Who Are Your Successful Salespeople?

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INTRODUCTION

The question of how to select the best salespeople is of crucial importance for most organizations which rely wholly or in part upon a sales organization both for communicating with customers and obtaining market information from them. As Stanton and Buskirk (1978) put it: "...the proper selection of salespeople is the key activity in the management of a sales force... A well selected sales force should be more productive than a poorly chosen one."

Benefits can include lower recruiting costs, reduced training and supervision costs, lower turnover, better sales performance, better customer relations and customer and community goodwill, and the provision of better market information for managerial decision making.

For most organizations the selection process has taken on added importance as it has become subject to legal scrutiny as a result of laws prohibiting age, race, sex, religion, and nationality discrimination in employment at the local, state, and federal levels. Although use of psychological testing for selection purposes is legal under
Title VII of the Civil Rights Act as long as the test is not specifically designed, intended or used to discriminate, such testing also is the employment practice which has been most criticized.

While predictors of sales success long have been subjects of interest and much debate among business managers, researchers have met with varying degrees of success as they have attempted to determine empirically what one or several key characteristics might tell a sales manager in advance whether or not a particular salesperson is destined to become a highly productive member of the sales force several years hence.

Some previous attempts at finding predictors of selling success or failure no doubt have focused upon the specific needs of a particular firm—useful results, if any, have not been made generally available. Other attempts which have been published have not succeeded very well in identifying general characteristics in new recruits which sales executives might look for to improve their selection process.

This study began by identifying the salesperson characteristics most often proposed by other investigators as predictors of future sales success or failure in order to see if a general profile of what might be called “successful salespersons” and another of what might be called “unsuccessful salespersons” could be constructed. Some of the predictors of sales success proposed by other investigators and their measures of success or failure are briefly discussed below. Then we present the methodology and the results of our own empirical investigation which successfully found certain predictors of selling success based on sales managers’ evaluations of the overall performance of each of their own salespeople as well as the sales managers’ ratings of each of their salespeople on twenty-four different personal attributes.

**PREDICTORS OF SALES SUCCESS**

What predictors of sales success have been found by previous researchers? Stanton and Buskirk (1978) asked whether there are some basic characteristics which are generally desirable for salespeople and answered the question with: “A qualified yes—a ‘yes, but’ sort of reply.” They cited six such attributes identified by McMurry (1968): (1) a high level of energy, (2) abounding self-confidence, (3) a value system marked by a chronic hunger for money, an improved standard of living, and more status and pres-