

Do students and faculty understand recruiter criteria for front-line sales positions?

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Boles, James S., Brian N. Rutherford, and Terry Loe, (2019), “Do students and faculty understand recruiter criteria for front-line sales positions?” *Marketing Education Review* 29 (4), 236-241. DOI: [10.1080/10528008.2019.1656087](https://doi.org/10.1080/10528008.2019.1656087)

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Abstract:

Students who take university sales courses are expected to graduate with a better understanding of what contributes to a successful sales career. The current research identifies 33 factors recruiters use in evaluating sales candidates. The top 10 attributes identified by recruiters as most important to the sales candidate’s selection are: 1) coachability; 2) work ethic; 3) drive; 4) integrity; 5) professionalism; 6) communication skills; 7) commitment; 8) achievement orientation; 9) adaptability; and 10) leadership ability. The study then examines how well students and faculty understand these sales organization requirements. While the first ten attributes indicate agreement regarding their importance, significant differences are found across recruiters, students, and faculty for attributes that are beyond the top ten.

Keywords: salespeople | recruitment | higher education

Article:

Introduction

Salespeople, as boundary-spanners, perform in a very different environment from most employees (Boles, Johnston, & Hair, 1997). Finding individuals who can successfully perform in these positions is difficult (Jaramillo, Mulki, & Boles, 2011) as indicated by employment projections suggesting that firms are attempting to hire salespeople (Manpower, 2009, 2014). Concurrent with efforts to fill sales positions with qualified applicants, significant growth has occurred in sales courses at universities (Pullins, 2017). Yet, research specifically addressing what firms seek when recruiting students for sales positions has received limited research attention. This deficiency is significant, since evidence indicates up to 50% of undergraduate business students and 80% of marketing students take their first job in some type of sales position (Bristow, Amyx, & Slack, 2006; Cespedes & Weinfurter, 2016; Stevens & Kinni, 2007).

The current research was undertaken for two reasons. First, to identify the hiring criteria used by recruiters when hiring entry-level salespeople. Second, to compare job attributes' importance rankings by recruiters, students, and faculty based on the means of each attribute.

Sales Recruitment and Hiring

Job Requirements for Entry-Level Sales Positions

Requirements of entry-level sales positions are varied and demand an unusually wide range of skills and capabilities (Plouffe, Hullah, & Wachner, 2009). These can include selling, collecting information, researching the competition and her/his customer's industry, prospecting, making presentations, communicating, using sales technology and following-up (Ingram, LaForge, Avila, Schwepker, & Williams, 2009). Further, salespeople often experience more rejection than many other employees (Castleberry & Tanner, 2013).

The high complexity of the sales environment is one reason that hiring for sales positions is difficult and often results in failure (Boles, Dudley, Onyemah, Rouziès, & Weeks, 2012). A new hire may be excellent at one task, or even several tasks, and still be unsuccessful due to her/his inability and/or lack of interest to do all required tasks. While many students report that they expect to work in sales, these same students appear to have misconceptions about sales positions (Bush, Bush, Oakley, & Cicala, 2014). Thus, improving student understanding of employer expectations of sales hires may help them be more realistic about the job and effective in sales positions (Bolander, Bonney, & Saturnino, 2014).

Methodology

Sample

Surveys were made available to industry recruiters, students, and faculty during a three-day collegiate sales role-play competition that included a sales career fair and multiple social networking events. Industry participants represented 58 national and international companies, many from the Fortune 500. The sample of industry recruiters included 201 females and 247 males for a total population of interest size of 448. A total of 71 usable recruiter surveys (54.9% female and 45.1% male) were obtained, for an overall response rate of approximately 16%.

Just under 85% of the recruiter respondents had sales experience. There were no differences between those with sales experience and those with only recruiter experience pertaining to the top ten most important attributes. Just over 75% of the recruiter respondents worked for B-to-B firms. There were no differences, based on t-tests, in respondents based on being part of a B-to-B or B-to-C firm pertaining to the top ten most important attributes. Just over 80% of the firms were international in scope.

Student and faculty data were also obtained. In total, 68 universities participated and included 136 competing students. An additional 128 non-competing students also attended to participate in the career fair. In total, 150 male and 114 female students were included in the population of interest. A total of 133 usable student surveys (42.1% female and 57.9% male) were obtained,

which represents a response rate of 50%. The faculty population of interest was comprised of 94 individuals, with 56 males and 38 females. A total of 50 usable faculty surveys (46% female and 54% male) were obtained, representing a 53% response rate.

