



NO TIME FOR MISTAKES

How to Hire the Right People in Sales and Customer Service

Hiring the right person for a job has always been **challenging.**

In a recent HR Dive Brand Studio and MHS Talent Development survey, 50% of respondents said they had difficulty with some aspect of hiring talent. It doesn't get easier once a new hire comes on board: 65% of the survey respondents said they had trouble retaining employees.

It's a critical time for businesses. They are in the middle of a sea of change. Many were already in the midst of or were contemplating a digital transformation. As a result of the current global health, social, and economic crises, companies are reexamining their business models to ensure their survival.

Employees play a critical role in that outcome, and while some industries may be hiring for open positions, budgets are tight. Hiring the wrong person for the job can be costly. HR Dive reports that turnover costs employers \$15,000 per employee.¹ That figure doesn't count the opportunity cost of having an unmotivated or underperforming employee in the job — or that person's effect on others.

And yet, companies can't operate without employees. The key is finding the right employees for the job. This challenge is especially concerning when it comes to finding employees for sales or customer service roles. Businesses must identify reliable ways to interview, hire and develop people in these essential positions.





The **Challenging Landscape** for Hiring Sales and Customer Service Employees

The landscape for hiring sales and customer service employees has traditionally been rocky. In 2019, for example, Manpower's Talent Shortage Survey found that, in the U.S., for the second year in a row, the job of a sales rep was the third most difficult to fill (behind skilled trade and IT).²

Although customer service positions weren't on that list, those positions have frequent turnover, which necessitates constant recruiting and hiring. McKinsey estimates that attrition in contact centers alone costs companies \$10,000 to \$20,000 to replace each contact center agent.³

Even with many looking for jobs in this year's evolving economy, finding and hiring the best candidates for available positions can still be difficult. When retail storefronts and restaurants shut down because of COVID-19, many employees lost their jobs. However, some businesses had an immediate need for new hires, said Elnaz Rezanian, a research scientist for MHS, a leading developer of scientifically validated career assessments and analytics.

"Some critical jobs, such as customer service roles, are experiencing a rise during this pandemic. Cashiers or retail

clerks who are working for essential businesses like grocery and drugstores, or call center reps are really in demand right now,” she said. But it’s not just companies with essential workers who should take note of this need, Rezanian added. Any company that wants to stand out from the competition must create a customer-centric culture by empowering their employees with the right customer service skills.

There is also the potential for job growth in sales, said Michael Vodianoi, a research scientist at MHS. “Sales roles, particularly those based remotely, have seen a significant increase in demand, based on LinkedIn job posting data.⁴ Over 90% of B2B businesses have transitioned to virtual sales models during the pandemic.”

In response, many sales positions also transitioned to digital channels, and virtual work is becoming not just a short-term solution but a long-term reality, he said. But a smooth transition to “virtual sales” isn’t a given. “The perceived effectiveness of digital sales is somewhat mixed. As a salesperson, being agile and adopting new technologies will be critical for success, as will the ability to be resilient and patient as customers slowly recover their spending dollars.”



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Michael Vodianoi
RESEARCH SCIENTIST AT MHS





The sales function is the lifeblood of a business, and customer service is the key differentiator,⁵ determining if a sale is simply a one off purchase or results in a long-term partnership with repeat business. Given the importance of these functions, companies must hire and keep the right people in the jobs.

Unfortunately, that doesn't happen often enough. Turnover rates in these two functions tell the story. The average turnover for B2B sales is 35%,⁶ compared with the average turnover in other industries of 13%.⁷ That figure is even more distressing in retail, where the average employee turnover was 60% in 2018.⁸ Customer service turnover is also high. The annual turnover for employees at U.S. contact centers ranges between 30% and 45%.⁹

Turnover is a strong indicator of a mismatch between the person and the job. Even if a company can fill a position, if the right person isn't hired, time, talent, money and other resources are wasted, and opportunities are lost.



Hiring the Right Sales or Customer Service Person is **Complex**

It would seem easy to hire for sales or customer service. Post an ad with the job requirements, conduct an interview, do a background check and make a decision. But that straightforward process doesn't provide all the information needed to make a confident hire.

It can be harder to get information in a remote interview.

Many companies that used to interview in person now conduct remote interviews. Those companies may hire new employees, sight unseen except via the laptop screen. It can be trickier to build a rapport in an online interview, ask the tough questions or glean clues from body language.

Sales professionals are used to selling — even themselves.

Hiring for sales professionals presents a unique challenge: “sorting real sales talent from good sellers,” Vodianoi said. “The key is identifying who has the talent to perform well on the job. Beyond just talking a good game, salespeople need to learn about their clients' needs, adapt to changing circumstances, be optimistic and resilient in the face of rejection, and set and achieve high goals. These qualities are often hard to determine through an interview process.”



