

# Part 4

## Sales management

Part Four considers issues related to the management of the salesforce. Chapter 13 examines the important elements of recruitment and selection. The job description acts as the blueprint for the personnel specification and this discussion is followed by the identification of sources of recruitment. Preparing a shortlist and the conduct of the interview are then examined along with the types of questioning techniques that are appropriate when considering the appointment of sales personnel.

Chapter 14 examines motivation and training of the field salesforce from the point of view of applying theories provided by Herzberg, Vroom, Adams and Likert along with the Churchill, Ford and Walker model of salesforce motivation. Sales management leadership is then considered, followed by sales training and the development of methods that improve selling skills.

Compensation is an important motivational element for salespeople. Chapter 15 looks at this and at how sales activities are organised. Such arrangements are geographical, product specialisation and customer-based structures, the latter of which breaks down into a number of sub-divisions. The establishment of sales territories is a determining factor when establishing the number of salespeople that might be required. Compensation plans are then considered around three main schemes: salary only, commission only and a mixture of salary and commission.

# 13

## Recruitment and selection

### OBJECTIVES

After studying this chapter, you should be able to:

1. Appreciate that salesperson selection is a key to ultimate selling success
2. Apply interview and selection procedures in the context of recruiting salespeople
3. Understand the advantages and drawbacks of certain tests and procedures related to selection

### KEY CONCEPTS

- ego drive
- empathy
- interview
- job description
- personnel specification
- psychological tests
- recruitment
- role playing
- salesforce selection
- shortlist

## 13.1 THE IMPORTANCE OF SELECTION

In attempting to recruit and select a new sales representative, sales managers find themselves in an unaccustomed role. Instead of being a seller they for once take on the role of buyer. It is crucial that this transition is carried out effectively because the future success of the salesforce depends upon the infusion of high-calibre personnel. There are a number of facts that emphasise the importance of effective **salesforce selection**:

1. *There is wide variability in the effectiveness of salespeople.* In the Institute of Marketing commissioned study<sup>1</sup> into salesforce practice, the following question was asked of sales managers: 'If you were to put your most successful salesperson into the territory of one of your average salespeople, and made no other changes, what increases in sales would you expect after, say, two years?'

The most commonly expected increase was 16–20 per cent and one-fifth of all sales managers said they would expect an increase of 30 per cent or more. It must be emphasised that the comparison was between the top and average salesperson, not top and worst salesperson. Clearly, the quality of the sales representatives which sales managers recruit can have a substantial effect on sales turnover.

2. *Salespeople are very costly.* If a company decides to employ extra sales personnel, the cost will be much higher than just basic salary (and commission). Most companies provide a car if travel is required and travel expenses will also be paid. The special skills necessary to make a sale, rather than to receive an order, imply that training will be required. No company will want to incur all of these costs in order to employ a poor performer.
3. *Other important determinants of success, such as training and motivation, are heavily dependent on the intrinsic qualities of the recruit.* Although sales effectiveness can be improved by training, it is limited by innate ability. Like other activities where skill is required, such as cricket, football and athletics, ultimate achievement in selling is highly associated with personal characteristics. Similarly, motivational techniques may stimulate salespeople to achieve higher sales but they can do only so much. A lot will be dependent on the inborn motivation of the salesperson to complete a difficult sale or visit another prospect instead of returning home.

A study by Galbraith, Kiely and Watkins examined the features that attracted salespeople into selling and what they valued most about their work.<sup>2</sup> The results are given in Table 13.1.

Table 13.1 shows that working methods and independence are more important than earnings as the attraction for entering selling. This challenges the assumption made by many companies that money is the main reason for embarking on a sales career. Independence is also highly valued when doing the selling job. The implication of these findings is that sales management should understand the reasons why people are attracted to selling in their industry to develop effective

Table 13.1 Features of most interest and most value

Most interest	%	Most value	%
Working methods	60	Independence	40
Independence	13	Earnings	18
Earnings	12	Providing a service	14
Company status	5	Freedom	11
Good training	4	Dealing with people	8
Promotion chances	2	Job satisfaction	6
Professional status	2	Status	3
Exclusive territory	2	Promotion prospects	1

Source: Galbraith, A., Kiely, J. and Watkins, T. (1991) 'Sales force management – issues for the 1990s', *Proceedings of the Marketing Education Group Conference*, Cardiff Business School, July, pp. 425–45.

recruitment strategies. They certainly should not blindly assume that earnings are always paramount.

Sales managers are clearly faced with a difficult and yet vitally important task. However, many of them believe that the outcome of the selection process is far from satisfactory. In the Institute of Marketing survey,<sup>3</sup> nearly half of the sales managers reported that fewer than seven out of ten of the salespeople they had recruited were satisfactory.

Recruitment and selection is a particularly difficult task when operating in overseas markets. The boxed case discussion identifies some of the key issues.

## Recruiting and selecting an international salesforce

A company wishing to recruit an international sales team has a range of options. Recruits could be expatriates, host-country nationals or third-country nationals. Expatriates (home-country salespeople) are well regarded by technical companies selling expensive products because they tend to possess a high level of product knowledge and the ability and willingness to provide follow-up service. Work overseas also provides companies with the opportunity to train managers and prepare junior executives for promotion. Furthermore, expatriates allow international companies to maintain a high degree of control over global marketing and sales activities. However, there are drawbacks. Expatriates are usually more expensive than local salespeople, they may not settle in the new country, and may fail to understand the cultural nuances required to sell successfully abroad.