Items

Items for this study were first developed using the 50 items from Weilbaker and Merritt (1992) and Wiles and Spiro (2004) item inventories. Adaptations to these items included changing the focus from what students look for in a company to focusing on what recruiters look for in a sales job applicant. For example, *recruiter shows interest* and *recruiter is knowledgeable* were adapted to state *student shows interest* and *student is knowledgeable*.

Since there have been changes in both the sales and business environment over the last decade, the authors felt it would be beneficial to ensure the attributes reflected the contemporary sales workplace. Feedback from industry sales professionals and sales faculty regarding deletions or additions to the items was obtained, resulting in 30 new attributes. In total, 80 attributes (62.5% from existing literature and 37.5% developed) were examined.

Data Collection

Items were ordered in the survey based on random number generation to reduce potential ordering bias. Respondents were requested to indicate how important they felt each attribute was to their company when considering a student for a position. They responded using a scale from “1” to “5” with “1” being “not at all important” to “5” being “very important.” Survey questions were asked with the following lead-in: “*For recruiters: We would like for you to answer how important you feel each of the below attributes is to **your company when considering a student for a position.** For students: We would like for you to answer how important you feel each of the below attributes is to **a potential employer when considering you for a position.** For faculty: We would like for you to answer how important you feel each of the below attributes is to **companies when they consider a student for a position.**”*

Selecting the Final Pool of Attributes/Items

After data collection, three experts in sales and sales management reviewed the list of 80 items to determine if a given attribute was a unique trait, personality, or characteristic for a given student. Judges were asked to classify attributes as yes, no, or unsure. Of the 80 initial items, 66 items were in agreement from all three judges (82.5%). Forty items were classified as “no” and one as “unsure” by all three judges, these items were removed from further analysis. Thirty-four of the 80 items had at least one judge stating that the item was a unique trait, personality, or characteristic for a given student. Specifically, all three judges agreed on 25 out of the 34 items, two of the three agreed on eight of the items, and one item had a single judge stating the item was useful. That one item (work with different people) was removed from further analysis. After reviewing the remaining eight items, the judges reached an agreement that the items were considered unique attributes. In total, 33 items were used in the next stage of analysis.