Critical customer service skills are overlooked.

When some companies hire for customer service, they assume anyone can perform the job and don't have a list of important skills for the role, Rezania said. "Customer service employees sometimes have to deal with angry customers. They have to deal with complaints. If they don't have the qualities, like composure or sociability, they won't be successful in their performance in these roles."

A lack of alignment exists between the job and the culture.

Companies must make sure the job requirements and expectations match the culture of the company. Imagine an organization that prides itself on long-lasting customer relations, yet hires sales professionals for their win-at-all-costs attitude. While neither side is necessarily wrong, both will be frustrated. "First off is figuring out what are the important set of characteristics and traits needed for this role based on the job requirements," Rezania said.

Hiring managers don't hire for the right characteristics.

One of the biggest ways interviews fall short is in assessing soft skills, Vodiano said. "This occurs even though 92% of talent professionals say soft skills matter as much or more than hard skills when they hire, according to LinkedIn's 2019 Global Talent Trend Report."¹⁰ As hiring and interviewing move to a more virtual environment, the challenge of evaluating soft skills gets even harder, and interviews alone are insufficient, he added. Alternative methods, including soft-skills assessments, are being used more than ever, and their increased quality and availability will play an essential role in good remote-hiring practices.

There is a disconnect between what managers and customers think are ideal qualities in sales positions.

LinkedIn's State of Sales Pocketguide compared the characteristics sales managers wanted in their new hires with those their customers wanted. Interestingly, customers said active listening was the most important characteristic. In contrast, hiring managers said problem-solving was the most vital, with active listening coming in seventh.

The right person may have been hired — but developed into the wrong person.

An employee may have been perfect for the job — until the job evolved or the person was promoted into a new position, but the skills or characteristics that initially brought success are no longer enough. For example, a customer service representative may have been superb at collaborating but may hesitate to take a strong leadership stance. Often, employees in this situation can struggle, and a once star performer can lack confidence and motivation.

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Improving the New-Hire Interview and Selection Process

When companies don't have the right person in the job, they risk the person's leaving—but may risk even more if the person stays. Their underperformance can affect the entire team. What's more, numerous studies have found a strong correlation between employee engagement and customer engagement, so an unhappy employee can lead to a dissatisfied customer.¹¹

Companies can reduce the risk of a wrong hire and improve the quality of their hires through assessments of sales and customer service competencies. Their profile gives hiring managers a missing piece of the puzzle. When used in conjunction with information from the candidate's resume, interview, skills testing and other background data, the assessment empowers hiring managers to make better hiring decisions.

The MHS Sales Aptitude Profile™ (Sales AP™) is a self-reported assessment that evaluates people on eight competencies that are critical for sales success.

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|---------------------------|------------------------------|
| 1. Achievement Motivation | 5. Sociability |
| 2. Assertiveness | 6. Persuasion |
| 3. Competitiveness | 7. Self-Confidence |
| 4. Composure | 8. Selling-Related Knowledge |



CUSTOMER SERVICE APTITUDE PROFILE™ (CS AP™)



"Hiring managers receive a report called the Interview Guide that helps them get a better understanding of the candidate's strengths and weaknesses and guides them through a structured interview process," Vodianoi said. The Sales AP™ also includes indicators that can help detect if the candidate was inattentive or faking when taking the assessment.

Similarly, the Customer Service AP™ (CS AP™) evaluates seven competencies that are critical to success in customer service roles, and it includes an Interview Guide with insights for the manager, Rezania said.

1. Achievement Motivation
2. Composure
3. Cooperativeness
4. Customer Orientation
5. Sociability
6. Self-Confidence
7. Upselling

If an assessment indicates that a potential hire has weaknesses but also has desired strengths, the hiring manager could bring the candidate on board and jump-start a program to get the person up to speed.

The profiles are also useful for current employees and can pinpoint development needs — which can be valuable in ensuring the success of an employee taking on new responsibilities. The Development report tells the employee how they scored and where they fall in the comparison group for each area. With each competency, the report outlines what the score means, why it is important for the position, and what it looks like in action. Next the report gives strategies that help the employee develop motivation for change — with ideas to help build awareness, actions to take and ways to track progress.



Conclusion

Getting the right sales or customer service employee in the right job is critical — especially now, as businesses have little margin for hiring errors. With tools that compare a candidate's characteristics with those needed in the job, managers can make better data-driven hiring decisions. The alignment results in better employee performance, engagement and retention — and happier customers.

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