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Five Steps to Recruiting Superior Sales Talent

by Ted Gulas

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For better results, goals, and success!

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Introduction

Ted Gulas formed his Alabama based company Gulas Group in 1988 after working for an international manufacturer as Vice President of Sales & Marketing. While working for the manufacturer, Ted discovered a workflow skills gap, which created problems for companies wanting better results from their mission- critical knowledge workers.

The Gulas Group identifies, measures, and improves the performance of individuals, teams, and organizations that want to supercharge results because of these workflow skills gaps. The immediate benefit for clients is seen in their ability to get better results, reduce costs, and increase revenues. Identifying, eliminating bottlenecks, and improving workflow in the Three Key Stages of Work on the Invisible Assembly Line accomplish this. They are: **DECIDE. DO. DELIVER**.

This booklet will help you **DECIDE and DO** the work of recruiting sales people more effectively by understanding all the steps you need to follow to find, recruit, and hire the very best sales professionals for your organization. We hope you enjoy it!

Step One: Identifying

The process of recruiting sales people is like no other process in your organization. Most mistakes are made by relying too much on sales history. Sales history is like the disclaimer on stocks: “Past performance is not necessarily an indicator of future performance.” That is why you must implement a systematic recruiting process to fill the most mission-critical positions in your organization.

An organization must do five things to execute a systematic recruiting process and successfully recruit sales superstars.

1. Identify
2. Test
3. Qualify
4. Search
5. Interview

These steps are often not executed effectively in most organizations today. The cost in wasted time and resources for this process to be out of control is estimated to be $450,000 for organizations and $150,000 per sales candidate.

Identifying the best sales candidate, the first step, is the foundation and focus area of the five steps. This step in the process can be further divided into four areas as follows:

1. Compatibility with the way you compensate, manage, and go to market.
2. A close match with your organization's culture.
3. Inventory the past, present and future flaws and challenges in your recruiting, the ramp up program and subsequent hiring results.
4. Ensure you understand each candidate's selling strengths, skills, and weaknesses.

Area one, reviewing a candidate's compatibility with your organization, begins from a structured list of questions preferably delivered via an EEOC-compatible sales candidate assessment before the interview. Questions such as:

- Who does the closing
- The percentage of time selling “new” versus selling “old”
- Amount of pressure on sales performance
- Pricing
- People the sales person should call
- And other specific areas of compatibility

must be answered before an interview. Caution is advised if compatibility is less than a 65% match, particularly on the top five issues.

Next on the list of criteria to identify a sales super star is organization culture. The best way to achieve this objective is to benchmark the behavior, values, and attributes the position requires. You are essentially asking: “If this sales position could talk, what would it say about the values necessary to stay motivated in your organization, what communication styles does the candidate need to bring to the job and what talents or attributes are necessary for superior performance in this particular sales role?” Your organization can then compare the candidate qualities to this baseline and determine how closely the match.

The most difficult part of recruiting for most organizations is conducting an honest self assessment of its flaws, both current and past, plus challenges related to things such as hiring, ramping up, and developing sales potential. The organization needs to create a checklist of issues addressing:

1. What titles in an organization must they visit
2. Support sales people will receive
3. Type of sales, whether conceptual or complex
4. Sales plans
5. Learning the market
6. Training during the first 90 days and one of the most critical
7. Accountability.

Once you build a checklist, you must honestly assess what flaws and challenges are below mastery for the organization. Justifying your answer becomes the next column in your checklist. For instance, if training during the first thirty days is not an issue, you need to evaluate why not. If it is an issue, evaluate why it is an issue. Everyone from the CEO to Human Resource professionals and the VP of Sales should complete their checklist individually, then come together as a group, discuss each item, and agree upon results.

The last area to review is ensuring the organization has researched the level of sales experience it requires for success. For example, will you need an entry level sales person, some experience, an experienced sales person, senior level, or executive level sales person? Each level of candidate will possess a certain combination of selling strengths, skills, and weaknesses. Each candidate will have severity attached to each of their major sales weaknesses indicating that certain combinations may prevent development or may not even be trainable. The best practice to accomplish this objectively is to contract with a company that provides this information for your organization. This information can then become a road map for a shortened ramp up time, sales development and coaching by your sales leaders after they are hired.

