

How to Hire the Best Salespeople

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Introduction

The biggest problem most businesses have is hiring the right people. Therefore, typically a manager's success depends on how well they solve the problem of hiring the best people for the jobs they supervise.

The second biggest problem most businesses have is how to grow revenue—the primary job of a sales organization. Thus, a sales executive's success depends on how well they solve the problem of how to hire good performing salespeople.

In this paper I will discuss the process of hiring salespeople and provide a Hiring Decision Scale that will identify what attitudes, attributes, skills, and knowledge to look for in specific type of sales job. In addition, I will provide an Interviewing Guide that contains questions to ask in a selection interview for that sales position.

The Hiring Process

Hiring must be part of an overall organizational talent management system that includes:

1. Job descriptions
2. Attitudes, attributes, skills, and knowledge needed to be successful in those jobs
3. Recruiting
4. Screening
5. Interviewing
6. Checking references
7. Selection
8. Follow-up/evaluating
9. Terminating

Job Descriptions

Before recruiting, screening, interviewing, and selecting salespeople, an organization must first describe the details of the job that is open. Therefore, it is imperative that before the hiring process begins that a detailed job description is written that contains the competencies that are required for a specific sales job, such as a sales development representative (SDR) or account executive (AE).

In this paper I am making the assumption that the sales position being described is an outbound, personal selling, business-to-business (B2B) job (as opposed to a business-to-consumer (B2C) job) which requires some prospecting and qualifying of prospective customers. Another assumption is that the sales job being described is one in which the assignment of getting customers (missionary selling) is combined with the job of keeping customers (service selling, or customer success).

Examples of the type of sales jobs that are being described are selling advertising for television and radio stations, newspapers, magazines, newsletters, news and entertainment websites and apps, software-as-service (SaaS) products, or business productivity or security services.

A job description for such businesses should contain the following elements:

1. Relevant reporting relationships
2. A statement of the sales organization's mission, purpose, goals, objectives, and strategies
3. The details of job tasks, necessary skills, and skill level
4. Specific performance expected and how performance will be measured

Relevant reporting relationships are pretty straightforward: who is a salesperson's supervisor or

team leader and who is the supervisor's manager.

A statement of the sales department's mission, purpose, goals, objectives, and strategies is important because it defines a sales organization's purpose, vision, and values. Daniel Pink, in his best-selling book, *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*, writes that what drives high performance and high job satisfaction are autonomy, mastery, and purpose. People in general, including salespeople, want more than a paycheck, they want a sense of purpose in their work, a sense that they are doing something worthwhile, that they are making a difference.

The details of job tasks, necessary skills, and skill level. The assigned tasks should include which of the six steps of selling a salesperson will be responsible for. The six steps of selling are: (1) Prospecting and Qualifying, (2) Researching Insights and Solutions, (3) Educating, (4) Proposing, (5) Negotiating and Closing, and (6) Customer Success.¹ For example, a SDR might be assigned to Prospecting and Qualifying and Researching Insights and Solutions. An AE might be assigned the tasks of Educating, Proposing, and Negotiating and Closing.

There are two types of necessary skills: hard skills and soft skills. Hard skills consist of understanding how to operate in a digital environment and using software such as Word, Excel, PowerPoint, Gmail, or Outlook or platforms such as Google search, LinkedIn, Facebook, or YouTube. Soft skills consist of such interpersonal skills as listening, communicating, collaborating, and adapting to change.²

Specific performance expected and how performance will be measured are both vital to be included in a job description so that applicants know what is expected of them. As I wrote above, talent management is a system that has several interdependent elements. Therefore, the two elements of specific performance expected and how performance will be measured must be based to some degree on the performance evaluation method used by a company, with the understanding that most performance evaluation systems in most companies that are conducted yearly are worse than worthless, they are typically counterproductive. Sales organizations must have separate, sales-specific measurement and evaluation systems that are implemented at least monthly to be effective.

Typically, sales performance is measured by such elements as: (1) the number of prospects developed and qualified in a month or quarter or (2) how many presentations are made to decision makers in a month or quarter, or (3) volume of business. Different companies have different definitions of what is measured, but regardless of the measurements used, job applicants must know precisely what numbers they will be held accountable for.

Attitudes, Attributes, Skills, and Knowledge Needed

Once a job description has been developed, then the attitudes, attributes, skills, and knowledge needed to be successful must be defined. There are dozens of attributes, attitudes, personality traits, behaviors, and skills that, combined, make a successful salesperson. However, when interviewing, you must reduce all of these down to a manageable set that can be identified by asking questions in a selection interview.

¹ Charles Warner with William Lederer and Brian Moroz. 2020. *Media Selling: Digital, Television, Print, Audio, and Cross-platform*. Wiley.

² Marco Dondi, Julia Kiler, Frederic Panier, and Jorg Schubert. 2021. "Defining the skills citizens will need in the future of world work." *McKinsey Quarterly*.

AESKOPP

In *Media Selling* I write that success in selling depends on seven elements: (1) **A**ttitude, (2) **E**motional Intelligence, (3) **S**kills, (4) **K**nowledge, (5) **O**pportunity, (6) **P**reparation, and (7) **P**ersistence. I believe these AESKOPP elements are a good way to begin to organize what attributes, attitudes, personality traits, behaviors, skills, and experience to look for in a selection interview.

Attitudes

For over 30 years at CBS, NBC, RKO, WWSW-AM, and AOL I interviewed and hired hundreds of salespeople, many who were highly successful. Over those years I learned it was best to develop a list of questions to ask and then ask the same questions in every subsequent interview. When I wrote the fifth edition of the textbook, *Media Selling*, that has been adopted by over 70 universities worldwide, I conducted research on the attitudes and attributes that make salespeople successful. For the purpose of this paper, attitudes, attributes, traits, and qualities all have similar meanings, and from now on they will just be referred to as attitudes.³

As a result of my interviewing experience and my research, I have narrowed down what to look for in a selection interview to the following elements, roughly organized according to the AESKOPP system. I have eliminated opportunity from the seven elements and added chemistry and fit to the list below;

- Attitudes
 - Integrity/honesty
 - Positive/optimistic
 - Competitive
- Emotional intelligence (self-awareness, self-management, social competence, and relationship management)
- Skills
 - Listening
 - Communicating
- Knowledge
- Preparation
- Persistence
- Chemistry and Fit

Integrity/honesty are attitudes that entail a sense of moral responsibility and business ethics, and are critical for salespeople to have because prospects do not buy from salespeople they do not trust, who do *not* have integrity, and are *not* honest.

Positiveness/Optimism are vital attitudes because salespeople continually face rejection, and they cannot overcome being rejected if they are pessimistic. Salespeople must believe they can control outcomes, and be positive and optimistic about the future.

Competitiveness is an attitude that has two basic elements: internal and external. Internal competitiveness involves competing with yourself—a drive to improve—a drive for mastery, which Daniel Pink in *Drive* writes is one of three basic human motivators, and which, in turn,

³ Marco Dondi, Julia Kiler, Frederic Panier, and Jorg Schubert. 2021. “Defining the skills citizens will need in the future of world work.” *McKinsey Quarterly*.

requires goal orientation and a growth mindset. A growth mindset is the opposite of a fixed mindset, as defined by Carol Dweck in her book *Mindset*. A person with a fixed mindset believes that personal attributes such as intelligence, ability, and motivation are innate and unchangeable. A person with a growth mindset believes that they and others can change, learn, and grow. Having a growth mindset is absolutely necessary for success in sales.

