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White Paper - Recruiting a High Performance Sales Team

Recent research suggests 1 in 7 new employees leave their new company before becoming competent. This paper explores some of the reasons for this and some of the techniques used by effective sales managers to maximise the chance of selecting and retaining top performers.

This is one of a series of papers on the techniques needed to build high-achieving sales teams. For more information on the topic, or to enrol on the workshop *Optimising the Sales Team*, go to www.directional.biz or call Directional on 02 9983 0712.

Research conducted by leading human resources consultancy SHL indicates that in Australia, 1 in 7 employees leave their job before they are competent. Poor selection and induction are major contributors to this statistic. This sort of job-hopping incurs significant costs as it takes an average of 7 months for Australian employees to reach competence in a new job. When you consider the ramifications with sales people, the costs may be multiplied many times, with sales staff turn-over leading to customer dissatisfaction, loss of business to competitors and damage to your company's reputation / brand.

So, while judgement or 'gut feel' will always have a part to play in recruitment, it pays to try to put some sophistication into the recruitment process, given the downside of getting it wrong.

It's often suggested that recruiting sales professionals is something of a dark art. After all, there are few if any formal qualifications relevant to most sales roles, and success in a previous sales role, even selling similar products for a competitor, is no guarantee of success in your organisation.

In the Directional workshop, *Optimising the Sales Team*, we explore 9 key steps that improve sales staff selection, and reduce the considerable risks of getting the selection process wrong. Two of these steps are: mapping skill-sets to the needs of your sales process, and using weighted characteristic matrices in evaluating and comparing candidates. Let's look briefly at each technique.

1. Mapping skill-sets to the needs of your sales process

It's now well established for most organisations, especially those selling to business or government clients, to have some form of structured and documented sales process.

As a result, even the most basic of customer relationship management (CRM) systems now allows sales forecasts to be tracked against a custom-designed sales process. Unfortunately, many organisations have developed these processes internally, looking outwards, rather than starting from the client's perspective of how they want to buy. If your sales team isn't using their CRM system effectively, or your sales results don't match sales forecasts month after month, then your sales process may be an area to re-assess. However, that's a topic covered in another Directional white paper.

Let's assume your sales process is sound and mirrors closely the decision-making process your clients use in buying from you. Then it makes admirable sense to structure your job description and skill requirements around this process.

Figure 1 shows a straightforward sales process that might be used in a technology or product sales environment with a fairly quick sales cycle. (Note that for clarity, we've ignored the customer buying process, sales objectives etc that would be present in a well-mapped sales process). From the eight steps in this example, it's simple to crystallise the key skills and attributes needed by your sales staff.

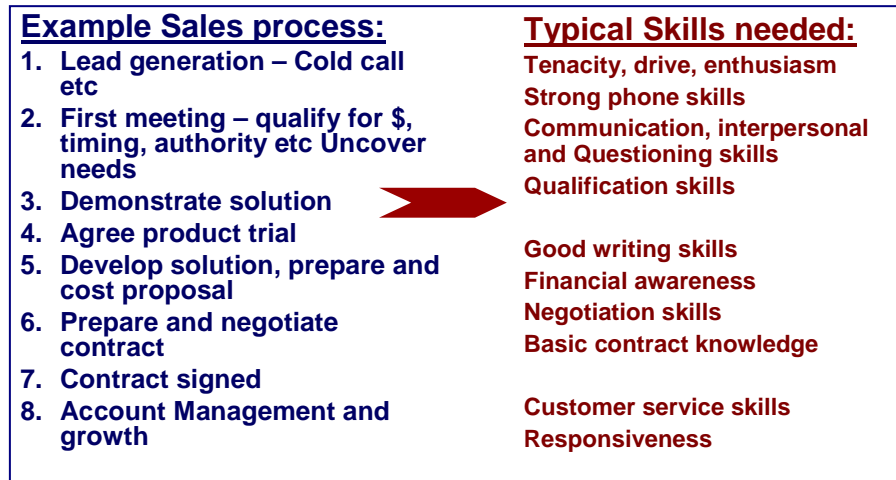


Figure 1. Aligning sales process with your customer's buying process is a pre-requisite for improving many aspects of sales performance, and helps define the skill-sets needed by sales staff.

2. Using weighted characteristic matrices in evaluating and comparing candidates

Having defined the skills you're looking for to take clients through your sales process, you then need to complete the two other characteristic groups – attitude and knowledge / experience, to round out our evaluation criteria. Weighting these on a scale of up to 50 ensures you prioritise those characteristics that are especially important.

This approach provides you with objectivity in the selection process. It also ensures that others who you ask to interview candidates, such as recruitment consultants and other managers and sales staff, have a clear understanding of the criteria for selection.

New Account Manager criteria	Jim Roberts	Peter Jones
Attitude		
Enthusiasm / drive / positive attitude	40	35
Intellect	10	5
Cultural fit - self managing ability	30	22
Skills		
New business prospecting	40	32
Customer service / responsiveness	10	8
Territory planning / management	30	15
Negotiating	10	5
Questioning skills	20	8
Teamwork / leadership skills	10	5
Presentation skills	10	5
Knowledge -		
Industry knowledge	20	8
Capital equipment sales experience	20	12
Total	250	160

Figure 2. Defining weightings for each characteristic helps to compare candidates objectively, especially when a number of interviewers are involved.

Successful sales leadership undoubtedly comes partly from good judgement. However, where the dark art of recruiting sales staff is concerned, it pays to add a little science to the process. Techniques such as these will reduce the time-to-effectiveness of new sales recruits along with increasing the chances of your new recruits achieving a successful induction into your business.

About the author.

Paul Howdle, Managing Consultant, Directional

Paul is a business and management consultant with a broad skills-base gained from over 15 years in sales, consulting and executive management roles. He has worked with organisations varying in size from start-up to multi-national. He has so far trained over 1,000 people in areas such as business management and planning, finance, leadership, project management and sales. He also has significant experience in initiating and developing creative strategic partnerships and alliances with organisations ranging in size from small companies to multi-nationals such as IBM, Westpac and Optus.

Paul's straightforward approach to business has helped many companies grow and prosper. Highlights for him include being one of a three-man team that built a new business from scratch to contracting over \$76m in its third year. At the other extreme, Paul has assisted another return to profitability.

He has worked with many organisations both large and small around Australia and SE Asia, including IBM, Fuji Xerox, Telstra, Fujitsu, QBE, Allianz, Axa, BP, Caltex, Optus, Commonwealth Bank, Westpac, Deutsche Bank, Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu, Department of Defence, CSIRO and Pacific Power.

For two years, he was a guest lecturer at Australia's top business school, the Australian Graduate School of Management (AGSM), leading 2-day sessions on topics such as Strategic Management, Marketing, Financial Analysis and Leadership as part of their Executive Development Programmes.