## Recruiting and selecting an international salesforce (*continued*)

The second option is to hire host-country nationals. The advantages are that they bring cultural and market knowledge, language skills and familiarity with local business tradition. This often means a shorter adjustment period for a company wanting to be active in a new overseas market. Also in Asia there is now a pool of people who have obtained Masters or MBA degrees in Europe or the United States from which to recruit salespeople and sales managers. However, these benefits must be assessed in the light of several potential disadvantages. Often host-country nationals require extensive product training together with knowledge about the company, its history and philosophies. Second, in some countries such as Thailand, Malaysia and India salespeople are not held in high esteem. This restricts the supply of well-educated people into sales jobs and makes the task of recruiting local people more difficult. Finally, loyalty to a foreign company may be less than from expatriates.

The third option is to hire third-country nationals. When hired from similar countries in a particular region, they provide cultural sensitivity and language skills, while allowing access to a more skilled and/or less costly salesforce than is available in the target country. Particularly for regionally focused companies, third-country nationals can be an effective compromise between expatriates and host-country nationals. However, the drawbacks are that the third-country national may have difficulty identifying with where and for whom they work. They sometimes suffer from blocked promotions, lower salaries and difficulties in adapting to new environments.

Sources: Based on Boyacigiller, N. (1990) 'The role of expatriates in the management of interdependence, complexity and risk in multinational corporations', *Journal of International Business Studies*, 21 (3), pp. 357–81; Honeycutt, Jr., E.D. and Ford, J.B. (1995) 'Guidelines for managing an international sales force', *Industrial Marketing Management*, 24, pp. 135–44; Zeira, Y. and Harari, E. (1977) 'Managing third country nationals in multinational corporations', *Business Horizons*, October, pp. 83–8; Ghauri, P. and Cateora, P. (2006) *International Marketing*, Maidenhead: McGraw-Hill.

There are a number of stages in the **recruitment** and selection process (see Figure 13.1):

1. Preparation of the job description and personnel specification.
2. Identification of sources of recruitment and methods of communication.
3. Designing an effective application form and preparing a shortlist.
4. Interviewing.
5. Supplementary selection aids – psychological tests, role playing.

An understanding of each stage and the correct procedures to be followed will maximise the chances of selecting the right applicant.

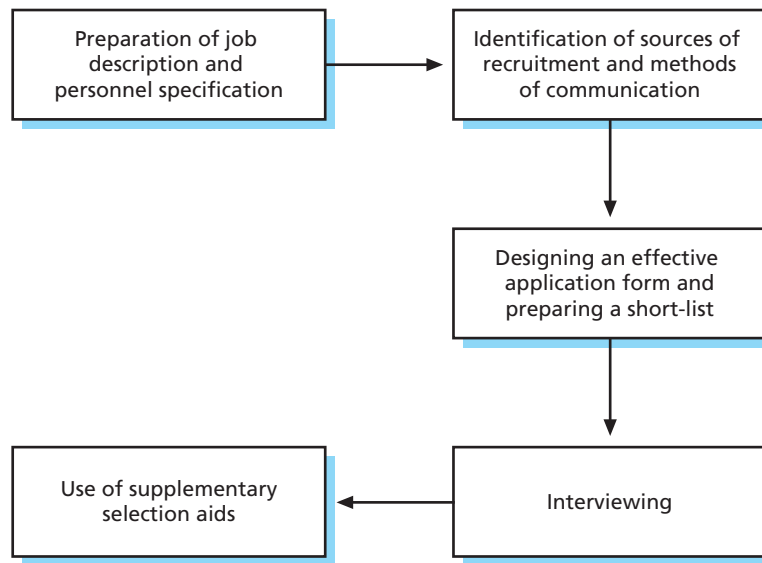


Figure 13.1 Stages in the recruitment and selection process

## 13.2 PREPARATION OF THE JOB DESCRIPTION AND SPECIFICATION

The production of an accurate **job description** should prove of little difficulty for the sales manager. They have intimate knowledge of what is required, having been a salesperson and out on the road with salespeople during training and evaluation exercises. Generally a job description will cover the following factors:

1. The title of the job.
2. Duties and responsibilities – the tasks which will be expected of new recruits, e.g. selling, after-sales service, information feedback, range of products/markets/type of customer with which they will be associated.
3. To whom they will report.
4. Technical requirements, e.g. the degree to which the technical aspects of the products they are selling need to be understood.
5. Location and geographical area to be covered.
6. Degree of autonomy – the degree to which salespeople will be able to control their own work programmes.

Once generated, the job description will act as the blueprint for the **personnel specification** which outlines the type of applicant the company is seeking. The technical requirements of the job, for example, and the nature of the customers which the salespeople will meet, will be factors which influence the level of education and possibly the age of the required recruit.

The construction of the personnel specification is more difficult than the job description for the sales manager. Some of the questions posed lead to highly subjective responses. Must the recruit have selling experience? Should such experience be

within the markets that the company serves? Is it essential that the salesperson holds certain technical qualifications? If the answer to all of these questions is yes, then the number of possible applicants who qualify is reduced.

The danger is that applicants of high potential in selling may be excluded. Graduates at universities often complain that jobs they are confident they are capable of doing well are denied them because of the 'two years' experience in selling' clause in the advertisements. The implications of this are that the job specification should be drawn up bearing in mind the type of person who would be *excluded* from applying if conditions are laid down with regard to such factors as previous experience. Is it really necessary or just more convenient since less training may then be required?

