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When it comes to hiring sales talent, most companies prefer to "buy" instead of "build." A sales leader at a technology company recently told us: "We only hire experienced salespeople who can hit the ground running." Leaders of these companies argue that hiring experience reduces training costs while allowing the company to gain outside perspective. In addition, salespeople with experience in the same industry bring customers and get quick sales.

But experience alone is not a sufficient predictor of who will be successful in a sales role.

Most companies have hiring profiles that identify the attributes that recruiters should look for. The best hiring profiles are specific to the sales role. Consider two profiles we saw recently for jobs in insurance sales and technical sales.

Here's what the insurance company was looking for in its sales rep:

• Knowledge of industry/sales process
• Computer skills
• High energy level
• Ability to work independently
• Presentation/communication skills

Here's what the technical sales job required:

• Knowledge of business planning/solution sales
• Self-motivated
• Presentation/negotiation skills
• Team player
• Creative/intellectual capability

Some hiring profiles list as many as several dozen attributes. The list usually includes a mix of competencies (learned skills and knowledge) and characteristics (innate traits and abilities). In the insurance sales example, "knowledge of industry/sales process," "computer skills," and "presentation/communication skills" are competencies. A candidate could come into the job with these competencies, or she could learn and develop them after she is hired.

In contrast, "High energy level" and "ability to work independently" are characteristics. These traits are largely inherent to a person. Characteristics are difficult to teach and take long periods of time to develop; consequently, training and development programs have limited impact on characteristics. Similarly, with the technical sales job, a candidate could learn and develop the competencies "knowledge of business planning/solution sales" and "presentation/negotiation skills" after he is hired. But he will have difficulty becoming a "self-motivated," "team player" with "creative/intellectual capability," unless he has these characteristics to begin with.

You can develop competencies with the right training, mentoring, coaching, support, and motivation programs. But to get characteristics, you have to hire the right individuals. In the words of one sales leader, "You can't send a duck to eagle school." According to another, "Although you can teach a turkey to climb a tree, it's much easier to hire a squirrel."

The best sales force recruiting processes focus on screening for success profile characteristics first and foremost. Characteristics should be "knockouts" in recruiting. For example, if a candidate for the technical sales job doesn't exhibit a minimum level of self-motivation, team-orientation, and creative/intellectual capability, he should automatically be eliminated, even if his experience gives him outstanding knowledge of business and solutions sales, and strong presentation and negotiation skills. Especially when hiring experienced salespeople, it's easy for recruiters to get distracted by competencies. It's nice to have competencies, but you *must* have characteristics. Without the right characteristics, it's highly unlikely that a candidate will be successful long term.

Bruce Nordstrom, ex-chairman of the department store known for its impeccable service, once said, "We can hire nice people and teach them to sell, but we can't hire salespeople and teach them to be nice." Experienced or not, an individual will only be successful in sales if he/she has the right characteristics — and characteristics are something you "buy" during hiring, not something you "build" by training.

To get those characteristics, you have to hire the right person.

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