External competitiveness involves competing with other salespeople—a drive to be the best—both within one’s own sales organization and with salespeople in competitors’ sales organizations.

In their bellwether *Harvard Business Review* article Mayer and Greenberg write that there are two basic qualities that good salespeople must possess: empathy and ego drive.⁴ The authors define ego drive as “the need to conquer.” They write that ego drive makes salespeople “want and need to make the sale in a personal or ego way, not merely for the money to be gained. [Their] feeling must be that [they] *have* to make the sale.” Mayer and Greenberg’s concept of ego drive is, in my view, better described as being *competitive*, mainly because in an interview it is much more difficult to identify the general concept of ego drive or even Pink’s concept of mastery than it is to identify competitiveness, wanting to win, and being driven to be the best.

Emotional intelligence

Emotional intelligence (EQ) has four elements: self-awareness, self-management, social competence, and relationship management. But, like ego drive, the broad concept of emotional intelligence is difficult to identify in an interview. *Empathy* is much more descriptive and easier to identify in an interview.

Empathy is the ability to feel, to connect emotionally to another person, to understand how *they* feel.

Skills

The hard and soft skills necessary to be successful in a sales job vary tremendously depending on the difficulty and complexity of a particular sales task assignment.

Hard skills, as defined in a job description, should be evaluated by a recruiter early in the selection process before an interview is scheduled with a hiring manager. The skill level needed on hard skills should be rated 0-4, with 0 indicating no skill or familiarity and 4 indicating an expert level. For example, if Researching Insights and Solutions is in a sales development representative (SDR) job assignment, then a SDR candidate should be competent (level 3 or 4) in using Excel or Google Sheets spreadsheets. If Educating is in the job description for an account executive (AE), then being competent (level 3 or 4) in creating and delivering PowerPoint presentations is important.

Soft skills should be also be considered by a recruiter in the initial screening interview. The soft skills to be evaluated are:

Listening means that a salesperson must not only hear another person but also be able to give verbal and non-verbal feedback that the salesperson has heard, understood, and empathized with what the other person is saying.

Communicating means that a salesperson can communicate with prospects concisely, logically, and with correct grammar both orally and in writing.⁵

⁴ David Mayer and Herbert M. Greenberg. 2006. “What Makes a Good Salesman.” *Harvard Business Review*. July-August.

⁵ Kyle Wiens 2012. “I Won't Hire People Who Use Poor Grammar. Here's Why.” <http://blogs.hbr.org/2012/07/i->

It is a mistake to correlate hard and soft skill levels with years of experience. In the vast majority of job descriptions, the value of experience is highly overrated. Mayer and Greenberg in their HBR article refer to it as the “experience fallacy.”

A person can increase their skill level with practice, but some people have more talent, facility, or intelligence than others and can, thus, learn to be competent or to master a skill faster than others. Therefore, what is important is a person’s skill level, not how long it took them to get to that level, not how much practice or experience they have.

Generally, HR departments write job descriptions, and, as a defensive mechanism, include more experience than is realistically needed to do most sales jobs. Do not consider years of experience in a job as vital. It is the skill level that is vital, and skill levels can be easily tested.

Knowledge

Knowledge is acquired largely because of a person’s curiosity and intelligence. However, such knowledge as a company’s or prospect’s industry, business model, company, products, customers, vendors, and competitors are all important, but such knowledge can be acquired in training sessions after a person is hired. Also, the type of sales job and the sales tasks involved usually determine how much prior knowledge is needed. Curiosity and intelligence are difficult to assess in an interview, but the level of prior knowledge needed to do a job as described in a job description can be tested in both screening and selection interviews.

Preparation

Preparation consists of strategic thinking before acting (aiming before firing), planning, organizing, and time management. Sales planning requires doing extensive research on a prospect’s industry, business, products, challenges (a euphemism for problems), and decision makers. A little more than a decade ago salespeople were trained to ask a series of discovery questions in qualifying interviews in order to gather information about a prospect’s industry, business, products, challenges, and decision makers, but prospects today do not have time nor will tolerate discovery questions. Prospects expect salespeople to understand their business and its challenges and to educate them on how what they are selling can solve one or more of their business challenges.

Persistence

Persistence is defined as “a firm or obstinate continuance in a course of action in spite of difficulty or opposition.” Persistence means obstinately sticking to a task. Persistence also includes grit, or the ability to pick oneself up after a fall or failure. Persistence requires courage. Salespeople will get ten times more “nos” than “yeses,” so having the courage to keep going, putting the “nos” behind them, and being able to move on are vital to success.

Chemistry and Fit

A resume, an initial recruiter interview, or a paper-and-pencil skills or knowledge test will not tell you how well people on your sales staff will like a candidate or how well a candidate will fit in on a team. Few tests can tell you about how a candidate’s values and ethics fit in with an organization’s values, so assessing how a candidate’s values and ethics fit with those of an organization is crucial.

Many of the above elements can be identified by two basic methods: (1) Paper-and-pencil or online tests and (2) selection interviews.

Tests

Often, companies attempt to identify desired attitudes by using personality and/or IQ tests. However, such tests often cause legal problems. Any type of test is illegal unless it can be proven definitively with valid and reliable research that what is being tested is essential to successful job performance.

Personality tests have often been challenged successfully in the courts and few companies have been willing to invest the huge amounts of time and money necessary to validate the efficacy of personality tests. Therefore, relatively few companies use them today, and those that do are open to legal challenges, especially from minorities.

Another reason I do not recommend using personality tests is because they are relatively easy for reasonably clever job candidates to manipulate. Almost all personality tests are “imminently fakable.” Smart applicants know what answers will make them seem to be pleasant, cooperative, and highly motivated. Also, almost all personality tests favor group conformity, not individual creativity.⁶

IQ tests are just as problematic. Standard IQ tests typically deal with problem-solving intelligence (math oriented) and verbal intelligence and leave out empathy.

Therefore, I do not recommend using either personality or IQ tests.

Interviews

If personality or IQ paper-and-pencil or online tests are not used to identify desirable attitudes and skills, that leaves selection interviews. However, before designing questions to ask in an interview, the attitudes and skills must be prioritized and weighted before interviewing candidates so a consistent formula for evaluation has been quantified. That prioritizing is accomplished with a Hiring Decision Scale.

Below in Exhibit 1 is a Hiring Decision Scale that I have developed over the years for hiring salespeople. In the Hiring Decision Scale below I have prioritized nine attitudes and skills described above and given them weights. I have weighed the first nine items on a scale of 10 through 2 and given the tenth, Chemistry and Fit, an average weight of the other nine, or a weight of 6. I used this method of weighting because I believe that the nine attitudes and skills should be prioritized in rank order, but that Chemistry and Fit is a distinctly different, more subjective issue and, therefore, should be given an average weight—in the middle between the highest (10) and the lowest (2).

Each sales organization should develop its own Hiring Decision Scale by comparing the best performing salespeople on the attitudes and skills to the worst performing salespeople.

