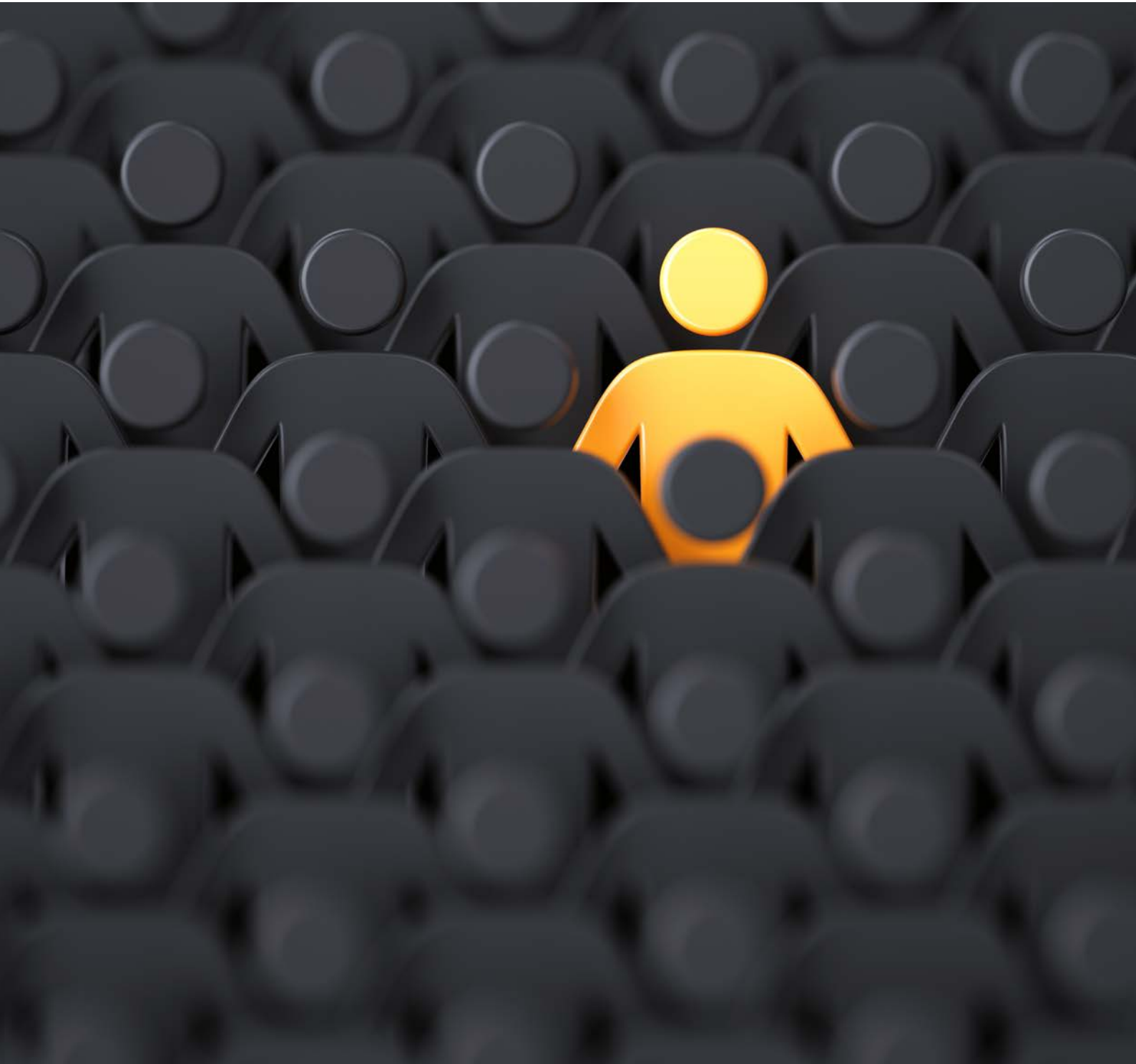


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SPECIAL REPORT //////////////////////////////////////

## FOCUS ON TALENT



# Hiring salespeople with talent

*Why an evidence-based approach is the route to a successful sales hire.*

Finding and recruiting the right salespeople is perhaps the most important role for any sales manager or leader. Hiring the wrong person – or at the other end of the scale, failing to fill the position at all – is costly in so many ways. The wasted recruitment costs are trivial in comparison to the revenues lost and all the other direct and indirect costs and consequences associated with failure.