Another aspect of the personnel specification is the determination of qualities looked for in the new salesperson. This is a much more nebulous concept than the level of technical qualifications, age or previous experience. The qualities themselves may depend on the nature of the job, the personal prejudices of the sales manager (a good rule of thumb is that many managers favour people like themselves), or be based on more objective research which has been conducted into attributes associated with successful salespeople. A survey which investigated selection practice among sales managers in large UK companies produced a plethora of qualities deemed to be important. Figure 13.2 lists the top 20 characteristics and the percentage mentioning each.<sup>4</sup> A more recent survey of recruitment advertisements for trainee and senior sales executives identified the qualities shown in Table 13.2.<sup>5</sup>

Mayer and Greenberg produced a more manageable list.<sup>6</sup> Extensive research among over 1,000 companies in the United States revealed only two qualities essential to selling – empathy and ego drive. **Empathy** is defined as the ability to feel as the buyer does; to be able to understand the customers' problems and needs. This is distinct from sympathy. A salesperson can feel and understand without agreeing with that feeling. The other basic determinant of sales success, **ego drive**, is defined as the need to make a sale in a personal way, not merely for money.

**Table 13.2** Qualities required of trainee and senior sales executives

	Trainee %		Executive %
Ambitious	27	Motivated	37
Motivated	26	Ambitious	25
Achievement-orientated	21	Enthusiastic	24
Enthusiastic	18	Communication	21
Communication	16	Achievement-orientated	11
Articulate	13	Work to deadlines	10
Committed	11	Committed	9
Intelligent	10	Intelligent	6
Work to deadlines	10	Articulate	7
Determined	10	Work under pressure	7

Source: Reprinted from Mathews, B. and Redman, T. (2001) 'Recruiting the wrong salespeople: are the job ads to blame?', *Industrial Marketing Management*, 30, pp. 541–50. Copyright © 2001, with permission from Elsevier.

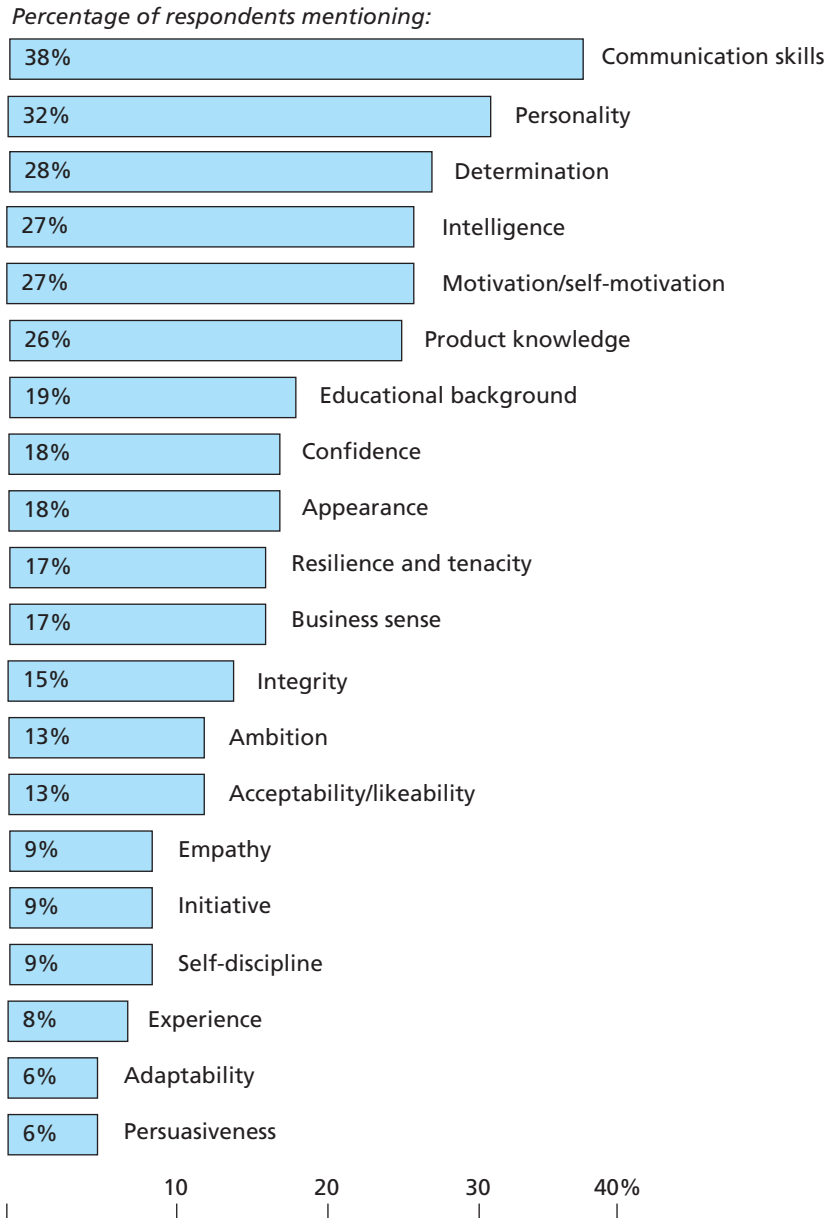


Figure 13.2 Important qualities of salespeople

Source: Jobber, D. and Millar, S. (1984) 'The use of psychological tests in the selection of salesmen: a UK survey', *Journal of Sales Management*, 1, p. 1.

