

The personality types to look for in sales recruitment

When hiring a salesperson, you want to look for an extraverted and conscientious individual. That's the common wisdom, in addition to being corroborated by a 1998 study by Vinchur and colleagues. But it turns out there's more to it than that when looking for the right personality for the job.

Andrew Grant, a business professor at Wharton, found that so-called ambiverts, who balance extraversion and introversion, make the best salespeople — not those who are highly extraverted. He explains that a salesperson who is too extraverted can come across as too excited and pushy, ignoring the customer's perspective and eliciting a negative response. (The good news here is that most people are ambiverts, meaning most people have one of the key traits needed for sales.)

Of the five factors of personality, conscientiousness is commonly known as the best and most consistent predictor of job performance. This is unsurprising, as it encompasses all the traits one would expect in a stereotypical hard worker: dependability, responsibility, organization, care and being achievement-oriented. But a 2013 study, "The Validity of Conscientiousness for Predicting Job Performance: A meta-analytic test of two hypotheses," demonstrates that conscientiousness is not the best and most consistent predictor for all jobs.

Shaffer and Postlethwaite classified jobs based on the level of cognitive ability they required and on three job characteristics: independence, routinization, and criticality (business importance). The authors discovered that conscientiousness is the best predictor for jobs that are low in independence, medium in routinization, and low in criticality — such as those that are compensated hourly or are entry-level. For jobs that require independence, are non-routine without a set structure, and are critical to the business, conscientiousness isn't such a good predictor. Almost any upper-level management position would fit this description.

So what about sales?

I used the authors' methodology to determine that sales involves a moderate level of independence, routinization, and criticality. It seems, then, that conscientious is indeed still a good predictor for sales performance, but that as an individual progresses through his/her sales career into management levels, conscientiousness becomes less important. One reason, the authors suggest, is that higher-level jobs — which are non-routine, independent, and business-critical — require a high degree of cognitive ability. A high degree of cognitive ability allows individuals to suppress the influence of

If you're unfamiliar with conscientiousness and the "big five," here's a quick overview. The Five Factor Model of personality, more commonly known as the big five, consists of five dimensions, or traits, we use to describe personality, and is best remembered with the mnemonic OCEAN:

Openness to experience
Conscientiousness
Extraversion
Agreeableness
Neuroticism

Together, varying levels of these factors combine to form an individual's personality, and different jobs require varying levels of different traits.

personality on their job performance. So, any measures of these individuals' personality would be unrelated to their performance.

If you're looking to recruit salespeople, then, looking for conscientious people is a good place to start. But if you're looking for salespeople who will move on to become sales leaders, you'll need more than that.