

7 Things You Should Know About Hiring (*and Keeping*) Top Sales Performers

RULES FOR HIRING MORE “A” PLAYERS AND AVOIDING MIS-HIRES.



salestalent

BEST TALENT. BEST FIT.

Introduction

Most sales and HR leaders are all looking for the same thing when hiring a sales professional. They want to select and hire the best available sales rep for a market that is also a great fit for their organization. Several obstacles stand in the way of achieving this goal. For starters, the majority of sales professionals that are actively seeking a new position fall well short of being a top performer. Top 20% sales professionals are head down, focused on crushing their quota.

Based on best practices gleaned from proven selection processes, such as Top Grading and the experience of placing only corporate sales professionals for 19 years, we have compiled the following short guide to hiring sales professionals. These rules for selecting top sales performers have helped our clients increase the % of "A" players they hire and decrease the % of mis-hires.

1

Top Performers Are Selected, Not Developed.

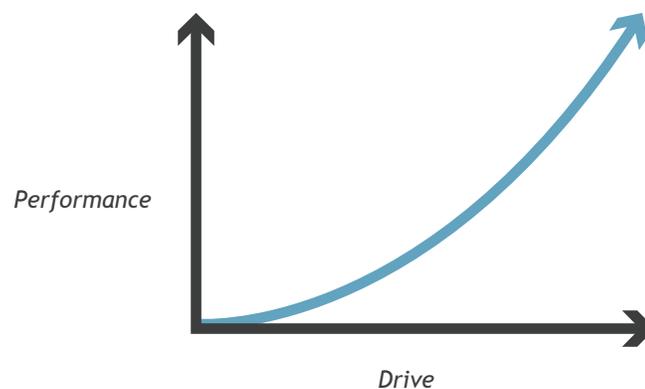
A core ingredient we've found in building an elite sales team is hiring sales reps that are intrinsically (internally) driven to perform. In our experience, it's extremely uncommon that a steady but unspectacular performer wakes up at the age of 28 or 35 and decides to (and actually does) perform at a high level. To be clear, some of these unspectacular performers interview (and perhaps stretch their accomplishments on their resume to appear) like superstars. A key ingredient they lack is drive.

At the center of top performers in all competitive fields is drive.

If you look at the backgrounds of top sales performers, you can almost always find multiple examples of excellence. Usually, you will see these examples from an early age, and they continue right up to the present. There are exceptions (left turners) which we'll address later.

We can look to athletics for a clear example of how selecting the right talent impacts team performance. Over the past ten years, the University of Alabama football's recruiting class has ranked in the top 5 every year. Seven of those ten years they ranked #1. The results? Five National Championships over the past decade! A telling stat is their recruiting budget during that timeframe. They were #1 or 2 in the nation for dollars spent on recruiting all ten years.

At the center of top performers in all competitive fields is drive. Drive, like any other characteristic, exists on a bell curve and for the most part, is set in an individual by adulthood. The drive of a top 20% sales performer is considerably stronger than the drive of a rep at the 50th percentile. A top 1%er's drive is positively pathological compared to our middle of the pack rep. It's this drive that compels an individual to put in additional cold calls before calling it a day or work on weekends to prepare for the upcoming week. In sum, you determine the ceiling of a territory the moment you choose the rep to fill that territory. Before we go on, it's important to note the difference between drive, ambition and extrinsic motivation.



Both driven and ambitious sales professionals possess motivation, but there is a clear difference between the two. Drive is innate, it's not a choice, it cannot be turned off, and it doesn't need external motivators to "turn on." Someone with drive simply needs the right fit and the right opportunity to excel. In football, they call these individuals "high motor" guys. They play hard whether the team is winning or losing. Switching sports, it's what made Michael Jordan the greatest basketball player of all time.

Ambition, on the other hand, is a choice. It is "turned on" when an individual is motivated to achieve a goal. Going back to our football analogy, these are the guys that "turn up" their play in a contract year. They choose to play harder. It's also why some reps stop performing at a high level when they get passed over for a promotion. To be fair, the right external motivation can most definitely influence the efforts and results of ambitious *and* driven sales reps.

