

How to attract, understand and retain top performing salespeople

By Mark Purbrick, (Managing Director, Peoplogica Pty Ltd)

I am yet to meet someone who says they have purposely hired a poor performer.

Why is it then that about 25% of the Australian workforce is considered sub-standard by their managers? And in many sales departments, the percentage of poor performers is unfortunately much higher.

Compounding the cost of this situation is that a top performer is three times more productive than a poor performer, yet you are probably paying them both the same base salary. Adding insult to injury, many of these poor performers keep performing at unacceptable levels, often in spite of your efforts to help them improve. This raises some critical questions for managers:

- How much revenue and profit is your sales team forgoing because your recruitment process has allowed poor performers to get through?
- What success could be achieved by increasing the number of top performers and decreasing the number of poor performers?
- Is there is a better way to attract, recruit and retain top performers?

The good news is that there is a better way, but sales managers and HR professionals, will have to first accept that their current processes are not working, and then have the courage to change the way they attract, select, train and coach their most important asset ... their people.

I'm not advocating a purely robotic selection process based on a set of exact criteria. A good salesperson is, after all, a master craftsman – part artist, part advocate, with a blend of knowledge, passion and desire. However, bringing a degree of science and applying a well-structured methodology to the recruitment and selection process will get you better results.

A three-part process to attract, understand and retain top sales performers

We all know that business strategies are constantly under pressure from external and internal forces, however, the attraction, selection and retention process always begins and ends with your sales strategy. If this is not clear and well-articulated, the chances of success are dramatically reduced.

PART 1: UNDERSTANDING YOUR TOP PERFORMERS

Not all sales roles are created equal. To be successful, an account salesperson may require very different skills, knowledge and abilities than those required to be an excellent territory manager.

Within a strategic context, establish clear role and personal benchmarks that identify ideal peak performance and which accurately reflect the organisation's overall business and go-to-market sales strategy.

Develop a clear business strategy, go-to-market strategy and sales strategy

Far too often, sales managers are presented with a sales environment as a fait accompli. This is a subject requiring far greater discussion than this article allows. I'll simply note that operational sales managers need to be fully involved in the wider business and go-to-market strategies within their organisation. After all, how can a sales manager build an appropriately skilled sales team when they have little or no input into the market

strategy? How can they appropriately coach and develop their team? And how can marketing support a sales operation unless the links between sales and marketing are strong and grounded in a shared view of market reality?

With the growth in team selling in many B2B organisations, plus an integration of web 2.0 (and, inevitably, 3.0 and so on) processes and customer interaction, it is more critical than ever before that the first three steps in this process involve operational managers to ensure rapid and appropriate response to changes in strategy and market engagement. Ultimate sales success depends fundamentally on the sales team that reflects the business and go-to-market strategy of the organisation.

Define and quantify success attributes for each clearly defined sales role

If the role requires a level of new business development, this should be clearly stated. If there are conversion factors which apply (e.g. ten new appointments lead to four product demonstrations which result in two sales) these should also be explicit. If it is principally an account management role and a minimum number of weekly visits for each representative is required, make that clear.

Develop High Performance Role Benchmarks

Managers must understand the nature of the role to determine the success attributes required and the level of competence required for the role. Remove as much subjectivity as possible by creating a high-performance role benchmark using objective assessments.¹ Identify and quantify the critical success attributes that the top performers have in common. Basing selection decisions on the proven attributes of existing top performers is the key to a greatly improved selection process.

By benchmarking current top performers we are then able to measure the degree of JobFit that applicants have compared to the proven top performers.

PART 2: SELECT WELL

Attract, screen and select the best candidate(s) by looking for best fit. Salespeople *must fit* the role for which they are being employed, at a job, team and organisational level. Many organisations limit their potential talent pool by applying criteria which are not relevant to the role. Define a clear set of benchmarks in building an appropriate selection methodology to ensure the successful candidate fits the role.

Getting the right fit

The principal key to successful recruitment is “fit”. The better the fit between the candidate and the employer’s role, the better the potential outcomes for both parties.

Individual jobfit is about matching individuals to the role to ensure they have the right abilities, traits, interests, technical capabilities and experience to succeed. Team fit is about getting the team chemistry right. Organisation fit is about ensuring the values and beliefs of the individual are aligned with the culture of the organisation. All three levels need to be addressed successfully to optimise the future performance of the new employee.

Screening candidates based on role benchmarks

Recruitment is arduous at the best of times. It’s a waste of everyone’s time conducting interviews with people who don’t demonstrate the base level of experience and knowledge required, or who don’t possess the required success attributes.

The purpose of screening is to select the most appropriate people to interview. The process will vary depending on the importance of the role and the number of applications received. In either case one simple rule applies: look for applicants who demonstrate the success attributes of the role.

I would also suggest a second rule. It is better to have a vacant position than it is to have the wrong candidate in the position. This is especially true for sales roles, where an inappropriate appointment can cause far more problems than a vacant territory.

¹ At Peoplogica we use the Profile XT JobFit® tool developed by Profiles International (PI). We use this instrument set due to the extensive research which supports its application. We have also found the tool to be extremely valuable at an operational level across a wide variety of industries and markets.

The first interview

The first interview is not just an opportunity for the candidate to impress a potential future employer. It is also a chance for the employer to demonstrate the professionalism, ethos and culture of the organisation, together with the future opportunities that the organisation can offer. Both the candidate and the employer should be “selling” themselves to each other. In presenting the role to potential candidates, interviewers must convey the role, the team culture and the rewards with absolute clarity.

