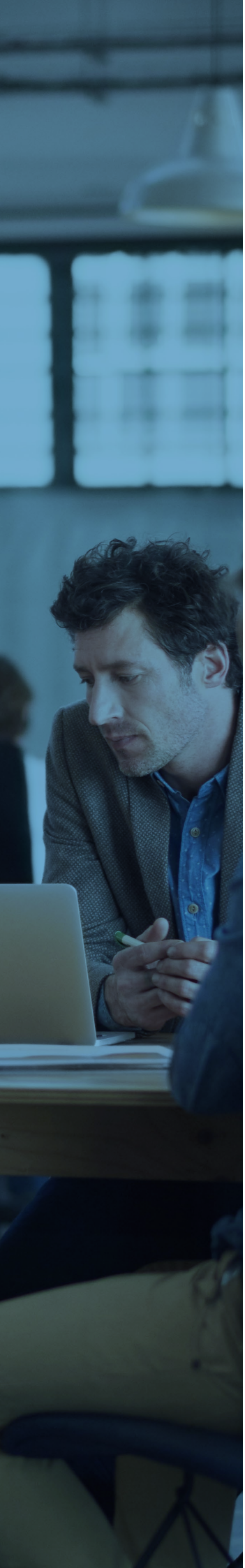
THE SKILLS CONNECTION

10 THINGS EVERY COMPANY GETS WRONG WITH GARTNER – AND THE OTHERS



Getting it right – building a relationship of trust and confidence with the analysts from Gartner, Forrester and the other research companies, so that they will be quick to write good things about you and recommend your products and services – ought to be easy.

You're looking to help them do their job. They're not looking to cause you any trouble. All you need is for them to develop an accurate and positive view of your capabilities. All they need is the information that will help them form a balanced view of what you've got to offer and how it relates to customer needs in a specific marketplace.

So why does it all go so horribly wrong so horribly often?

In the main, the analysts will be coming to you to learn about you and your relevance to the needs of their buyer clients. Your job is simply to give them what they need so they can understand your offering, see what problems you can solve, recognise what differentiates you from your competitors and identify your place in the market. It should be simple.

Yet our experience – and the Skills Connection's team of ex-Gartner analysts has a cumulative total of more than 150 years of front-line experience – is that almost every vendor makes completely unnecessary mistakes that muddy the message.

In fact, if the ten most frequent errors and pitfalls could be eliminated, your chances of getting the analysts to refer business in your direction, validate your company with buyers, and even achieve strongly positive results in any relevant Magic Quadrant or Wave, would be hugely better.

Here are the Top 10 traps for the unwary.

It hardly needs saying that these are the kind of mistakes anyone at all can recognise when it's someone else who's making them.

The problem comes when you're right up close to the situation and you can't see the wood for the trees.

01

Not identifying your key differentiators before you start

The analyst is your most important audience – more important to your future than any customer, any investor, any journalist. Analyst ratings, write-ups and recommendations can literally change your company's prospects overnight, raising your profile, catapulting you onto shortlists, generating leads and confirming your position as a significant player in your market.

But what do the analysts want to know about you? First and foremost, they want to know what makes you different. You need to be able to sum that up in a few simple, well-chosen sentences, backed up by hard, factual evidence and specific, relevant customer references.

But many vendors, we find, have so much they want to say about their offerings, their technologies and their vision that they can't discipline themselves to keep it short, sharp and straightforward.

It can be hard to get everyone singing from the same hymn sheet. Ideally, you would have your story and your key differentiators sorted out and understood across the company well before anyone is in contact with the relevant research firms. But it is a hundred times harder to fix the problem if ad hoc conversations are already under way and the analysts have already begun to hear mixed messages and too many different interpretations of what your company is about. You can't start too early, and it's all too easy to start far too late, which makes it devilishly hard to get the right results.

02

Leaving the analysts to draw their own conclusions

Never mind your dealings with analysts, this is a mistake people make all the time in their own lives. We lay out the facts for the people we are talking to, produce our evidence – and then stand back, assuming they will interpret them the same way we do and draw the obvious conclusions. But it doesn't always work like that.