The recruiting manager is often torn between the fear of missing out (FOMO) and the fear of messing up (FOMU). Missing out means failing to fill the open headcount. Messing up means hiring someone who subsequently fails in their new role. Neither is a satisfactory outcome. In both cases, the manager is typically still responsible for the quota allocated to the role in the meantime.

To compound the problem, salespeople with proven potential are in short supply. There is a tremendous war for talent. Good salespeople are confident of their own value. They are highly selective when it comes to their choice of role and employer, and they have developed powerful bulls\*\*t detectors. Headline on-target earnings matter less to them than their confidence about the income they will actually earn. Their potential employer's reputation and culture matter to them, as does their working environment.

## How attractive is your organisation?

Organisations with negative reputations and weak or negative cultures start with a huge disadvantage in this war for talent, to the point where, if executives are concerned about their ability to attract talent, they first need to look at the attractiveness of their organisation. Weak or negative organisational cultures attract and sustain weak and negative employee communities, and nothing anyone says in a recruitment advert or in the interview process is going to do much to change that.

What do we mean when we talk about "talent" anyway? The dictionary defines it as "natural aptitude or skill" and there's



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no doubt that these are foundational qualities. But experience tells us that this isn't enough. These natural aptitudes and skills might indicate someone has potential, but they always need to be successfully applied in the context of the role. And your potential employee's character, attitudes and behaviours are perhaps the most important determinants of whether their apparent talent is actually going to deliver the outcomes you are looking for.

## Hiring decisions

Hiring decisions – particularly sales hires – are too important, and too difficult, to be left to chance. The costs and consequences of getting these decisions wrong are so negative that we cannot afford to rely on the impressions conveyed in the interview process, and this is particularly relevant given that it is sometimes said (only partly in jest) that the one thing an incompetent salesperson has learned to do successfully is to sell themselves at an interview – particularly if the interviewer's own bulls\*\*t detector has been poorly calibrated.

As if this wasn't enough, CVs are typically highly polished selective interpretations of a candidate's career to date and often weak predictors of future performance. Even if the headlines look impressive, how the claimed results were actually achieved is often less obvious (and can't be taken at face value). Hiring primarily based on experience or the impression made at interview without taking full account of character, attitude and behaviour is a very high-risk strategy.

## Competencies

We can't act as if sales hiring is solely an art form. We need to ground it in science and in evidence. We need to be confident that our decisions are based on accurate observations of key indicators of aptitude, attitude, behaviour, and on core competencies. But before we do so, we need to be clear about the most important attributes and competencies we are looking for in the roles we are recruiting in to.

These will inevitably differ depending on the type of role. For example, is the role focused on new business or account management? Are we looking for hunters or farmers? Are salespeople expected to find their own opportunities, or respond to leads? Do we tend to compete on price or value? How much initiative do we need our salespeople to apply – or do we expect them to "follow our process"? How rigidly do we expect them to qualify opportunities? These attributes and competencies (and others) are critical to finding the right people for each role.

You'll notice that many of these attributes and competencies are clearly specific and unique to sales and are unlikely to be addressed by the sort of generic assessment tools

that many HR departments use for non-sales roles. Whilst these generic tools are not without value in general recruitment, they tend to be very weak predictors of success in selling roles. We need to use sales-specific tools if we are to identify great sales candidates.