Mayer and Greenberg claim that when an applicant has a large measure of both these qualities they will be successful at selling anything. Their research led them to believe that sales ability is fundamental, not the product being sold:

Many sales executives feel that the type of selling in their industry (and even in their particular company) is somehow completely special and unique. This is



true to an extent. There is no question that a data-processing equipment salesperson needs somewhat different training and background than does an automobile salesperson. Differences in requirements are obvious, and whether or not the applicant meets the special qualifications for a particular job can easily be seen in the applicant's biography or readily measured. What is not so easily seen, however, are the basic sales dynamics we have been discussing, which permit an individual to sell successfully, almost regardless of what he is selling.

(Mayer and Greenberg 1964, p. 264)

Certainly, the evidence which they have provided, which groups salespeople into four categories (highly recommended, recommended, not recommended, virtually no chance of success) according to the degree to which they possess empathy and ego drive, correlated well with sales success in three industries – cars, mutual funds and insurance. Their measures of empathy and ego drive were derived from the use of a psychological test, the *multiple personal inventory* (discussed in section 13.6). In summary, a personnel specification may contain all or some of the following factors:

1. Physical requirements: e.g. speech, appearance.
2. Attainments: e.g. standard of education and qualifications, experience and successes.
3. Aptitudes and qualities: e.g. ability to communicate, self-motivation.
4. Disposition: e.g. maturity, sense of responsibility.
5. Interests: e.g. degree to which interests are social, active, inactive.
6. Personal circumstances: e.g. married, single, etc.

The factors chosen to define the personnel specification will be used as criteria of selection in the interview itself.

It should be noted that the recruitment of key account managers involves the identification of additional qualities that may not be required in a traditional salesperson. Key account managers develop long-term relationships with selected customers and to do this are usually supported by a team composed of people from production, finance, logistics, marketing and other functional groups.<sup>7</sup> As such they require the skills and power to co-ordinate and expedite service to key accounts, and to co-ordinate communications among functional groups involved in servicing key accounts. Preparations of the job description and specification can be aided by reference to the tasks and skills of key account management discussed in Chapter 9 with particular reference to Table 9.2 'Tasks performed and skills required by key account management'.

### 13.3 IDENTIFICATION OF SOURCES OF RECRUITMENT AND METHODS OF COMMUNICATION

#### Sources

There are six main sources of recruitment:

- from inside – the company's own staff;
- recruitment agencies;

- educational establishments;
- competitors;
- other industries;
- unemployed.

### *Company's own staff*

The advantage of this source is that the candidate will know the company and its products. The company will also know the candidate much more intimately than an outsider. A certain amount of risk is thereby reduced in that first-hand experience of the candidate's personal characteristics is available. However, there is no guarantee that they have selling ability.

### *Recruitment agencies*

Recruitment agencies will provide lists of potential recruits for a fee. In order to be entered on such a list, reputable agencies screen applicants for suitability for sales positions. It is in the long-term interests of the agencies to provide only strong candidates. The question remains, however, as to the likelihood of top salespeople needing to use agencies to find a suitable job.

### *Educational establishments*

It is possible to recruit straight from higher education personnel who have as part of their degree worked in industry and commerce. Most business degree students in Britain have to undergo one year's industrial training. Some of these students may have worked in selling, others may have worked in marketing. The advantage of recruiting from universities is that the candidate is likely to be intelligent and may possess the required technical qualifications. It should be borne in mind that the applicant may not see their long-term future in selling, however. Rather, they may see a sales representative's position as a preliminary step to marketing management.

### *Competitors*

The advantage of this source is that the salesperson knows the market and its customers. The ability of the salesperson may be known to the recruiting company, thus reducing risk.

### *Other industries and unemployed*

Both these categories may provide applicants with sales experience. Obviously careful screening will need to take place in order to assess sales ability.

### *Communication*

Although some sales positions are filled as a result of personal contact, the bulk of recruitment uses advertisements as the major communication tool. Figure 13.3 shows

Percentage of respondents mentioning:

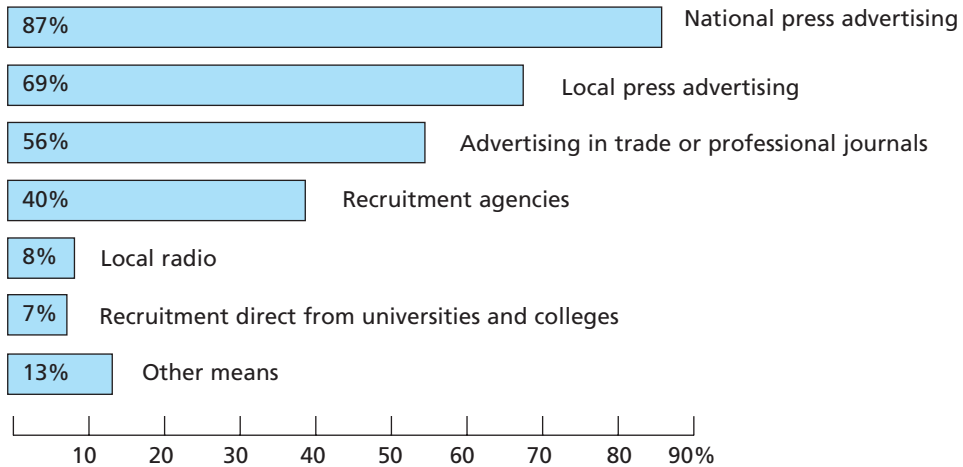


Figure 13.3 How companies attract external applicants

Source: Jobber, D. and Millar, S. (1984) 'The use of psychological tests in the selection of salesmen: a UK survey', *Journal of Sales Management*, 1, p. 1.

how large companies attract applicants from outside the company. It is advisable to be aware of a number of principles which can improve the communication effectiveness of advertisements.

