

NONTECHNICAL ROLES IN TECH

Vol. 1



Sales
Marketing
Customer Success

Nontechnical Roles In Tech, Vol. 1

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Dorm Room Fund is committed to producing the smartest and best-equipped student founders, across any industry or practice. More importantly, we want to prepare students with the skills to become great founders — which in many cases can happen after you've worked in tech for a few years out of school.

Unlike other traditional routes or industries, there isn't a whole lot of precedent when it comes to working at a tech company. Companies like Google and IBM recently [eliminated their requirement](#) for you to have a college degree, following suit to what a lot of startups have already been doing. You don't need an MBA or a specific degree to work in tech. So where does that leave you?

In this post, we'll go over some of the roles you can have at a tech company, what skill sets they require, and how these roles help you 'break into tech' as a non-technical person. This is not an exhaustive list — we will be publishing future volumes that cover other roles (i.e. operations, design) and what they entail. For all our engineers and STEM students out there, sit tight! We'll be doing a post soon on those routes.

This post is laid out to cover the following functions that are apparent at almost every tech company:

Sales

Marketing

Customer Success

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Customer Success

Sales

No matter how amazing your product is, your company only grows if you're able to sell it. While sales has been around since the [beginning of commerce in 18th century America](#), it has evolved dramatically in recent years, especially in the realm of technology.

Who should go into sales?

Sales is a great fit for anyone who loves to hustle, likes being rewarded based on what they produce, and enjoys thinking critically and creatively about problems. While it's often assumed that you need to be extroverted or a people-person to go into sales, this really isn't the case. The best salespeople are experts at driving conversation, reading people, and negotiating. Researching well and putting together a strong case for their product is necessary — rhetoric and smooth talk are not. Some of the best salespeople are experts at driving conversation, reading people, and negotiating, but do this based on their ability to research and put together a case for their product, not just by using rhetoric or smooth talking.

"For the remainder of your life, you will have to sell yourself, in job interviews, at work, and with your personal relationships, a sales role could offer you the best to learn how to do so"

— [Jay Singh](#), Learning Solutions Consultant @ LinkedIn
(University of British Columbia 2018, B.Comm.)

Sales is also a great fit for anyone who wants to become an entrepreneur. From the early stages of launching a product, the first thing you'll need to do is go out and talk to prospective customers to gauge their interest, and eventually sign them onto a pilot. While you may not necessarily be selling anything directly, those skills are crucial to getting early buy-in, getting feedback on your product, and understanding how to position it.

What do salespeople do?

Most new grads will go into what is called a Business Development Rep (BDR) or Sales Development Rep (SDR) role. This is a role where you are learning how to sell. Typically, your role might involve the following:

- Finding potential customers for your product
- Reaching out to potential customers to see if they are interested
- Having calls with potential customers to learn more about their business, and see whether they are a fit for your product

Some companies (especially smaller ones) will give you more freedom in your role, in terms of how you can reach out to customers and what narrative you use. They may even let you manage the entire sales process, which involves everything from your first email to getting a signed contract!

"The key is selling a product or service that you believe in because then you will be genuine in spreading that gospel to the customer. Regardless of whether a particular deal closed, I'm meeting interesting people, making strong relationships, and acquiring knowledge that will propel my career forward."

— [Mike Belkin](#), Enterprise Account Executive at [Catalant](#)
(Amherst College 2011, B.A. Political Science)

Every company from Google to 10-person startups hire for sales, with the majority being open to taking students fresh out of school. To do well in these roles, you want to convey the following:

- **Grit** show your ability to hustle and put effort in your work
- **Critical Thinking** show how you can analyze potential customers and gauge whether they would be interested in your product
- **Creativity** everyone is trying to sell something, what makes you different? How might you think about your outreach in a way that sets you apart?

Career paths for salespeople vary, but many new grads will get promoted to an Account Executive (full salesperson) after 6-12 months in their role. Some will stay in those roles, while others will pivot to other areas of the business (i.e. the roles below) or go into entrepreneurship.

Sales

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Marketing

It used to be said that people with big dreams and visions went into marketing — think Mad Men and elaborate ad campaigns. Then [growth hacking](#) came into play, companies started tightening their ad budgets, and marketers needed to be more data-driven and systematic than ever. Today, a tech marketer straddles the line between creative big ideas and tangible ways to achieve them.

Who should go into marketing?

Unlike sales, marketing is a lot more dependent on audiences than 1-to-1 relationships. You need to understand who wants your product, and focus more on getting their attention and giving them reasons to reach out, than closing the deal. The best marketers are people who love to learn how people think and why they make the decisions they do. They're curious about how different email subjects, designs, and narratives engage a certain audience, and are pumped about giving their sales team a much easier sell.

"User Acquisition constantly puts my data analysis skills to the test as I strive to find the best way to market Postmates to new customer segments. Now, I'm directly responsible for strategizing, planning, and generating revenue growth as the company continues to grow"

— [Benjamin Dunn](#), Growth @ Postmates
(USC 2017, B.A. Print and Digital Journalism)

Marketers also make incredible entrepreneurs. In the early days of starting a company, being scrappy and finding ways to gain traction are both crucial to being successful. That might start with finding ways to get the attention of your first customers and evolve by discovering which channels give the most cost-effective leads. If you're non-technical, marketing (like sales) is a pivotal skill to being an effective co-founder and growing your team.