This last criterion in the process naturally leads to the second most important issue you must consider when hiring a sales superstar. The second issue in hiring a sales superstar is to test each candidate via a simple licensing agreement against what the organization identified to be successful. The most successful organizations conduct this testing before they waste time sorting through polished resumés and staged interviews.

In closing, it is crucial to remember this: do not leave any of these four areas within the identifying process to chance. To do so will result in high turnover, a complacent sales team, longer ramp up time, and underperforming recruits.

Step 2: Testing

No organization in professional sports today will pay a star athlete to play professional sports without a rigorous test. Why do most professional sales organizations bypass testing and use past performance prerequisites for hiring super stars in today's complex sales environment? The answer is that most sales tests are not sales tests, which results in a very low predicative validity. This means if you can follow the tests suggestions you will not get the consistent results you hoped for. Yes, these tests are marketed as sales tests, but that is the furthest from what they do. Before I explain, let's put this in perspective.

Recently I wrote an article which outlined the five steps in recruiting a sales superstar ranked in order of importance. The five steps in order of importance are Identify, Test, Search, Interview, and Qualify. If you do not do this correctly, you risk wasting as much or more than $150,000.00 per bad sales candidate you hire. While "Searching" for a candidate may be the actual second step you perform, "Testing" the candidate is second only in importance to "Indentifying" the right candidate. In "Testing" a candidate you have to rely on two variables. These variables are 1) when will you test and 2) choosing the correct test to use.

As stated earlier, tests that are marketed as sales tests are not true indicators of whether the candidate will and can sell. A better way to explain this is: can the sales candidate consistently execute a sales process? Let me try this one more time! Can the sales candidate manage a sales pipeline that is actually a true forecast and not a lists of hopes, prayers, wishes and dreams? If you choose a behavioral, personality, psychological, aptitude based test, the answer is no. Notice I did not say not to use these tests for certain situations. I said if you want a test with a predictive indicator of sales success, you would be best to choose a test that can predict sales success after you hire the candidate. Choose a test with very high predictive validity. That is, if 95% of those recommended by a sales specific assessment and subsequently hired are considered successful by their employers. If 75% of those not recommended but hired anyway fail, then you have picked the right test.

Here is a great way to explain the issue you need to be aware of. If you choose any behavioral, personality, psychological, aptitude, based tests mentioned above you may find out that the behavioral scientist say the top 5 % of sales people have the following common characteristics. They enjoy selling, they prospect consistently, and they have a strong outlook. Did you also realize the bottom 5% of unsuccessful salespeople have these same characteristics too? There are many more characteristics just like this that the bottom 5% of sales people have, such as having written goals and comfortable talking about personal finances.

When choosing the right type of sales test, make absolutely certain the predictive validity is available for your inspection. The next question to ask in order to maximize pre-testing of sales candidates is when do you test? Clients of mine have actually wanted to wait until after they read hundreds of resumés and then interview the candidate before testing the candidate. Think about that for a moment. That is like saying I have so much time, energy, and effort that spending more time reading resumés and meeting with candidates makes more sense than only placing hirable candidates into my recruiting pipeline. I do not recommend my candidates do that and will discourage them to the best of my ability. Here is what I recommend. Determine the number of salespeople you want to hire per year, then purchase a recruiting license that allows you to test as many candidates as necessary for one fee until you receive a pool of hirable candidates to spend time with.

Use a predictive sales test as your first filter in determining who makes your candidate recruiting pipeline. You can even set the system up so that the candidate reads the ad and is electronically directed to take the test before any time at all is spent researching or talking to the candidate. Think of the time, energy, and effort saved by not going though hundreds of resumés to cull out one or two perspective candidates! And the best is yet to come when you do talk to the candidate. You will know more about them than they even know about themselves. In addition, after you hire the right candidate, you can put together an objective ramp-up plan that takes into consideration strengths, skills, hidden weakness and negative beliefs that may hinder their sale success. At the Gulas Group we always use the Sales Candidate Screening from The Objective Management Group.