Exhibit 1: Hiring Decision Scale

Hiring Decision Scale: AE

Tasks

Educating

Proposing

Negotiating and Closing

	<u>Weight</u> <u>(1-10)</u>	<u>Score</u> <u>(1-5)</u>	<u>Total</u>

Empathy	10		
Competitive	9		
Integrity/honesty	8		
Listening	7		
Communicating	6		
Persistence	5		
Preparation	4		
Positive/Optimistic	3		
Knowledge	2		
Chemistry and Fit (Average weight)	6		
Total	60		
Total Indexed to 100	20		

Exhibit 2: Example

Hiring Decision Scale: AE

Tasks

Educating

Proposing

Negotiating and Closing

	<u>Weight (1-10)</u>	<u>Score (1-5)</u>	<u>Total</u>
Empathy	10	4	40
Competitive	9	5	45
Integrity/honesty	8	5	40
Listening	7	4	28
Communicating	6	3	18
Persistence	5	4	20
Preparation	4	5	20
Positive/Optimistic	3	5	15
Knowledge	2	3	6
Chemistry and Fit (Average weight)	6	4	24
Total	60		256
Total Indexed to 100	20		85.3

Notice in the Hiring Decision Scale Example that the weights have been multiplied by the scores and then the totals have been added for a grand total score of 256, which has been indexed to 100 for a final score (think of it as a grade) of 85.3. If a candidate scores over 75, you should consider them good enough to hire.

Recruiting

Today, virtually all recruiting is done by third-party recruiting companies that use AI to scrape the web, especially LinkedIn, to find job candidates who have the skills needed for a particular sales job. Companies such as ZipRecruiter conduct initial automated AI searches, then recruiting companies such as Korn Ferry or internal recruiters conduct preliminary screening interviews, and then the recruiters pass on to a hiring company’s managers a small number of qualified candidates to interview.

Even though recruiting for sales jobs is done by either external or internal organizations,

sales managers should continually look for talent. It should be an ongoing process and not occur only when a job is open. Recruit all the time and recruit actively. This means that at conventions, community meetings, calling on customers, shopping, or dining out sales managers must be on the lookout for talent.

Referrals are also an excellent source for developing talent. A company's own salespeople are the best sources for referrals because the sales staff knows who is good on the street. Salespeople are better at assessing sales talent than customers are. Be careful about referrals from customers because they might prefer salespeople who are soft and easy, and, thus, give low prices and deals that are too good, or customers might like salespeople who are easy to negotiate with, or, worse, who take losses too easily.

Also consider recruiting salespeople who work for competitors. Salespeople usually know who at their competition are hurting them, so sometimes a good way to strengthen a staff and weaken a competitor's staff is to hire one of their effective salespeople. However, stealing salespeople from the competition can escalate into a talent bidding war. Furthermore, if several salespeople are hired from a competitor, a company might find itself with a lawsuit for tampering. Furthermore, when salespeople are stolen from the competition, typically bidding wars ensue in which money is the lure. Remember, there is never going to be enough money to satisfy people who change jobs only for money. If they come just for more money, they will go somewhere else just for more money, too.

Screening

Today, most screening is done by third-party recruiting companies or in larger firms by internal recruiting or talent organizations. Their screening procedures are similar to those mentioned below for dealing with unsolicited applicants for a sales job.

Sales executives often get phone calls from people looking for sales jobs, and those calls need to be screened properly. I recommend that as many of these calls be taken as possible. Give a person two minutes to give you their "elevator pitch" about themselves. If the two-minute elevator pitch is good, set up a screening skills test. If callers do not have an elevator pitch or are otherwise unprepared, then suggest they write an email explaining why they want a sales job in the company—that is all, do not say more. Give them as little guidance as possible in order to give them the opportunity to show how knowledgeable, enthusiastic, and persistent they are.

If a call from a prospective candidate, cannot be taken, have someone screen the calls. Train call screeners to ask why the callers want a sales job and then to listen to an elevator pitch (tell applicants that they have only two minutes). If it is a good pitch, have the screener set up an appointment and ask for an email as to why the applicants want to work for the company and do the job that is open. It is important to give the email assignment in order to see how well someone writes. Is the email grammatically correct and does it have an adequate business-language approach? If the elevator pitch is inadequate, go no further.

Two things to remember about screening: Always be polite and gracious, even when turning people away. Try to be as accessible as possible and to give people a two-minute opportunity to sell themselves. It is not only good PR but also a star might be discovered.

Resumes, Cover Letters, and Letters of Recommendation

Studies have shown that 45 percent of resumes contain false information. Most college careers services departments and resume writing courses and services advise to claim as much responsibility as possible and to hype a resume with "positive" language. In other words, most resumes are systematically exaggerated. Look over a resume quickly to check dates, make sure

it flows properly, is logical, and is grammatically correct, but do not give the resume entries any credence until after probing more thoroughly in an interview.

Profiles on LinkedIn are usually a more reliable source of information than prepared resumes, and LinkedIn is primarily where most recruiting AI software scrapes to find qualified sales job candidates. On the other hand, resumes that have been specifically written for the job that is open deserve a close look because applicants have made a special, intelligent effort.

Cover letters (emails) are an excellent way to evaluate an applicant's communication skills (especially grammatic writing), preparation, and knowledge.

Letters of recommendation are virtually worthless. Imagine one that reads "Don't hire this turkey?" The only letters of recommendation to pay any attention to are those from highly credible executives or teachers who write letters that are very specific about why a candidate is especially qualified to succeed in your specific open sales job.

Interviewing

Successful interviewing begins with setting the right objectives.

Objectives of a Selection Interview

1. To assess the attitude and skills of a candidate.
2. To identify past behavior as an indicator and predictor of future behavior
3. To asses chemistry and fit
4. To predict success in a job

Problems With Selection Interviews

1. Confirmation bias
2. Stereotyping
3. Comfort with similar people
4. Tendency to be unstructured
5. Situational influences
6. Environmental influence
7. Interviewer differences
8. Interviewing order in which candidates appear
9. Interviewer mood
10. Tendency to forget
11. Tendency to remember only negatives
12. Talking too much
13. Losing control of the interview
14. Arrogance
15. Pressure to hire

Solutions

Interviewers must conduct structured and disciplined interviews in order to overcome these problems.

Confirmation bias: In order to overcome the tendency to hold on to first impressions too long and, thus, to confirm an initial bias, interviewers must suspend making any judgments for the first 20 minutes of an interview. Regardless of a first impression, be fair to applicants and give them an opportunity to clarify why they are right for the open job.

Stereotyping: In order to avoid the natural, subconscious drive to stereotype people, interviewers must develop the proper attitude: open, objective, skeptical, and attentive. Interviewers must be open to new ideas and diverse people, remain absolutely objective during the entire interview, and not allow a first impression, which is often a stereotype, to linger in their minds.

Comfort with similar people: Interviewers must be particularly careful not to be impressed with similar people, such as someone of the same gender, same age, same type of college education (or same college—the old-school-tie effect), or similar social background. The natural tendency to like similar people or to be impressed with a common experience is called a halo effect, and you must remain objective to avoid any halo effects. The rule for interviewers to follow is, “Don’t clone yourself.”

Tendency to be unstructured: It is imperative that interviews be structured, which means using an Interviewing Guide, printed out in advance, that contains all the questions—open-ended and follow-up questions—that are going to be asked and room under each question to take notes on a candidate’s answers.

Situational influences: Situational differences occur when the preconditions for an interview change. For example, a recruiting firm might be hired to find viable candidates for a sales job, and you might have a tendency to unconsciously favor all candidates recommended by the recruiting firm and neglect other candidates who might be well qualified. Or, an interviewer might interview a candidate who the CEO of the company’s assistant said, “Mr. Jones (CEO) wonders if you have time to see Jane Doe for an interview?” Of course, the interviewer has to make time, but depending on their past experience with CEO recommendations, an interviewer might be favorably or unfavorably disposed to the candidate and, thus, not be objective. Often interview requests from an organization’s top executives are courtesy interviews that are motivated by social favors or business relationships, and the executives are not necessarily recommending a person, just doing someone else a favor.