If your offering uses a quarter of the power, does a day's work in an hour or eliminates the need for human intervention in a key process, spell out the benefit – lower costs, higher productivity, fewer staff. Don't just hope that those hard-pressed analysts, preoccupied with their busy schedules, will make the connection, slap their foreheads and cry "My word, this is unique! This makes this company different from all the rest! I must tell the world."

It's not going to happen. And even if the facts you've included in your presentation make a tremendous impact now, how likely is it that it will all be remembered accurately six months later, when the moment of truth arrives for you, when the analyst is talking to that incredible prospect or is preparing to position you in an MQ or Wave?

Don't hand the analyst a recipe list of ingredients. Make the salad.

03

Including huge amounts of marketing fluff

Analysts hear too much of everything. Under normal circumstances, they attend briefings, presentations and conferences all the time. They handle hundreds of inquiries per year. Even in the aftermath of a global pandemic, they are rushed off their feet.

The only way they can survive the blizzard of information that's hurled at them is to develop their own BS filters. And what seems like a cool marketing line to you will often sound very like BS to their jaded ears.

If you're claiming to have the most secure, the most scalable or the fastest product, you'd better have some pretty clear, no-nonsense proof to back that up. If you're trying to say "We are the most trusted adviser", you probably shouldn't even bother. The claim is effectively meaningless and well-nigh impossible to substantiate.

The signs that the fluff is getting in the way of the message are often easy to recognise. You ask a question and you get no feedback at all, or the analyst asks you to repeat the question. Worse still, you try to arrange a follow-up briefing and find the analyst's diary seems inexplicably full for months to come.

It's time to take the hint. Less is more. Analysts want evidence. If they wanted a barrage of tired clichés and vapid marketing-speak, there are probably plenty of your competitors who could provide it.

04

Repurposing slide decks created for other audiences

Every bit of communication you put out should be guided by a MAP – a plan that defines its Message, Audience and Purpose.

What are you saying? Who are you saying it to? Why are you saying it (and what do you want the recipient to do next)?

Your message should always be consistent. You may want to angle it slightly differently, but it should always be about your key differentiators.

But your audience of analysts is quite unlike any other audience you address. They're not investors, so they don't need to know about the pedigree, career background and hobbies of your founders. They're not customers, so they are not sitting there worried about budgets and aching to find a solution to some urgent need. They're not journos looking for an eye-catching tech story, a big personality to laud or denigrate or a breath of scandal to exploit.

They are a knowing group of listeners, fully aware of the familiar problems in their market segments, up to speed about what your competitors are offering, sceptical about exaggerated claims and probably pessimistic about their chances of picking up any new information or insights from your presentation.

So your purpose is to surprise them. Honour their needs by showing them a fresh, custom-built slide deck that gives them less of what they don't want and more of what they can use.

Deep down, from a product or service perspective, the analysts want the answers to just three questions.

1. What problem do you solve?
2. Who do you solve it for?
3. What's unique about the way you solve it?

Answer those and you've done the main part of the job. If they need anything else from you, they'll appreciate your short, uncluttered presentation and use the Q&A time that's left at the end to ask for more.

The truth is, recycling the decks you've prepared for other situations won't work well with the analysts, even when you've taken out all the obviously irrelevant slides. Start from scratch, follow your MAP and build a deck for now. If that means using just ten slides and getting the whole thing done in a crisp, concentrated and relevant half an hour, the analysts will thank you for it.

05

Forgetting to show what your vision is

If your company's vision statement is so bland and generalised that it could be applied to all of your competitors and half the other tech firms on the planet, it needs rethinking.

If it's so specific and detailed that the key slide takes a full two minutes to read, it probably means you've got tactics but no vision. A slide like that may be a roadmap for future developments, but it's not a vision of where the company aspires to be.

Vision is important. Why? Because technology buyers use analysts to future-proof their decisions. They aren't looking to them to identify the best solution today, but rather to provide advice on who offers the best solution over a reasonable expected lifetime of use.

