

Personality Tests Detect What Makes Salespeople Tick

By Ira Wolfe

What is it that differentiates the top producing salespeople from the ones that go through life working very hard to eek out a paycheck? Is it sales knowledge? Is it experience? Or is it personality?

With over 16 million people employed in sales and sales-related positions, there certainly is no shortage of salespeople with experience. Billions of dollars are spent each year on sales training so it seems unlikely that there is a lack of sales knowledge? And yet there is no single position that demands comparable attention and investment from executives, business owners, and managers than sales when it comes to recruiting and hiring.

Given all the data and information and past experiences about how personalities affect sales performance, doesn't it make sense for hiring managers to understand what makes successful sales people tick?

Recent validation studies and thousands of empirical experiences prove that personality traits give individuals a leg up in achieving what they want to achieve. In fact, scientists now believe that 50 percent of the differences in our personalities is inherited. But not everyone with the "right" personality becomes successful. Why? Because personality is not a case of you have it or you don't. Personality traits provide a recipe for success but other factors determine whether these traits will be turned on....or just lie dormant.

What are these "other" factors? In addition to some genetic component, environment certainly influences how an individual uses these natural abilities. For example, growing up in a family of extroverts with parents who encourage a bit of risk-taking will turn on different traits than a conservative upbringing that values a subdued, private lifestyle and feels that a bird in hand is worth more than two in the bush.

Personality traits also combine in unique ways. The number of possibilities is enormous which explains why two people who might look capable of selling (or doing any job for that matter) perform very differently in the workplace. That explains why understanding personality traits gives managers a new powerful tool in making hiring and training decisions and getting the most out of their employees.

Personal values also determine how personality traits shine brightly in one situation yet lie in the shadows in another. Compare two people with turned-on competitive genes but one values life by how much wealth they've attained while the second treasures exploration and the knowledge that comes with it. The first measures his success in dollars while the latter invests his time and resources in books and continuing education....even if what he learns is not ever applied. The thrill of victory is not owning the most toys but having the right answers.

Much of the scientific research for using personality tests (and not sales skills and sales knowledge tests) for hiring salespeople comes from the Big 5 or Five-factor model. This model has been studied since the mid-1950s and has gained enormous acceptance as a result of the need to hire highly productive employees, the increasing competition from a global marketplace, and the high cost of recruiting and training.

The **Big 5 Traits** are easily remembered by the acronym OCEAN. The letters represent:

Openness to Experience: Measures how open to innovation, change, and risk a person is. Openness to experience determines flexibility to explore new opportunities. Salespeople who are

more open thrive in a more fluid, dynamic, and technology driven marketplace while the more conventional salesperson prefers a more predictable, traditional, and familiar routine.

Conscientiousness: Measures how organized, punctual, disciplined and reliable a person is. Salespeople who prefer spontaneity over conscientiousness can be very effective at making sales but time management, follow up with customers, and completing sales reports will be an ongoing challenge.

Extroversion: Measures the energy an individual derives from working with large groups of people and/or lots of continual activity. Salespeople are typically extroverted but like all the other traits, relying on natural strengths without understanding how they can affect others can be detrimental to a career. For instance, extroverts believe there are no strangers, just people they haven't met yet. They do however tend to dominate conversations, be overly optimistic, and do more talking than listening.

Agreeableness: Measures how like trusting and accommodating a person is. Highly agreeable people will go out of their way to avoid conflict and therefore cold-calling, closing and holding profit margins can be a big problem if this individual chooses sales as a career.

Neuroticism: Measures how an individual will cope with stress, anxiety, and rejection. While some degree of restlessness and excitability ignites urgency, too much of it triggers impulsive behavior and vulnerability. A reasonable level of neuroticism protects the individual from complacency and yet energizes them to respond when things aren't going as planned. Perseverance and resilience - two traits absolutely necessary when you're talking about commission-based sales - are linked to the neuroticism trait.

Screening candidates and existing salespeople is easy with our online personality tests. Both our TotalView Assessment System and ASSESS Expert Personality Survey are based on the Big 5 personality model and validated by organizational psychologists for use in the workplace. These tools help managers and recruiters easily recognize which candidates have the personality traits that can drive, neutralize or sabotage success after they are on the payroll.

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