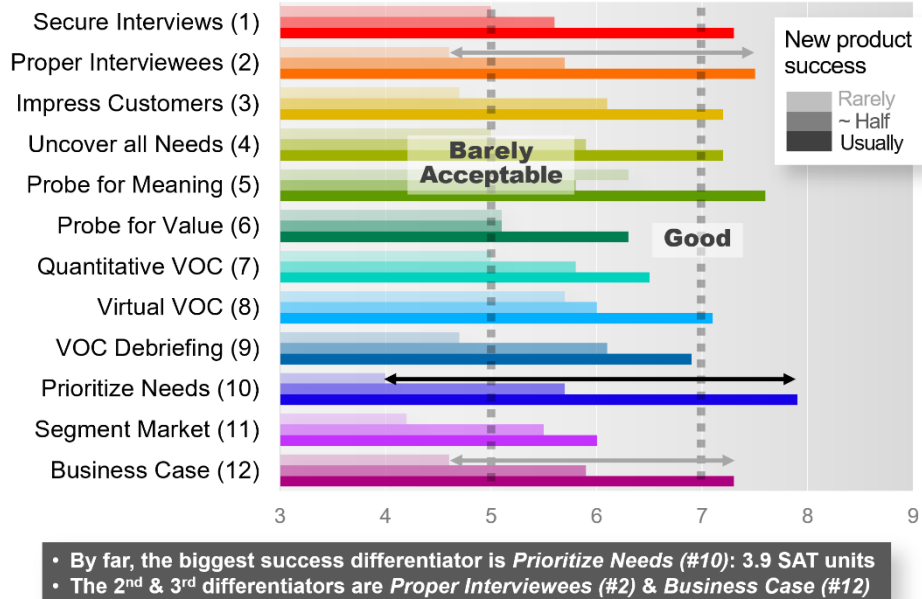
If teams' VOC skills are "barely acceptable," don't be surprised if fewer than half their projects succeed.

Finding #3: The biggest VOC differentiator in new product success is prioritizing customer needs

Now that we've seen correlations between VOC skills and new product success, we can get a bit more granular. Remember that we "guessed" which 12 VOC skills to include in this survey. But did we guess right? In terms of driving new product success, we'd like to know:

- Which VOC skills are the most and least helpful?
- Should we have excluded some skills because they have no impact at all?

6. Relationship of VOC competencies to new product success



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We'll use Chart #6 to answer these questions. It's similar to Chart #4, except the bar shadings relate to new product success instead of understanding market needs. Most would agree that this is the more important question: "Which VOC competencies relate to *new product success*?"

As you compare respondents that "Rarely" succeed in new products (light horizontal bar shading) to those that "Usually" succeed (deep shading), consider three takeaways:

- The biggest differentiator is *Prioritize Needs* (#10), with a huge gap (3.9 SAT units).
- The 2nd and 3rd differentiators are *Proper Interviewees* (#2) and *Business Case* (#12).
- None of the 12 VOC skills is superfluous: There is *some* differentiation in each one.

Let's spend more time on *Prioritize Needs*. If you remember Chart #1, this was rated as the most *important* VOC skill overall. And in Chart #4 it was the biggest *differentiator* for understanding market needs. In later charts, you'll also see the "untrained" are most *eager* to improve this VOC skill.

So what's going on with the VOC skill of prioritizing market needs? To understand it better, consider two innovation errors you should avoid in new product development:

- **Errors of omission:** This is failing to uncover all articulated and unarticulated customer needs. This is addressed in VOC skill #4, *Uncover all Needs*.
- **Errors of commission:** This is choosing the *wrong* needs to work on. It requires prioritization of customer needs, and is addressed in VOC skill #10, *Prioritize Needs*.

As you'll see later in this report, most B2B companies are *terrible* at prioritizing market needs—unless they've had special training in this. They “go interview” customers and bring back a mishmash of customer needs. Then they try to figure out what to do with these needs, unfortunately leaving customers out of this part of the process.

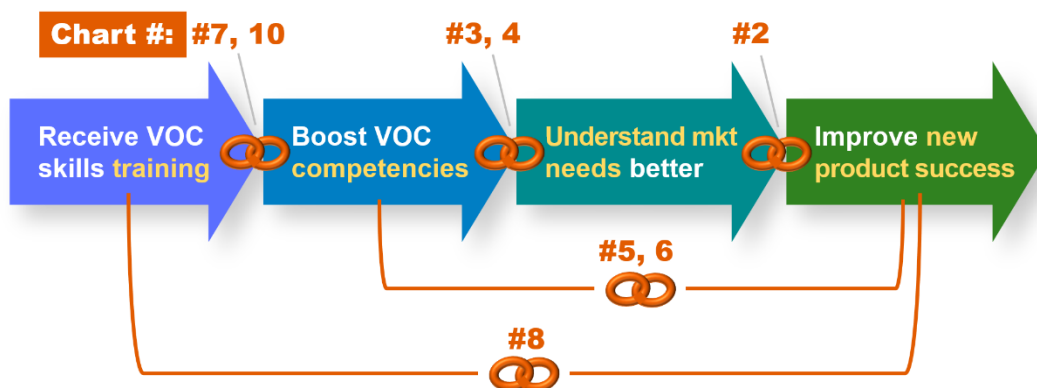
We'll explore a better way later, but for now, just remember prioritizing market needs is a huge differentiator. Suppose someone asks, “How can we boost market understanding and new product success?” Most likely your best answer is, “We need to *prioritize market needs* better.”

Your best answer is, “We need to *prioritize market needs* better.”