No matter what the situation is and no matter what an interviewer’s prejudices are to judge or not to judge a candidate favorably, once an interview appointment is set up, all candidates, regardless of how they came to the interview, must have a fair opportunity. Give them at least 20 minutes, listen to them carefully, and remain objective. And, most important, no matter what the situation is, ask the same questions in the same order as are asked in any other interview. Always use an Interviewing Guide.

Environmental influences: Interviews should be conducted in a quiet place with few distractions. Also, make certain there are no interruptions. Hold all calls. One of the biggest complaints people have about being interviewed is that the person who interviewed them was continually interrupted and that the interviewee did not have a fair chance to be heard. Be nice, pleasant, and never arrogant. In every interview interviewers want the people being interviewed to leave with a positive view of the interviewer and of their organization.

Another environmental issue is the room setup. Try not to sit behind a desk with the interviewee on the other side of the desk. That setup is too formal and gives the interviewer a daunting power advantage. It is best to have a sofa or a couple of chairs arranged around a coffee table, a setup that is more casual, less formal, and a little more intimate, which gives the candidate a chance to relax.

Often getting out of the office for an interview is a good idea. Interviews at restaurants can be more relaxing and less tense for an applicant. Also, if the interviewer eats while a

candidate talks, the interviewer cannot talk that much and has to listen.

More and more interviews are conducted online on platforms such as Zoom, Google Meet, or Microsoft Teams. If an interview is conducted online, begin the interview with a friendly, informal approach in order to put the interviewee at ease. Start the conversation with small talk and personal anecdotes that make an interviewer seem as warm, welcoming, and human as possible.

Interviewer differences: More than one person in an organization should interview all candidates. I recommend that at least three, and preferably four, people in a sales organization interview all legitimate candidates. If a company has an HR department, someone from HR should interview the candidate and give candidates information about such things as a company's values, culture, and benefits.

Often when there are several interviewers, one person may believe a candidate is perfect for a sales job while other interviewers may believe the same candidate is unsuitable. By three or more interviewers I mean interviewers in separate interviews, not two or three in one interview setting. It is not a good idea to have two or more interviewers at the same time because it makes most candidates uncomfortable. They feel as though they are being ganged up on. When candidates feel pressured, they tend to clam up instead of opening up and you learn less about them.

The best way to lessen the negative effects of interviewer differences is for everyone who interviews a candidate to use the same Interviewing Guide. Immediately after an interview, everyone should fill out a Hiring Decision Scale and then compare notes.

In Daniel Kahneman, Oliver Sibony, and Cass R. Sunstein's book, *Noise: A Flaw in Human Judgment* about making decisions, the authors recommend a process for making good, objective group decisions. If a team of people are making hiring decisions, the group should meet, and before saying anything about candidates being considered, each person should: (1) Write down on a piece of paper the rank order of the candidates being considered based on their rating on a Hiring Decision Scale, (2) fold the paper so that no one else in the meeting can read it, and (3) place the folded paper in front of them. Then, when the discussion of the candidates begins, the first person to speak should open the folded paper in front of them and read their ranking and rating of the candidates and why they ranked them in that order. The first person to speak should be the least senior person in the meeting. The discussion should continue with each person speaking in reverse order of their seniority or position of power. This procedure should be followed because if the most senior or most powerful person speaks first, it influences all the others.

Interviewing order in which candidates appear: If several interviews are conducted back-to-back, and one interviewee is awful and the next one is mediocre, the mediocre one will seem like a superstar. On the other hand, if one interviewee is a superstar and the next one is mediocre, the mediocre one will seem like a complete dud. Be aware of these ordering effects and make certain that to take notes on an Interviewing Guide and rate each interviewee on a Hiring Decision Scale immediately after each interview.

Interviewer mood: An interviewer's mood can have a significant effect on how an interviewer evaluates a candidate. "Interviewers in high spirits rated applicants more favorably than interviewers who were down in the dumps. Also, interviewers who were in a good mood remembered more of the applicant's positive traits, while those in a bad mood recalled more negative information," according to psychologist Robert A. Baron in an article in the *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*. Baron also suggests that male interviewers are more strongly

affected by their moods than women are. Baron writes that it is imperative in an interview to separate out personal feelings when evaluating a person.⁷ Therefore, interviewers must be aware of their moods and factor this information into their evaluation of a candidate. Assessing their own mood is difficult for most people, but rigorous use of an Interviewing Guide and a post-interview Hiring Decision Scale can help mitigate the effects of mood.

Tendency to forget: Typically, filling an open sales job takes weeks or even months of interviewing potential candidates. Because of the effects of primacy and recency, people tend to remember best the first and the last interviews, which means that those interviews in the middle of an extended interview process tend to be forgotten. Using an Interviewing Guide, asking the questions in an Interviewing Guide, taking notes on the Guide, and by completing a Hiring Decision Scale for every applicant immediately after each interview is the only sure way to overcome this tendency to forget.

Tendency to remember only negatives: All people, and therefore, all managers have a natural fear of making mistakes. Therefore, people have a tendency to pay attention to perceived negatives about a candidate, such as lack of a college degree or lack of experience, in order to avoid making mistakes. Interviewers should focus on strengths and positives.

Talking too much: One of the biggest problems in interviewing is talking too much, especially at the beginning of an interview. Clever applicants will try to get interviewers to talk and will ask a lot of questions about the job, the interviewer, the company, the current sales staff, and the boss and his or her bosses. There is a natural tendency to be polite and answer such questions, but do not do it. When interviewers answer questions, they are telegraphing the answers they want to hear. The best way to deflect such questions at the beginning of an interview is to smile and say, “We’ll have plenty of time to talk about other things later on, but first I want to get to know *you* better.” Do not be sucked into answering questions at the start of an interview. *Shut up and listen.*

Losing control of the interview: In addition to talking too much and telegraphing answers to candidates’ questions, interviewers too often lose control of an interview. They let clever, experienced interviewees control an interview by asking questions that will help them give answers interviewers are looking for. The best way to maintain control is to respond to probing questions with something like, “We’ll have time later on for me to answer your questions, but for now I’d like for you to focus on answering my questions.”

Arrogance: I have been fortunate over the years and have hired some excellent people, but I learned the hard way—through trial and error—many of the hiring principles I am writing about now. But when I was with CBS, I failed to hire, actually turned off, several excellent people because I was arrogant. Arrogance in a interview can scare away good people who could possibly become fierce competitors.

Pressure to hire: Often some of the biggest mistakes managers make in hiring salespeople is when there is pressure to hire someone. Having a sales job open usually means lost sales as other salespeople and sales management scramble to cover accounts. Top management hates

⁷ Robert Baron. 1993. “Interviewers’ Moods and Evaluations of Job Applicants.” *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*. Volume 23, Issue 4.

the idea of lost sales, and so there is usually pressure from higher-ups to fill an open sales position. I have heard sales managers moan, “I need a warm body, fast,” and then hire the first warm body they interview.

There will always be some pressure to fill a job. In those situations, you hire the best person for the job, not the first person who might be adequate. Remember, interviewing and hiring managers will be judged on at least two criteria: (1) How good the managers are at interviewing and selecting people and (2) how well those people perform. The second criteria is the most important of the two, so take time necessary to hire good performers.