There is a wide selection of national and regional newspapers for the advertiser to consider when placing an advertisement. A major problem with such classified recruitment advertising is impact. One method of achieving impact is size. The trick here is to select the newspaper(s), check the normal size of advertisement which appears in it, then simply make your advertisement a little bigger than the largest. This should ensure a good position and its size will give the advertisement impact. Furthermore, the larger space will reduce the likelihood of the advertisement being poorly specified. This is an important consideration since research into sales job advertising in the printed media found the 'typical' ad to be ill-specified, giving only a very rough sketch of the job and the organisation concerned.<sup>8</sup> This method assumes, of course, adequate funds, although compared with selecting a lower quality salesperson, the extra cost to many companies is small.

The other component of impact is the content of the advertisement. The headline is the most important ingredient simply because if it does not attract and is not read, then it is very unlikely that *any* of the advertisement will be read. An inspection of any Friday night regional newspaper will highlight the lack of imagination employed in designing the average sales representative recruitment advertisement. There is plenty of scope, therefore, to attract attention by being different. As in the case of size, look at the newspaper which is to be used and ask the question: 'If I were contemplating changing jobs, what headline would attract my attention?'

Finally, if imagination is low and funds are high, it is worth considering employing a recruitment advertising specialist who will produce the advertisement and advise on media. Whether the advertisement is produced by the company itself or by a recruitment specialist, it is important to ensure that all of the major attractions (not

just features) of the job are included in the advertisement. This is necessary to attract applicants – the object of the exercise.

## 13.4 DESIGNING AN EFFECTIVE APPLICATION FORM AND PREPARING A SHORTLIST

The application form is a quick and inexpensive method of screening out applicants in order to produce a **shortlist** of candidates for interview. The questions on the form should enable the sales manager to check if the applicant is qualified vis-à-vis the personnel specification. Questions relating to age, education, previous work experience and leisure interests are often included. Besides giving such factual information, the application form also reveals defects such as an inability to spell, poor grammar or carelessness in following instructions.

The application form can reveal much about the person who is applying. Some applicants may be inveterate job-hoppers; others may have inadequate educational qualifications. Whatever the criteria, the application form will often be the initial screening device used to produce a shortlist. Its careful design should, therefore, be a high priority for those involved in selection. Four categories of information are usual on application forms:

1. *Personal*
  - name
  - address and telephone number
  - sex.
2. *Education*
  - schools: primary /secondary
  - further and higher education: institutions, courses taken
  - qualifications
  - specialised training, e.g. apprenticeships, sales training
  - membership of professional bodies, e.g. Chartered Institute of Marketing.
3. *Employment history*
  - companies worked for
  - dates of employment
  - positions, duties and responsibilities held
  - military service.
4. *Other interests*
  - sports
  - hobbies
  - membership of societies/clubs.

Such an application form will achieve a number of purposes:

- (a) to give a common basis for drawing up a shortlist
- (b) to provide a foundation of knowledge that can be used as the starting point for the interview
- (c) to aid in the post-interview, decision-making stage.

Having eliminated a number of applicants on the basis of the application form, an initial or final shortlist will be drawn up depending on whether the interviewing procedure involves two stages or only one stage. References may be sought for short-listed candidates or simply for the successful candidate.

## 13.5 THE INTERVIEW

The survey into the selection processes for salespeople of large UK companies<sup>9</sup> identified several facts pertinent to the **interview**:

1. Most companies (80 per cent) employ two-stage interviews.
2. In only one-fifth of cases does the sales manager alone hold the initial interview. In the majority of cases it is the human resources manager or human resources manager and the sales manager together who conduct the initial interview. This also tends to be the case at the final interview.
3. In 40 per cent of cases the HR manager and sales manager together make the final choice. In 37 per cent of cases the sales manager only makes the final decision. In other cases, marketing directors and other senior management may also be involved.

These facts highlight the importance of the sales manager in the selection process and indicate that selection normally follows two interviews – the screening interview and the selection interview. If the procedures described so far have been followed, the sales manager will have already produced a personnel specification including some or all of the factors outlined above and repeated here for convenience.

1. Physical requirements: e.g. speech, appearance, manner, fitness.
2. Attainments: e.g. standard of education, qualifications, sales experience and successes.
3. Aptitudes and qualities: e.g. ability to communicate, empathy, self-motivation.
4. Disposition: e.g. maturity, sense of responsibility.
5. Interests: e.g. identification of social interests, interests related to products that are being sold, active versus inactive interests.

The job specification will be used as a means of evaluating each of the shortlisted candidates. In reality other more personal considerations will also play a part in the decision. A candidate whom the sales manager believes would be difficult to work with or might be a troublemaker is unlikely to be employed. Thus, inevitably, the decision will be based upon a combination of formal criteria and other more personal factors that the sales manager is unable or unwilling to express at the personnel specification stage.

Having carried out the essential preparation necessary to form the basis of selection, what are the objectives and principles of interviewing? The overall objective is to enable the interviewers to form a clear and valid impression of the strengths and weaknesses of the candidates in terms of the selection criteria. In order to do this, all applicants must be encouraged to talk freely and openly about themselves. However, at the same time the interviewer(s) must exercise a degree of control in order that the candidate does not talk at too great length on one or two issues, leaving insufficient time for other equally important factors (possibly where the candidate is weaker) to be adequately discussed.