Finding #4: VOC skills & new product success are impacted by VOC training

Let's do a process check. So far, Charts #2 through #6 have shown correlations between the last three steps below. But we haven't examined the impact of VOC *training* yet.

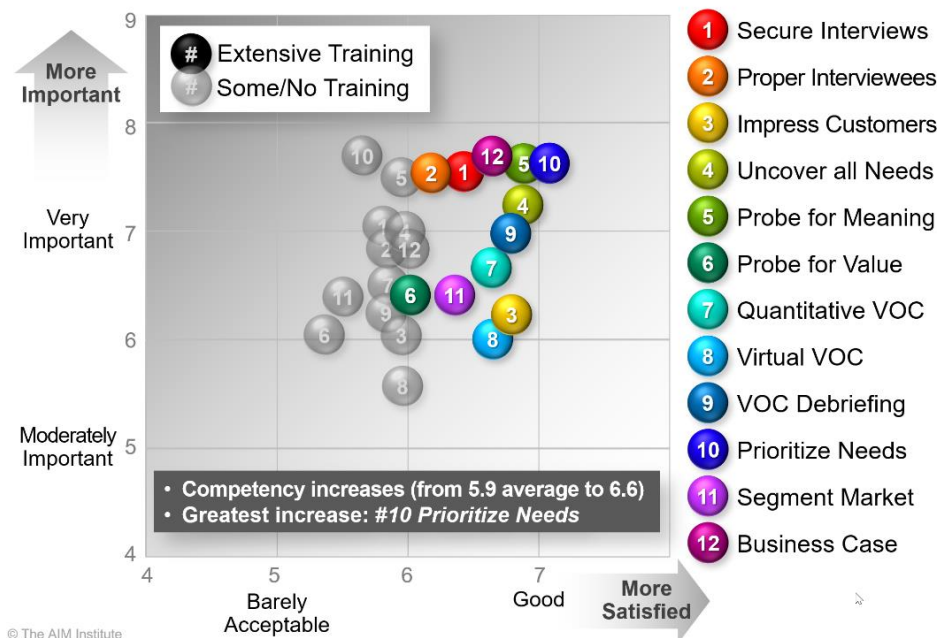
Charts in this report suggesting strong correlations (🔗)



We'll begin by looking at all types of VOC skills training, and then—in the next Finding—we'll explore a certain form of B2B-optimized training called New Product Blueprinting.

Chart #7 is a variation of Chart #1, except here we've divided the respondents into two groups: Those that had “Extensive” VOC training and those that had “Some or No” training. (We didn't have enough respondents admitting to “No” training to create its own group.)

7. Impact of VOC training levels on VOC skill competencies



As you compare the two groups, you'll notice...

- Competency increases in every VOC skill with more VOC training (on average from 5.9 to 6.6).
- The greatest improvement in competency is quite familiar: #10, *Prioritize Needs*.

But frankly, aren't the bubble "shifts" a bit smaller than what you'd hope for? They certainly aren't as big as the "Barely Acceptable" to "Good" shifts we've seen in prior charts. We'll come back to this point later, but the question it raises is, "Is the typical VOC training program as good as it could be?"

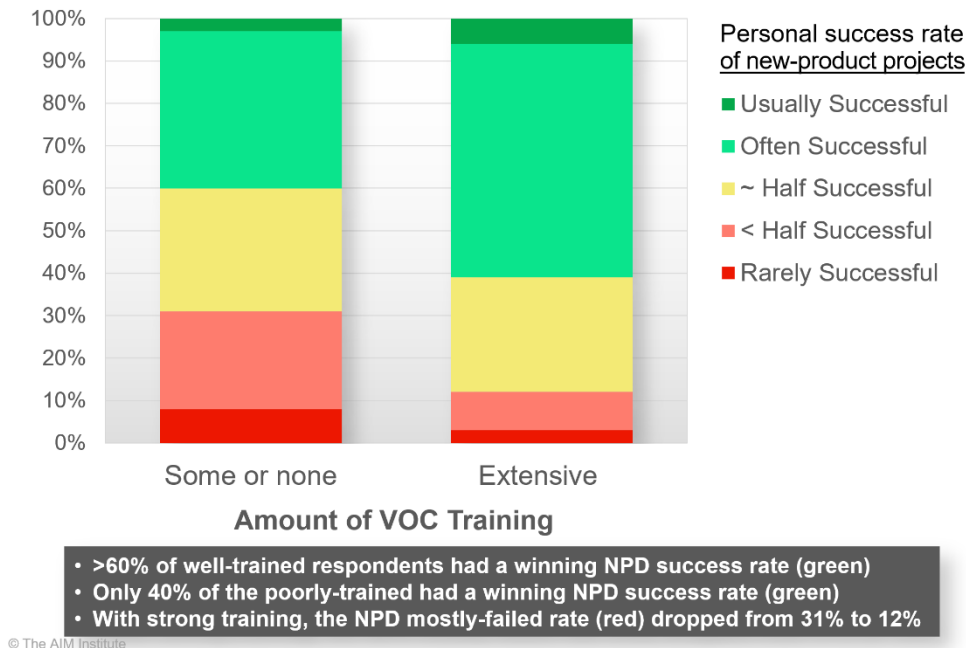
If you've been keeping track, you've now seen correlations between each of these four factors: VOC training to VOC skills... to understanding market needs... to new product success. Now we'll see if we can make a connection across all four, from VOC training all the way to new product success.

Is the typical VOC training program as good as it could be?