Strengths of Selection Interviews

I have detailed above the problems with selection interviews and how to overcome these problems. But interviews also have benefits:

1. To learn what motivates candidates
2. To discover a candidate’s strengths
3. To assess chemistry and fit

To learn what motivates candidates: The first, and most important, benefit of an interview is to learn what tasks, values, and interactions might motivate a candidate. By listening carefully and asking questions that probe candidates’ values, goals and curiosity, interviewers will know what turns candidates on and what motivates them in addition to their own drive.

To discover a candidate’s strengths: Many candidates hesitate to talk about their strengths and talents because they do not want to appear conceited or boastful. In an interview use probing questions to get them to open up about their strengths, talents, and interests. Understanding a newly hired person’s strengths allows putting them on a team that needs their skills and talent.

To assess chemistry and fit: Interviewers should ask themselves, “Would my team and I like to have a beer after work with this person?”

Structuring an Interview

Structure your interview in three phases: (1) An introductory and initial exploratory phase that lasts 15-20 minutes, (2) a specific, job-related questions phase that lasts 30-35 minutes, and (3) a wrap-up phase that lasts 2-5 minutes.

Exhibit 3 is an Interviewing Guide in which the left-hand column contains questions to ask in an interview for a sales job and that right-hand column contains a corresponding note on what to look for with each question. Print out the Interviewing Guide and use it take notes on a candidate’s answer to each question.

Note that in the Interviewing Guide there are several situational questions included that use the STAR method. Situational questions are the most effective questions to ask in order to evaluate a candidate’s problem-solving ability, competitiveness, preparation, persistence, and knowledge.

At the end of the day in which a candidate is interviewed, fill out a Hiring Decision Scale. It is imperative that a Hiring Decision Scale be completed the same day as an interview to overcome the tendency to forget.

Once an Interviewing Guide has been developed, from that time forward always ask the same questions in the same order in all subsequent interviews.

Exhibit 3: Interviewing Guide

Interviewing Guide

Candidate’s Name: _____

Date: _____

Questions	What You Are Looking For
Phase One (15-20 minutes)	
<p>(Put candidates at ease with a friendly welcome. Briefly explain your role in the structure of the sales organization. Talk about the job position and the assignment, but not in too much detail. Be brief. Then ask the following questions, giving candidates plenty of time to answer each one; pause and use silence to get them to expand on their answers.)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Tell me about yourself. 2. “Who were your role models growing up?” 3. “Where did you go to high school?” 4. “What activities and hobbies were you involved in?” 5. “Are you certified in anything?” 6. “Did you go to college, and if so, where?” 7. (If they went to college) “What was your major?” 8. (If they went to college) “What activities or sports were you involved in?” 	<p>Overall, on questions 1-4 you are looking for empathy—the ability to connect with you.</p> <p>Looking for goal orientation—did candidates have goals they wanted to achieve.</p> <p>Looking for inspirational, hard-working role models. Be careful and do not ask about parents’ occupation or race—it is illegal. Use silence to get candidates to reveal as much as possible.</p> <p>Probe on high school question to ask about favorite courses, teachers, and coaches.</p> <p>Probe for extra-curricular activity and sports. You are looking for competitive, high-energy people.</p> <p>Did they take online courses and get certified in anything such as Salesforce or IAB Digital Media Sales.</p> <p>If they did not go to college, skip to Question 9 and do not be too concerned or react negatively.</p> <p>Does a college major, such as psychology or business administration potentially prepare a candidate for your sales job?</p> <p>Probe on the activities question. You are looking for competitive, hard-working people</p>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 9. “How did you prepare for this interview?” 	<p>Looking for how thoroughly they prepared. Do they know the company founders, company value on the stock market, customers, competitors, product knowledge? Did they look you up on LinkedIn?</p>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 10. “What interests you about our industry and our company?” 	<p>The more passionate candidates are about your industry and company, the better they can sell in it.</p>

<p>11. “What are your favorite industry newsletters, magazines, newspapers, podcasts, or information sources?”</p> <p>A. “Why”</p>	<p>Looking for general industry and company interest and knowledge. Ignorance of your industry and lack of knowledge about your company is a knockout factor.</p> <p>The “why” question gives candidate the opportunity to expand on their knowledge, to show how well they prepared. Their answers will give you insight into how they communicate and how articulate they are.</p>
<p>13. “Tell me about where you have worked?”</p>	<p>Looking for logical job progression. If someone has had a lot of jobs, if each one was a logical step up and a progression toward a career goal, that is OK.</p>
<p>14. “What three personal and professional accomplishments are you most proud of?”</p>	<p>Looking for a record of success, persistence, organization, and honesty. Probe deeply on each accomplishment to determine what specific actions they took. Ask the candidate to answer in a STAR format: Situation, Task, Action, and Results. Or, what the situation was, what the task was, what action they took to accomplish the objectives of the task, and what the results were</p>
<p>15. “What do you want your next job to do for you that your last job didn’t?”</p>	<p>Looking for optimism, realism, maturity, and goal orientation. People who are goal oriented are achievers and are ambitious. Looking for a growth mindset and curiosity.</p>
<p>16. “Give me three reasons why you want to work for this company.”</p>	<p>This is one of the most critical questions because it signals to you how well aligned they are with your company’s vision, mission, and values. The answer to this question also shows how well prepared they are.</p>
<p>If the interviewee is not a viable candidate, terminate the interview at this point by saying:</p> <p>“I appreciate your taking the time to come see me. I enjoyed getting to know you better. However, we’re looking for someone with a different level of experience and skill set than yours. But I’ll keep your resume on file.”</p>	<p>It is important to be honest with interviewees. Remember, you want them to feel good about you, your company, and the interview.</p>
<p>Phase Two (30-35 minutes)</p>	
<p>17. “What did you like best about your previous jobs?”</p> <p>18. “What did you like least about those jobs?”</p> <p>19. “To make a sale, did anyone do things that you felt weren’t right?”</p>	<p>Looking for what turns people on or off, for a positive attitude, for optimism.</p> <p>Same as above. Be wary of overly negative people. If they knock ex-bosses too much, they will knock you behind your back.</p> <p>Beginning of several ethics questions. You are looking for honest people who have the integrity not to break the rules to get an order.</p>

<p>20. "Are there some things you would not do to get an order?"</p> <p>21. "How would you define ethical behavior for a salesperson?"</p>	
<p>23. "Give me an example of a Situation in which you had a Task to accomplish. What Actions did you take and what were the Results?"</p>	<p>Looking for competitiveness and persistence.</p>
<p>24. "Review for me exactly what your job responsibilities were in your last two jobs."</p> <p>25. "Give me some examples of successes you had in these jobs."</p> <p>26. "What are three things that contributed most to these successes?"</p> <p>27. "Give me some examples of failures you had and how you handled them."</p> <p>28. "Tell me about when you took an unexpected initiative."</p>	<p>Review candidate's resumes and drill down on what they did. Be a little more serious, more businesslike. Put on some pressure to see how they deal with it.</p> <p>You are looking for problem-solving ability, competitiveness, persistence, and logical, concise communication.</p> <p>Are they claiming more success than they really had? Answers show how organized candidates are. Are they giving credit to good managers and to other team members? Narcissistic, self-absorbed, and selfish people claim successes were all about their own efforts. Looking for a "we" attitude, not a "me" attitude.</p> <p>You are looking for persistence, realism, discipline, and honesty. Mature people will admit failures and many will attribute some of their successes and failures to luck, which is realistic and honest.</p> <p>Looking for creativity, problem-solving.</p>
<p>29. "Give me an example of a Situation in which you had a Task to accomplish. What Actions did you take and what were the Results?"</p>	<p>Looking for logical organization and conciseness. Be concerned about disorganized rambling.</p>
<p>30. "Where do you want to be in five years from now?"</p>	<p>Do not ask what job they want in five years; they might not want a job. They might be unrealistic and immature and want to be retired. Also, you learn about career goals. This is a fairly standard question, so they should have a well-prepared answer.</p>
<p>31. "What would be your dream job eventually?"</p>	<p>Looking for ambition, realism, a growth mindset, and goal orientation.</p>

