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THE SCIENCE OF SALES TALENT MATCHING: IDENTIFY THE RIGHT PEOPLE TO DRIVE SUCCESS

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66% OF SALES ORGANIZATIONS DON’T HAVE A CLEAR UNDERSTANDING OF WHAT ‘EXCELLENT’ LOOKS LIKE FOR EACH OF THEIR SALES ROLES.[1]

[1] Korn Ferry Sales Maturity Survey 2024

Building a sales team is no easy task. It requires finding the right talent for the right roles at the right time.

For sales leaders, the stakes are high. A bad hire doesn't just impact short-term performance. It can lead to lost revenue, disrupt team dynamics, and result in costly re-hiring processes.

When it comes to talent matching, many organizations opt for the well-established path:

- Identify a talent gap—where the team lacks critical skills or people
- Define the roles needed to fill it
- Write a job profile
- Hire based on that profile

But for today's sales teams, this approach is too simplistic.

Success depends on talent that can adapt quickly, build meaningful relationships, and deliver consistent value throughout longer, more complex sales cycles.

Just because an individual excelled in one role doesn't mean they will do the same somewhere else. Every organization is different and has its own unique working style and culture.

To effectively match talent to roles, you need to adopt a specific, research-driven strategy.

In this eBook, we walk you through that strategy to ensure you have the best talent in the right roles to boost productivity and drive performance in your sales team today.

DEFINE WHAT SALES SUCCESS LOOKS LIKE IN YOUR ORGANIZATION

You want the best talent for your organization—people who will drive performance, boost revenue, and contribute to long-term growth. But to make that happen, you must first define what success looks like for your sales team.

This starts with clearly establishing the key performance indicators (KPIs) that will measure your team's effectiveness. Do this, and you can quantify success and track it, which will:

- Help you hire the right people
- Set clear performance expectations for when they're on board

Success metrics will be specific to your organization and industry. For a subscription-based SaaS company, for example, average contract value is likely to be an important metric. However, this is unlikely to be relevant in a professional services firm, where a key performance metric might be billable utilization rate.

HERE ARE SOME SUCCESS METRICS TO CONSIDER:

1. **Quota attainment:** how well a seller meets or exceeds their targets
2. **Cross-sell and upsell deals:** the ability to sell more to existing customers
3. **Revenue growth:** how the seller contributes to the organization's overall financial success
4. **Profit margins:** rather than looking at deal quantity, how much profit the seller is making from a deal
5. **Sales cycle length:** how long it takes for the seller to move the buyer through the sales process
6. **Customer retention and churn:** how well the seller keeps their existing customers and how much new business they generate from them
7. **Win rate:** the percentage of deals a seller wins versus the total number of opportunities
8. **Customer satisfaction score:** how happy the customer was with the service or product sold
9. **Sales activity metrics:** number of calls made, emails sent, and demos given

ANALYZE YOUR HIGH PERFORMERS

Once you've established your measures of success, the next step is to identify and then analyze your high performers. Remember that numbers, such as win rates and deal size, tell only part of the story. You also want a clear understanding of the traits, competencies, behaviors, and drivers that make these individuals successful.

TRAITS

Inherent qualities people possess that define how they behave in a certain situation, such as optimism or introversion.

COMPETENCIES

The technical skills a person has to do a task, such as data analysis or software development.

BEHAVIORS

Sometimes referred to as soft skills, these are the observable characteristics that drive someone's action. Unlike traits, they can be adjusted depending on the situation or environment, such as being collaborative or a good communicator.

DRIVERS

Internal motivations and values that propel individuals to achieve their goals, such as a desire for personal growth or recognition.

It's crucial not to analyze your high performers in isolation. You need to compare them to the rest of their peers to really identify what makes them stand out.

> If you look only at your high performers, you won’t be able to uncover their secret sauce and discover what differentiates them.

Sam Tepper,
Korn Ferry Senior Client Partner

ARE YOU IDENTIFYING YOUR HIGH PERFORMERS ACCURATELY?

In sales, it's easy to assume the top performers in an organization are those who close the biggest or most deals or who exceed their targets the quickest.

But it's more complicated than that. To find your true high performers, you need to analyze performance from multiple angles.

Hard numbers are important. But you should also consider factors such as deal quality, customer satisfaction, and the ability to build long-term relationships.

"Are you looking at high performers from a snapshot in time or over time?" asks Tepper. "Organizations may think someone is a great performer, but they could have just lucked out on a recent deal, which skewed the numbers."

Another factor to consider is how long a seller has been in their current job.

"We often get data sets with low performers who are new to an organization. If they're new, they haven't had time to perform, so you should take them out of the data set."