We'll use Chart #8 for this. We divided all respondents into two groups: those with "Some or No" VOC training, and those with "Extensive" VOC training. (And at this point, we don't care what *type* of VOC training they received.)

We then segmented both groups by respondents' personal new-product success rate, from "Rarely Successful" (deep red) to "Usually Successful" (deep green).

8. Impact of VOC training levels on new product success



Have you ever heard someone in your company ask, “But how do we *know* VOC training will help our new product success?” This would be a good chart to show them. Here we see a correlation from VOC training all the way to new product success rates:

- 61% of extensively trained respondents had a winning NPD success rate (green)
- Only 40% of those with some/no training had a winning NPD success rate (green)
- With extensive training, the NPD “mostly-failed” rate (red) drop from 31% to 12%.

These aren’t enormous gains, but let’s put this into perspective. Consider the cost of training employees in VOC skills to the cost of R&D working on dead-end projects. What would the impact be if 61% of your employees had winning NPD success rates instead of 40%? To get a sense for this, check out the section on the next page called, “Let’s do the math.”

VOC training seems important enough that we should consider *types* of training. But before we do that, let’s ask the question, “What are those with some or no training most *eager* to improve?”

For this, we’ll use something called Market Satisfaction Gaps (fully explained in the white paper, [Market Satisfaction Gaps](#)). This is something the AIM Institute’s VOC trainees use to gauge the level of “eagerness” their customers have to improve certain outcomes (desired end results). It’s a way to... wait for it now... *prioritize market needs*.

Let's do the math: What's the financial impact of VOC skills training?

In Chart #8, you saw that serious training in VOC skills correlates to a higher percentage of professionals with “winning” new product success (NPD) rates. In other words, these well-trained people have successful NPD projects over half the time. But the increase wasn't massive... from 40% of respondents with some or no training to 61% for those extensively trained.

So our question is, “What's the return on investment for such VOC training?” To see, imagine this describes your business in the “before” case (left column in Chart #8):

- Revenue = \$100 million/year
- Average profits (gross margin) = 30%
- R&D spending = 2% of revenue = \$2 million/year
- Vitality index = 10%, so new product sales are \$10 million/year
- NPD success rates are 25% for 31% of employees (red in Chart #8), 50% for 29% (yellow), and 75% for 40% (green)... for an overall NPD success rate of 52%.

Here's the “after” case: You provide extensive VOC training to your organization for \$100,000. (This would be the cost, for instance, to train 30-40 employees in New Product Blueprinting.) As a result, the following occurs in your organization:

- NPD success rates now match Chart #8's right-side “extensively trained” column: 25% for 12% of employees, 50% for 27% (yellow), and 75% for 61% (green)... for an overall NPD success rate of 62%.
- Your vitality rate rises in proportion to NPD success rate, so annual new product revenue rises from \$10 to \$11.9 million, and gross profits from \$3 to \$3.6 million.
- Over the next 5 years, your \$100,000 of training returns \$3 million in added profits.

But wait... How can VOC training yield a 30-fold return on investment? It's from *leverage*, properly aiming all that misguided R&D spending.

But wait... How can \$100,000 of VOC training yield \$3 million in profits, a 30-fold return on investment? It's from *leverage*, properly aiming all that misguided R&D spending. In this case, your \$100,000 has aimed \$10 million of R&D (\$2 million/year for 5 years).

In fact, the above scenario *underestimates* the return on VOC training: Understanding market needs better doesn't just help more new products “make it through” R&D to become revenue-generating products. Since these products address market needs better, they also command premium pricing and hence higher profit margins.

For this VOC skills survey, Importance and Satisfaction responses were converted into numerical values. A Satisfaction score of “Barely Acceptable” = 5 on the 1-to-10 SAT scale, for instance. And an Importance score of “Moderately Important” = 5 on the 1-to-10 IMP scale. Market Satisfaction Gaps are then calculated as follows:

$$\text{Market Satisfaction Gap} = \text{Avg IMP} \times (10 - \text{Avg SAT})$$

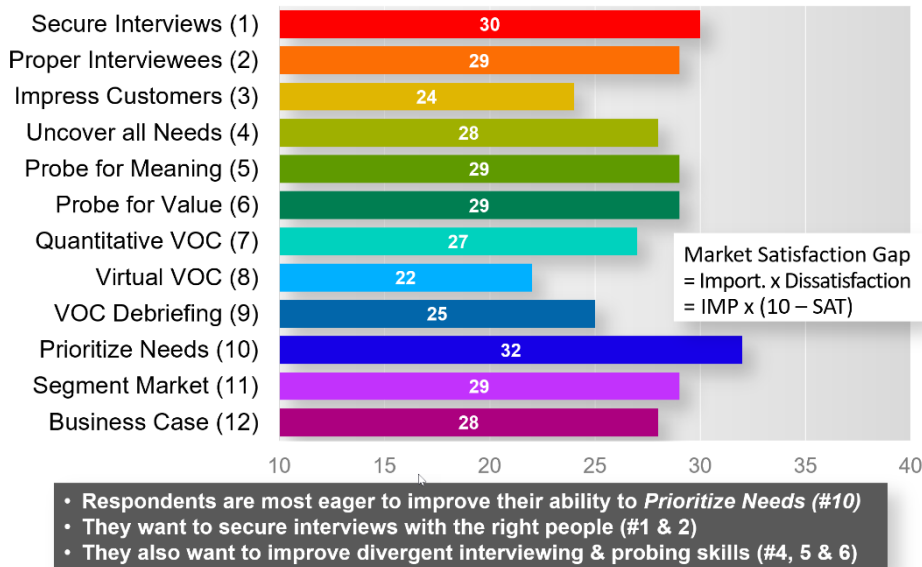
That’s the formula, but how do we interpret it? Well, the less satisfied you are with something important to you, the more eager you are to improve it, right? So higher Market Satisfaction Gaps indicate greater eagerness to improve.

