

What Skills Do I Need in a Recruiter: HR or Sales?

By Ross Rich, Managing Principal, Selection Strategies, Inc.

There is an old adage in politics; *“If you want a real friend, buy a dog.”* Well in the world of sales recruiting the line goes this way, *“If you want a real sales recruiter hire a salesperson.”* While recruiting (or “staffing” if you still refer to IT as “data processing”) has traditionally been the domain of Human Resources its location is misplaced especially when it comes to sales recruiting. Human Resources organizations, because they are typically charged with administration, cost control & risk mitigation, tend to treat recruiting as an administrative function and are more inclined to hire people who simply facilitate the process rather than drive it. All recruiting IS sales and sales recruiting is particularly unique.

Our experience shows that the most effective sales recruiters are those who most closely match the characteristics of an enterprise technology salesperson. There are several reasons why, which we’ll discuss in a moment, but the most salient characteristic is what we call Discernment. Discernment is the ability to assess situations and people quickly and accurately. Discerners are good problem solvers, they’re analytical and think strategically. Judging talent is the single most critical ability an effective recruiter brings to the game. In this capacity an effective recruiter acts like the sales organization’s Director of Player Operations...*scouting for talent and building a championship team.*

So how do we define what we need to look for in a sales recruiter? In following our own selection methodology we begin by defining the nature and requirements of the role and study the operating environment to construct a relevant profile or competency model. The model consists of three dimensions: Abilities, Chemistry & Experience. For the purpose of this discussion we’ll narrow our focus to the key elements of the Abilities dimension. The Abilities dimension of the profile defines the traits & skills required to effectively perform the role of sales recruiter for an Information Technology company.

The Sales Paradigm

I’ve already stated my belief that the sales recruiter is essentially a salesperson who sells the company and its’ career opportunities instead of a product or service. Because I’ve put a stake in the ground about this paradigm let’s take a moment to discuss the parallels between sales and recruiting.

The recruiting process corresponds to the major phases of most complex sales cycles – Planning, Prospecting, Qualifying, Evaluating, Negotiating and Closing. Recruiters, like their sales counterparts, must be thoroughly versed on the opportunity and be able to articulate its’ value; plan how to attack their territory; leverage multiple lead generation sources; prospect relentlessly for viable candidates; quickly qualify candidates in or out; engage and thoroughly assess the candidates suitability while managing & coordinating the interview process; negotiate the terms of employment and close the candidate. The analogies to sales dictate a more sales oriented profile for recruiters because the activities demand essentially the same behaviors.

The Complex Sale, an Atlanta-based sales force effectiveness and methodology consultancy, has defined several sales “types” that offer good insights to the recruiting model we’re discussing here. These models correspond to different kinds of selling environments and roles.

Sales Profile Models

| Sales Type | Characteristics |
|------------|---|
| Teller | Product knowledge, demo skills, technology expertise. |
| Sellers | Listening skills, probing, linking, customized presentation skills, flexibility, selling benefits, personality, persuasiveness, objection handling. |
| Farmers | Project management, problem solving, delivery, service, nurturing, and responsiveness. |
| Hunters | Competitiveness, leadership, strategy, getting to executives, strategic literacy, company knowledge, resourcefulness, goal-driven. |
| Partners | Sees big picture, strategic thinker, industry expert, collaborative problem solver, team leader, shared goals and rewards, long-term focus. |

Used with permission from The Complex Sale, Inc.©

As I'll describe later, the "Teller" and "Farmer" models reflect two of the recruiting styles common to today's recruiting world. For our purposes the "Hunter" or "Partner" models are preferable because of the critical role sales recruiters play. For them to function as agents for and "trusted advisors" to hiring managers they must possess the abilities and skills that effectively make them a peer; therefore, we're seeking to raise the bar and the level of sophistication of sales recruiters.

The complex selling environment of Information Technology has many characteristics that require a more sophisticated and talented form of salesperson. A commodity or transactional sales person will find the transition to a more complex selling environment difficult because the increased complexity requires more skills. Sales recruiting in Information Technology is no different and is characterized by several conditions that warrant a different approach and a different type of recruiter:

- Sales recruiting is fundamentally a relationship-based activity.
- Talent trumps experience and assessing talent is the single most important aspect of recruiting.
- Successful recruiting favors the company (and recruiter) whose process is perpetually in motion.
- The demand exceeds the supply of experienced, talented sales professionals.
- Candidate pipeline development and cultivation requires a dedicated commitment of time.