32. "How are you doing in achieving your career goals?"	Looking for persistence, optimism, realism, and goal orientation.
33. "What do you need to improve on to reach your career goals?"	Looking for honesty. No one is perfect and everyone can improve. So, if candidates say, "nothing," they are lying and trying to hide something. Also, looking for self-knowledge and humility.
34. "Tell me about your typical work day. When do you get up, when do you get to work, how do you organize your day?"	Looking for signs that a person is a disciplined, well-organized hard worker. Remember, the early bird gets the worm.
35. "Can I see your calendar for the past couple of weeks."	See if they have been straightforward about their typical work day.
36. "What kind of business day would be ideal for you?" 37. (If the candidate does not mention travel in the answer to the above question, ask) "How do you feel about travel?"	Looking for maturity, realism, goal orientation, and a strong work ethic. Also looking to see if someone enjoys travel, if travel is involved in the job the candidate is applying for.
38. "Give me an example of a S ituation in which you had a T ask to accomplish. What A ctions did you take and what were the R esults?"	Looking for preparation and persistence. Be concerned about disorganized rambling. Make sure STAR questions relate to the job, i.e. SDR or AE.
41. "When you give a presentation for your product, how do you create value for it?"	Looking for communicating skills and knowledge. Are candidates commodity, price-only sellers or do they take pride in creating value?
42. "Who (company) is your biggest competitor and what do you say about it when you make a sales presentation?"	Watch out for people who sell negatively and who trash competitors. Be very careful about hiring them because they will sell negatively, and you will have to re-train them.
43. "Tell me about a buyer or customer you call on. What motivates him/her?" 44. "How do you sell to him/her?"	Looking for emotional intelligence and understanding of people. These two questions are among the most important you will ask, particularly Question 40. The longer, more detailed the answers are and the deeper the insights are the better. Beware of short, simplistic answers.
45. "In all of the jobs you've ever had, who was the best boss, and what are three attributes that made them so good?"	You want to learn if they might be high maintenance and, thus, not prefer independence and autonomy. Look for organization and conciseness—you asked for three attributes, so see if they give you three and just three, which will tell you how well they listen.

46. "Don't tell me his or her name, but who was the worst boss, and what are three things that made them so bad?"	The worst-boss question will give you insight into self-image and defensiveness. If people take a bad boss personally ("He didn't like me"), beware, because not liking them does not describe the bad behaviors a boss exhibited.
47. "What are the personality traits and attributes of a good salesperson?" 48. "What are your personal strengths?"	These next two questions indicate how well a candidate listens and how well organized they are. Smart, well-organized people give a long list of traits and attributes and see the connection between Question 43 and 44. This is a question that candidates should know is asked in virtually every interview, so they should be prepared to answer it with a long list of strengths. The answers to this question signals a candidate's self-image, self-confidence, and self-knowledge. If they have a short list or the list does not include "bright," believe them.
49. "What are your shortcomings?"	Use the word "shortcomings" not "weaknesses." The concept of a weakness is too pejorative and people are afraid to reveal weaknesses, but they will often talk more openly about shortcomings. You do not care what the shortcomings are because you are not looking for weaknesses or negatives, you are looking for honesty and self-awareness. A mature, realistic, honest person will say something like, "I tend to be disorganized, but I have taken a time- management course and work hard to make a plan and stick to it." Beware of people who say, "I'm too honest." They clearly are not, at least about their shortcomings.
50. "Tell me again why you left your last several jobs." 51. "What will your bosses say about you if we were to call them?"	Put a little pressure on people. See if they become uncomfortable or if they give the same answers as before. The if-we-were-to-call-them question is an implied threat. Watch candidates carefully to see if they become nervous or seem to be afraid that you will call. You are looking for confidence.
52. "What do you do in your spare time?"	Looking to see if they engage in competitive activities or sports. Also, to see if they read and what they read or watch TV and what they watch.
53. "What good plays, movies or series have you seen lately? Tell me about them."	The organization, detail, length, thoughtfulness, and richness of a candidate's answers will give you insight into how they communicate and how verbally adroit they are. The breadth of their language and how they express concepts and ideas will signal how articulate they are. If their discussion of a movie or series is thoughtful and articulate, the chances are that their description of your product will be as good.
Phase Three (2-5 minutes)	

56. “We only have a few minutes left, so I want to give you the opportunity to sell me on yourself. Tell me why you want to work here.”	Let them sell you. See how intelligent their pitch and story is. Look for people who want challenges, growth, and opportunity, not necessarily more money. People who will switch jobs just for money will move on for more money after you hire them. You are also looking to see how much knowledge they have of your company—have they done their research.
57. “Give me five reasons why I should hire you.”	Do not hire anyone who cannot think of five reasons. Strongly consider hiring people who can give you 10 or more solid reasons – they are able to create value for themselves.
58. “What could I have done better during this interviewing process.”	You might learn something.
59. “Do you have any questions for me?”	Some candidates will ask how they did in the interview or will try to close—get you to hire them. Do not make any commitments or tell them how they did until after they have seen other people in your organization. Answer all questions honestly.
60. “Thank you for taking the time to talk to me today and to answer my questions.” A. Tell candidates they will be seeing other people in your organization and give them the names, e-mail addresses, and phone numbers of the people to call to set up appointments. B. Give candidates 15 minutes to complete a project that tests a skill, such as entering data into a spreadsheet and using at least one formula. C. Give candidates a take-home project, such as creating a PowerPoint presentation that sells your product.	If you can set up another interview or two at this time, do so. If you are strongly in favor of hiring someone, you might want to sell a little at this time, but do not make any commitments yet. Always give candidates a take-home project or assignment and see how quickly they get back to you. The faster they get back with quality work, the better.

Checking References

In most companies, HR, an internal talent management team, or a recruiting company will usually check references, but I have found this is usually an exercise in futility. Most companies know that they are liable for a law suit if they say anything negative about a previous employee, so they often only confirm the dates a person worked at the company and the person’s position. Nothing is learned about a candidate this way. First, references given by candidates will, of course, be good ones, so why bother? Second, always get permission from a candidate to check references because candidates might not want their current employer to know that they are interviewing.

Check with colleagues in the business—friends and colleagues whose judgment that are trusted. It is best to deal with these colleagues face-to-face whenever possible, because they will be more open than on the phone. Colleagues in the business who you trust will give an honest assessment because they know they will probably call some day and ask for references. Check with several people—the more the better.

Be careful about asking customers about a candidate. If a customer raves about a candidate and urges that they be hired, and the candidates are not hired, the customer can get upset because their recommendation was ignored.