We’ve had the benefit of coaching thousands of B2B new-product teams in every conceivable industry, and here’s what we’ve learned. If an outcome has a Market Satisfaction Gap of *around* 30%, it indicates high eagerness for improvement.

Let’s apply this to those 12 VOC skills. We won’t bother with the respondents that had “extensive” training: They had low Market Satisfaction Gaps since they were already satisfied with their skills. Chart #9 reveals which VOC skills those with some or no VOC training are most eager to improve.

9. Eagerness to improve VOC skills (those with some/no training)

Higher Market Satisfaction Gap = greater eagerness to improve



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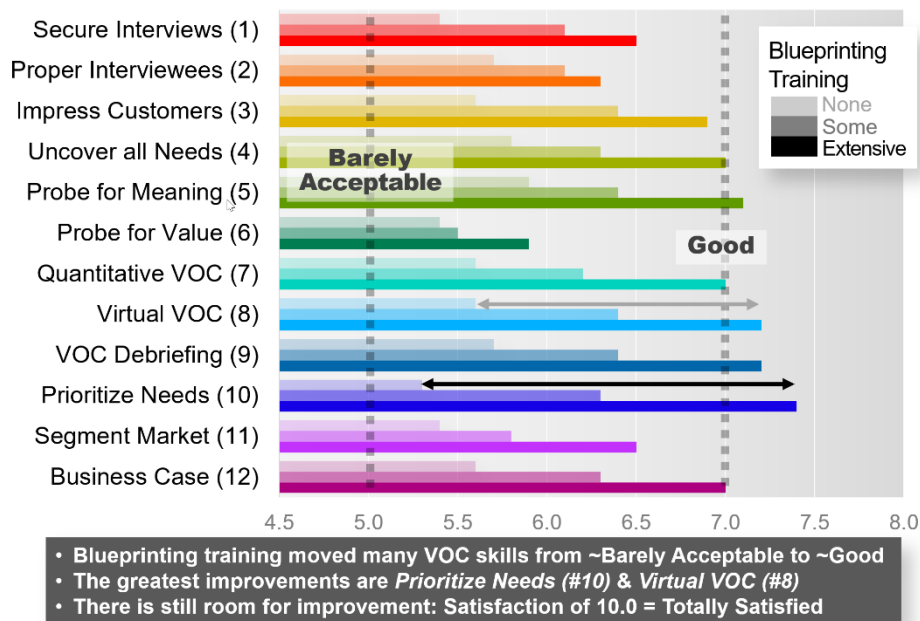
This chart shows that those with limited training had eight VOC skills with a Market Satisfaction Gap of 28 or more. They were eager to improve much. The VOC skill they want to improve the most is probably looking familiar to you by now: *Prioritize Market Needs*.

Finding #5: Training in New Product Blueprinting improves VOC skills more than other methods

If you're comfortable that training in VOC skills can be helpful for your business, it's probably worth exploring what *type* of training might be most helpful. In 2005, the AIM Institute began training large multi-national companies in New Product Blueprinting. This methodology includes *B2B-optimized* VOC skills, which have been continually refined and taught via hands-on, real-project practice. (See www.newproductblueprinting.com for more.)

Chart #10 shows the impact of Blueprinting training on VOC competencies... from no training (light shading)... to some training (medium shading)... to extensive training (deep shading).

10. Impact of Blueprinting training on VOC competencies



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Those *untrained* in New Product Blueprinting generally had VOC skills slightly above “Barely Acceptable.” With *extensive* Blueprinting training, many skills approached or reached “Good.” More than any other skill, Blueprinting training helped respondents improve their ability to *prioritize market needs*. (These respondents prioritized needs using the Market Satisfaction Gap methodology they learned in their training, as described earlier.)

We mentioned earlier that 5 = “Barely Acceptable” on the horizontal satisfaction scale, and 7 = “Good.” You should also know that 10 = “Totally Satisfied.” This means there’s still considerable “upside” in VOC skills competency, even for those trained in Blueprinting. Here’s the good news: If we can identify and address weak areas, VOC training could have an even larger impact on VOC skills than the sizeable increases you see in Chart #10.

Consider what it would take for respondents to say they were totally satisfied:

1. The *skills* methodology they learned would need to approach “perfection.”
2. The *training* they went through would ensure complete mastery of these skills.