Table 1. Attributes Importance to Recruiters When Selecting a Sales Candidate

Attribute	Recruiter			Student			Faculty		
	Rank	Mean	S.D.	Rank	Mean	S.D.	Rank	Mean	S.D.
Student is coachable	1	4.80	0.40	1	4.77	0.47	2	4.78	0.46
Student's work ethic	2	4.76	0.46	7	4.64	0.64	5	4.69	0.55
Student's drive	3	4.73	0.56	2	4.74	0.53	4	4.74	0.49
Student's integrity	4	4.70	0.52	6	4.65	0.67	9	4.54	0.71
Student's professionalism	5	4.69	0.55	5	4.66	0.63	8	4.63	0.57
Student's communication skills	6	4.68	0.68	4	4.71	0.57	1	4.88	0.33
Student's commitment/loyalty	7	4.68	0.63	14	4.56	0.78	12	4.46	0.68
Student is achievement oriented	8	4.65	0.56	11	4.58	0.63	3	4.76	0.52
Student is adaptable	9	4.63	0.59	3	4.73	0.54	6	4.66	0.59
Student's leadership ability	10	4.59	0.62	10	4.58	0.74	13	4.46	0.65
Student is able to step out of their comfort zone	11	4.59	0.67	13	4.56	0.66	15	4.42	0.64
Student's morale	12	4.56	0.65	9	4.60	0.81	10	4.48	0.58
Student is ethical	13	4.54	0.79	12	4.56	0.71	16	4.38	0.90
Student's personality	14	4.52	0.61	15	4.55	0.69	14	4.44	0.70
Student shows interest	15	4.51	0.69	8	4.61	0.56	7	4.66	0.52
Student is friendly	16	4.48	0.63	16	4.49	0.69	11	4.46	0.61
<i>Student's intelligence^a</i>	17	4.20	0.71	17	4.43	0.74	18	4.20	0.64
<i>Student is knowledgeable^{a,c}</i>	18	4.18	0.83	18	4.41	0.76	19	4.14	0.70
<i>Student is aggressive^b</i>	19	4.10	0.76	25	3.95	0.95	25	3.69	0.94
Student activities	20	4.00	0.74	23	4.05	0.99	20	4.12	0.81
<i>Student's education^a</i>	21	3.92	0.89	20	4.33	0.86	17	4.20	0.61
Employee creativity	22	3.90	0.75	21	4.05	0.87	23	3.80	0.89
Work/life balance	23	3.88	0.92	22	4.05	1.02	24	3.73	0.86
<i>Student's work experience^{a,c}</i>	24	3.81	1.01	19	4.35	0.75	22	3.92	0.83
<i>Job security^{b,c}</i>	25	3.76	0.76	27	3.88	0.98	27	3.44	0.92
<i>Student has had an internship(s)^{a,b}</i>	26	3.58	1.08	24	4.03	0.97	21	4.06	0.84
<i>Student's references^a</i>	27	3.37	1.02	28	3.78	0.96	26	3.52	0.99
<i>Student's resume is unique^{a,b,c}</i>	28	2.99	1.09	26	3.93	0.98	30	3.37	0.95
<i>Student's grade-point average^{a,b}</i>	29	2.87	1.09	29	3.30	1.16	29	3.41	0.79
<i>Student knows employees in company^{a,b}</i>	30	2.86	1.32	30	3.24	1.26	31	3.24	1.08
<i>Student's age^a</i>	31	2.80	1.19	31	3.18	1.31	32	3.06	1.00
<i>Student is attractive^{a,b}</i>	32	2.49	1.30	32	3.12	1.14	28	3.42	0.91
<i>Student's gender^a</i>	33	1.77	1.28	33	2.52	1.35	33	2.12	1.02
Average Reported Value		4.02	0.80		4.20	0.83		4.09	0.74

Mean values at/above 4.47 (recruiters), 4.54 (students), and 4.42 (faculty) are significantly higher than average (4.02; 4.2; 4.09, respectively).

Mean values at/below 3.58 (recruiters), 3.95 (students), and 3.80 (faculty) are significantly lower than average (4.02; 4.2; 4.09, respectively).

^adifference between recruiters and students ($p < .05$); ^bdifference between recruiters and faculty ($p < .05$) ^cdifference between students and faculty ($p < .05$)

Analysis

The 33 individual-level attributes associated with recruiter requirements were ranked from most important to least important based on sales recruiters', students', and faculty's assessments of the items' importance as evidenced by the mean of each attribute. These rankings, including means

and standard deviations, are provided in Table 1. Following the presentation of these rankings, t-tests were used to determine the significant differences across the recruiters, students, and faculty regarding item importance in their evaluation of potential new hires.

Results

In order of importance, recruiters ranked their top ten as: 1 – *student is coachable*; 2 – *student's work ethic*; 3 – *student's drive*; 4 – *student's integrity*; 5 – *student's professionalism*; 6 – *student's communication skills*; 7 – *student's commitment and loyalty*; 8 – *student is achievement oriented*; 9 – *student is adaptable*; and 10 – *student's leadership ability*. Two of these ten attributes were ranked slightly lower by students: *student's commitment and loyalty* at #14 and *student is achievement oriented* at #11. Further, two of these ten attributes were ranked slightly lower by faculty: *student's commitment and loyalty* at #12 and *student's leadership ability* at #13. However, when we look at the mean scores, we find there are no significant differences ($p > .05$) between the recruiters, students, and faculty for those items that are in the top 10 of importance to recruiters.

While the rankings for the top ten attributes are similar across recruiters, students, and faculty, starting with *student intelligence*, the 17th attribute, significant ($p < .05$) differences were found in mean scores across the three groups. In total, 14 of the 33 rated attributes examined showed at least one significant ($p < .05$) difference. For instance, recruiters place less importance than students and faculty on *student work experience*, *student has had an internship(s)*, *student's grade-point average*, and *student is attractive*. Also, recruiters place less importance than students on *student's intelligence*, *student is knowledgeable*, *student's education*, *job security*, *student references*, *student's resume is unique*, *student knows employees in company*, *student's age*, and *student gender*. Regarding faculty rankings, recruiters place more importance on *student is knowledgeable*, *student is aggressive*, *job security*, and less importance than faculty on *student's resume is unique* and *student is attractive*.

