Improving Salesperson Recruitment: Examining Practices of Screening Candidates for Potential Success versus Potential Failure

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Salesperson recruitment efforts largely target identifying candidates who appear to possess 'sales success traits'. However, success traits may differ from failure traits. Theory and practice both devote low attention to understanding the unsuccessful salesperson, and how to incorporate sales failure into the recruitment process. This paper reports the results of an exploratory study that examines salesperson recruitment, tests the notion that recruiters 'overlook' failure issues, and develops variables that should motivate failure probing, which should be useful for theory and practice.

INTRODUCTION

One of the most important tasks facing sales managers is hiring the right people. Personnel selection receives significant interest in the academic sales literature, with studies examining antecedents and consequences of hiring decisions (e.g., Ganesan, Weitz and John 1993), trends in recruitment practices (e.g., Cron et al. 2005), hiring for contexts that involve international sales efforts (Honeycutt, Ford and Kurtzman 1996), and individual characteristics that signal potential fit (e.g., Maxwell et al. 2005). Personnel selection also receives attention in practitioner literature, reflected in the Good to Great key finding that "getting the right people on the bus" is critical (Collins 2001), and in managerially oriented articles that provide experience-based insights and suggestions related to hiring. The research reported in this paper investigates two intriguing sales recruitment insights reported in a recent practitioner oriented article (HR Chally Group 2007). This project explores and extends the insights in a manner useful to the academic community, furthering the ideas for both theory and practice. Notably, many marketing undergraduate students start their careers in sales, and thus we view the project as having potential benefit to marketing professors who help companies recruit their students.

The two insights examined in this study are stated as mistakes commonly made when hiring salespeople. One mistake was referred to as "Using successful people as models," and refers to the notion of hiring people who possess characteristics common to top sales performers, without recognizing that these same characteristics may be common among bottom performers. Thus, screening tools used to recruit salespeople may be ineffective because they may identify the wrong "top" candidates, as these

candidates share characteristics of both top and bottom performers. The second mistake was referred to as "Not researching the reasons that people fail," and refers to the notion that hiring managers have a biased perspective when hiring, correctly placing effort in understanding what makes salespeople succeed, but failing to ascertain why salespeople have failed. This mistake, which has been studied much less in the literature as demonstrated in Appendix 1, may lead a hiring manager to recruit a person who is poised to perform well on some aspects of the job, but who is also poised to fail on other aspects of the job. Both mistakes deal with performance failures, and involve neglecting failure issues in the personnel selection process.

Given the insights above, the purpose of this paper is to examine the assertion of these mistakes. We seek to assess the importance of the two 'common mistakes', and measure the degree to which these problems occur. Further, if the assertions appear to be important and prevalent, then we seek to develop recommendations for research and practice that would lead to corresponding improvements in hiring processes. The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. We discuss the importance of these issues; why including failure issues in screening may or may not be critical to managers hiring salespeople. We then discuss Study 1, which was qualitative, and which led to some validation of the assertions above and development of hypotheses to test quantitatively. We then discuss Study 2, which entailed a survey-based quantitative test, and provided further validation and resulted in pinpointing very specific areas where mistakes occur. Finally, we present conclusions and recommendations.

IMPORTANCE OF INCLUDING FAILURE ISSUES IN SCREENING

The importance of focusing on failure during a screening process may be questioned for three reasons, each discussed below. Questioning the importance of excluding failure in the screening process is important, because if excluding failure is unimportant, then the exclusion is appropriate rather than mistaken.

First, in sales settings are failures rare or low in cost? We consider a failure to be an employee who fails to achieve minimum work related goals, or who decides to leave the company so the cost of the recruitment effort is insufficiently recovered. If virtually all recruited salespeople were later deemed as non-failures, then spending time identifying potential failures would be wasteful, as their likelihood of occurring would be very low. Also, if the cost of recruitment is low, then again spending time with failure issues would be wasteful, as a hire that results in failure could be replaced inexpensively with another hire. For this "are failures rare or low in cost" question, we note research indicates failure rates in sales positions are high both in absolute sense and relative to other types of positions (Richardson 1999), and that costs of replacing failing employees have long been assessed as high (Rosenberg, Gibson and Epley 1981). Further, we note a company could have an employee they consider to be failing and yet retain the employee; in this case the cost is also high, as work related goals are not achieved. Thus, failures in sales settings are not rare, and are costly.