## Profiling candidates

Once we've established and prioritised the required attributes and competencies, we then need to profile all our potential candidates against the desired selling profile, and to do so early in the selection process – before shortlists are drawn up – rather than waiting until towards the end of the exercise, by which time we may have eliminated otherwise promising candidates or still be running with people who will never make the grade.

And whilst the results of the assessment should never be the sole determinant of who ought to be hired or not, the recommendations of specialised sales candidate assessment tools have been scientifically proven (unlike the generic personality assessments) to have very high predictive value.

For example, Objective Management Group's own research of over two million candidates found that 92% of candidates who were hired after being recommended by their assessment tool rose to the top half of their new sales force within 12 months, whilst 75% of the candidates who despite not being recommended were nevertheless hired failed within six months.

Compare that to the average success rate of traditional sales hiring approaches (whether using generic personality tests or not), and I challenge you not to be impressed. Just imagine the revenue gap between following an evidence-based process and relying on conventional methods. It can (and it often has) made the difference between a successful sales management career and an uncomfortable failure.

## What works best?

My advice is to commit to an evidence-based approach, but not to allow yourself to be railroaded by HR into using a generic company-wide personality profiling tool that has weak correlation at best with successful sales hiring decisions. Be clear about the attitudes, behaviours, and competencies you are looking for in each role, and profile every credible candidate against that profile.

Take experience and the candidate's claimed track record into account, but never rely on them as your sole criteria. Carefully consider how each candidate might fit into your organisation and assess their potential to develop, grow and succeed. And think carefully about how good a "fit" your organisation is for your preferred candidates. Do these things, and your chances of making good sales hires that deliver results and stay and grow with you will be dramatically improved.

One last point, which I'll return to in the following article: if you truly understand every salesperson's attitudes, behaviours and competencies you are in the best position to make the most of their talent.



## About the author

Bob Apollo is the founder of UK-based Inflexion-Point Strategy Partners, the B2B sales effectiveness experts. Following a successful career spanning start-ups, scale-ups and corporates, Bob now spends his time as a coach and advisor to growth-phase technology-based businesses, equipping them to adopt the principles of Outcome-Centric Selling.



# Developing the potential of talented salespeople

*Why development is so much more than just training.*

In “Hiring salespeople with talent” (see pages 6-7), I explored the challenges involved in making good sales hires. Now I want to shift attention to some of the key things we need to do if we are to fully develop the potential of the talented salespeople that we have just hired.

You might not be surprised to learn that I believe that this involves understanding each salesperson’s attitudes, behaviours, and competencies in the context of our expectations for the role that we expect them to fulfil – as well as the future roles that we anticipate they might take on as they grow and develop.

Just as there is no such thing as a completely “perfect sale” (at least I have never observed one in any complex B2B sales environment), I believe that there is no such thing as a completely “perfect salesperson”. There is always the potential for improvement in any salesperson. Indeed, I’d suggest that a personal commitment to continuing self-development is one of the defining attributes of a top salesperson.

## Coaching

But, of course, managers can’t and shouldn’t simply rely on each individual salesperson’s commitment to personal self-development. We have a responsibility to guide their development. Some of this, of course, will come in the form of training programmes that are offered to our sales community as a whole. But the greatest impact will almost always come from our personalised coaching activities with each individual salesperson.

Unfortunately, we’ll struggle to target our coaching efforts if we don’t properly understand the current attitudes,

behaviours, and competencies of each of our salespeople. That’s where the evidence-based assessments I referred to in my article on hiring can prove so useful. As well as evaluating potential new hires, I believe that there’s an overwhelming case for assessing our existing salespeople and managers as the foundation for our coaching and development activities.

## Coaching for attitude

This gives us a set of personalised benchmarks which allow us to identify and agree each salesperson’s key priorities for individual development. Whilst the precise blend of desired characteristics will vary from role to role, Objective Management Group’s research has identified a handful of universal attitudes that define the coachability and potential of every salesperson.