## The interview setting

The interview setting will have a direct bearing on the outcome of the interview. A number of examples will illustrate this point:

1. The room should be one where the sales manager is unlikely to be interrupted by colleagues or telephone calls. If this is not possible, visitors and telephone calls should be barred.
2. A very large room with just two or three people occupying it may not have the intimacy required to obtain a free, natural discussion.
3. A large desk situated between candidate and interviewer, particularly if littered with filing trays and desk calendars, can have the psychological effect of distancing the two parties involved, creating too formal an atmosphere and inhibiting rapport. A more relaxed, informal setting away from the manager's work desk is likely to enable the interviewee to relax more easily. The use of a low table which interviewers and interviewee can sit around (rather than sitting face-to-face) is a common method for achieving this effect.

## Conducting the interview

Besides creating the right atmosphere by the judicious selection of the interview setting, the interviewers themselves can do much to help establish rapport.

What happens at the beginning of the interview is crucial to subsequent events. The objective at this stage is to set the candidate at ease. Most interviewees are naturally anxious before the interview and when they first enter the interview setting. They may feel embarrassed or be worried about exposing weaknesses. They may feel inadequate and lack confidence. Above all they may feel worried about rejection. These anxieties are compounded by the fact that the candidate may not have met their interviewers before and thus be uncertain about how aggressive they will be, the degree of pressure that will be applied and the types of question they are likely to ask. Some sales managers may argue that the salesperson is likely to meet this situation out in the field and therefore needs to be able to deal with it without the use of anxiety-reducing techniques on the part of the interviewers. A valid response to this viewpoint is that the objective of the interview is to get to know the candidate in terms of the criteria laid down in the personnel specification, or 'profile' as it is sometimes called. In order to do this candidates must be *encouraged* to talk about themselves. If sales ability under stress is to be tested, role playing can be used as part of the selection procedure. There are a number of guidelines which, if followed, should reduce anxiety and establish rapport:

1. One of the interviewers (preferably the sales manager) should bring the candidate into the room, rather than the candidate being sent for through a secretary or junior administrator. This reduces status differentials and hence encourages rapport.
2. Open the conversation with a few easy-to-answer questions, which although not directly pertinent to the job, allow the candidate to talk to the interviewers and gain confidence.
3. Continuing in this vein, questions early in the interview should be, if possible, open-ended rather than closed. Open-ended questions allow the applicant scope for talking

at some length on the topic, e.g. 'Can you tell me about your experiences selling pharmaceuticals?' Closed questions, on the other hand, invite a short answer, e.g. 'Can you tell me how long you worked for Beechams?' Some closed questions are inevitable, but a series of them makes it difficult for the candidate to relax and gain confidence. Indeed, such questions may give the impression that the applicant is uncommunicative, when really the problem lies with the interviewer.

4. Interviewers should appear relaxed and adopt a friendly, easy manner.
5. They should be courteous and appear interested in what the applicant says.

Having successfully established rapport and reduced anxiety, the interviewer will wish to encourage candidates to talk about themselves, their experiences, attitudes, behaviour and expectations. To do this the interviewer not only needs to develop the art of being a good listener but also needs to develop skills in making people talk. The skills required in the needs analysis stage of the selling process (discussed in Chapter 8) may be used in an interview to good effect. Specifically, the interviewer can use the following techniques:

1. the 'playback' technique;
2. the use of rewards;
3. the use of silence;
4. the use of probes;
5. summarising;
6. the use of neutral questions.

### *The 'playback' technique*

The interviewer repeats the last few words of the candidate's sentence in order to elicit the reason for what has been said. For example, the candidate might say 'I worked for XYZ Company for two years, but I didn't like it very much.' The interviewer follows with 'You didn't like it very much?' Candidate: 'No, the sales manager was always on my back, checking to see that I was making my calls.'

### *The use of rewards*

Obvious interest in the candidate's views, experiences and knowledge shown by the interviewer confers its own reward. This can be supplemented by what can only be described as encouraging noises such as 'Uh, uh' or 'Mmm, yes, I see'. The confidence instilled in the candidate will encourage further comment and perhaps revelations.

A further method of reward is through 'eye behaviour'. The subtle narrowing of the eyes, together with a slight nodding of the head can convey the message 'Yes, I see.' The correct use of such rewards comes only with experience, but their application is undoubtedly an aid in encouraging the candidate to talk freely.

### *The use of silence*

Silence can be a very powerful ally of the interviewer. However, silence must be used with discretion, otherwise rapport may be lost and candidates may raise their barriers to open expression.

Its most common use is after the candidate has given a neutral, uninformative reply to an important question. A candidate, eager to impress, will feel uncomfortable and

interpret silence as an indication that the interview is not going well. In such a situation they will normally attempt to fill the void, and it may be that the only way they can do this is by revealing attitudes or behaviour patterns which otherwise they would have been happy to have kept hidden. Alternatively, the pause may allow the candidate to formulate their thoughts and thus stimulate a more considered reply. Continuing with a follow-up question without a pause would have precluded this happening. Either way, extra, potentially revealing information can be collected by the discriminate use of silence.

### *The use of probes*

The salesperson who is adept at needs analysis will be well acquainted with the use of probes. In an interview, comments will be made which require further explanation. For example, the applicant might say, 'The time I spent on a sales training course was a waste of time,' to which the interviewer might say 'Why do you think that was?' or 'That's interesting, why do you say that?' or 'Can you explain a little more why you think that?' Such phrases are to be preferred to the blunt 'Why?' and are really alternatives to the 'playback' technique mentioned earlier.