Second, does screening candidates for success essentially accomplish the same objective as screening candidates for potential failure? If so, then failure issues are addressed through efforts that focus on success. In response to this second question, we note success typically is equated to in-role achievements, such as sales productivity. On the other hand, as recognized in the OCB literature, extra-role behaviors often correlate significantly with managers' evaluations of salesperson performance, and yet may not be consciously thought of as success elements (MacKenzie, Podsakoff and Fetter 1993). Thus, performance in some dimensions may distinguish success from lack of success, whereas performance in other dimensions may distinguish failure from lack of failure. This notion has been applied frequently in the study of satisfaction with product performance via the Kano model (Vargo et al. 2007), which is analogous to satisfaction with employee performance. Ultimately, we expect a salesperson could be classified as successful in both sales productivity and various extra-role dimensions, classified as successful in sales productivity and yet failed in extra-role dimensions (or vice versa), or may be classified as failed in both sales productivity and extra-role dimensions. In fact, even if a salesperson is viewed as succeeding on both sales productivity and extra-role dimensions, a failure could exist because

the salesperson decided to leave the company before the company sufficiently recovers the cost of the recruitment effort. Thus, screening for success may focus on a subset of critical dimensions, insufficiently protecting against hiring a person who ends up failing on other important dimensions.

Third, are signals of failure obvious to sales managers, or even potential salespeople? In this case, putting low overt effort into screening for failure would make sense, as screening would occur without much effort or notice. However, research results indicate sales managers often have mistaken impressions of why failures occur among salespeople (Lilly and Porter 2003), and are unable to anticipate who would be the worst salesperson at a rate higher than chance (Emery and Handell 2007). Further, even salespeople themselves are often uncertain about what factors have contributed to their performance (Dixon, Forbes and Schertzer 2005), and we expect signals of failure would be even less obvious to potential salespeople. Thus, we conclude that failure signals are not simply obvious, and that effortful screening for failure is important.

Based on the issues above, our overall assessment is that: 1) salesperson failure is costly and frequent, 2) screening for potential success may insufficiently guard against hiring a person who fails, and 3) effort spent screening for failure is likely to be helpful, as causes of failure are often non-obvious. To some extent, the oft-repeated adage from Winston Churchill applies, specifically that those who fail to study history are doomed to repeat it. In the context of salesperson recruitment, some inclusion of failure in the screening process seems very important.

STUDY 1: QUALITATIVE ASSESSMENT

We had four primary objectives for Study-1 which parallel four questions. First, from the perspective of professionals involved in salesperson recruitment, do recruitment efforts generally lack a component of looking for issues that signal potential failure? Second, if recruitment efforts really do omit efforts to probe for potential failure, do practitioners view the omission as a case of failure being overlooked, or is the omission intended for reasons beyond the three issues discussed above? Third, are post-mortems commonly conducted after salesperson failures occur, in a manner where resulting knowledge could be easily used in subsequent recruitment efforts? And fourth, what factors do recruiters feel should logically motivate the amount of effort they spend when probing for potential failure?

Method
An interview guide was developed that contained questions reflecting the first three objectives above. The fourth objective was to identify factors that should impact the amount of effort spent probing for potential failure, and prior to our first interview we developed a potential list of twelve factors, to be discussed with interviewees after they were prompted to suggest their own ideas. Twelve interviews were held, six on the phone and six in person that each lasted 30-50 minutes in length. Each interview involved one or two professionals from a company that recruited salespeople. In person interviews were held on a college campus, and interviewees comprised a combination of recruiters and sales managers, all involved with campus recruiting for sales positions. Interviewers were two co-investigators; one investigator conducted phone interviews, and both investigators participated in all six in person interviews.

