

## Title:

Selecting Salespeople From Outside Your Industry

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## Summary:

There is an old saying in the computer world that dates back to the days of mainframes and terminals. These early computers cost tens of thousands of dollars and there were a handful of competitors in that market space. The dominant player was IBM who was often the highest priced option even though the competitive solutions were fairly similar. IBM's market-leading position created a security blanket for buyers that developed into a common phrase - "Nobody was ever fired for ...

## Keywords:

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## Article Body:

There is an old saying in the computer world that dates back to the days of mainframes and terminals. These early computers cost tens of thousands of dollars and there were a handful of competitors in that market space. The dominant player was IBM who was often the highest priced option even though the competitive solutions were fairly similar. IBM's market-leading position created a security blanket for buyers that developed into a common phrase - "Nobody was ever fired for choosing IBM."

Unfortunately, this conventional wisdom permeates sales hiring today. "Nobody is ever fired for hiring salespeople from within their industry." Sales is one of, if not the toughest positions within a company to successfully fill. Many companies struggle even with internal sales candidates. What hurdles do salespeople present to hiring?

First, consider hiring for a different position, say a computer programmer. The first hard skill assessment is how well the candidate knows the programming language. The programming language is the same (.net, java, C, etc.) no matter which company employs the programmer. The expertise of their skill set can be determined through a comprehensive interview. Usually a skilled programmer will still be considered even if they do not possess direct industry experience in the hiring company's market. Their computer programming skills are transferable.

Successful salespeople have a blend of hard and soft skills that are difficult to define and even tougher to measure. Companies often incorporate "self-starter," "motivated," "team player" and other buzzwords into their employment ads without clearly defining what traits are most important to the position. Many times these traits are merely window dressing as the company naturally gravitates to candidates with direct industry experience. The assumption is that the candidate knows how to sell in our market so they will be easier to manage.

This is a flawed approach. No matter how intricate your market or complex your product or service, teaching someone how to sell is far more difficult. Companies hire salespeople to sell. The company's focus should be on finding specific sales talents.

#### --SALES PROCESS--

The method by which a salesperson maneuvers a prospect into a customer is essentially their skills of the selling trade. This process is far more important than their industry experience. Experience simply shows you where they have hung their hat over time. Sales process is the far better predictor of how they will perform for your company.

Some process-oriented topics to pursue with sales candidates:

- Have them walk you through their standard sales process.
- What does a good prospect look like in their current role?
- At what point do they attempt to close a prospect?
- How long is one sales cycle? What do they do to try and shorten that cycle?

Strong sales candidates are able to explain how they acquire new leads, how they qualify them and how they close them. This process should be wrapped around their company's value proposition. Pay close attention to theoretical answers as opposed to experiential answers. Theories are for science. Real-world skills are for sales. As long as the hiring company has clearly defined their sale, they are able to ascertain if the candidate's skills are transferable to their sale. This information is far more valuable than assuming sales skills based on past industry experience.

#### --QUALIFYING--

If overall sales process is the first piece of the puzzle, qualifying ability is second. Successful selling pivots on the salesperson's ability to qualify opportunities and discover the prospect's potential. Obviously there are other important aspects, but none supersede the skill of efficiently determining a prospect's need, budget, timing, decision process and alternatives.

The key here is to look for similarities between your typical sale and the candidate's abilities. Topics to address:

- What is their current company's value proposition and how do they put it in play?
- What is the typical buying process for their prospects? How do they navigate through that process?
- What are the 3 most common objections they have to overcome? How do they respond to them?
- How many competitors do they have to beat to get the deal? Who is their toughest competitor and what adjustments do they personally make to beat them?

Focusing on qualifying topics like these provides a fairly detailed picture of their qualifying abilities. A sales candidate with strong, transferable skills will clearly stand out. At this point, we would recommend assessing the strongest candidates to objectively measure their qualifying skills and aptitudes including empathy, self confidence, problem solving and listening ability. The sum of this data would identify candidates who have the potential to exceed expectations at your company.

#### --UTILITARIAN MOTIVATION--

86% of the top-performing salespeople in any market, industry or geography share a common motivation - a desire to receive a return on their investment of resources (money, time, effort, etc.). These salespeople are driven to utilize resources to accomplish results while gaining a measurable return on that investment of resources.

Successful selling requires people who can efficiently determine which prospects will provide the greatest return proportionate to the effort. This utilitarian drive is ideal in selling. A strong salesperson is constantly sorting the puzzle pieces of information they have gathered during the selling process and seeking out the remaining pieces to either close the deal or find a new prospect.

Hiring salespeople who do not have the utilitarian motivation is high risk to say the least. Other motivations include a desire to help people, become an expert, be in a position of power or establish rules for others to follow. All of these motivations have a noble purpose, but they are not the primary motivation behind the vast majority of successful salespeople.

Sales process, qualifying ability and a utilitarian motivation are 3 fundamental aspects for which to screen salespeople from outside of your industry. The finer points can be assessed for overall fit once these 3 areas are identified.

Candidates from outside your industry bring different ideas and approaches while not being constrained by stereotypical sales approaches that can permeate a specific industry.

Clearly the ideal candidate has strong sales abilities and direct industry experience. Yet, too often companies become intoxicated with a marginal, but industry experienced, sales candidate in spite of their deficiencies. There is a liability to hiring only from your industry. Instead, hire for talent first and avoid the experience-only trap that leads to recycling mediocrity.