Do not let references have too much influence. Candidates might have been poorly managed, might have been assigned an unproductive list of accounts or leads, or might not have been properly supervised in their previous jobs. I believe it is better for interviewers to trust their own intuition more than the recommendations of others.

Reluctant Candidates

Reluctant candidates are people who have indicated that they are happy where they are and are not necessarily looking for a job, but might be willing to talk. Do not personally call a reluctant candidate, but have an internal or external recruiter call them and set up an interview.

When interviewing a reluctant candidate, use an Interviewing Guide and ask the same questions asked of every other candidate. At the end of the interview, sell the job a little bit more than would be normal. It is important to remain as objective as possible and ask the same questions because, if the candidate is as good as is hoped, the interviewing company will have a good comparison between the answers the good candidate gives to those answers other candidates give—patterns will be apparent.

Selection

Most companies have their own procedures for having prospective hires fill out applications and making an offer. However, as a general rule, make sure that all candidates fill out an application and sign it. A resume is not a legal document, but a signed application is, so if candidates lie on a resume, there is little that can be done, but if they lie on an application and sign it, it could be a legal cause for termination.

Following are the steps you should take in making an offer:

1. Begin an offer meeting with a sincere complement and an encouraging comment. Say something like, “We have put you through an exhausting interview process and we believe you’re the right person for the job. We really like you, think you’ll fit in well here, and be successful.”
2. Summarize and review candidates’ strengths. By reviewing candidates’ strengths, they get positive reinforcement and feel wanted.
3. Thoroughly review with candidates the job description and assignment. Too often hiring managers give short shrift to this step or over-sell the job in their eagerness to hire someone. It is a good idea during this step to present a realistic job preview (see below). Be positive but realistic.
4. Review the company’s employee handbook with special emphasis on benefits and pay procedures.
5. Review how candidates will be evaluated, and if there is a performance coaching system in place, go over it in detail. There should be no ambiguity in candidates’ minds as to what kind of performance is expected and how their performance will be evaluated. Ambiguities in this area can lead to messy and expensive law suits if the candidate is hired and subsequently terminated.
6. Review an offer letter, which should come from the top executive of the unit. It is imperative that there is a rule that no employee may start to work without an offer letter, which should include details about the job, assignments, expectations, and compensation. Most companies have standard offer letters that are written by a squad of lawyers, so use it and never alter it without checking with HR or a company lawyer.
7. Give candidates the offer letter and allow them to take it home and think it over. Just as with customers, do not want to use high-pressure tactics to get them to sign.

Remember, how salespeople are treated is how they will, in turn, treat customers. There is a danger in giving candidates an offer letter and letting them have too long to think it over. There must be a deadline on offers, and two business days is best, I think. The danger with giving candidates a two days to think over an offer is that candidates might use the offer as leverage to get a raise from their current employer. If that does happen, use it as a learning experience. Go back over interview notes and see where the candidate might have given a clue of his or her uncertainty or intentions in some of the answers. Also, make a note that the candidate used the offer as leverage, and inform HR so that the same mistake will not be made again with that candidate. What the candidate did, in essence, was bait-and-switch selling, and a company does not want that kind of person selling for it. Furthermore, look at such an experience positively—the company has been saved from hiring the wrong type of person.

Realistic Job Previews

It is important to be realistic and not oversell a job. Control candidates' level of expectations about the job because there is a tendency for candidates to over-simplify a job, assume they can do it easily, and that it will easily meet their level of expectations (often unrealistically high). Job expectations are usually dictated by candidates' monetary needs, not necessarily the reality of the job difficulty. Lower their expectations by giving them a realistic job preview and by telling them it will take longer than they expect to learn the complexities of the product and of the job and to make the money they are hoping for. By lowering their expectations, they will be happier when they make more money than they expect.

According to Wall Street Journal column by Jared Sandberg titled “Short Hours, Big Pay Short Hours, Big Pay And Other Little Lies From Your Future Boss,” realistic job previews lead to more organizational commitment from employees, less turnover, and higher job satisfaction. Over-promise, the column warns, and “the honeymoon will come to a rapid and unfortunate end.”

Follow-up and Evaluating

If candidates accept an offer and are hired, make sure to follow up in one month and three months after they start with an informal interview and ask how they are doing. Is the job what they expected and are they getting adequate training on the product, procedures, and processes? Also, after six months, sales management should have a pretty good idea of how a person is performing, and it is a good time to check that person's rating on interviewers' Hiring Decision Scales when they were hired. How accurate were the ratings? Is there anything that could be learned about the interviewing process, attitudes and skills needed, or the Hiring Decision Scale?

Terminating

The first rule of letting people go, is never, *never terminate someone in anger, under pressure, or in a crisis*. Firing people in anger or in a pressure situation will inevitably lead to a wrongful termination law suit. More important, it is not fair to an employee, and if they are fired impulsively, it makes the firing manager not only look like an awful person but also feel like an awful person the next day.

The second rule of letting people go is *always do it in person* (or on Zoom if necessary). Never fire people over the phone. The biggest complaints heard from fired employees is, “They did it on the phone. They didn't have the decency to tell me to my face.”

Do not have someone other than the top sales executive let a salesperson go. For example, if the person being terminated reports to a local sales manager, for example, the local sales manager should be present, but the firing should be done by the top sales executive. If someone lower in the sales hierarchy terminates an employee, the terminated person will typically demand to see the top sales executive in an attempt to argue the top person out of the decision. Termination meetings must have an air of finality about them, which is why both the top sales executive and the sales manager to whom the terminated person reports be present at the meeting. Some companies require that an HR person be present, too. So always follow company procedures. Do not let an HR person alone fire someone because it is too impersonal and too insensitive.

The next rule is *have a check ready*. When people are being let go, the first thing they think about is money—their security. If a check is ready for them along with an explanation of all of the financial arrangements (vacation, severance, benefits, and health insurance pick-up options—a legal requirement), it reinforces that the decision is final. Everyone knows about it—the boss, HR, and the financial people (if the financial people know about it, everyone does). Talk about money first, it makes the meeting more businesslike, less personal, and less fault finding or blaming. Also, ask for IDs and keys. All of these details are difficult to carry out and seem a little ghoulish, but they are necessary for creating a sense of finality and for legal reasons.

The next rule of letting people go is to *make it short and gentle*. A termination meeting should last no longer than 10-15 minutes. By keeping it short, the person being let go is saved the pain and humiliation of a long, blame-filled meeting in which all that person's shortcomings are detailed. Spare them. Do not offer refreshments, do not greet people warmly or in an overly friendly manner. Be serious, businesslike, and as brief and gentle as possible.

The next rule is *do not give specific details about the termination*. When the terminating executive talks to the person being let go, say something like, "Fred, we have something very serious to talk about. I'm sure this is no shock to you because we've had many discussions about your performance. We've decided to make a change. This doesn't mean we think you're a bad person, but it just isn't working out. This is the wrong type of sales job and the wrong type of place for you. We have a check ready for you with a summary of your severance and benefits."

In the terminating comments, do all you can to preserve a person's dignity and self-respect. Next to losing a family member or a divorce, losing a job is the most traumatic event in most people's lives. Therefore, let people go with as much grace and kindness as possible, if for no other reason than to keep terminated people from saying too many damaging things about the company. I have seen research that indicates that about 45 percent of people who are let go say good things about the company that fired them, and many of them wind up with a better job.