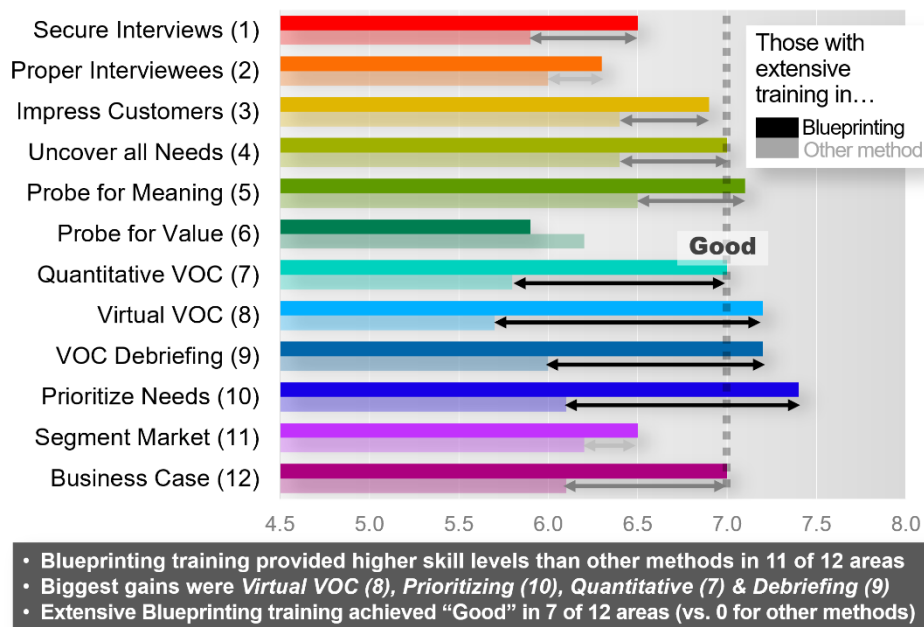
While there’s room for improving #1 above (*what* is learned), we believe the real “paydirt” will come with *how* VOC skills are learned: the training approach. Our experience indicates two areas are especially helpful. First, new learners must be part of a team that receives *dedicated coaching* on their first real-product project. Second, the team’s business *leaders place a high priority* on building this capability, even in the face of near-term pressures.

There have been many VOC methodologies taught over the years, such as Design for Six Sigma (DFSS) and Quality Function Deployment (QFD). New Product Blueprinting differs from these other methods in many ways, but chief among them are these:

- Customers can see the supplier’s notes as they’re taken during the interview, either using a projector in a conference room or a web-conference screen (“virtual VOC”).
- Instead of a questionnaire or interview guide, *customers* decide what to talk about—not the supplier—and are asked questions like, “What other problems do you see?”
- Teams don’t stop at qualitative interviews, but also conduct quantitative interviews, seeking 1-to-10 importance and satisfaction ratings (for Market Satisfaction Gaps.)

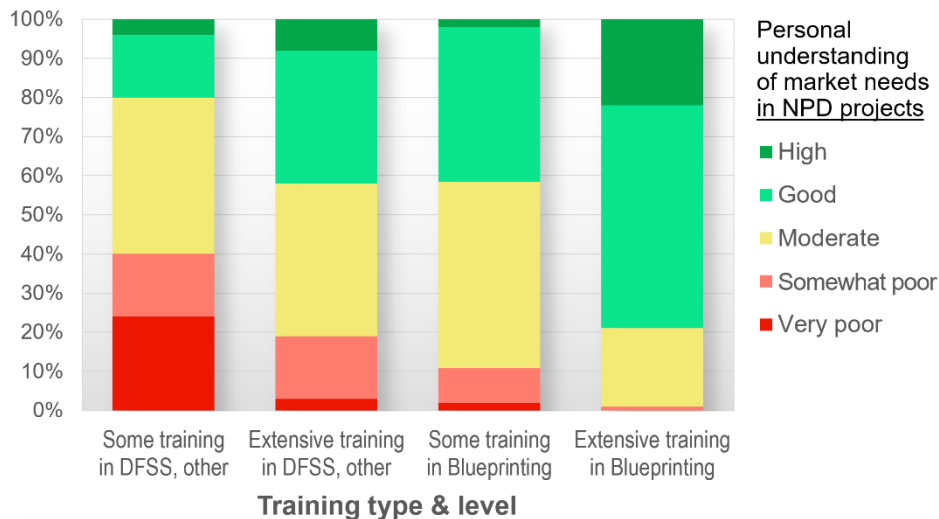
Chart #11 shows that Blueprinting training provides higher VOC skill levels in 11 of the 12 areas. The two greatest “differentiators” are *Virtual VOC* and *Prioritizing Market Needs*. For more on virtual VOC, download the white paper, www.virtualvoc.com.

11. VOC competencies for those trained in Blueprinting vs. other methods



You may remember a *long* time ago (Chart #2), we saw a strong correlation between understanding market needs and new product success. Now let's examine the impact of training type and level on understanding those market needs.

12. Impact of training type & level on understanding market needs



- DFSS & other: 20% (some training) & ~40% (extensive) had a Good/High mkt understanding
- For those with extensive Blueprinting training: ~80% had Good/High understanding
- Many companies can go from 1-in-5 to 4-in-5 employees gaining Good/High understanding

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In the two left columns of Chart #12, you see the impact of some vs. extensive training in DFSS and other methods. Not bad: With extensive training, the percent of respondents with a Good/High understanding of market needs (green zone) *doubles...* from 20% to 40%.

The third column from the left shows that “some” training in Blueprinting yields similar results to “extensive” training in DFSS and other methods. In the fourth column, you see the impact of extensive training in Blueprinting: Now 80% of respondents are “in the green” with a Good or High understanding of market needs.

Let's consider what this means for the typical B2B business. Unless they've been quite intentional about it, most B2B companies today are in “the far-left column.” This means about one in five of their employees has a strong (Good/High) understanding of the needs of the market for which they'd like to develop a new product.

That should make us nervous. But look at the *potential* in the right-hand column. Instead of one-in-five employees having a strong understanding of market needs, the business could easily have four-in five.

Instead of 1-in-5 employees having a strong understanding of market needs, the business could easily have 4-in-5.

Finding #6: VOC skills & attitudes are impacted by a company's use of VOC

In this section, we'll compare the VOC skills of employees working in companies that don't employ VOC to those that do. You may find this surprising, but many B2B companies today conduct little or no VOC. They typically use a stage-and-gate process with a light-bulb graphic on the left that's labeled, "Idea Generation." If you ask them *whose* ideas are being generated—theirs or their customers—they'll say they are their own ideas.

