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...hire the right person
for the right role...

Executive summary

With an increasing focus on talent as a means of conveying competitive advantage, the search is on for ways to manage sales talent more effectively. However, effective talent assessment has long been the element missing from sales talent management strategies.

Sales Talent Assessment transforms the relationship between the employee and the employer, enabling both to move forward on a shared development journey towards higher performance in which both shape the outcome.

The best talent assessment tools are dynamic and align both employees and the organization with the expectations of the market. They enable organizations not only to select talent most suited to existing roles but to assess potential to grow along with the organization – enabling employers to 'hire for the future'.

Benchmarking talent against a 'High–Performer' profile for specific sales roles enables organizations to deploy talent where it will be most effective and provides a robust and objective route to off–loading under–performing talent.

A credible assessment tool puts the focus firmly on talent management for competitive advantage by enabling organizations to:

- hire the best available people – from a wider talent pool – to fit specific roles in the sales organization and drive revenue;

- target development precisely when and where it is needed and only when it will provide an appropriate return;

- drive talent retention strategies;

- maintain the talent pipeline; and

- engage in credible succession planning.

Talent replaces process

If the 20th century was the century of process, with businesses built around products, labor and capital, then the 21st has emerged as the century of talent: the most successful enterprises are being re-defined around their 'thinking-intensive employees'; meanwhile, organizational design is being re-engineered to enable such people to thrive and optimize their contribution in the context of the digital economy.

And, of course, sales talent is right in the thick of this revolution.

Back in 1997, and again in 2001, McKinsey & Co highlighted the so-called 'War for Talent' with seminal work[1] that helped shaped corporate thinking into this decade: organizations must constantly rethink the way they plan to attract, motivate, and retain employees. Yet, in 2008 and some 15 years on from the original research, the authors of another McKinsey report[2] had this to say: 'Companies like to promote the idea that employees are their biggest source of competitive advantage. Yet the astonishing reality is that most of them are as unprepared for the challenge of finding, motivating, and retaining capable workers as they were a decade ago.'

Talent is key to growth

McKinsey's Lowell Bryan and Claudia Joyce[3] looked at talent from the perspective of organization design and came up with a simple conclusion that has far-reaching consequences for businesses today: your workforce is the key to growth in the 21st century. By tapping into their underutilized talents, knowledge, and skills organizations can earn tens of thousands of additional dollars per employee, and manage the interdepartmental complexities and barriers that prevent real achievements and profits.

Right people in the *right* roles

Jim Collins, author of seminal work *Good To Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap … And Others Don't*[4], highlights how having the *right* people in the *right* roles is what gives the most successful organizations their competitive edge.

He writes: 'We expected that good-to-great leaders would begin by setting a new vision and strategy. We found instead that they first got the right people on the bus, the wrong people off the bus, and the right people in the right seats – and then they figured out where to drive it. The old adage "people are your most important asset" turns out to be wrong. People are not your most important asset. The *right* people are.'

So, the War for Talent has never actually ended. Indeed, the War for Talent – especially for revenue-creators – is hotting up: the War for Sales Talent is now being waged across the globe.

What good looks like

The *right* people in the *right* roles are an organization's most important asset but, until recently, it has been difficult and costly for organizations to understand exactly what good looks like, particularly in sales, because effective assessment tools that can comprehensively assess suitability for a specific role and, therefore, accurately predict performance have not been available.

Selling and sales management has for a long time been something of a dark art and the competencies required to perform across a range of quite disparate sales roles have often been ill-defined and poorly documented. In reality, while we tend to group everybody in a revenue-generating position under the same sales umbrella, selling is a broad church representing a wide spectrum of related but sometimes radically different roles, each of which requires its own specific skills and competencies.

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This in turn has meant that hiring has been something of a hit–and–miss affair, given the paucity of talent available and employers' patchy understanding of 'what good looks like' in any given sales role. Using Collins' terminology, how then to shape the organization for optimum performance by getting:

- the right people on the bus;

- the right people off the bus; and

- the right people in the right seats?

The talent pipeline

In the classic *The Talent Management Handbook*[5], the authors explored the importance of systematically identifying, keeping, developing and promoting an organization's best people. They identified three key steps to a human resources strategy that would drive an organization's success in terms of its talent:

- identify, select, and cultivate what they termed 'Superkeepers' – those employees an organization could not afford to lose;

- locate and develop highly qualified backups for key positions, which are critical to organizational continuity; and

- allocate resources to employees based on actual and/or potential contribution to organizational excellence.