Results
Responses indicated hiring efforts have both goals in mind: hiring candidates poised for success, and avoiding candidates poised for failure. Further, both goals were viewed as very important. However, respondents had not given much thought to the notion of deliberately probing for failure, or that traits found among top performing salespeople used for screening could also exist among low performing salespeople (which they agreed was quite possible). When discussing whether the word "overlooked" applies to probing for failure, responses indicated that, yes, failure is generally overlooked in the sense that hiring efforts are unintentionally skewed toward focusing on success rather than failure. That is, we found screening for success was more intuitive to people than screening for failure, that a benefit to focusing on failure was initially non-obvious to respondents, but that respondents embraced the idea once

it was clarified. Regarding the third question, we found post-mortems are informally conducted to understand why salesperson failures occurred. However, these efforts are not conducted in a systematic manner, do not always involve multiple people and varying points of view, and generally do not link back to subsequent recruitment efforts.

With respect to factors that may impact the amount of effort spent probing for potential failure, respondent comments led to revisions in factors we had identified prior to the interviews (a mixture of deleting and combining of factors), and led to some new factors being identified. Ultimately, our qualitative probing resulted in identifying and defining eleven factors expected to impact the degree to which recruitment efforts focus on screening for potential failure (see Appendix 2). Interestingly, these factors have general importance, and could also impact the emphasis recruiters devote to screening for potential success. As an example, respondents reflected on urgency or time pressure associated with a recruitment effort, noting that some recruitment efforts are rushed, in which case less focus is likely to be devoted to all screening areas, including both screening for potential failure and success.

STUDY 2: QUANTITATIVE ASSESSMENT

Our Study 2 goals were to more fully validate the notion of failure issues being overlooked, and to examine the impact of the eleven factors (developed in Study 1) on the degree to which recruiters focus on failure, which we define as the amount of conscious effort directed toward probing for failure issues during a recruitment effort.

Guided by Study 1 results, we developed our first set of hypotheses to contrast recruitment focus on failure with focus on success. Our first hypotheses are that recruitment efforts focus more heavily on: H1a) amount of overall recruitment attention directed at success *versus* failure, H1b) amount of effort spent developing success-profile information *versus* failure-profile information, H1c) amount of time spent trying to understand why prior salespeople had succeeded *versus* failed, and H1d) the level of effort spent screening applicants on success *versus* failure.

Also guided by Study 1 results, we developed our second set of hypotheses around the eleven constructs provided in Appendix 2. Our entire study revolves around examining a lack of attention placed on probing failure, thus our goal in testing is to determine whether overall attention to failure is insufficiently responsive to the factors in Appendix 2, which are factors that recruiters state should have an impact. Hypotheses must be falsifiable, which is problematic with examining a lack of effect. Thus, for H2a-k, we hypothesize that variables in Appendix 2 will lack an association with overall attention to failure, and *will have an association* with overall attention to success. That is, to test an 'overlooking' of failure, we examine variables recruiters believe should associate with attention to failure. If such variables are unassociated with attention to failure, but are associated with attention to success, then we view failure as being overlooked.

Method
Data was collected from 99 respondents via a survey. Respondents comprised recruiters and sales managers who had some recruiting responsibilities. Measures for items were abridged from extant literature where available, were otherwise developed for the survey, and involved a combination of Likert and semantic differential five point metric scales. Several classification questions were asked in addition to questions pertinent to testing hypotheses. Tests for H1a-d involved comparisons of means (four issues, looking to see if the means for 'success' were significantly higher than means for 'failure'. Tests for H2a-k involved the following regression model.
- Basic regression model: $DV = B_0 + B_a*IV1 + \ldots B_k*IV11 + e$
    - DV: amount of effort spent probing for failure
    - 11 IVs should have impact, but posited to be "overlooked"
    - Again, we need falsifiable null value. We run second regression with DV measured as effort directed toward probing for success

o We then compare B_a-B_k coefficients: given IVs should impact screening for failure, we each test hypotheses using:

- Is $B_{(a-k)}$ (success) > $B_{(a-k)}$ (failure)? If yes, hypothesis supported

o Moderation also tested: % of respondent's duties oriented toward recruitment (non significant results)

o Two IVs posited/modeled with inverted-U relationships (Exp./Vis.)