If it is appropriate and authentic, say something like, "Fred, you're a good, honest person, and I'm sure in a less competitive, more service-oriented sales position, you'd do a good job. I'll be glad to give to a good recommendation along those lines." In other words, offer to help them find a job that is compatible with their talents and skills. Of course, you cannot offer a recommendation if someone is being fired for lying or embezzling. You must be authentic and honest in what you tell people. Do not make promises that cannot be kept.

The next rule of letting people go is *if it is a surprise to them, something has been done wrong*. By conducting regular performance coaching and evaluation sessions, salespeople are advised where they stand and how they are doing. If salespeople are not performing well and are in trouble, they have to know how they doing on a regular basis. If there had been regular performance coaching and evaluations meetings with salespeople, if appropriate improvement goals had been discussed, and if they had signed a performance improvement contract, then they

are, in a sense, firing themselves. Also, if sales management has been honest with people, it will come as no surprise to those being let go that it is time for them to leave.

The next rule of letting people go is *never argue and do not apologize*. Terminated people hurt, and their initial reaction is often anger and they often demand wrathfully, “What did I do wrong? Give me specific reasons.” The tendency is to react to anger with anger, and, therefore, to respond with a laundry list of transgressions and mistakes. This is the worst possibly response. First, it is like kicking people when they are down. It is cruel. Second, such a response invariably starts an argument. If specific details are given, the person being fired will immediately become defensive and shoot back a series of excuses and rationalizations. The argument and the escalation has begun.

Sometimes, managers have a tendency, when faced with anger and demands about specifics, to apologize and say something like, “I’m sorry; I wish I didn’t have to do this.” Never apologize or say “I’m sorry,” because it indicates remorse on and gives the message to the terminated employee that there might be a chance to change the decision.

Finally, giving specifics, as tempting as it might be, opens a company up to a wrongful termination lawsuit. Often people will say, “Write me letter detailing everything I did wrong.” Do not fall into this trap. Just tell them, “I understand that you’re upset and feel hurt. Do yourself a favor, go home, reflect on things, and think about whether you want a long list in writing and on the record of all the specific reasons why we made the change. It might possibly hurt your chances of getting another job. Call me next week and let me know if you still want something in writing.” In my experience, 9 times out of 10, people will not call back and will not want a letter. If they do, consult a company lawyer and have the lawyer write a letter if they think one is appropriate.

The next rule is *let people go on Friday afternoon*. Some books on hiring and firing indicate it is best to terminate people in the middle of the week so they can go out and find another job right away. I do not agree. By letting people go on Friday afternoon, they are given the opportunity to go home, to think about it, and to cool down. For example, if they have children, Saturday is a day off and kids expect their working parents to be home, so it is not a shock to see their parent home. In this way, parents can tell their families in their own way and at a time they deem appropriate.

Also, I think it is important for people to cool off before they go out to look for another job. I recommend that people take a vacation and think about their future. Are they sure they want to stay in sales? In that particular industry? Is this an opportunity to do something they have always wanted to do? If, with the firing manager’s help, terminated people look at their situation as an opportunity rather than a problem, it often helps them make a positive career change.

Also, by recommending that people cool off and contemplate their future, they may be done another favor. People who look for a new job immediately after being fired often do so angrily and with a chip on their shoulders. This negativity comes across in subsequent interviews, which can hurt them.

The next rule is *have people leave immediately, but let them come back to clear out their space over the weekend*. Allowing people who have been fired to walk around with drooping shoulders or crying and saying sad, angry good-byes to everyone in the office is terrible for morale—their own morale and their colleagues’ morale. Plus, they are more than likely not saying anything nice about the company or the firing manager as they are saying their angry goodbyes. Do the terminated employee a favor and save them the embarrassment of other people seeing them angry, sad, and depressed. Do the other employees a favor and save them the embarrassment of having deal with a colleague who has been fired. Make arrangements

with security to let terminated people in the office over the weekend to collect their stuff. Furthermore, if they are accompanied by a security guard, they are much less likely to steal anything and less likely to take sensitive information with them.

The final rule about letting people go is to *do it sooner rather than later*. Firing people is the most difficult and unpleasant thing managers do, which is why so many managers avoid doing it and put it off too long. In addition, managers often avoid letting people go because they think it might make them look bad to their bosses to fire someone they hired. Just as hiring is a manager's most important job, letting poor performers go is equally important, because it is unfair to the company and to other good performers to keep poor performers around. A good way to de-motivate good performers is to keep mediocre performers on the payroll.

I learned in my sales and sales management career that the salespeople in any sales department know who is good and who is not. Everyone sees how disciplined and organized their colleagues are, how they treat their customers on the phone, how many orders they get, and how hard they work. Effective salespeople respect management that weeds out mediocre performers and rewards the top performers because that way they perceive management as being fair.

Summary

The hiring process should be part of an overall talent management system that includes: (1) Job descriptions, (2) attitudes, attributes, skills, and knowledge needed to be successful in those jobs, (3) recruiting, (4) screening, (5) interviewing, (6) checking references, (7) selection, (8) follow-up/evaluating, and (9) terminating.

A job description should include: (1) Relevant reporting relationships, (2) a statement of a sales organization's mission, goals, objectives, and strategies, (3) the details of job tasks, necessary skills, and skill level, and (4) specific performance expected and how performance will be measured.

The next step is to decide what attitudes, hard and soft skills, and knowledge are needed to be successful in the sales job described. In my experience and in my research, I have identified 10 attitudes, skills, and qualities to look for when hiring to fill an open sales job:

1. Empathy
2. Competitiveness
3. Integrity/honesty
4. Listening
5. Communication
6. Persistence
7. Preparation
8. Positiveness/optimism
9. Knowledge
10. Chemistry and Fit

Organizations should develop a Hiring Decision Scale that gives weights to the above, and then interviewers should fill out a Hiring Decision Scale as soon as possible after interviewing a candidate.

The next step in the overall hiring process is recruiting, which is typically done by third-party firms such as ZipRecruiter that use AI to scrape the web, especially LinkedIn, to search for people with a required skill set. Then, typically third-party firms or internal recruiters conduct preliminary screening interviews in order to narrow down a list of qualified candidates to send to the managers of the company with an open sales job. Also, those

managers should also be recruiting all the time to look for potential sales talent everywhere.

When screening applicants, let them present a two-minute elevator pitch. If the pitch is good, schedule an interview, but ask every applicant to send an email explaining why they want to work for the company and do the work in the open job.

Interviews must be structured by using an Interviewing Guide that includes all the questions that a candidate will be asked. Once a company develops an Interviewing Guide, interviewers should always ask the same questions in the same order to every candidate they interview because, over time, patterns will emerge that identify both good and poor performers.

When a candidate is made an offer, give them a realistic job preview. Then, give them a formal offer letter and then give them no longer than two days to accept or decline the offer. If they accept, have them sign and return the offer letter.

Follow up and evaluate the person you hired three and six months after they started the sales job in order to see if the predictions for their success were accurate. Understand that predictions will not always be accurate. Hiring mistakes will be made.

If someone is mistakenly hired, correct it as soon as possible. If a person has to be fired, remember these rules: (1) Never terminate someone in anger, under pressure, or in a crisis, (2) always do it in person, (3) have a check ready, (4) make it short and gentle, (5) do not give specific details about the termination, (6) if it is a surprise, something wrong has been done, (7) never argue and do not apologize, (8) do it Friday afternoon, (9) have people leave immediately and come back to clear out their space over the weekend, and (10) do it sooner rather than later.

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