In practice, analysts will usually expect to see a vision statement that chimes with their own view of the market and its priorities. They want to see evidence that you understand what trends are driving change in the market. Looking ahead, they want to hear what problems you will be solving and who you will be solving them for. If your vision of the future differs from theirs, you will need to explain why your strategy and planned trajectory are right for you, for your market segment and for your customers and prospects.

That means avoiding the temptation to deal in generalised blue-sky concepts, but also steering clear of over-detailed descriptions of a string of upgrades and minor product enhancements. You should certainly offer a development roadmap, outlining significant steps forward in the next 12 to 24 months, but keep that separate.

Your vision should be bold, distinctive and realistic, and you should spell it out to the analysts in a way that makes it clear that you know exactly what you're trying to achieve and how you're going to get there.

06

Inside-out vs outside-in

You know what's inside the Black Box. You know you have great, perhaps worldbeating, technology that's bound to get every analyst in your sector curious and excited.

Don't count on it. Your claim to have made a high-tech breakthrough may catch the analysts' attention, but they, like your customers, are not interested in advanced technology for its own sake. They are interested in it for what it can deliver. In fact, your unique approach may well be seen as a risk factor ("Why aren't other people tackling the problem that way, if it's so much better than what has been used up to now?").

Analysts only start to become convinced about brand new solutions if they begin to see concrete evidence of what they can do for customers. Most of them have heard too many exaggerated claims and seen one too many false dawns.

What they want now is proof of tangible customer benefits – not in the Petri dish, but out there under market conditions. They want relevant and verifiable performance figures, backed up by solid reference cases. You may believe your innovations are about to disrupt the market and turn the established order on its head. They want evidence that they'll help customers make money, save money or solve specific problems. They want the outside-in view.

But you, inevitably, have the perspective of the insider who's looking out. You are up to your ears in your technologies and solutions, jargon and company history and it's hard for you to understand what those on the outside don't know.

You are suffering from the well-documented cognitive bias that two of our heroes, the American communication gurus Chip and Dan Heath, call the Curse of Knowledge. Because you know too much of the detail, it is virtually impossible to judge just what any outsider, including the analyst, does or doesn't understand about your offering or your value proposition.

You know the patents you've been granted, the design problems you've solved, the constraints you've overcome. You know how different that makes your product or service. But is it clearly better, from the customer's point of view – and the analyst's?

Hopefully, the answer is yes. If so, that's the point of view from which you should describe your offering. Keep it simple. Keep it short. Keep your insider knowledge to yourself, except in those rare cases where a glimpse inside the box is necessary to account for a huge leap forward in customer benefits. Your audience is on the outside, so tell your tale from the outside in.

07

Not rehearsing

This is such a basic mistake you'd think nobody would make it. But that's not the way it is. If you don't rehearse the presentations or demos you've lined up for analysts, things will go wrong. That's just what happens, whether you're working from a full script, a detailed list of bullet points or a few lines of handwritten notes.

If you haven't rehearsed, key points will be left out, you'll stumble over your messaging or your own technology might let you down. You'll be caught off guard by an analyst's question you should have foreseen. Or, worst of all, you'll get halfway through and suddenly realise that the logic of the story you're telling doesn't hold up.