Why Is the Ability to Judge Talent So Critical?

A year ago the supply-demand imbalance was so acute that the people shortage was considered the single greatest obstacle to continued growth and expansion. Often, due to the diluted pool of experienced talent, companies were forced to compromise their "Experience" standards and hire people whose pedigree was far less than desired. It is a given that adherence to candidate quality is a function of the size of the candidate pipeline and the pressures to hire. Couple this with a tendency to give greater weight to "Experience" over "Abilities" or competencies and you have a formula for disaster. Experience has always been the traditional focus of recruiters and hiring managers and yet, experience alone, is the least reliable and predictive of future success.

An historical example can illustrate. In 1940, while the United States attempted to stay out of the Second World War it was still preparing itself for the eventuality of fighting. President Franklin Roosevelt and General George Marshall, the Army Chief of Staff, began identifying the officers who would lead the Army should the US enter the war. Marshall had, over the course of his career, kept a little black book in which he recorded thoughts and observations about each and every officer he encountered. He returned to that list in assembling the group of officers who would lead the US Army in World War II. Interestingly enough he ignored the "resume" and sheer years of experience and reached down into the ranks of the officer corps to tap officers who

displayed great promise...those who had impressed him with their drive, intellect, energy and skill. Had he relied solely on experience soldiers like Dwight Eisenhower and George Patton would have retired from the Army in the days before World War II and our armies would have been led by the same generals that led the Army in World War I, likely to defeat. Marshall's discernment of the situation and recognizing who and what was required to build an army that could fight and win was the key to ultimate victory. The world may not hang in the balance over a technology sale but the keys to winning are the same.

While the recruiting situation has changed dramatically in a few short months the basic problem of hiring hasn't changed one bit. Hiring talent is still the key to competitive superiority. The current "buyer's market" may lead companies to believe there is an abundance of talent available and that choosing talented sales professionals is now an easy task. This belief is dangerous.

The last five plus years have witnessed a remarkable growth in technology and almost unchecked capital spending. Given driving factors like decentralized client-server computing, Y2K, the emergence of the Internet and unprecedented economic expansion technology sales people enjoyed a period where selling was certainly easier than today's tight-money conditions. Sales people today must be as adept at creating opportunities as servicing demand, in almost every respect, the current conditions are requiring sales people to flex muscles they haven't used in a long time or never fully developed.

The hazard for recruiters and hiring managers who rely solely on experience is that factors like "performance track record," "over-quota achievement," "W2 earnings records," as well as other measures are not totally reliable indicators of the candidate's true ability. Recruiters have to be better today because they must dig deeper and be more accurate in assessing sales competence. The "Discerner" trait I referred to earlier, as well as, a thorough understanding of the industry and a systematic, methodical approach to evaluating talent are the keys to winning the competition for talent.

The Environment

The market conditions may have changed but the basic goal of recruiting hasn't...it is still about winning the talent war and gaining competitive advantage by having better people. The disappearance of the dot-coms and the shrinking ranks of many technology vendors has alleviated the critical shortage of people for those companies that remain but it hasn't entirely solved the problem nor has it eliminated the need for talent. In many cases companies are seeking to upgrade their storehouse of talent and must be able to sift through the swelling ranks of available candidates to identify the truly talented. Also, the current sluggish economy has made top-performing candidates (the classic passive candidate we all seek) reluctant to leave their current positions and pursue new opportunities which places greater emphasis on the recruiter's sales abilities. It will be even more critical to drill down with candidates to identify the competencies required for success. The older paradigms of recruiting can no longer satisfy the demands of today's sales recruiting environment.