Step 3: Searching

When I ask attendees at our executive briefing titled “Recruiting Superior Sales Talent” to rank the importance of the recruiting steps, "Searching" is normally ranked incorrectly. In order of importance, “Searching” should be step 3 after the “Identify” and “Testing.” However, many of you rank “Searching” as step two in your process, after “Identify” in area of importance. This confusion between the importance and sequence of steps causes many organizations to underachieve when it comes to executing the searching step. Organizations tend to panic and get in such a hurry to fill their pipeline with candidates they default to a traditional searching method that is, at best, ineffective for the 21st Century.

The traditional method of “Searching” for superior sales talent fails for many reasons:

- Marketing for the position describes the candidate a company would like to hire and provides way too much company information—instead, you should describe the opportunity in detail.
- You need great sales people, but they are already in a job and typically not actively looking to change
- You have not built in insurance, such as testing, before conducting phone screening and looking over resumés
- Most organizations are confused about the real purpose of benchmarking and how to use it effectively in a search
- You are not using automation to its best capacity in the searching process to save your team time and energy
- You place too much faith in the job description
- Past performance is not necessarily an indicator of future performance (just like purchasing a stock history is not necessarily an indicator of future stock performance). If you make your search contingent on previous performance, you may set yourself up for a trap.

I will offer more detail on some of these traditional steps for searching for a sales superstar along with some suggestions for improvement.

Searching and marketing for superior sales talent are similar and neither can be done effectively unless you first did the most important step in this recruiting process: correctly identifying the right candidate. As part of the Identify step, you should have isolated things like the market your new employee will call on, the size of target companies, the average size of your accounts, length of your sales cycle, who the new employee will call on, and whether the end user needs and wants your product or service—or whether they need it but don't want it.

In your marketing you should fully describe the opportunity in detail, making sure to look up key words that candidates will search for online on job recruiting sites like Monster, the Ladders, and others. You marry up the key words using a template exercise. The template exercise works like a puzzle where you choose, then combine, common text phrases and demographic and psychographic words from your Identify step. Here is a brief example of how it comes together:

> Selling high end business services to C-Level executives of large corporations in a complex selling environment and a growing market against the incumbent vendor.

Using the template correctly and indentifying all the challenges the candidate must overcome is an important way to shift from traditional searching for superior sales talent. Another way to shift from traditional searches is to list your total compensation package in the marketing support materials. In addition, if you really want to break with the traditional way of searching for superior sales talents, don't ask for a resumé. Have the candidate send one or two paragraphs describing how and why they meet the specifications in the marketing material. Next, make sure you automate the process by using auto responders to direct candidates to a testing site before you decide which one to pursue. All of these exercises are designed in a way that someone who is not actively looking for a position says to themselves, “Wow that describes me! I need to look into this more.”

Searching for superior sales talent requires an entire company effort. You should mandate an intense recruiting effort from the CEO to the receptionist that includes PR, marketing, and Internet employment ads. The stakes are just too high. The incidental cost of assessing candidates should be the insurance, not the final criteria. I recommend that my clients preferably have at least three hirable candidates after the assessment process in order to hire one. Most clients don't like to hear that. But usually one candidate won't fit for some reason that everyone in the department agrees on, and then you're left arguing about which of the remaining two will knock the ball out of the park. What a nice argument to have!

To up the chances of attaining three great candidates, you must understand the posting cost challenge. While your posting won't expire for two months, you must repost your ads every week to continue the flow of resumés. Then, you must know where to post the ad as well as the way the site's search engines work. With Monster.com, you must know how to use each field and drop-down list so that your ad comes up with the appropriate search key words. If potential candidates don't see your ad, they can't respond to it.

It should be evident by now that you need a new mindset to correctly search for superior sales talent in today's market. This article only touched on the highlights of a few steps in the process. Soon we will write about using Benchmarking in the search for superior sales talent.

Step 4: Interviewing

To hire a superior sales talent, conduct short, intense interview sessions. First make sure the candidate has completed the formal sales screening process and is recommended in the testing portion. Award bonus points for candidates with a small ramp up time and an ideal fit in the testing portion of the process. Next, get an experienced administrative staff employee to conduct a brief but structured phone screening. The philosophy of using senior administrative staff for this step in hiring a sales candidate is because they have the intuition to know if the person on the other end of the phone sounds professional enough to be allowed to talk with senior executives.