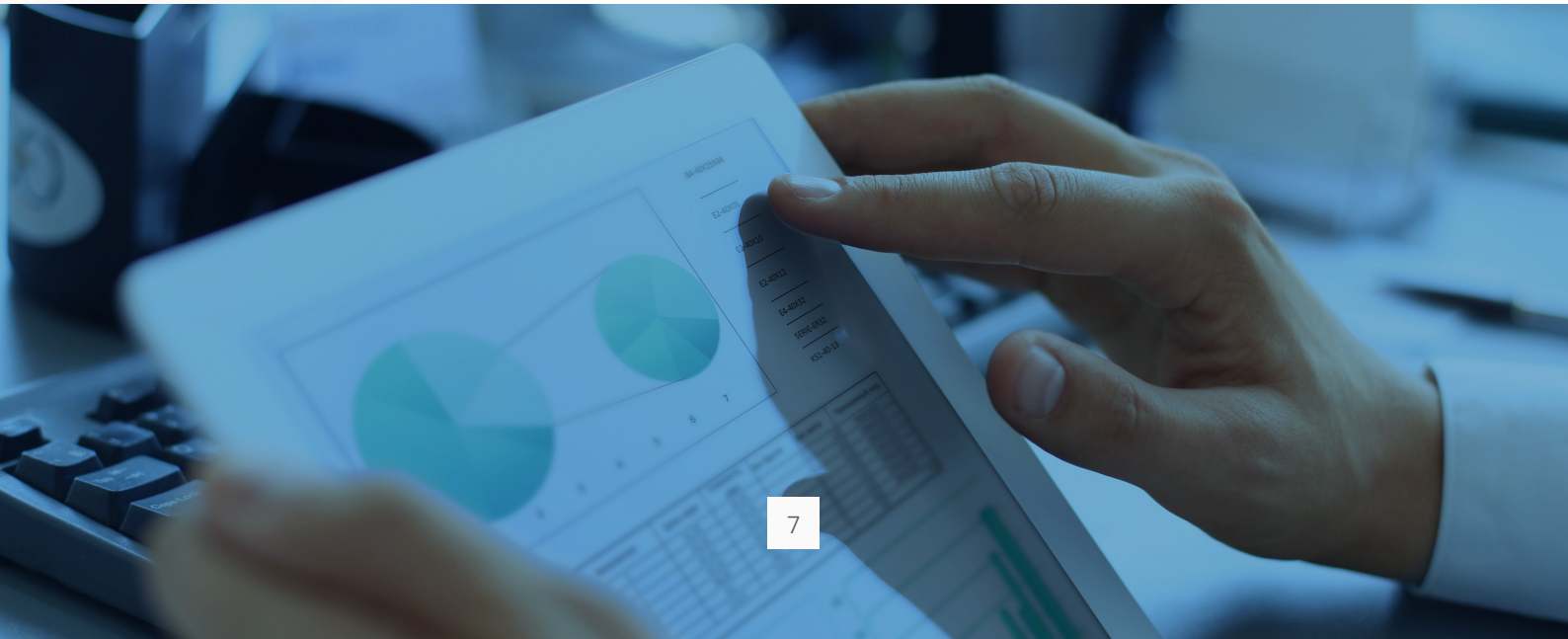
Inexperienced presenters need a couple of successful rehearsals under their belts to ease their nerves and put them at ease with their material. Confident, self-assured founders or senior execs may have all the facts at their fingertips, but they need rehearsing, too, if only to make sure they cover the right ground, match their content to the slides and stay within the agreed timing.

Presenters with a tech background may need to be steered away from too much geeky detail. Fast-talking business development people may need to be trained to curb their enthusiasm, slow the pace and avoid alienating the analysts with an obvious sales pitch.

Everyone can do better with a bit of practice, working with material that's already familiar.

Practice makes perfect, they say. But perfection isn't the goal. The aim is simply to avoid the kind of hiccups and mishaps that distract the analysts' attention from your key messages.

Fifty years ago, the great Mexican-born golfer Lee Trevino came out with the memorable line that became his catchphrase. "The more I practise, the luckier I get," he said. In business, as in golf, you generally tend to get what you deserve. By rehearsing properly, you make your own luck. If you don't rehearse, you're just asking for trouble.



08

Piling on after the decision's been made

This one is particularly relevant for those companies featuring in marquee assessments like Magic Quadrants, Waves or MarketScapes. It may come as a shock to you to know that the analyst who is assessing you is not approaching your company with an open mind.