Since prior research indicates the amount of involvement in recruiting may affect selection decision making (Marshall, Stone and Jawahar 2001), we also included a measure of respondents' percent of duties in recruitment as a moderator.

Results

Hypotheses 1a-d were all supported. Specifically, for each dyad (success versus failure), the mean score on success exceeded the mean score for failure, with differences of 1.65, 0.72, 0.35, and 0.99 (on five point scales), all significant at $p < 0.01$.

Hypotheses 2a-k involved examining whether the key variables were associated with overall attention to success, but not attention to failure. Of the eleven variables, none were significantly related to attention of failure, and yet six of these were significantly related to attention to success: control, visibility, surprised failures, experience, impact of failure, and retention. All relationships for these variables were significant at $p < 0.01$, except for impact of failure which was significant at $p = 0.031$. Thus, six of the eleven tests resulted in support for failure being "overlooked" (see Table 1).

TABLE 1
STUDY 2 FINDINGS: MAIN REGRESSION MODEL USED FOR H: A-K

	Coef.	Std.Err.	P-value
(Constant)	4.56	0.81	0.00
Control*	0.26	0.09	0.00
Experience*	0.26	0.09	0.01
Impact of Failure*	-0.15	0.08	0.06
Retention*	-0.20	0.07	0.00
Surprised Failures*	-0.28	0.11	0.01
Visibility*	-0.12	0.09	0.18
Attitude	-0.04	0.08	0.61
Bias	-0.03	0.11	0.76
Candidate	0.08	0.11	0.48
Confidence	0.08	0.09	0.38
Urgency	-0.05	0.07	0.44

Notes:
1. Six Independent Variables denoted with "*" are significantly related to recruitment focus on potential success, but not to focus on potential failure
2. Visibility was posited and found to have a non-linear relationship (linear n.s. above)
3. Adjusted R-square = 0.203

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

We examined several efforts related to recruitment of salespeople, and whether recruitment efforts adequately focus on the potential for performance failure. We found support for the notion that recruitment efforts somewhat 'overlook' failure issues, that candidates possessing success traits may also have failure traits, and that efforts to probe for potential failure are not driven by factors which recruiters believe should motivate such probing.

From a practical stance, our work suggests factors that recruiters should draw upon when considering whether to incorporate failure issues during the recruitment process, and provides ideas for how to develop recruitment efforts to include failure issues, and ultimately improve hiring results. Specifically, recruiters must design an evaluation process that provides a more balanced approach; one that considers those individual factors that might contribute to success, as well as those factors that may inhibit salespeople from reaching their full potential. Recruiters would also be well advised to 'demystify' failure within the organization so that learning opportunities are not missed. That is, by stripping away the organizational bias against sale-related failure, there will likely be more dialogue about contributing factors and how future failures might therefore be avoided.

This paper addresses an important gap in the sales force management literature and provides a catalyst for future study. We suggest this research be extended in two primary ways: examining traits common among salespeople categorized as failing and determining the extent to which salesperson turnover can be reduced through incorporating failure probing efforts during the recruitment process. By doing so sales managers may gain the insights needed to optimize the hiring/recruitment process, as well as potentially enhance sales force retention levels.