This becomes a whole lot easier if a reliable and objective talent assessment tool is available.

For the sales organization, an effective suite of talent assessment and analysis tools opens the door to a valuable talent pipeline by enabling employers to:

- hire people most suited to the roles available;

- understand what motivates individuals to perform and thrive within an organization;

- reassign under–performing employees to more suitable roles; and

- confidently identify a suitable replacement should this becomes necessary.

The hiring process

Given the substantial cost of hiring top sales talent, which anyway is in short supply, it's not surprising that much attention is now being focused on retention strategies. Within this context of high cost and short supply, it is all the more important that all retention strategies are optimized prior to hiring top talent.

Talent retention at the higher echelons starts long before the 'onboarding' process when a new employee actually joins an organization: it begins with the search for the right candidate. However, the key to attracting quality candidates is often an employer's reputation in the talent marketplace.

For many companies – our clients included – effective recruitment at the top levels depends on reputation – their 'hiring brand' is vital. Word of mouth and peer–group recommendation are key factors in a candidate's decision whether or not to join an employer.

The way that employers conduct the search and hiring process is also an important factor: our clients tell us that using a credible assessment tool as part of this process not only helps them to determine whether or not the person concerned is right for the role under consideration; it brings the additional benefit of underlining the professionalism of the employer to the candidate, and consequently, its attractiveness as an organization to work for.

The onboarding process

Indeed, a suitable assessment tool is both a powerful motivator in itself and a vital tool in understanding what motivates top talent to perform. New hires who are well–supported by their employers almost inevitably come up to speed faster and start making a contribution earlier – a fundamental consideration for people in a sales role.

Assessment can also provide organizations with a development needs analysis for every employee, while offering the means to work in partnership with them in creating a personal development plan. This forms the start of a development journey that employee and employer will make together. It is of paramount importance that the employer communicates the concept of this shared journey right from the outset.

The development journey

Uniquely, our Sales Talent Assessment tool not only measures – with considerable accuracy – suitability for an existing role, but also predicts potential or 'headroom' for a candidate to grow into a new one. This brings with it major benefits on the part of the employer, not least in terms of succession planning, but also because assessment lights the way for organizations to optimize development budgets by focusing development where it will deliver most return.

As Pierre Gurdjian and Oliver Triebel pointed out in the *McKinsey Quarterly*[6], many training programs don't yield the desired results. One reason is that they are usually launched without sufficient knowledge of where the gaps in employee skills exist. An effective assessment tool, along with a suitable analysis dashboard that provides a detailed overview of skills gaps at individual and team level, fills this void.

With development focused exactly when and where it is needed, there come additional benefits to individual employees, who understand that the organization is not only making a substantial investment in them but also avoiding wasting

their time with poorly conceived development programs. Such individuals are more motivated and engaged – and therefore more productive – and ultimately stay with an organization longer, all of which positively impacts the bottom line.

Conclusion

The concept of a shared development journey is very powerful, both for employee and employer – with motivation and engagement comes a sense of empowerment that employees can not only shape their own destiny but that of the organization itself: as they develop, the organization develops too.

Enlightened organizations are using this concept to imbue a sense of responsibility in their key employees and to drive their sales talent pipeline. This brings them massive competitive advantage.

A rigorous, reliable and objective assessment tool of the caliber of Sales Talent Assessment has not been available within the sales sector until now. It puts the focus firmly on talent management for competitive advantage by enabling organizations to:

- hire the best available people – from a wider talent pool – to fit specific roles in the sales organization and drive revenue;

- maintain the talent pipeline;

- target development precisely when and where it is needed and only when it will provide an appropriate return; and

- engage in credible succession planning.

By informing organizations about the precise level of sales talent available within the organization – and its future potential – Sales Talent Assessment opens the door to building a dynamic talent management strategy.

Because the tool is continuously updated in line with the demands of the market, Sales Talent Assessment enables employers to build talent management strategies which are themselves agile and responsive. This helps businesses continuously optimize their sales talent according to market conditions and drive strategic sales change if necessary. This powerful concept enables businesses to unleash the power of key sales talent to drive long–term, sustainable growth.

References

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