Some sales professionals respond very well to extrinsic motivators and achieve similar results to some of their intrinsically motivated peers. The challenge with hiring sales reps that require extrinsic motivation (lack internal drive) is the constant need for their manager to "stay on top" of them. In essence, the rep is borrowing drive or ambition from their manager. If your sales reps are in the field for most of the week or worse, a state away, this quickly becomes an insurmountable problem. It also explains why many sales reps with solid track records of success fail when they move from a structured sales role to a company that doesn't provide them with extrinsic motivation.

[Next: Start With a Target: Developing a Hiring Profile](#)

2

Start With a Target: Developing a Hiring Profile.

When we start a new relationship, it often becomes clear that our new client hasn't invested the time required to develop a clear and repeatable hiring profile. To address, we have two steps to help us build one. Before we get those, it's important to know why it's imperative to create a consistent and repeatable hiring profile. If we are pulling talent from wildly different backgrounds and experience levels how will we ever get enough data to see what's working and what isn't? We won't know what adjustments to make.

Let's get back to the steps. First, we look at what's worked and what hasn't. Our client may want x, y or z qualities in a sales rep but do these qualities correlate with hiring success. Often the trends aren't obvious as it can take a good sized data set to uncover answers. For example, we can't write off ADP sales reps just because you hired two and they both failed. After all, only 25% of the reps from a given company are top performers. Of those, only a fraction are a good fit for your organization.

The second step is to uncover what the hardest part(s) of the job is. Find a sales rep that excels in this arena and your chances of making a successful hire skyrocket. Hire a stellar sales rep that is weak at the hardest part of your job, and you will have a mis-hire on your hands.

What we glean from these two steps gives us the starting point for our hiring profile. Over time we'll measure our results and continuously refine the profile.

Here is an example of what a basic hiring profile might look like:

4-12 yrs B2B outside sales experience from a hunting, high activity, consultative sale.

Demonstrated ability to sell to the C level of organizations with \$5-30M in revenue.

Earnings history of \$80k-\$130k.

Documented top 25% sales performance against their peers.

Next: Most Selection Processes are Broken

3

Most Selection Processes are Broken

It has been suggested that most hiring managers choose the right candidate 50% of the time. A three-year study of hiring processes by Lauren Rivera, a sociologist at Northwestern, within “elite professional service firms” sheds light as to why. During her research, she examined the hiring criteria and thought processes of hiring managers within that field. Absent “reliable predictors of future performance,” Rivera writes, “assessors purposefully used their own experiences as models of merit.” Among the factors she found with major weighting in their hiring decisions were “shared leisure interests.”

Hiring managers choose the right candidate less than 50% of the time.

She found that hiring managers were choosing candidates that were most like them or most like reps that they’d hired in the past who were successful. In our own experience, most hiring managers we encounter are more sophisticated than Ms. Rivera’s subjects. Still, they fail to look at the full picture of a candidate’s fit and potential for success within their organization. Once a hiring manager falls in love with an aspect of a candidate, they usually fail to fully thoroughly vet the rest of the ingredients necessary for a successful hire.

Hiring biases and blind spots are easy to miss and require a disciplined, thorough and objective approach to successfully navigate. The simplest and most effective method we've found for evaluating sales talent (which we learned from a fabulously successful and fast-growing medical consumables company) we call Can Do, Will Do and Fit. This more objective approach gives us a repeatable, teachable and effective way to measure and compare candidates. We'll explore each in the next section.

Can Do Score	
Will Do Score	
Fit Score	
Total	24 = HIREABLE

Next: Can Do, Will Do & Fit

4

Can Do, Will Do & Fit

Can Do

Does the candidate have the necessary skill set to perform at a high level (can they do the job)? When interviewing a candidate, compare them to the list of required skills that we identified when we established our hiring profile. From that list, zero in on the most difficult skills to train and the skills that are imperative for success (the hardest parts of the job). As an example, the key skills required could be the ability to consistently set a high volume of quality appointments with the C suite, the selling skills to sell value over price and the people skills and savvy to navigate the internal politics of your prospects and clients.