During the qualifying step of the process each characteristic is then weighted, totaled, and used as part of the final scoring of the candidate, as well as who will be scheduled for the next phase of the interview process. You can read more about this in chapter 5. After the candidate has successfully made it through these initial filters, move on to the next phase.

The next phase of the interview process is for the administrative personnel to schedule candidates who did well enough to qualify for a phone or in person first interview session. The person conducting this second interview session must leave their "need for approval" behind for this part of the process. The idea here is to schedule a fast paced interview where the goal is to apply pressure on a candidate similar to the pressure they will experience in the field if they were out cold calling. You are not there to sell your company at this interview session. The introduction to the candidate sets the stage so I recommend you be very "matter of fact" in your tone and give the impression you are rushed but not rude. You may say something to the effect:

"Thanks you for taking time to visit here today. Due to some unforeseen issues, we will not be able to use the entire time allotted. In the short time available there is so much to learn about you. The consequence of our short stay is the questions will be fast paced to fit our time. You should not get upset by the pace."

At this point your pre-planning should have come together in four general areas and many specific questions within each area. The four general areas I prepare for are:

1. Resumé
2. Assessment
3. Behaviors, including intrinsic motivators and cultural fit
4. The Opportunity and Close

Before we briefly discuss what each of the areas is composed of you should understand a couple of things. First, construct a scoring matrix to rank your candidates. Second, it is best to keep the candidate on the defensive. This is not your day to show off your bonding and rapport skills. Be respectful and very adult, but make sure you understand your emotional quotient score and do not get emotionally involved. Third, remember the philosophy here is they are auditioning for the sales role. You should have in mind TV shows such as “America Has Talent,” “American Idol,” and “Dancing with the Stars.” And just like the TV shows, it will be best to have different judges scoring the candidate with specific interview questions around the four general categories. Having these various judges will definitively allow your company to follow the guidelines set by the EEOC. Now choose the best candidates to come in for a face to face interview session.

Now it is time to prepare for the interview by studying the resumé you have for the candidate. Within the resumé portion of the interview you should be looking for specifics generated from their resumé statements. Here is a question that speaks to that rule:

You indicated that you developed and implemented a ____. What exactly was your role in the development?

- How did you implement it?
- Was it successful?
- What were the actual results?

I construct my questions with a general topic and several follow up questions as the one above. Here's a tip make sure you only ask one question at a time.

Once you have completed the Resume’ portion of the Interview it is time to move on to the assessment/test. I usually break down the assessment portion of the interview under these headings:

- Compatibility
- Skill Sets
- Excuse Making (if present)
- Interview Tips (questions from screening; I choose one to three with relevance)

You should then construct questions from each of the headings above. Here is an example of how to construct a question about excuse making (if it is present).

One of my concerns while reviewing your report was that you have a tendency to blame circumstances for any lack of results rather than taking responsibility. I am concerned about this because our culture requires our employees take responsibility. Describe how you will adapt to our sales philosophy regarding excuses?

There are numerous other issues that link to the Behaviors section from the 21 Sales Competencies that you can draw specific question from For instance if your sales candidate screen says the candidate has a hidden sales weakness in Uncovering Actual Budgets. You may ask how she can establish a budget when the prospect says he does not have one. You should score each answer on the candidates spread sheet way on a scale of one to five. Some of the observations will be about warmth, energy, experience, overall self presence, and numerous others. If your candidate does make it past this initial face to face interview, then I suggest you then conduct a behavior styles and motivators screening to use in subsequent follow up interviews. This will insure the candidate will meet your organization's culture, it will determine how you will communicate with them in the future as well as what intrinsically motivates them to come to work each day.

To wrap all this up, you need to describe the sales position opportunity from the 30,000 foot perspective, and then close by compiling a list of tough final interview questions. Construct a scoring system where you can rate the answers on interview questions such as "why do customers trust you?" on a scale on one to five. Don't forget to construct questions from the test and information gathered from the resume. Next, as part of the close, you work on building a script to describe the opportunity at the 5,000 foot level and list who you are searching for and why salespeople have failed at this job. The magic here is to ask the candidate to explain why they will not fail at the opportunity you just described.