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APPENDIX 1
SAMPLE OF SALESPERSON SUCCESS/FAILURE FACTORS

Author(s)	Success Factors	Failure Factors
Malms and Schmitz (2011)	Internal motivation, readiness, state of mind	N/A
Burke (2010)	Mental focus, awareness, communication	Complacency, lack of discipline
Steward, Hutt, Walker and Kumar (2009)	Customer need based perspective, relationship driven	Product-based technical perspective, technical specification driven
Amyx and Bhuian (2009)	Opportunity recognition, boundary spanning capabilities	N/A
Bonney and Williams (2009)	Opportunity recognition	N/A
Fu (2009)	Experience	Age, Inexperience
Belonax, Newell and Plank (2007)	Credibility, trust, expertise, relationship building	
Mathieu (2007)	Past performance, ability to incorporate technology tools into selling process, empowerment	N/A

Muir (2007)	Interpersonal skills, charisma, organizational goals	N/A
Dixon, Forbes and Schertzer (2005)	Confidence, managerial support and mentoring	Inexperience
Jaramillo and Marshall (2004)	Knowledge base, post-purchase service, preparedness, networking	Use of jargon, inadequate screening
Marshall, Goebel and Moncrief (2003)	Interpersonal skills, content knowledge, relationship building	N/A
Park and Holloway (2003)	Learning orientation, job satisfaction	N/A
Matthews and Redman (2001)	Self-selection, compensation	Experience, poor position advertising, poor compensation
Strutton and Pelton (1994)	Relationship with management, organizational solidarity, psychological climate, autonomy	Lack of perceived fairness
Badovick (1990)	Success, self blame for failure	Past failure, external blame placement for failures
Moncrief, Hart and Robertson (1988)	Compensation, healthy competition among peers	N/A
Friedman (1985)	Entrepreneurial personality, persuasive capabilities, empathy, goal setting focus	N/A
Slocum, Cron, Hansen and Rawlings (1985)	Company's competitive position, product development involvement	Potential for upward mobility

APPENDIX 2
FACTORS AFFECTING SCREENING FAILURES

Variables	Definitions	Rationale
Experience	Recruiters' professional years performing sales related duties	As experience becomes moderate, recruiter understanding of failure is still in a developmental state, and recruiter interest in focusing on failure is high, and increases (versus low or high experience, in which case recruiters are not yet looking at failure or view their knowledge as fairly complete; **hence a nonlinear association)**
Impact of Failure	Degree to which a potential failure will leave a high and lasting impact on the company	As impact increases, (e.g. negative effects on others, company reputation, etc.), preventing failure becomes more important, and focusing on failure increases
Surprised Failures	Degree to which recruiters were surprised by prior salesperson failures	As surprise becomes high, desire to delve into failure issues increases, and hence focus on failure increases
Retention	Degree to which salesperson turnover rate is acceptable to company.	If turnover is low, pre-hire concerns of failure are low, and focus on failure is low. As turnover becomes high, increased concerns surface, and focus on failure during screening increases.

Urgency	Immediacy of need for recruiting result	When urgency is high, an abbreviated recruiting process occurs, and focus generally is low for many recruitment efforts. When urgency becomes low, focusing on failure increases, in tandem with increased focus on other issues
Visibility	Degree to which recruiters are exposed to prior salesperson-failure details	As visibility becomes moderate, partial information about failure is available, need for more information is clear, and thus focusing on failure thus becomes important and increases (versus high or low visibility, and **hence a nonlinear association**)
Attitude	Degree to which recruiter has an optimistic outlook, feeling virtually any person recruited could perform well if they try hard	As attitude decreases, potential failure occurrences become more likely, thus focusing on potential failure becomes more important, and increases
Bias	Recruiter tendency to ignore disconfirming evidence	If bias is high, focus will center on probing for potential success, overlooking issues that may indicate failure. If bias becomes low, more attention is paid to disconfirming (failure) evidence, and focus on failure increases.
Candidate	Degree to which recruiter believes job candidates actions suggest failure (verbal and nonverbal cues)	As candidate raises "red flags" during the screening process, the likelihood of failure is perceived to increase, and focus on failure increases
Confidence	Degree to which recruiter believes s/he can pick best candidates based on quick impression	As confidence decreases, focusing on failure becomes more beneficial, so recruiters can confirm or deny first-impression intuitions, and hence increases
Control	Degree to which recruiters believe the able to predict the failure of a salesperson is within their control	As control becomes more positive, focusing on potential failure becomes more productive, and hence increases (ties to expectancy theory literature)