Discussion

To succeed in a position, a prospective employee must understand what it takes to be successful before he/she knows if it is something that fits his/her skill set. Understanding expectations may be particularly important for entry-level sales positions (Tomkovick, Erffmeyer, & Hietpas, 1996). With the expanding sales curriculum offered by many universities, faculty have an opportunity to help students have more realistic perspectives regarding the sales position (Agnihotri et al., 2014; Loe & Inks, 2014). Well-organized sales courses and programs can help students adjust their expectations via guest speakers, job shadowing opportunities, internships, and student networking opportunities with sales professionals and recruiters (Bolander et al., 2014; Bush et al., 2014).

The dissemination of this study's findings can be used by faculty to help students with their personal development plans. For example, given that *student's leadership ability* is one of the top ten attributes sought in job applicants, faculty can coach students to seek out leadership opportunities. Additionally, assignments and/or projects may be developed that help develop leadership skills in students. Faculty could coordinate sales curriculum across sales courses to

allow leadership opportunities, such as requiring sales management students to coach introductory sales course students in sales techniques or methods.

Providing insight regarding what recruiters seek in job applicants may also help students strategize their positioning during job interviews. For example, given that *student is coachable*, *student's work ethic*, *student's drive*, and *student is adaptable* fall in the top ten attributes of importance, faculty can illustrate the importance of identifying examples of a student's accomplishments to address these attributes.

For the top ten attributes, the findings indicate that student and faculty beliefs about job attribute importance to recruiters are generally accurate. One reason for this is that many faculty teaching sales bring industry representatives and recruiters on campus to serve as guest speakers, role-play as buyers, mentor students, and participate in mock interview sessions. This collaborative effort helps recruiters better understand students, helps students have a clearer understanding of recruiters' expectations, and assists faculty in better understanding the perspective of both firms' and students' views of various job attributes. Results from this study indicate that, with only a few exceptions, faculty need to continue doing what they are doing.

Even with the similarity between groups on the top ten attributes, this study identified several instances where student views differ from those of recruiters. In the last 17 items, students significantly differ from recruiters in 12 of their importance ratings mean scores. The differences between recruiters and students regarding attributes represent an information gap that provides an opportunity for sales faculty to become better intermediaries between students and sales organizations. With this new knowledge, they can better coach students on what is important to sales organizations when selecting new front-line sales applicants.

Faculty members have a reasonable understanding of the most critical skills and attributes recruiters are looking for in new hires. However, results suggest they still have additional work to do in better understanding what recruiters desire in job applicants (Allen, Dugan, Popa, & Tarasi, 2017). For instance, faculty underestimated the level of emphasis that recruiters place on *student is aggressive* and *job security* attributes (faculty rank 25 and 27). This new knowledge can inform instructor course curriculum development and be used to more effectively coach students to be more assertive in job interviews and emphasize they are looking for an organization where they can be career employees. Study results indicate that faculty overestimate the importance recruiters place on *student's resume is unique*, *student's grade-point average*, and *student is attractive*. While these issues are important, faculty may need to place somewhat less emphasis on these items and focus more on attributes rated higher by recruiters (Neely & Cherry, 2010; Widmier, Loe, & Selden, 2007).

Limitations

A potential limitation is that average importance scores for the 33 items were four or higher on at least 22 of the items for all three groups. Further, all but one of the items was above three for students and faculty. Caution should be exercised when using the mean scores to assess the importance of each attribute, given the high values for most of the attributes. The sample was composed of students, faculty, and potential employers who participated in a national sales role-

play competition. Thus, the sample is not necessarily generalizable to other marketing students and could have some degree of non-response bias. Additionally, reducing the number of items used to collect data to focus only on items specific to a unique individual potentially resulted in a loss of some information that might have been of interest had those non-individual items been retained.

Conclusion

This study provides insight regarding what recruiters seek in student applicants for a sales position, as well as offering a comparison with what students and faculty members perceive is important to recruiters. While there were no significant differences in the top ten attributes among recruiters, students, and faculty, 14 of the 33 rated attributes were found to show at least one significant ($p < .05$) difference.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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