Professor David Guest calls this aspect of the employment relationship the “psychological contract.”² The psychological contract is not the official terms and conditions contained in the formal employer-employee contract, but all the unwritten promises and suggestions that are made about the job. In sales roles, this can easily become misleading or ambiguous, such as territory descriptions which are not entirely accurate, indications of the level of prospecting required or indications of earnings potentials which later prove to be unachievable. Research indicates that new employees will rely on the unwritten aspects of the role as much as the formal contract and if this leads to the salesperson being misled, then performance and engagement levels will be affected.

Use of other selection and assessment tools

A wide range of assessment tools exist to confirm the success criteria established in Part 1 of this process. Gauge potential employees against the benchmarks established for these attributes.

Measure only the attributes you already know to be essential for success. Don't waste time, money and energy measuring items just for the sake of it.

Selection is not an exact science. Ensuring fit based on objective, measurable criteria is the best system available. Ignoring the data and basing selection on subjective criteria will limit the likelihood of employing a top performer to 25%. The choice, ultimately, is yours.

Final interview and reference checks

The final interview is very much the business end of the process. For someone to be sitting in front of you for a second time, they are most likely good enough to do the job. We want an outstanding performer, so the purpose of the final interview is to confirm any aspects of the applicant's fit that may still be in question.

You should be in a position to predict whether the candidate has the potential to be a top performer at the end of the interview.

Final selection and job offer

Base your selection as much as possible on observable behaviours and the respective fit of each candidate. If you have a stand-out candidate, make an offer as soon as possible.

If you have candidates who demonstrate similar appeal, consider offering the position to the one who will bring most diversity to your team. Extensive research suggests that a diverse team will outperform a team which is more uniform in its make-up.³ As innovation in the sales function will lead to competitive edge, it's wise to have as broad a team mix as possible as long as the team members possess the critical success attributes of the role.

PART 3: RETAIN THE BEST

Good sales talent is always in demand. If you have given the time and gone to the trouble of recruiting high performers, make sure that the first impression they have of your organisation reassures them that their decision to choose you as an employer was correct. Invest in their talents to ensure they continue to deliver the best possible sales results to both your existing clients and your prospective clients, and continually review the role in terms of your evolving business, go-to-market and sales strategies.

² Guest, D 2004 “The Psychology of the Employment Relationship: An Analysis Based On the Psychological Contract,” *Applied Psychology: An International Review*, Vol. 53, no. 4, pp. 541-555.

³ Gratton, L and Erickson, T 2007 “8 Ways to Build Collaborative Teams,” *Harvard Business Review*, November 2007, Volume 85, Issue 11, pp. 100-109.

Induction, training and coaching program and ongoing career development

High performers have high expectations of their employers. They like working with other high achievers and generally like to learn and be challenged. They are also not totally motivated by money.⁴ Creating a personalised induction program not only ensures your new recruits get up to speed as quickly as possible, but will demonstrate your organisation's commitment to them to build the loyalty you will need to retain top talent.

Here are some aspects of the initial induction and training program you should consider:

- Involve them with the team as quickly as possible.
- Customise their training and don't make them do programs or courses they've already successfully completed.
- Consider using a proven top performer as a mentor and/or coach.
- Provide regular, collaborative feedback and adjust the program accordingly.
- If your new recruits are Gen Y (born after about 1977), they will be looking for different things than older recruits. Organisational values and flexibility are particularly important to this group, as is the need for honest, regular feedback on their performance.⁵

This induction period should meld seamlessly with an ongoing commitment to their personal and career development.

Role review and ongoing strategy alignment

As your sales strategy changes, so may the requirements of particular sales roles. Regularly review high performance role benchmarks as well as the skills, knowledge and experience of your sales team. We can't predict all changes, but change is inevitable, therefore our sales function will need to constantly adapt to maintain a competitive edge. Even top performers need to build knowledge and skills to maintain their high level of performance. The good news is that most top performers want to do this. Your role as a manager is to simply enable their success to continue.

Sales success is integral to overall organisational success

If you need to go to market with a sales strategy that involves the use of personal selling (whether it's transactional, relationship, solution, or any other flavour of selling) make sure you employ people with the qualities and attributes most likely to deliver organisational success. As a sales manager, you need to stay well connected with your organisation's business and go-to-market strategies. Ensure that the people in your team are the people who fit the future and possess the appropriate skills, knowledge and motivation to meet the goals that result from these strategies.

Apply the three-part framework outlined here and you WILL attract, select and retain high-performing salespeople and, in the process, join the exclusive group of sales managers who have many top performers and few, if any, poor performers.

About this article

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About the author

Mark Purbrick is the Managing Director for Peoplogica and also serves as a Director on a number of company and government boards. As well as being the Regional Director of Profiles International, his past roles include the Chief Executive Officer/Director of The Wine Society and the Trading Manager for The Fosters Group (Wine Clubs Division). Mark's philosophy is simple. "Select people based on 'fit' not 'like,' measure their performance, recognise good performance, challenge poor performance, listen to them and then trust them. Get this right then you can spend most of your time on the customer, vision and strategy which are the future of your organisation" for further information go to www.peoplogica.com

⁴ Groysberg, B, Lee, L and Abrahams, R 2010 "What It Takes to Make "Star" Hires Pay Off," *MIT Sloan Management Review*, Winter 2010, Vol. 51, No. 2, pp. 57-61.

⁵ Meister, J and Willyard, K 2010 "Mentoring Millennials: Delivering the Feedback Gen Y Craves is Easier than You Thought," *Harvard Business Review* May 2010, Vol. 88, No. 5, pp. 68-72.