Such companies are "launching products at their customers" to see what works. Ask when they understand market needs, and they'll say, "I guess we wait to see if customers buy the new product." It apparently hasn't occurred to them that they should *first* understand needs and *then* develop solutions... instead of the other way around. They don't realize B2B customers could tell them *exactly* what they want (in terms of outcomes) *before* development... if they just knew how to ask.

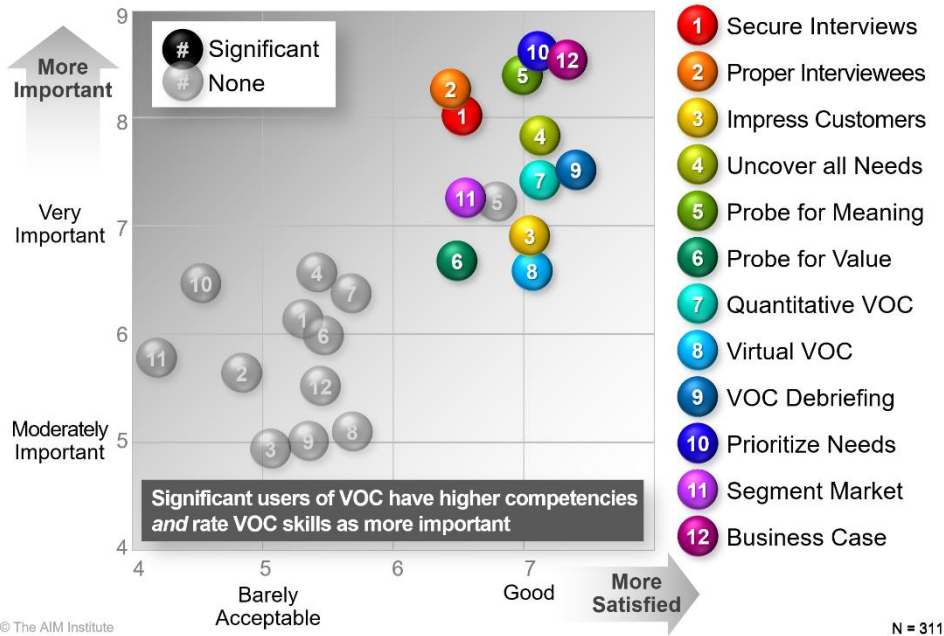


Think about that: There might be *less* efficient ways to understand market needs than going through the *entire* new product development process first. But it's hard to imagine what could be less efficient.

Before you feel too sorry for companies that are *not* conducting VOC today, consider this: They've been operating at a certain business performance level today—revenue growth, profit margins, etc.—so they've now got tremendous *upside* potential to their business performance. Given the correlations you've already seen, you can imagine how improved VOC skills could lead to improved new products... and from there all the way to more rapid, profitable, sustainable organic growth.

We'll use Chart 13 to compare respondents that work for two types of companies: those that use no VOC today and those that use VOC extensively. For the "non-VOC-users," most of the VOC competencies hover around "Barely Acceptable." Not so at companies that extensively use VOC: These respondents average "Good" VOC competencies.

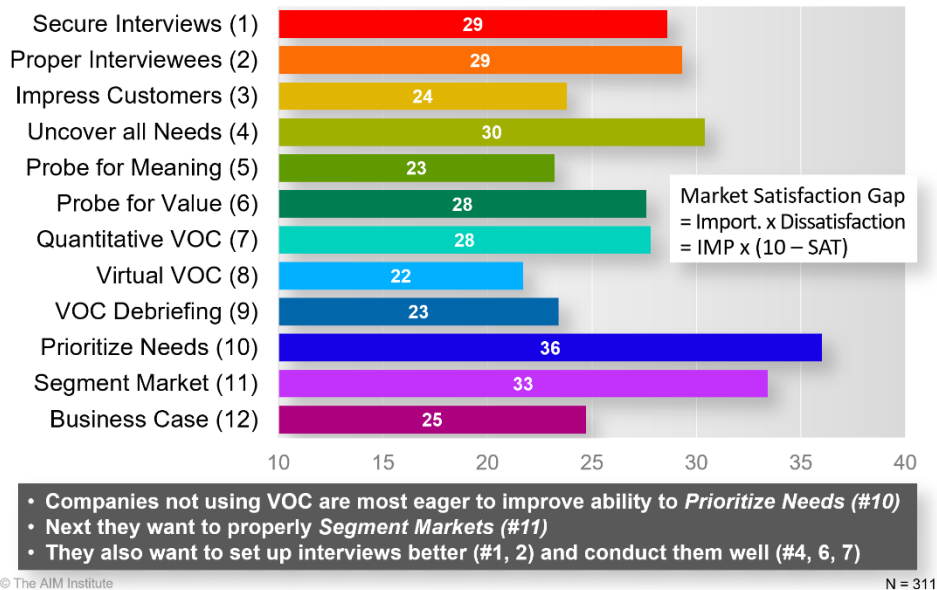
13. To what extent does your company use VOC?



When companies don't use VOC, respondents also assign appreciably lower Importance scores than "extensive" VOC users. Yet, even though they see less value or usefulness (Importance), non-VOC-users are eager to improve many VOC skills, as shown in Chart #14.