Companies must create an operating environment that supports the kind of recruiting we're describing and attracts and keeps the kinds of recruiters we're profiling. Here are some of the characteristics we compare and contrast between the "old" and "new" ways to execute recruiting:

Recruiting Paradigms

| Traditional Model | System Characteristic | Recommended Model |
|---------------------------|----------------------------------|------------------------|
| Cost-Based | Operating Model/Value Prop | Value-Based |
| Centralized | Organizational Alignment | Field Operations |
| Episodic | Recruiting Activity | Continuous |
| Human Resources | Recruiter Profile | Sales |
| HR | Organization Recruiter Alignment | Business Units |
| Generalist/Administrative | Recruiter Role | Specialist/Operational |
| Cost | Sourcing Guidelines | Speed |
| Cost-Per-Hire | Recruitment Metrics | Value-Per-Hire |
| Experience | Candidate Profile Focus | Competencies |

Selection Strategies, Inc. ©1999

The Model Sales Recruiter

It's important to begin by defining the role because we must distinguish between types of recruiters. There are myriad of roles that can be broadly labeled as "recruiter" ranging from Sourcers to Executive Recruiter. The role we are discussing and recommending is the most senior incarnation and most closely aligned to the Executive Recruiter. This internal recruiter works directly and collaboratively with the line management team and functions as a surrogate manager.

The image of recruiters that most people think of is either the classic "headhunter" or the internal "administrative" variety. Neither one of these adequately addresses the environment we've described. The "headhunter" represents too much of the "Teller" profile. They possess little consultative ability and tend to view recruiting purely as a numbers game – the "throw it against the wall and see what sticks" approach. This is the kind of recruiter who is always "pitching" opportunities but never really qualifies the candidate or thoroughly analyzes the position to assess the best fit.

The internal type is most analogous to the "Farmer" profile -- pleasant, cooperative, and helpful but passive and often struggling for access to management and credibility outside of HR. These recruiters are often facilitators of the process, taking on many of the administrative and logistical details but generally not driving the process or proactively prospecting for candidates.

These models don't represent examples of two extremes as much as they illustrate common practice. The profile we seek is most closely aligned with the "Hunter" & "Partner" models. Why? Because it represents the characteristics that ensure the recruiter can and will do the following critical things:

1. **Cares about winning** – sees the nature of their role as engaging in a war for talent. Cares passionately about getting the best people and believes that they are selling the best opportunity. Simply put...they're Competitive!
2. **Can assess talent** – can systematically identify, judge, categorize and attract talent to the company. Can accurately assess a candidate's capabilities and is seen as a "good judge of horse flesh."
3. **Can triangulate** – can effectively intersect the needs & interests of the company and the candidate while selling against competitive opportunities. Is effective at positioning the company and its opportunities and can credibly articulate its value, culture, history and differentiation.

4. **Sees the big picture** – sees beyond the immediate needs and their own personal objectives and looks out for the best interest of the company and the candidate. Doesn't discard talent but, thinking strategically, steers candidates better suited for other roles to other parts of the company or keeps lines of communication open.
5. **Networks** – develops, cultivates and leverages a personal & professional network that yields candidates, sources, leads and referrals.

It is the combination of competitive motivation, judgment skills about people and situations and sales skills that distinguish the profile of the Sales Recruiter. Current recruiters should be evaluated on their performance and how well it corresponds to these requirements and future recruiters assessed on their alignment to the profile. Candidates for sales recruiting roles may be found in several different sources:

- Former or current salespeople
- Aspiring salespeople
- Former or current line managers
- Executive recruiters who also had business development/sales responsibilities

We have had success with former military officers who were aspiring sales people. Junior Military Officer who have decided to leave the service and pursue opportunities in the civilian sector and were seeking sales positions make good recruiter candidates. Their assessment skills have been honed in the leadership roles they fulfilled in the military service and the exposure to a sales oriented role serves as a good training ground for those aspiring to transition into a full-fledged sales position.

The current conditions in the marketplace, while they may be favorable to employers, should not be permitted to lead to complacency. Some companies may be lulled into thinking that the stream of candidates will never run dry and that they will always be in the driver's seat (didn't we also think the NASDAQ would hit 5000 and just keep going up?) but most of us know that these things run in cycles. Companies committed to market leadership and dominance do the right things all the time and companies seeking to stay ahead in the war for talent will continue to adopt practices that give them a competitive advantage. Hiring a sales recruiter that can provide that edge is an excellent first step!