



Pillar

A Sales Leaders Guide to Hiring Great Salespeople



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Introduction

The average annual turnover in sales is 25 to 30%. This means that the equivalent of the entire sales organization must be hired and trained every four years or so, and that's EXPENSIVE!

Consider this. Direct replacement costs for a sales employee can range from \$40,000 to \$70,000, while other sales positions can cost a company as much as \$300,000. Moreover, these figures don't reflect the lost sales while a replacement is found and trained.

Bottom line: companies typically spend more on hiring in sales than they do anywhere else. This is why it's so important to ensure you uncover the right sales candidates efficiently and effectively....and that starts with interviewing. The recruitment process has become broken for various reasons...poor communication with candidates, bias within interviews, interviews aren't being standardized, skills aren't being assessed correctly, etc.

So, how do we fix this? Let this e-book be your guide to going from conducting your best interviews to making your greatest hiring decisions. Because after all, salespeople can sell themselves, but how do you bring GREAT salespeople into your organization?



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Interview Stages

According to IBM, a positive interview experience makes candidates 38% more likely to accept a job offer, and that starts with creating a structured interview process. Keep in mind that each interview stage should be identical for each candidate to ensure an equitable, unbiased hiring decision is made. We recommend the following 6 steps (including a task and reference check) for sales candidates:

1.) Screening

We're not telling you something you don't already know here, but recruiters should conduct a preliminary phone interview that typically lasts 20-30 minutes. This initial conversation determines whether an individual is a viable option for the job. In sales, they'll be on the phone a lot, so pay particular attention to their phone etiquette and ensure they've done some prep work. Sales reps need to have their stuff together before they talk with prospects, and if they already do this by prepping for phone interviews, they are likely worthy of moving to the next stage.

2.) First Interview

The first interview should be a one-on-one interview between the applicant and the hiring manager(s). This is the time to ask questions related to work experience and skills (scroll to pages 5-6 for the top 10 skills to assess) and also for the candidate to ask their own questions to determine if there's a mutual fit. Side note: It's a red flag if they DON'T have any questions! Depending on your organization, this will most likely be a virtual interview, and in fact, more and more job seekers are preferring live video interviews to in-person interviews.

3.) Second Interview

If the candidate has succeeded in impressing the hiring manager(s) after the first conversation, a second interview is the opportunity for the candidate to meet with different department heads and/or subject matter experts within your organization. The interviewer(s) will ask deeper, more specific questions to follow up on certain topics from the first interview and attempt to get a better idea of how the candidate will acclimate to the work environment.

4.) Task

Now it's time for qualified candidates to move further down the gauntlet! Some candidates may fly through the process and woo anyone with their charm, but the true test lies in writing an email or presenting a sales pitch (depending on inside vs. outside sales).

- Inside sales reps send tons of emails. Ask them to perform a simple task of drafting an email they would send on behalf of your company to a prospect. In order to succeed in today's sales environment, you have to know how to communicate well via the written word, and this is a great way to evaluate a task that is a key part of their day-to-day duties.
- For outside sales reps, a live sales pitch is common to show that the candidate can speak clearly and confidently in front of an audience. You want to know that you're hiring an effective salesperson, and a sales presentation gives you a good idea of the candidate's sales style to ensure it aligns with your company's approach.

5.) Final Stage

The final interview with the hiring manager(s) sets the stage on making the ultimate hiring decision. During this step, you should review the task with the candidate. This is also the time to ask deeper questions that you didn't have time to address during the first interview. As Howard Stern, critically acclaimed as the best interviewer of all time, always says... "treat each interview as a conversation" where both the interviewer and the candidate contribute.

6.) Reference Check

Many companies find reference checks to be unnecessary, but trust us, you want to cut through any exaggerations by completing them. Request a list of at least three references from the candidate and contact them to get their insights into the candidate (we recommend that at least one reference is a former manager of the candidate's). This way, you'll be able to independently verify your assumptions about the candidate, address any concerns, and hopefully have the confidence you need to hire them without any second guesses.

Interview Structure

Using an interview structure is important for several reasons...it gives each candidate a fair evaluation, ensures interviewers connect candidate skills to specific job duties, and helps employers make hiring decisions quickly. To lead an effective interview, you should have a set structure to properly evaluate each candidate and provoke a productive discussion. Here's how we recommend that you structure an interview:

1.) Intro

We recommend that you spend about 5 minutes at the beginning of the interview for introductions and an overview of the candidate's experience. This helps the candidate become more comfortable before beginning the actual interview. During this time, the interviewer should also review the purpose of the interview (i.e., how skills align with the role, to discuss written assessment, etc.).