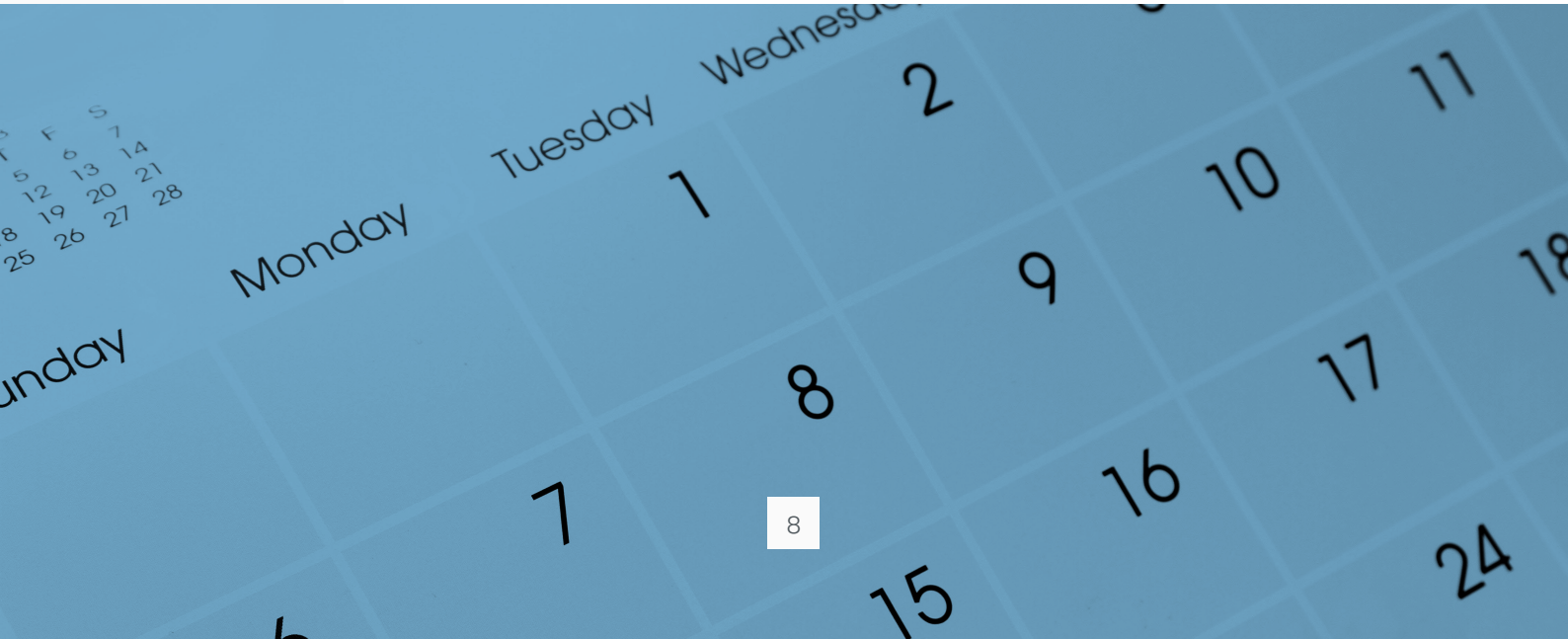
That's not to say that the analyst is biased, either for or against you. But analysts live out in the real world, 365 days a year. They watch your industry, talk to the customers and vendors involved, compare notes with other analysts, keep an eye on the trade media and attend countless online or face-to-face events. By the time the MQ or Wave process gets going, the analyst involved is bound to have developed some idea of what your company is about.

It may be only a vague general sense of your place in the market. But however imprecise this perception of you is, it's already rather late in the day to try to change it.

You need to get in first.

Ideally, you should have been investing in building a working relationship with the analyst throughout the year. If you are springing into action the day the MQ welcome package arrives, you've probably left it too late. By that stage, the analysts have already formed a view about the shape of the market and started drawing up the list of vendors to be included in their assessments. If you're not on that list – or if you are on it, but the analyst has already decided you're not a significant player – the odds are already stacked against you.

So it is much better to start early and avoid getting into this situation. The idea of treating the relationship with the analysts as a year-round engagement, rather than a one-off encounter centred on the MQ process, is steadily gaining ground. It's always easier to influence people's perceptions before they've decided what they think. Once they have a fixed idea in their heads, it's a question of trying to persuade them that you are right and they are wrong – and analysts, like everyone else, don't like to change their minds. Whatever your strengths and however good your supporting evidence is, you'll be facing an uphill task.