Once you've identified your high performers and carried out a comparative analysis, you can then create Success Profiles for roles based on the competencies, traits, drivers, experiences, and sales skills that differentiate them from their peers.

You're essentially defining what 'excellent' looks like in your organization.

Sales organizations that have a clear understanding of what "good" looks like for their sales roles achieve superior performance across the board:

+25%
QUOTA ATTAINMENT

+17%
WIN RATES

+8%
REVENUE ATTAINMENT

They also report

17%
LOWER VOLUNTARY TURNOVER[2]

20%
LOWER INVOLUNTARY TURNOVER[3]

[2&3] Korn Ferry Sales Maturity Survey 2024

THE POWER OF SUCCESS PROFILES

Success Profiles are the key to everything—from hiring and development to retention. They are the foundation for building a strong team, guiding who you bring on board, how you nurture their growth, and how you keep them engaged and motivated.

The key is to create Success Profiles that will achieve success in your organization, not any organization.

"At Korn Ferry, we take a whole-person view, looking beyond just skills to consider personality traits and motivations. This lets us better predict what leads to success, since it's not just about having the right skill set, but how engaged someone is and what drives them to achieve,"

"From there, we create Success Profiles based on our statistical analysis—pinpointing the key competencies, traits, and behaviors that set top performers apart from the rest."

says Tepper.

Success Profiles provide a basis for interviews when organizations are hiring.

You could, for example, interview five different people for a role, but the questions you ask will vary depending on each individual's strengths and areas for improvement in relation to the Success Profile. This tailored approach ensures that the interview focuses on the most relevant competencies for each candidate.

LEARN MORE ABOUT KORN FERRY SUCCESS PROFILES

ASSESSMENTS AND INTERVIEWS

It’s easy to say, “Identify and analyze your high performers,” but how do you do it effectively?

Conducting detailed assessments allows you to define the qualities that make up your high sales performers. The first step is to survey a sample of your high and low performers (without telling them which category they fall into) and then augment these surveys with in-person interviews.

“The surveys are very specific around competencies, traits, drivers, and experiences. Not just skills. Then, the interviews are to get context,” says Tepper.

Remember, you’re not labeling someone as a high (or low) performer based solely on the amount of revenue they bring in. You’re measuring them against your pre-defined success metrics.

Once you have this rich data set, you can run a statistical analysis to spot trends. Then, you can create Success Profiles to use as a benchmark for all sales roles, helping you hire and develop people with the traits of top performers.

This strategy is important if you want your sales team to be effective and engaged.

KFI research shows that people who are a strong fit to their Success Profile are 7.5x more likely to be highly engaged by their role. They are likely to work harder, collaborate more, and look after customers better.

GETTING THE FULL PICTURE

Your interviews and surveys shouldn't focus solely on technical skills. While these are important, they are just one piece of the jigsaw. To get a complete picture of what a high performer looks like, you need to look deeper and uncover their soft skills.

For example, are they:

- Good communicators?
- Active listeners?
- Resilient?
- Adaptable?
- Collaborative?

"Other things we look at is whether this person is driven to achieve. Are they optimistic? Do they seek credibility?" says Tepper.

To uncover key traits, you need to ask the right questions. Here are just a few examples:

Q

What frustrates you at your organization?

Q

What takes time but adds little value?

Q

What do you think differentiates the high performers from everyone else?

Although answers to these questions are often general, with a large enough sample, you can start to see patterns.

Korn Ferry uses comprehensive psychometric assessments to identify an individual's current strengths, gaps, personality traits, and job-related competencies.

MEASURE, MONITOR, AND ADAPT

"Salespeople of the future won't look exactly like the salespeople of today."

—Purbita Banerjee, Senior Vice President at Korn Ferry

Identifying the competencies, traits, and drivers of your high performers is not a one-and-done job. It's important to continually monitor them in comparison to their peers, as the criteria for high performance can shift as the business, market, or product evolves.