When evaluating a candidate's selling skills, the authors of Miller Heiman's "Strategic Selling" look for sales reps who can clearly explain their sales approach and have a repeatable road map for exceeding quota. Do they know how to get to a sale and can they articulate it?

After assessing a reps' competencies relative to our list, we rate them on a scale of 1-10 (with 8 being considered hireable). This gives us our Can Do score. Something to consider when scoring is that they should be rated relative to the experience and pay level you are offering. To paraphrase Brad Smart, the author of Top Grading, an "A" Player is someone who is in the top 10% of professionals at a given pay level.

Will Do

This is a measure of a candidate's drive mixed with the candidate's motivation to perform the job at hand within the constraints of your organization. Three attributes that we consider are: overall track record, track record with the three most difficult aspects of your job and the candidate's interest/passion for the day to day tasks of the job.

Again, after interviewing, we rate the candidate from 1-10 to establish their Will Do score. We give extra weighting to a candidate's willingness to prospect with positions that involve a medium to high volume of cold-calling. Most sales reps know how to cold-call and have done it in the past, but few consistently do it without strict micro-managing.

When evaluating a candidate's track record, look for consistent patterns of excellence beginning with high school. Academics, athletics, and adversity faced are considered for high school and college. By looking at this time frame of their life, we get a glimpse into how they were shaped into who they are today. With each sales position held, we look at their performance vs. quota, and vs. their peer group, awards won, promotions and earnings progression. Taken as a whole, you can see their career trajectory. Weigh recent results much higher than results from the past. Ideally, we find a consistent, upward arc. If there were some setbacks, why?

Before we move on to Fit, let's revisit your hiring profile. As you are developing it, consider that the career (and income) trajectory of a top 10% performer rises much faster than one in the top 25%. Perhaps your minimum experience bar is ruling out the top 10%ers. If your profile requires eight years of experience and pays \$150,000/yr but top 10% performers in your field are earning \$225,000 on average in their 8th year, you may have doomed yourself to hiring a top 25%er at best.

Fit

Getting Fit right can be challenging as many of the factors are subjective. When evaluating candidates to work here at Sales Talent, we refer back to our company values as the primary basis for a candidate's Fit.

For example, collaboration is a key component of our culture and the success of our team. A lone wolf simply would not "Fit" at Sales Talent. Whether you use your company's values or another guide to determine Fit, it's essential to make the process as objective as possible.

The second consideration with Fit is how a candidate's career goals and ambitions fit into what's possible and probable at your company. If a sales rep has a burning desire (and the talent) to make \$250,000/yr in the next four years and your top rep last year earned \$150,000, we have a high probability for turnover. In addition to income fit, we consider the match between a candidate's development goals with what our client can offer. From this, we have two aspects to score: values/culture fit and career fit. From these two we can determine our Fit score.

After adding the three scores from Can Do, Will Do and Fit we have a candidate's total score. We need to see a 24 or higher to rate a candidate hireable. They must also score an 8 or higher in each of the areas to be hireable. By following this approach, we now have a repeatable and effective way to compare potential candidates to a standard and each other.

Next: Up and Comers and Left Turners

5

Up and Comers and Left Turners

All other things being equal, we have found that the majority of our best hires fall into one of two camps - up and comers and what we call left turners.

What an up and comer is should be fairly obvious but to give some color it's a sales professional on the lower end of your profile (and often times has even less than your minimum) for sales experience but has results comparable or close to (but with a far steeper career trajectory) more seasoned reps.

A left turner with an up-and-comer trajectory is likely an A player.

Drawing again from the field of sports, LeBron James entered the NBA right out of high school and promptly won Rookie of the Year. If we stick with basketball, 8 of the ten players on ESPN's 2011^{*} Top 10 Players Rankings left college early, and one entered the NBA at the age of 19 after playing one year in Europe. Only one, #10 played four years of college ball before joining the NBA.