14. Eagerness to improve VOC skills (companies not using VOC)

Higher Market Satisfaction Gap = greater eagerness to improve



The highest Market Satisfaction Gap is for the VOC skill, *Prioritize Market Needs*, which you may remember is the strongest differentiator in new product success (Chart #6). So even companies that don't use VOC seem to understand the value of this VOC skill.

Finding #7: Most B2B companies have similar VOC behaviors

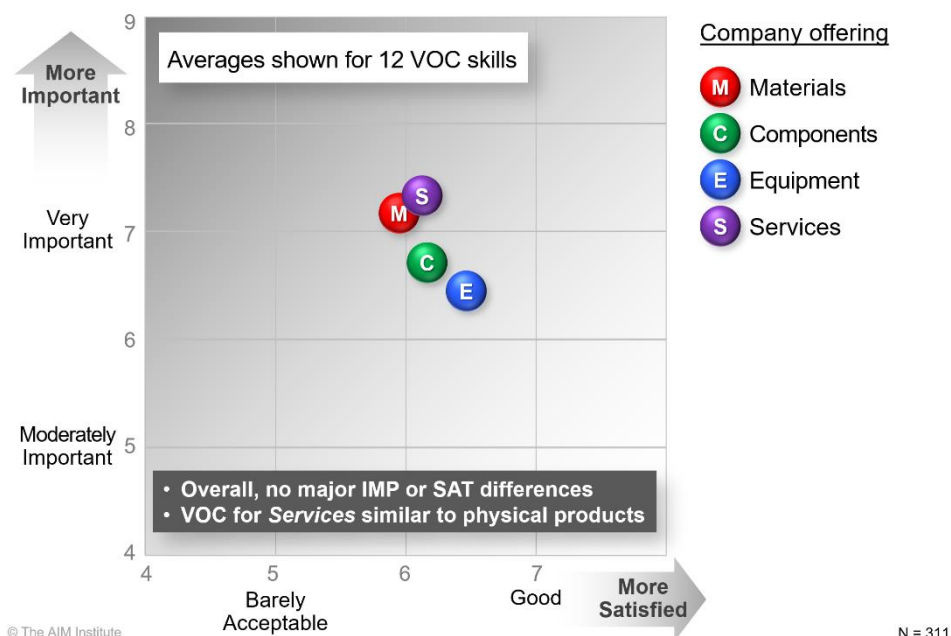
You could certainly be excused for reading these research results and thinking, “yes, but you see my company is *different*.” Over the years, though, our AIM Institute staff has been quite surprised to see how *similar* most B2B companies are, whether they’re designing sewer pipes or satellite components or something in between.

But of course, that’s just our anecdotal experience. Let’s see what the *data* reveal in this new research. We like to classify B2B companies into producers of four offering types:

- *Materials*: chemicals, plastics, metals, glass, etc.
- *Components*: Parts, sub-assemblies, fixtures, etc.
- *Equipment*: Fully functional devices, comprised of materials and components
- *Services*: Non-physical offerings, such as software, support, consulting, etc.

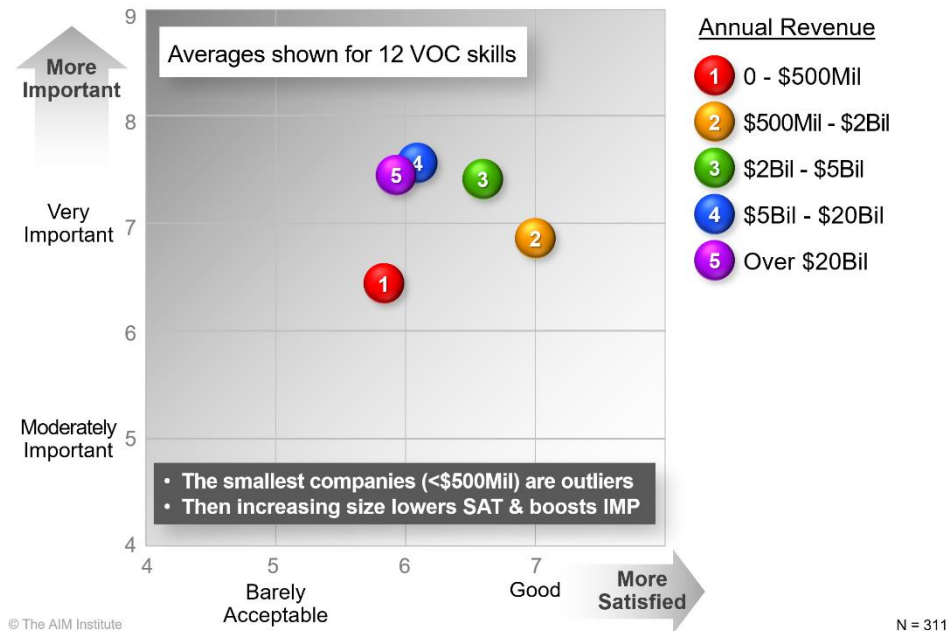
Surely this diversity in offerings is so great that VOC skill levels and importance would be quite different, right? Not really. As shown in Chart #15, there’s not much difference in Importance or Satisfaction ratings between the four types of offerings. If anything, we would have expected “Services” to be an outlier from the rest (producers of physical articles). But that wasn’t the case.

15. Impact of a company’s offering type on VOC competencies



OK, the type of offering doesn't seem to matter. But what about the size of the company? Chart #16 shows the impact of company size on VOC competencies.

16. Impact of company size on VOC competencies



Here we do see some difference, albeit small ones. The “outlier” seems to be companies with revenue less than \$500 million per year. As company size increases to between \$500 million and \$2 billion per year, VOC skill levels climb to “Good” and Importance to “Very important.” As company size increases even further, we see this peculiar pattern: Respondents self-assess their VOC skill levels lower and their importance higher.