2.) Skills Assessment

This section represents the bulk of the interview and should assess how the candidate's skill set translates to the job duties required. The interviewer should ask no fewer than 8 questions per hour. This equates to about 5-6 minutes per question, leaving enough time for the candidate to answer and for the interviewer to ask any follow-up questions. We recommend at least 2 follow-up questions per candidate answer on areas that are important to dig deeper. Keep in mind that the candidate should do 2/3rd's of the talking here to ensure they have enough time to sell themselves.

3.) Candidate Questions

Getting to know the candidate and their qualifications is just as important as the candidate getting to know more about your company and what you can offer them. Leave about 8 minutes at the end of the interview for candidate questions and to briefly discuss next steps. This is also a great way to signal the conclusion of the interview.

Here's how following the structure above would look for a 45 minute interview:

Intro = 5 minutes

Skills Assessment = 32 minutes

Candidate Questions = 8 minutes



Top 10 Skills to Assess

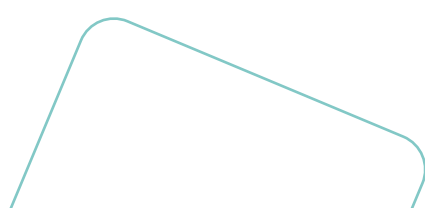
By ensuring that prospective sales candidates instill the most critical skills, your organization will be better equipped to close more deals. So, what separates high-performing salespeople who exceed their quota from under-performers who miss their quotas by more than 25%?

1.) Communication

The most obvious skill, but we still have to include it! Strong communication skills are the foundation of building meaningful relationships with buyers because what's the point of being an expert in a product or service if you can't convey its value to prospects?

2.) Motivation

Motivation is what drives people to success and plays a critical role in productivity, quality, and speed of work. It's an essential element for the growth of any organization.



3.) Productivity

Between prospecting, client meetings, and phone calls, managing time can be challenging. The expression "time is money" has never been more true than when you're in a sales role as time spent inefficiently in sales is lost revenue. Salespeople that know how to manage their time efficiently achieve a higher level of productivity.

4.) Goal Oriented

Excellent sales professionals are motivated by the notion that there's an ambitious goal to be reached, that achieving their goal feels incredible, and that there's a reward at the finish line. Given this mindset, these sellers will exert all effort to meet or surpass targets.

5.) Persistence

The ability to continue to pursue a goal or an outcome even when it's difficult and even when it's going to take a significant amount of time and energy is a critical component of sales success. In fact, it typically takes eight touches before a salesperson books their first meeting with a prospect, so those that give up after one or two calls or emails are leaving opportunities behind.

6.) Coachability

Coachable sellers don't shy away from tough feedback, they embrace it and have an internal motivation to improve. Great people don't need to be perfect people, so assessing whether a prospective candidate is flexible, is open to receiving feedback, and actively seeks opportunities to learn is pivotal to sales performance.

7.) Resilience

Sales is constantly filled with difficulty, opposition, and rejection. The best sales reps have a way of channeling rejection to power their internal drive to improve. They don't give up and instead take the learning lessons and envision the opportunity to go back and try again.

8.) Empathy

Successful sellers are almost always buyer-centric and know what the customer wants before they even know it. They're proud of the product they're selling, and their first priority is helping and understanding the customer. After all, people buy from people they trust!

9.) Confidence

Sales is all about accomplishing a transfer of confidence. A prospect has to believe in a rep's confidence more than they believe in their doubts about making a purchase decision. Being able to confidently deliver a pitch and answer a prospect's objections is one of the most important skills to master as a sales pro. However, look for someone who exhibits humility at the same time as you don't want someone who's overconfident.

10.) Curiosity

Great sales reps are inquisitive and willing to understand the "why" behind a prospect's pain points. They aren't just focused on making a sale, but are also interested in the buyer's challenges.



Interview Questions to Ask

Now that we've assessed the skills that are fundamental to hiring great salespeople, let's review some example questions to ask that align with each. Interviewing is an important (if not the MOST important) step in the employee selection process, and asking the right questions is detrimental to determining if an applicant's experience and personality meet the requirements of a sales role.