Left turners require more explanation. Occasionally we see exceptional sales reps that didn't get into sales until a later age. These are supremely talented sales reps with a gift that they didn't realize they had until they entered sales. Their performance in their roles prior might be subpar compared to their peers as they were trying to do a job that they were ill-suited for. When evaluating these individuals, we place most of our weighting on their performance once they found sales. If you find a left turner with a similar trajectory to an up and comer over their sales careers, you most likely have an A player. A plus is their maturity level as they are older than a comparable up and comer.

Up and Comer

- ↑ Strong Career Trajectory
- ↑ High Potential
- ↓ May Require More Training / Ramp Time

Left Turner

- ↑ Strong Sales Career Trajectory
- ↑ Good Mix of Potential and Maturity
- ↓ May Require More Training / Ramp Time

Seasoned "A" Player

- ↑ Proven Performer
- ↑ Potentially Faster Ramp Time
- ↓ Can You Afford Them?
- ↓ Competition - Can You Attract Them?

Next: Avoiding Mis-Hires, aka Spotting Liars

6

Avoiding Mis-Hires, aka Spotting Liars

ADP performs millions of background checks in each year. During these checks, they found that 46 percent of applicants lied about their work histories. Worse yet, 6% revealed an undisclosed criminal record within the past seven years. Included in the list of misrepresentations they found were “inflating past accomplishments.” So how do you spot lies so you can select genuine top performers?

We use a process that we call Triangulating. Does this person:

Possess the resume of a top performer?

Interview like a top performer?

Can document their sales performance to prove that they're a top performer?

In our experience, the least vetted of the three criteria (and possibly the most important) is the documentation of sales performance. Unfortunately, the interview system is rigged to encourage lying. Sales reps know that they won't earn your job if they reveal that they were 89% of quota last year. "Stretching" the truth will increase their chances of landing the job. As a bonus, it might increase the package they're offered. You can get around this by requiring candidates to provide documentation of their sales performance and earnings history (where legal). We see three tangible and immediate results after adding this step:

1. Candidates argue with us about this requirement citing "privacy," "trust," "confidentiality" or claims that their employer doesn't provide any information. In almost every case, when we give candidates the opportunity and some flexibility as to what info would be acceptable, the candidate could not provide sufficient documentation.
2. A large percentage of candidates disappear or cite other reasons as to why they're not interested in the position.
3. The hit ratio of quality hires increased, and turnover went down.

So how much documentation is enough? You have enough once you are *convinced* that this person is telling the truth. For example, they are missing their 2017 quota #s, but their w-2 from 2017 is in line with 2016 and 2018.

Next: Be Realistic

7

Be Realistic

Depending on the available talent pool and the size of the metro you are recruiting in, a top 5% or even a top 10%er may not exist with your preferred background that also fits with your comp plan. In the recruiting world, these perfect (but unobtainable) candidates are called “purple squirrels.” Navigating this reality requires some flexibility with your hiring profile to find a top performer (given that most companies can raise their pay only so far).

When faced with this, we have found success one of two ways:

1. Broaden the industries that you are recruiting out of. The medical client that taught us Can Do, Will Do and Fit is a fantastic example. They prefer to hire sales reps with previous medical sales experience as it decreases ramp time. When they can't find an A player with industry experience, they target stellar b2b candidates. After reviewing several years worth of hires, we found that a disproportionate percentage of their top performers were these b2b reps (although it took these reps longer to ramp up).
2. Look at candidates with less experience that are more affordable but have A player trajectories. The critical piece here is finding a stellar up and comer or left turner.

Moving Forward

With the first year investment in a sales hire exceeding six figures (salary, training, benefits, etc.) it's hard to underestimate the importance of selecting the right sales candidate. We hope that this guide will provide you with a solid starting point for increasing your probability of success.

For more sales hiring insights (posted quarterly):

Sign Up: salestalentinc.com/blog/

For more information about how we recruit passive, currently employed top sales performers:

Visit: salestalentinc.com

Call: (855)245-9463

Sales Talent: Best Talent, Best Fit.