A choice of phrases and techniques allows the interviewer to vary the approach to probing during the course of the interview. Although it may not always be possible to guarantee, probing of particularly embarrassing events such as the break-up of an applicant's marriage (if thought relevant to job performance) or failure in examinations should be left until the interview is well under way and certainly not be the subject of scrutiny at the start.

### *Summarising*

During an interview, the interviewer will inevitably be attempting to draw together points which have been made by the applicant at various times in order to come to some opinion about the person under scrutiny. A useful device for checking if these impressions are valid in the subject's eyes is to summarise them and ask for their corroboration.

After a period of questioning and probing, the interviewer might say: 'So, as I understand it, your first period in sales was not a success because the firm you worked for produced poor quality products, inferior in terms of technical specifications compared to competition and you felt inexperienced. But your second job, working with a larger, better-known company, was more satisfactory, having received proper sales training and having the advantage of selling a recognised high-quality product line. Would you say that this was a fair summary?' Having obtained agreement, the interviewer can then move to another area of interest or continue to investigate the same area with the certainty that there has been no earlier misunderstanding.

### *The use of neutral questions*

A basic principle of good interviewing is to use neutral rather than leading questions. The question 'Can you tell me about the sales training you received at your previous employer?' is likely to lead to rather different, less biased responses than, 'I'm sure you learnt a lot from your sales training courses, didn't you?' Again, 'What do you feel about dealing with the type of customer we have?' is more neutral than, 'I'm sure you wouldn't have any problems dealing with our customers, would you?'



### Other considerations

There are other considerations which an interviewer is wise to bear in mind. First, they must not talk too much. The object is for most of the time spent interviewing to be used to evaluate the candidates. Second, part of the interview will be a selling task in order to ensure that the chosen applicant accepts. The balance between evaluation and selling is largely based upon judgement and no hard and fast rules apply, but obviously the competitive situation and the strength of the candidate will be two factors that affect the decision.

Third, the interviewer must discreetly control the interview. A certain amount of time will be allocated to each candidate and it is the interviewer's responsibility to ensure that all salient dimensions of the candidate are covered, not only those about which the candidate wishes to talk. Some of the earlier techniques, used in reverse, may be necessary to discourage the candidate from rambling on. For example, the interviewer may look uninterested, or ask a few closed questions to discourage verbosity. Alternatively, the interviewer can simply interrupt with 'That's fine, I think we're quite clear on that point now,' at an appropriate moment.

Finally, the interviewer will need to close the interview when sufficient information has been obtained. Usually, the candidate is forewarned of this by the interviewer saying 'OK, we've asked you about yourself. Are there any questions you would like to ask me (us)?' At the end of this session, the interviewer explains when the decision will be made and how it will be communicated to the candidate and then thanks them for attending the interview. They both stand, shake hands and the candidate is shown to the door.

Research has shown that interviews that are structured, i.e. have a pre-planned sequence, perform better at selection than those that have very little predetermined structure.<sup>10</sup> This emphasises the need to carefully pre-plan the content and organisation of the interview. Interviews generally measure social skills, including extroversion, agreeableness and job experience and knowledge.<sup>11</sup>

## 13.6 SUPPLEMENTARY SELECTION AIDS

### Psychological tests

Although success at the interview is always an important determinant of selection, some firms employ supplementary techniques to provide a valid measure of potential. A number of large firms use **psychological tests** in this way. However, care has to be taken when using these tests and a trained psychologist is usually needed to administer and interpret the results. Further, there are a number of criticisms which have been levelled at the tests:

1. *It is easy to cheat.* The applicant, having an idea of the type of person who is likely to be successful at selling, does not respond truly but 'fakes' the test in order to give a 'correct' profile. For example, in response to a question such as 'Who is of more value to society – the practical man or the thinker?' they answer 'the practical man' no matter what their true convictions may be.

2. *Many tests measure interest rather than sales ability.* The sales manager knows the interests of successful salespeople and uses tests to discover if potential new recruits have similar interest patterns. The assumption here is that sales success can be predicted by the types of interests a person has. This is as unlikely as discovering a new George Best by measuring the interests of young footballers.
3. *Tests have been used to identify individual personality traits which may not be associated with sales success.* Factors such as how sociable, dominant, friendly and loyal a person is have been measured in order to predict sales success. While some of these factors may be useful attributes for a salesperson to possess, they have failed to distinguish between high- and low-performing sales personnel.

Earlier in the chapter, reference was made to the use of the multiple personal inventory in order to predict the degrees of empathy and ego drive a person possesses. Mayer and Greenberg have shown that sales success can be reasonably accurately predicted once these characteristics are known.<sup>12</sup> The ideal is a person who possesses a high degree of both. A high degree of empathy (an ability to feel as the customer feels) and ego drive (the need to make a sale in a personal way) are usually associated with high sales performance. Plenty of empathy but little ego drive means that the salesperson is liked by the customers but sales are not made because of an inability to close the sale purposefully. A person with little empathy but much drive will tend to bulldoze their way through a sale without considering the individual needs of customers. Finally, the person with little empathy and ego drive will be a complete failure. Too many salespeople, say Mayer and Greenberg, fall into this last group.

