

Is your sales team meeting expectations? If not, it may be time to review your hiring procedures.



“Hiring good people is hard. Hiring great people is brutally hard. And yet nothing matters more in winning than getting the right people in the field. All the clever strategies and advanced technologies in the world are nowhere near as effective without great people to put them to work.”

- Jack Welch

Keys to hiring top sales professionals:

- *Understand the characteristics of your top performers*
- *Know the job requirements*
- *Be purposeful in the selection process and use insight from all team members*
- *If hiring and growing sales professionals is not your strength, find a partner you can trust*

You have a great idea, a marketable product, and market research demonstrating a high demand for your solution. Why aren't sales skyrocketing? The answer could quite well lie with your sales team.

As a rule, 20% of salespeople are responsible for 80% sales volume and turnover among reps is high. Suffice it to say that hiring and retaining successful salespeople is integral to sustainable growth. But what exactly constitutes a top 20% salesperson, how can he or she be picked out from a crowd of applicants, and how do you reduce turnover? This is an age-old question.

Programmed to Succeed

Back in 1964, David Mayer and Herbert M. Greenberg published an article in the Harvard Business Review entitled, *What Makes a Good Salesman*. Triggered by what they describe as “an obvious need for a better method of sales selection” (high costs of hiring, high turnover rates and loss of company reputation) they embarked upon seven years of research. What they found is that the most successful salespeople possess a unique combination of empathy and ego drive. Empathy to take the time to listen, to understand their customer's wants, needs and concerns, ego drive, a need to succeed, to keep them motivated when things get tough.³

In 2001, in the book *How to Hire and Develop Your Next Top Performer*, noting that, “As our service economy shifts into high gear, what it takes to succeed in sales is a little more complicated than it once was... What the best people truly sell are solutions—solutions that uniquely meet the particular needs of each client,”² Greenberg and co-authors Harold Weinstein and Patrick Sweeney added to the two factors above, stating that service motivation, conscientiousness and ego-strength (resiliency in the face of rejection) are also key qualities of a great salesperson.²

Over the years, numerous articles have been written on the subject, offering a myriad of solutions, characteristics and habits to look for. Frequently cited traits include honesty, high-energy, an internal drive to succeed, the ability to listen, the courage to keep trying in the face of rejection, and the tendency to think outside of the box, and ask tough questions.

Conspicuously absent in all of the above is product knowledge and industry experience.

Successful businessman Jack Welch said, “When hiring you have to make a trade off. Do you hire someone to get a job done fast, or do you hire him based on his potential for growth? My advice is: try to pick the second option.”⁴

By hiring based on a certain set of characteristics as opposed to industry knowledge, you stop being anchored by the past. You can **create the dream**, rather than work with someone steeped in tradition and bogged down by paradigms.

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Matching the Individual to the Job

So how do you identify this high energy, courageous, passionate, empathetic and driven individual who will work well within your organization?

First, **define the job**. While it is important to really understand who your candidates are it is equally important to understand the job you are hiring for. Are you selling a product or service? How often will the candidate be required to close? How will leads be generated? What type of support system is there? Is there room for growth within the organization? Know the answers up front and you will have the framework to match the candidate to the job.^{1,2}

Second, define the combinations of **character traits that best suit the job**. Going into an interview, you should have a clear cut vision of the type of person who can be successful with your clients and work well with the rest of your team.

Without a doubt, certain situations require specific skill sets and different combinations of the traits mentioned above. The traits alone are good indicator of potential for success. When coupled with "job matching" techniques they are even better. By matching the person to the job, costly turnover can be reduced.²

The Selection Process

In some cases, identifying the right person boils down to experience – to the fact that you've been down the path enough that you have the gut instinct to recognize a winner when you see one. This is where an experienced sales management staff comes into play.

Each candidate should go through several layers of interviews, meeting with team members as well as management. One on one interviews work well for screening, but as the candidate moves along in the selection process interviews should be done in teams to give the interviewers the chance to bounce

ideas off of one another and see if they got the same "feel" from the candidate.

Interview questions should cover the candidate's interests, outside experiences, anything that gives you a picture of the "whole person." Personality profiling tests add to that picture.

In addition, look for characteristics that reflect the role. Did the candidate arrive prepared, ask good questions, listen, take notes, communicate clearly, and exhibit critical thinking skills? If not, take that as a red flag and walk away.

Understanding what internally programs a person to succeed in sales is important, as is understanding how a person will fit into a given environment. It is not easy. It is not, however, impossible. What it takes is time, effort, attention to detail, a roadmap to success, and a commitment to succeed.

Partner Effectively

If you've been down the hiring path before and have been met with nothing but frustration, it's never too late to make the right move. Consider outsourcing your sales effort with an experienced, strategic ally dedicated to new business acquisition; an ally who understands the ins and outs of hiring, managing, and retaining top sales performers; an ally who has the leadership, experience and best-in-class systems in place to help take your business to the next level.

¹ Greenberg, Herbert M., and Jeanne Greenberg. "Job Matching for Better Sales Performance." Harvard Business Review. N.p., n.d. Web. 20 July 2010. <<http://hbr.org/1980/09/job-matching-for-better-sales-performance/ar/1>>.

² Greenberg, Herb, Harold Weinstein, and Patrick Sweeney. *How to Hire and Develop Your Next Top Performer*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2001.

³ Mayer, David, and Herbert M. Greenberg. "What Makes a Good Salesman." Harvard Business Review. N.p., July-August 1964. Web. 20 July 2010. <<http://hbr.org/2006/07/what-makes-a-good-salesman/ar/1>>.

⁴ Welch, Jack, and Suzy Welch. *Winning*. New York: HarperCollins, 2005.