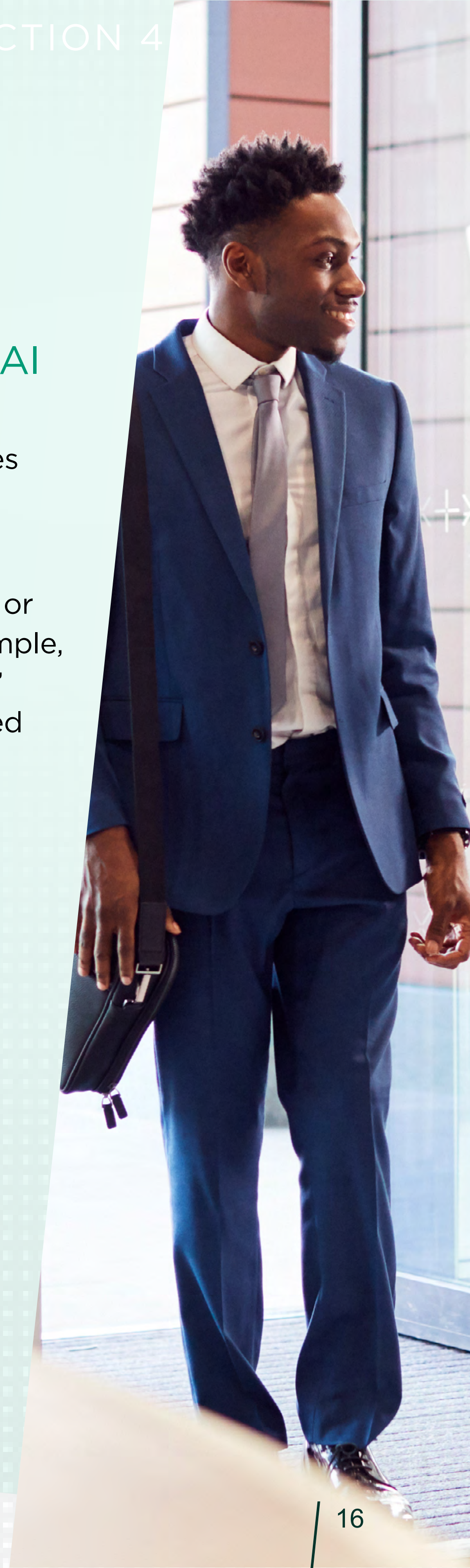
Constantly refining what 'excellent' looks like in your organization is crucial for benchmarking new hires and will make sales talent assessments easier and more successful.

MAKE THE MOST OF TECH AND AI

Technology—especially AI—is already playing a major role in how organizations monitor sales reps and define success, and its influence will only continue to grow.

A Customer Relationship Management (CRM) or Learning Management System (LMS), for example, can tell an organization a lot about top sellers' behavior, such as how collaborative or engaged they've been over a certain time frame.

And generative AI can take huge amounts of data and deduce the leading indicators of high performance. For example, it could determine that the best performers send emails of three lines or less or that top performers tend to follow up with clients within 24 hours of initial contact.



HOW ORGANIZATIONS CAN DEVELOP SALES COMPETENCIES

The key to developing high-performing competencies in your existing workforce is hyper-personalized learning journeys, both in terms of what team members are taught and how they're taught.

"Individual learning journeys are absolutely the answer. You don't need to send somebody on a three-day course which covers only 5% of what they need," says Banerjee.

Coaching should be as precise as possible and delivered in a way that best suits the individual, which may not be in a classroom but learning through showing, for example.

Real-time feedback is also incredibly powerful. It can give individuals immediate insights as to how they could change their behavior to get better sales outcomes. AI tools can make this process even easier.

HERE ARE A FEW EXAMPLES OF HOW AI SALES TOOLS CAN HELP:

- Analyzing and offering feedback on email or phone communication style
- Providing time management tips to optimize productivity
- Suggesting relevant responses to prospects based on successful past interactions
- Summarizing conversations and automatically generating follow-up tasks
- Simulating sales scenarios—allowing reps to practice pitching, handling objections, and negotiating

IDENTIFYING MANAGERS AND LEADERS

“When you promote top sales reps to manager, at least half the time it backfires.”

Purbita Banerjee,
Senior Vice President at Korn Ferry

When it comes to matching talent to managerial and leadership roles, organizations routinely promote their best individual performers. But this strategy often fails.

Just because someone excels at closing deals or retaining customers doesn’t automatically make them a good manager.

The solution is to apply the same talent assessment strategy used for sales reps when identifying potential managers, namely:

- Define your leadership success metrics
- Identify and analyze your high performers compared to their peers
- Pinpoint their differentiating factors

Then, coach team members to incorporate these factors into their daily work habits and approach.

It’s important to note that performance metrics for defining high-performing managers will be different compared to reps. With managers, you’re not as concerned about deal size or profit margin. It’s more about their impact on the team as a whole.

“It’s about how well they coach their teams to success. It’s about what’s happening on average across the team. Are the majority of people performing?” says Banerjee.

If you want to identify the right leaders for your organization, the message is clear —scientific analysis is the key to sales team success.

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Ready to discover more about how Korn Ferry can **help you match the best talent to the right roles in your organization?**

SPEAK TO ONE OF OUR EXPERTS TODAY.

GET IN TOUCH

Korn Ferry is a global organizational consulting firm. We work with our clients to design optimal organization structures, roles, and responsibilities. We help them hire the right people and advise them on how to reward and motivate their workforce while developing professionals as they navigate and advance their careers.

Business advisors.
Career makers.