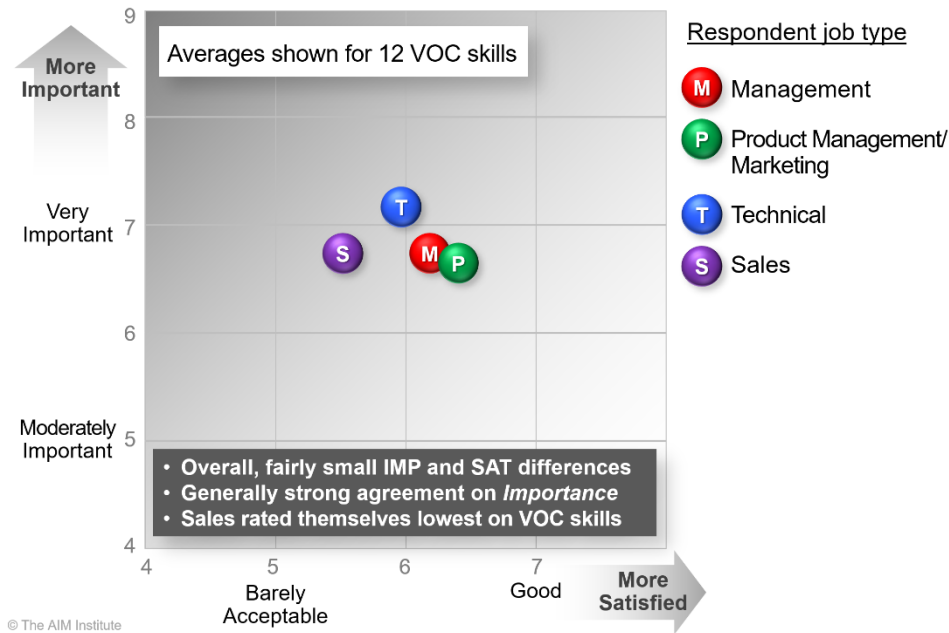
There's probably a story in these data, but it's not obvious to us. Some perspective is helpful, however. Even though company size seems to have an impact on VOC skills, it's relatively small. Whether a company *uses* VOC or has *trained* its employees, for instance, has a much larger impact than *what* that company produces or how *large* it is.

We wanted to answer one more question: Does it matter what the respondent's job function is? If the answer is “yes,” it has a couple of implications:

- Our research could be prone to sampling error. That is, we'd get different results if more marketing people had responded than technical, for instance.
- Job functions within a B2B company would not be “like-minded.” You'd see the value of VOC skills quite differently depending on your role. And that's *not* a good starting point for improvement.

As it turns out, job function seems to matter little. Chart #17 shows a reasonably tight cluster along both axes for the four job types surveyed. In our view, the most interesting point is that sales professionals rated themselves the lowest on VOC skill levels.

17. Impact of job type on VOC competencies



If type of offering, company size and job type don't have a large impact, is this good news, bad news, or no news at all? We think it's good news: What matters is not the hand you've been dealt. It's what you *do* with it. Regardless of the nature of your company or your job, you're pretty much in the same boat as other B2B professionals.

What matters is not the hand you've been dealt. It's what you *do* with it.

The actions of your leadership team are what make the difference. A big difference. Your business can have great success if they are committed to *using* VOC in a meaningful way (see Chart #13) and to *training* their employees in VOC skills (see Charts 8 & 12).

In conclusion

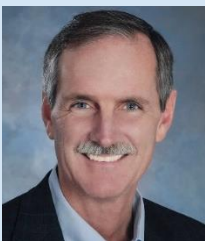
Are you eager to drive organic growth through blockbuster new products? If you were planning to do this by hiring more R&D or fine-tuning your NPD process, please hit the pause button. It's likely that your strongest point of leverage—by a *lot*—is to build and deploy strong B2B VOC skills. You're already investing a bundle in R&D. Now it's time to *aim* it with great precision. It's time to create products customers really want.

Learning More

Use these resources to move your company toward market-facing innovation and growth:

- Subscribe to Dan Adams' [B2B Organic Growth](#) video series... one free 2-minute video per day or per week (50 in all).
- Visit www.newproductblueprinting.com for videos and other resources.
- Visit www.blueprintingtraining.com to see training options.
- [Contact AIM](#) to set up a private phone- or web-conference.

The best way to understand New Product Blueprinting is to attend one of our **virtual** public workshops (2 half-days). This includes a trial subscription to Blueprinter software®, e-learning, BlueTools® aids, BlueHelp® knowledge center. Learn more at www.blueprintingworkshop.com.



Dan Adams is the founder of The AIM Institute, and author of the book, [New Product Blueprinting: The Handbook for B2B Organic Growth](#), the weekly blog, [Awkward Realities](#), and the newsletter, [B2B Organic Growth](#). He is a chemical engineer, and holds many patents and innovation awards, including a listing in the National Inventors Hall of Fame. An award-winning speaker, he has trained thousands of B2B professionals all around the world in his methods.



Scott Burleson is Sr. VP for AIM, and author of [The Statue in the Stone](#), with 48 laws of jobs-to-be-done. He scored blockbuster new product success as an engineer at John Deere, before becoming the Director of the Strategyn Institute... where he taught Tony Ulwick's "outcome-driven innovation." Today, AIM clients love his passion for customer insight & innovation, whether he's training a workshop group or guiding a client team through a high-impact project.