P.S.) We're a BIG fan of skills-based questioning as it's scientifically proven to provide better insight. In fact, all of the questions below have been pulled from Pillar's library of hundreds of questions (you can even add your own).

1.) Communication

- Give an example of how you carefully considered your audience prior to communicating with them. What factors influenced your communication?
- How do you prioritize tasks and projects? How do you communicate this prioritization with those involved?
- Tell me about a time when you were communicating with someone and they did not understand you. What did you do?

2.) Motivation

- Tell me about a time when you lost your motivation or felt disengaged from your work. What happened?
- What incentives or benefits would motivate you in this job?
- What motivates you to wake up and go to work every morning?

3.) Productivity

- How do you limit distraction at work?
- What are your productivity hacks that you use in your day-to-day life?
- Describe the work environment or culture in which you are most productive and happy.

4.) Goal Oriented

- What project would you consider your most significant career accomplishment to date?
- Give an example of an important goal that you set in the past. Tell me about your success in reaching that goal.
- What have you done professionally that you've succeeded at but isn't an experience you'd want to repeat?

5.) Persistence

- How do you deal with rejection?
- Tell me about something that didn't go according to plan at work. What did you do and what was the outcome?
- Do you keep a positive attitude during difficult situations? How?

6.) Coachability

- What is one area, personally or professionally, where you see the need for improvement in your life?
- When was the last occasion you asked for direct feedback from a superior? Why? What was the feedback and what did you do with that feedback?
- What management style gets the best results out of you?

7.) Resilience

- How long are you willing to fail at this job before you succeed?
- Could you tell me about a time you were given a task that you had limited knowledge about?
- Describe a project that you had to work on for an extended period of time and how you stayed engaged?

8.) Empathy

- Are you helpful by nature? How so?
- What kind of things or people inspire you?
- If you were in my position, what skills do you think would be most important to the role you've applied for?

9.) Confidence

- Tell me about a time when you had to convince another team member or leader to buy into a new idea or project. How did you accomplish this?
- If you could claim to be an "expert" in anything (personal or professional), what would it be and why?
- Can you describe a time when you had a different opinion than your boss, and how you approached the situation?

10.) Curiosity

- What new skills have you learned over the past year?
- Describe two or three major trends in your profession today.
- What's the most recent topic you've Googled for work?

Bonus

If the roles you’re hiring for are more senior in nature, here’s a few sales-specific questions to get a feel for the candidate’s previous selling experience.

- What is your best memory of a sale you won?
- What are 3 things you do to build rapport with a prospect?
- What is your approach to researching prospects prior to a call?
- How do you define a successful first meeting with a prospect?
- How do you acquire leads?
- At what point do you stop pursuing a prospect?
- Tell me about a time you lost a sale.
- What is your least favorite part of the sales process?

Sample Scorecard

Using an interview scoring system that grades candidates’ responses on a predetermined scale is one way to make a hiring decision based on data, not gut feeling. We’ve formulated a sample scorecard that you can use based on the skills we outlined earlier on.

Position:

Candidate Name:

Interviewer:

Date of Interview:

Please rate the candidate on the criteria below.

- 1 = I do not feel this candidate embodies this skill.
2 = This candidate showed this skill to some extent.
3 = This candidate adequately showed this skill.
4 = This candidate amazed me with the level at which they embody this skill.

Skill	Score (1-4)	Comments
Communication		
Motivation		
Productivity		
Goal Oriented		
Persistence		
Coachability		
Resilience		
Empathy		
Confidence		
Curiosity		

Overall Strengths:

Overall Concerns:

What would help this candidate be most successful in the role?:

Grow better with every hire

Hiring great salespeople can make or break your company as the initial sales contact is the first tangible impression people will have of your organization. Emphasizing the skills that are required to be successful and asking the right questions will support the foundation of a winning sales culture.

In fact, Pillar can help you bring the best salespeople into your organization. Take the guesswork out of hiring by using our interview intelligence platform that empowers teams to hire the right talent efficiently and equitably. Through a number of helpful features, such as sales-specific interview guides, question guidance in interviews, and side by side candidate comparisons, Pillar helps dramatically reduce the failure rate in hiring while eradicating missed sales quotas.

Structuring your interviews, coming up with the right skills and questions to ask, and implementing a scorecard process is A LOT! Pillar can handle all of this for you and seamlessly integrates right in the tools you use every day (Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Greenhouse, Lever, and more). Learn more and schedule a demo today at pillar.hr/get-a-demo.

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