These common qualities – the foundational platform upon which development depends – include desire, commitment, outlook, motivation, and the willingness to take responsibility. OMG’s analysis of over two million salespeople has also identified the salesperson’s need for approval (perhaps best described as the determination to be respected rather than the need to be liked) as one of the most important factors: top-performing salespeople tell the customer what they need to know, rather than what they want to hear.

Whilst these may at first appear to be soft or squidgy qualities, they are in fact all measurable using the right evidence-based sales assessments – and they can all be developed through effective coaching if both parties are willing, particularly if you are able to constructively confront the salesperson with evidence, rather than sharing your personal

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opinion on the matter.

Other observable attitudes and behaviours that directly impact sales confidence and performance include the salesperson’s ability to stay in the moment rather than be distracted, their comfort in discussing money issues and their ability to handle and recover from rejection. Most of us suffer from self-limiting beliefs that can hold us back, and the same is true of every salesperson – unless they have a coach who can identify, confront, and address them.

## Coaching for competence

I’ve deliberately invested time in highlighting the importance of coaching for attitude and behaviour when establishing evidence-based development plans for salespeople but coaching for competence is of course just as important – it’s just that it is always that much more effective when based on a solid platform of positive attitudes and behaviours.

If positive attitudes and behaviours are somewhat universal, the relative importance of key competencies often varies from one role to another. Drawing upon some of the examples in my previous article, these might include: is the role focused on new business or account management? Are we looking for hunters or farmers? Are salespeople expected to find their own opportunities or respond to leads? How much initiative do we need our salespeople to apply or do we expect them to “follow our process”?

Based on our answers to the above, we’ll probably conclude that the following competencies are more or less important to each role:

- Their effective use of social selling
- Their ability to make the most of both virtual and face-to-face selling
- Their ability to qualify opportunities consistently and accurately
- Their presentational skills and effectiveness
- Their ability to develop constructive relationships
- Their ability to reach and engage decision-makers
- Their ability to sell consultatively, and to establish meaningful value
- Their ability to negotiate effectively and emerge with a win-win outcome
- Their willingness to follow our defined sales process or framework

You can probably think of more, but I hope you’ll agree that the above is a good starting-point when it comes to assessing and developing sales competencies. When I assess sales organisations on behalf of clients, we typically find that some of these competencies would benefit from team-wide training initiatives and others are more specific to particular roles or individuals.

## Training needs reinforcement

If you decide that a training-led approach is appropriate for a

particular competence or group of competencies, and if you’ve ever undertaken or led a training programme, you’ll probably have observed that training without reinforcement tends to have a minimal lasting effect on performance. If all we do is to put our salespeople on training courses without carefully designed reinforcement through coaching, tools, and process, we shouldn’t be surprised to conclude that our investment of time and money has been wasted.

Assuming that we’ve made intelligent, evidence-based hiring decisions in the first place, then whether or not these people succeed in their roles is primarily down to our ability to develop their talent and help them reach their potential. Unlike the shrinking minority of CEOs that I still occasionally come across, I have never been a believer in simply “hiring the right people and letting them get on with it”.

Developing the potential of our salespeople is a relentless and ongoing process. It starts with hiring people with the attitudes, behaviours, and competencies to succeed in the first place. It requires that we understand the attitudes, behaviours, and competencies of our existing salespeople and sales managers. It depends on our seeking out evidence and not relying on assumption or supposition. And it requires the same qualities of persistence and determination that we expect to see in our salespeople.

It clearly can’t be accomplished through training alone. It needs a blend of structured training and personalised coaching. And it will fail without the necessary reinforcement and follow-up.

## Start at the top

So, I’ll leave you with one last thought: if reinforcement and follow-up are so important, wouldn’t it be better to start with your sales managers and leaders, and to ensure that you have the right people in place to perform these critical roles and that you have fully equipped them to get the very best out of their people?



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