Make sure to give bonus points to any candidate that will ask you," If you need their help to meet your organization's objectives that were discussed in the interview."

We also have a document titled the "Twenty Minute Interview". You can obtain a complimentary copy of this document by sending an e-mail to results@gulasgroup.com. Be sure to put Twenty Minute Interview in the subject line.

Step 5: Qualifying

As far as the importance of steps, “qualify” is listed as one of the least important. If you are off a bit on this step, your formal interview process could make up for the difference. You do have to consider how much time you can waste by not qualifying correctly. In terms of sequence, it is the fourth step in the process, coming after “test.”

Now that you do have several candidates that have been recommended from the sales screening, you have to qualify the “best of the best.” During this process, focus on the candidate’s ability to execute your sales process. You can consider the cultural fit to your organization’s culture later on in the process.

The first thing you should do is create a spreadsheet so you can qualify all candidates uniformly, objectively and quickly. The first column is the names and numbers of the candidates. Next, you want to build the columns to use as part of an initial phone conversation between your administrative staff and the candidate. Here is a list of columns for the administrative person to use: presence, rapport, articulate, warmth. You should use 1 point for each column. The administrative personnel will usually know a professional sounding person on the other end the phone that they would let speak to someone on the executive staff. The candidate is asked what their schedule looks like over the next few days to coordinate a call back with the executive, provided they make the cut to the next stage of phone interviews. You can also include a few other background questions such as “how long have you been looking for a position like this?” Next, you can ask are they currently employed. The candidates that the administrative team scores well will be called back for a 15 minute phone interview with the executive.

Next, expand the existing spreadsheet to include these new columns that the executive will fill out: experience meets criteria, closing ability, meets technical requirements and handled/put off. Each gets 2 points with the exception of they handled/put, off which receives 4 points. A philosophy to consider when the executive returns the call at the allotted time with the candidate is to put them under the same pressure as if they were cold calling a suspect. You don’t have to be as rude as some suspects, but be very matter of fact and assertive with your time, and even end your call before the allotted time. You can use a statement such as this to close your phone screening: “Some will be receiving a call by 4 pm today from our administrative staff. If you do receive that call, you will then be invited in to participate in the formal interview. If you do not receive that call today you failed to make the next round.” After initiating the end of the call, if they attempt to keep you on the phone with any kind of question, award them 4 points.

Some of the questions to discuss on this phone interview sound like this: “What in our advertisement or what the recruiter told you piqued your curiosity enough that you are excited about being candidate for this position?” This one question will tell you a lot about their vision, values, research and preparedness. You can also ask them to tell you about your web site. For instance, “what types of clients are we trying to reach and why?” Finally you can ask, “What sales book have you read or what sales developmental courses have you participated in within the last year or so?” That should give you enough information to tally up your score for the next round of formal interviews.

Once you have tallied your scores and made you choices, you are ready to use the detailed interview tips from the sales candidate screening. Also at this time you can compare how and why they do what they do based on the benchmarking which is derived from behavior, personal attitudes, interests and values reports. This will tell you how and why they do what they do, which needs to be a good cultural fit to your organization. You can also drill down and do the specific research about their resumé to determine certain patterns and education trends. This last part of the qualification process is to prepare your questions in advance and make sure you don't play it by ear in the interview. Score each interview, compare your results to others that interview the candidate, and then let your gut give you some direction for the final call.

Learn More About Effective Sales Development

Do you need additional help building and developing an effective sales force? The Gulas Group can help. We offer a variety of coaching and assessment services, plus on-site training courses, to help your organization be the best it can be. We tailor many courses specifically to sales professionals.

Some areas where we can help you include:

Strategic Solutions
Designed to help you plan clear strategies, set realistic goals, and manage smoother projects.

Execution Solutions
Developed to enhance your management and execution behaviors.

Delivery Solutions
Developed to help you re-gain your edge in communicating, team building, customer service, positive conflict resolution, influencing skills, and sales development.

Visit our Solutions page at http://www.gulasgroup.com/solutions.shtml or contact us for a consultation. We look forward to helping you achieve better results!

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