The test itself – the multiple personal inventory – is based on the forced choice technique. Subjects pick those statements that are most like and least like themselves from a choice of four. Two of these statements may be termed favourable and the other two unfavourable. Mayer and Greenberg claim that the test is difficult to fake, since the two favourable statements are chosen to be equally favourable and the two unfavourable ones are equally unfavourable. The subject, then, is likely to be truthful. Since it is very difficult to produce statements which are *equally* favourable or unfavourable, the cautious conclusion is that the forced choice technique minimises cheating rather than completely eliminating it. The test also overcomes the criticism that psychological tests measure personality traits that may not be correlated with performance. Mayer and Greenberg describe empathy and ego drive as the ‘central dynamics’ of sales ability and produce evidence that scores on these characteristics correlate well with performance in the car, insurance and mutual funds fields.

If the multiple personal inventory, or any other psychological test, is to be used as a basis for selection of sales personnel, a sensible procedure would be to validate the test beforehand. Research has shown that other personality tests correlate with performance and that different types of people do well in different selling situations. Randall, for example, has shown that the type of person who was most successful selling tyres could be summarised as a ‘grey man’.<sup>13</sup> His characteristics were those of a humble, shy, tender-minded person of below-average intelligence, quite unlike the stereotyped extrovert, happy-go-lucky, fast-talking salesperson. The explanation of why such a person was successful was to be found in the selling situation. Being in the position of selling a brand of tyre that was not widely advertised and had only a small market share, the salesperson had to hang around tyre depots hoping to make sales by solving some of the supply problems of the depot manager in meeting

urgent orders. He was able to do this because his company provided a quicker service than many of its competitors. Thus, the personality of the man had to be such that he was prepared to wait around the depot merging into the background, rather than by using persuasive selling techniques.

This rather extreme example demonstrates how varied the sales situation can be. Contrast that situation with the skills and personality required to sell hi-fi equipment, and it becomes immediately apparent that successful selection should focus on matching particular types of people to particular types of selling occupations. Indeed Greenberg, since his earlier study, does seem to have moved position and recognised that successful selling depends on other personality dynamics 'which come into play depending on the specific sales situation'.<sup>14</sup> Consequently different psychological tests may be required for different situations.

Validation requires the identification of the psychological test or tests which best distinguish between a company's above-average and below-average existing salespeople. Further validation would test how the predictions made by the test results correlate with performance of new recruits. Recent research has cast doubt on the general applicability of the empathy/ego drive theory of sales success, but certainly the multiple personal inventory could be one psychological test used in this validation exercise, although it must be carried out under the supervision of a psychologist. Research has also shown that tests measuring integrity, conscientiousness and optimism perform well at predicting sales success.<sup>15</sup>

Finally, it must be stressed that the proper place of psychological tests is alongside the interview, as a basis for selection, rather than in place of it.

## Role playing

Another aid in the selection of salespeople is the use of **role playing** in order to gauge the selling potential of candidates. This involves placing them individually in selling situations and assessing how well they perform.

The problem with this technique is that, at best, it measures sales ability at that moment. This may depend, among other things, on previous sales experience. Correct assessment of salespeople, however, should be measuring *potential*. Further, role playing cannot assess the candidate's ability to establish and handle long-term relationships with buyers and so is more applicable to those selling jobs where the salesperson-buyer relationship is likely to be short term and the sale a one-off. Role playing may, however, be valuable in identifying the 'hopeless cases', whose personal characteristics, e.g. an inability to communicate or to keep their temper under stress, may preclude them from successful selling.

## 13.7 CONCLUSIONS

The selection of salespeople, while of obvious importance to the long-term future of the business, is a task which does not always receive the attention it should from sales managers. All too often, the 'person profile' is ill-defined and the selection procedure designed for maximum convenience rather than optimal choice. The assumption is

that the right candidate should emerge whatever procedure is used. Consequently the interview is poorly handled, the smooth talker gets the job and another mediocre salesperson emerges.

This chapter has outlined a number of techniques which, if applied, should minimise this result. Specifically, a sales manager should decide on the requirements of the job and the type of person who should be able to fulfil them. They should also be aware of the techniques of interviewing and the necessity of evaluating the candidates, in line with the criteria established during the personnel specification stage. Finally, the sales manager should consider the use of psychological tests (under the guidance of a psychologist) and role playing as further dimensions of the assessment procedure.

Chapter 14 examines two further key areas of sales management: motivation and training.

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## PRACTICAL EXERCISE

### Plastic Products Ltd

Plastic Products Ltd is a company that produces and markets plastic cups, teaspoons, knives and forks for the catering industry. The company was established in 1974 in response to the changes taking place in the catering industry. The growth of the fast-food sector of the market was seen as an opportunity to provide disposable eating utensils which would save on human resources and allow the speedy provision of utensils for fast customer flow. In addition, Plastic Products has benefited from the growth in supermarkets and sells 'consumer packs' through four of the large supermarket groups.

The expansion of sales and outlets has led Jim Spencer, the sales manager, to recommend to Bill Preedy, the general manager, that the present salesforce of two regional representatives be increased to four.

Spencer believes that the new recruits should have experience of selling fast-moving consumer goods since essentially that is what his products are.

Preedy believes that the new recruits should be familiar with plastic products since that is what they are selling. He favours recruiting from within the plastics industry, since such people are familiar with the supply, production and properties of plastic and are likely to talk the same language as other people working at the firm.

#### Discussion questions

- 1 What general factors should be taken into account when recruiting salespeople?
- 2 Do you agree with Spencer or Preedy or neither?

## Examination questions

- 1** Distinguish between the job description and the personnel specification. For an industry of your choice, write a suitable job description and personnel specification for a salesperson.
- 2** Discuss the role of psychological testing in the selection process for salespeople.