What do marketers do?

If sales is everything from the minute someone is interested in your product to the moment they buy, marketing is obsessed with everything before and after the sale. How did someone find your product? What do they need to know before they're genuinely interested? How do you get a new customer to stick around?

The actual tasks behind marketing can be broken down into the following sections:

(1) Branding and Content This is most similar to the traditional idea of marketing, which includes crafting a brand for your product and developing content that helps convey it to prospective buyers. Marketers focused on this task might spend time figuring out what their ideal customers are thinking, what initially gets them interested, and the messaging behind how your product solves their problems.

Sample task: Writing a blog post that highlights a common pain point with your customers, and how your product addresses it (i.e. case study)

(2) Demand Generation There's no point in having an incredible brand if nobody knows about it. Marketers are responsible for getting the right people interested in a product and convincing them of its value. They do this by experimenting with 'channels', which are the different ways you can reach a potential customer. Think email, Facebook ads, and [Search Engine Optimization](#).

Sample task: Designing a series of Facebook ads that are targeted towards groups that you think could be great customers.

In terms of the actual skills you need to learn to be a successful marketer, [this post](#) from Buffer on ‘t-shaped’ marketing sums it up nicely. Tech marketers are typically excellent at 1-2 marketing skills, i.e. email marketing and paid advertising, and understand all the other areas of marketing to a functional degree, such as public relations and SEO.

“I got into Growth after realizing that I wanted to combine my various interests and skills in marketing, engineering and data. I had always been interested in multiple functions and Growth was the perfect combination of all these various interests. I now get to spend my time analyzing data and running experiments to see how we can drive user growth and engagement.”

— [David Ongchoco](#), Growth at Amplitude & DRF Alumni
(University of Pennsylvania 2018, B.S. Computer Science)

Career paths for marketers also differ depending on the size of the company you plan to work for. Larger companies like Google have [training programs](#) that get you acquainted with how they do marketing and give you a track for progression. Others have more versatile roles where you might be tackling several tasks related to branding and/or demand generation. Typically, an entry-level marketer may work for a year before getting promoted to a management role or bigger project scope, then more strategic or leading roles (i.e. Head of Marketing) after 2-3 years at smaller startups.

Sales
Marketing

Customer Success

Customer Success

When a business acquires a customer, they gain revenue and begin to scale, that much is obvious. Losing a customer, however, is a lot more costly than simply losing that revenue. That business also wasted resources to get the customer's interest (marketing) and valuable time from the sales team in signing them on. The role of someone in customer success is to prevent this from happening.

Who should go into customer success?

Customer Success is like sales in that those who excel in it take a genuine interest in their customers, are great listeners, and think critically about how the product can help them. The difference is that you aren't selling to someone who may or may not be interested in your product. These customers are already committed to using the product, and are paying your company for access. Hence, they may be more receptive to what you have to say, but the bar will be higher.

Great Customer Success Managers (CSMs) are also very meticulous in their work, pay attention to detail, and are good at creating and following a process. They're also a fan of working with people — customers are part of your company's family, and it's your job to make them feel like it!

What does customer success do?

CSMs are not just customer support. They need to be proactive about the customers for a respective product, thinking of ways that can help them get more use out of the product. Initially, this often means helping a customer learn the product and figure out

how it integrates within their organization. Later, this might grow into seeing what other problems that customer faces, and how your product can be adapted to address them.

"As a Customer Success Manager, I'm considered an extension to my client's business. I'm incentivized to find better ways for them to use our product, and they win by getting more value out of our product. I'm like an internal quarterback, responsible for ensuring a one customer experience both internally and externally"

— [Khaliq Rehman](#), Account Manager at PatSnap
(Queen's University 2016, B.Comm)

Customers that receive a strong onboarding and continual support will gain more from using a product than those who don't. At a base level, that means that they stay customers longer (read: more revenue), but they can also become bigger customers as they buy more from you, and eventually grow into an advocate that helps you get more strong customers. CSMs bear much of the responsibility in starting these conversations and upselling existing customers on new features, pricing plans, or other revenue streams. At many organizations, once the conversation is in a good place, it can be passed off to a sales rep to negotiate the details.

Here are a few sample tasks that a CSM might take on:

- Onboarding a new customer to integrate the product into their existing activities (including team structure)
- Answering more technical or intensive questions around how the product works and what it can do
- Checking in with customers to track their progress, and creating plans to help them achieve their goals for your product

Career growth for CSMs can differ drastically depending on what you're interested in. Some who enjoy the more technical side of Customer Success may venture into roles that directly support the same team, whereas larger companies may have Customer

Success split into various areas (i.e. onboarding, upselling, etc.) in which you can specialize. CSMs know the product better than other non-technical roles (i.e. marketing and sales), which also makes them well-poised to transition into product management or other roles at the company.

Conclusion

Tech is one of the fastest and most exciting industries to work in. Opposed to popular belief, you don't need to know how to code to add value to a company; roles like sales, marketing, and customer success are pivotal to the growth of any tech company, and can provide an amazing start to your career.

We want to keep in touch and support you in your journey — [follow Dorm Room Fund](#) for more content on tech, venture capital, and student entrepreneurship. Working on a great idea? [Apply here](#) for DRF funding.