09

Putting junior people in charge

Nurturing your relationship with the analysts is a vital element in the success of any ambitious tech company.

What they write about you and who they recommend you to can be key factors that open the door to RFIs and shortlists, big deals and new markets. Even if you are a small company or you operate in one part of a highly specialised area, like finance or healthcare, and you are not in line for inclusion in a Gartner Magic Quadrant or Forrester Wave, your interaction with the analysts who are focused on your market can be hugely influential.

You are still likely to have analyst briefings to prepare, demos to organise, relevant customer case studies to identify, year-round information flows to manage and possibly RFIs to respond to. All this is too much for one person, so it has to be a team effort.

And we are not just talking about admin tasks here. The responsibility for working with the analysts is far too important to the business to be left to your junior staff. If you were selling your house, would you leave your teenage son or daughter to show potential buyers around?

To make sure the fundamental messages are right, the team that takes on these duties must include the senior people responsible for strategy, product development and marketing. You'll need input from a senior sales exec who's used to countering customer objections and describing your key differentiators quickly and clearly.

The team must work as a unit, meeting to clarify what's most important and to develop a coherent story. Once these essential elements are in place, the most effective way to put them across is to build up a steady, sustained working relationship with the relevant analysts that continues throughout the year, rather than being concentrated on the period leading up to formal assessments or scheduled market reports.

But there is also the key question of who should front your demos and presentations. Again, there may be a temptation to hand the responsibility to a bright and competent junior. We would advise against that.

Without necessarily seeking to build a personality cult around your founder or chief executive, you should be taking the opportunity to build the relationship with the analysts at the top level. Analysts like to feel they are getting their information from informed sources who match their own level of seniority and expertise. And if an unexpected curveball question comes up at the end of a session, it is always best to have it answered by someone with the authority to think on their feet and decide, on the spur of the moment, what future plans can be revealed and what should be held back. There will be other opportunities to give your young talents a baptism of fire, but these key moments of interaction with the analysts are not the right time to do it.

10

Not prepping advocates

Analysts are trained to be sceptical and take vendors' claims with a pinch of salt. They are not practitioners, so they don't really know how well your high-spec products and services stand up to the rough and tumble of life on the front line. The only way they can learn the truth is by listening to what your customers say. They'll always discount a certain amount of the feedback from your most enthusiastic customers, but they'll be paying more attention than ever to the eye-witness accounts that come from those with direct experience of using your products.

It's now extremely important that your best reference customers – your happiest, most engaged users, and the ones who are using your products and services in the most advanced and interesting ways – show up, in particular, on Gartner's enterprise peer review site, Peer Insights (as well as on other similar independent sites like G2, Trust Radius and IT Central Station). And it is essential that these keen, supportive users tell their stories in a way that does justice to your offering. With the best will in the world, it's all too easy for a well-intentioned customer to accidentally give a negative impression while trying to be helpful.

For example, the customer might innocently write "When we originally got the product it was misconfigured and they were very quick to work with us to put things right." That's a genuine attempt to convey something positive about your company's responsiveness, but the analyst may well interpret it as meaning "The product is sometimes delivered in a misconfigured state", which is hardly going to help your cause.

There's a fine line to be drawn between preparing and coaching, but you must make a point of encouraging (and reminding) your best customers to tell their stories on Peer Insights and you must talk to them beforehand to help them understand how the process works and how the information they provide will be portrayed and used.

Don't push it too far, or the customer may resent your interference. But do have that conversation. Your supportive user does need to realise, in particular, that misunderstandings sometimes occur and chance remarks may be taken out of context. Customers should not be afraid to voice their candid opinions, but it's probably useful to know that when things go wrong in this critically important setting, it's often because too much has been said, rather than too little.

The Skills Connection is a specialist analyst engagement firm whose consultants have all been senior Gartner analysts. We help firms ranging from fast-growing start-ups to high-flying market leaders get the very best business results from the analyst channel.

Contact us

USA, Canada, Latin America +1 203 912 7205
Europe, Asia Pacific, Middle East: +44 (0)1494 464397

www.theskillsconnection.com | inquiry@theskillsconnection.com