



Balancing the Art and Science of Interviewing Sales Professionals

Calling out the most important part of the sales recruiting process is very much like naming your favorite child, especially if you have more than one. Every element is uniquely important, and executing well on all of them is vital to getting the result you want: a profitable long-term relationship with a new sales rep or leader. However, the interview should be considered one of the most important steps among many.

No matter how strategic you have been in designing the position or structuring the search, screening resumes, and creating your short list, someone who looks great on paper might not measure up in real life. Everything you've learned before the interview pales in comparison to the information you can glean from conducting an actual interview.

Selling is both an art and science, and so is interviewing top sales talent.

The Science: Interviewing for Hard and Soft Skills

When you interview top sales talent, evaluating hard skills as well as soft skills is considered the science behind the process. However, this absolutely does not mean it should be approached as if it is “easy” or that either of those skills can be just brushed over.

Most hard skills—the technical aspects of the job including specific skills and experiences—are covered in the resume. But you still have to fully explore them to be sure the candidate’s self-presentation is completely accurate. Ask detailed questions such as these, and don’t just listen and move on—drill down on their answers:

- What does your sales process look like from start to finish? Who do you call on? How do you prospect for clients?
- Tell me about the hardest deal you ever closed – what were the objections? How did you overcome them? What resources did you utilize? How did you ultimately realize success? What did you learn throughout the process? What could you have done differently looking back? How did this change how you handled future deals?

Soft skills can be slightly more difficult to assess, like communication skills, interpersonal skills, organizational skills, creativity, resourcefulness, flexibility, etc. but they are vital to success in sales. Ask and explore questions when interviewing a potential sales person like these:

- Describe a specific person you work extremely well with – why do you feel you work well together? Tell me about another person you currently struggle working with—why is it difficult to work with them and what have you done to improve the working relationship?
- Tell me about a recent failure you experienced. What happened, how did you work through it, and what did you learn?
- Walk me through how you manage your daily and weekly schedule. What technology tools do you actively use to help you stay organized?

The Art: Interviewing for a Cultural Fit

Over the years, the business world has done a good job improving the interview process by introducing structured ways of evaluating competencies and behaviors. Most hiring managers have been trained to some degree on interviewing for hard and soft skills. Unfortunately, we see many organizations struggle with interviewing to determine a cultural fit, and ultimately miss out on great candidates.

Why? **Because they come to the conclusion of a “poor fit” too quickly without looking at the whole picture.**

Our experience tells us that too many hiring managers don't spend enough time or use the right tactics to understand cultural fit. Many will hire/not hire based on their gut feeling after a first interview. This is a big mistake. Gut is important, but it's only one part of the whole picture.

I highly recommend you take more time and garner more input from the potential sales person. It's hard to assess a cultural fit in a one-hour meeting. Instead, give it as much time as you can—four to five hours is not considered too much—and more than that is considered even better to get a clearer picture. Here are our suggestions to uncover if there is a cultural fit:

- Take the candidate on a ride-along to a client meeting.
- Engage the candidate in multiple conversations with multiple team members (different levels and various departments).
- Ask the receptionist how the candidate interacted with him or her upon arrival.
- Take the candidate to an informal lunch.
- Take both the candidate and spouse to a dinner.

These techniques will give your gut more information to work with, including input from other people's gut instincts, as well as add your own second and third impressions.

One final and critical suggestion is that even with more information obtained to complete your decision, do not insist on a perfect match to all your specified criteria. I believe an overall match of 80 percent should be considered a good match. You are not hiring a new best friend, but instead finding a candidate with the best skill set that will fit within your organization. Remember, diversity in both skills and personalities adds depth to your company.

For more information on how to become a better interviewer and hire the best sales talent, please reach out to us. We have created a client interview guide that will help ensure you have the skills to hire the right candidate. Write or call John O'Brien at job@salestalentgroup.com, 770-888-0380 and we will send it your way.

NEED HELP WITH YOUR CURRENT INTERVIEW PROCESS FOR TOP SALES TALENT?
CONTACT US FOR A FREE GUIDE!

Interviewing Tips From One Of Our Top Clients



Scott Braynard
SVP, Sales & Marketing

“1. Don’t skip steps. I like to see a candidate in person a minimum of twice in the recruiting process. You’d be surprised how a candidate changes from one interview to the next. Consistency is a key factor. Anyone can turn it on and have a good interview, but to do it again

indicates they will more likely sustain their personality if selected. Avoid rushing and settling for just one personal interview. It’s important to see if they are the same person the second or even third time around.

2. Ask them to describe the value proposition and competitive differentiators of their current offering. If they can’t articulate it concisely they will struggle with yours, too.

3. Pay attention to how they tell stories. So much of persuasion and connection is effective storytelling. If they can’t captivate you in the interview with a good story, they won’t captivate prospects either. It will affect their ability to fit in with other employees, too.”

4. Be diligent in understanding why a candidate made change from one previous job to another, not just why they’re interested in your opportunity. Look for patterns in their decision making. For example, if they’ve been RIF’d more than once you need to be alert to performance issues. If they followed a previous boss, you need to determine the risk of it happening again.

5. Ask unusual questions in a personal interview to determine their core personality. What books are you reading – to determine if they have the baseline curiosity to do the job. What music do you listen to – to determine the depth of their character, and how varied their interests are. Where is your favorite place to travel – to determine how bold the adventurous they are. Candidates rarely come to a personal interview prepared to address those types of questions, so you also get a glimpse of how they think on their feet.

6. In the final personal interview, do they loosen up and enjoy themselves. Many high-quality candidates are nervous and guarded in the early stages. Once they have met with you and spoken with you several times, they should be comfortable showing some personality and being themselves. If not, they will have difficult connecting with prospects and other teammates internally.



John O'Brien is the Founder, CEO and Managing Partner of Sales Talent Group, an executive search firm specializing in placing sales leadership, outside sales, and insides sales professionals nationwide for the past 20 years.