

## Washington Business Journal

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Tips and Talk

# Hire people with solid sales experience to beat the numbers, don't hire for product knowledge.....

Washington Business Journal - by [Nancy McCarthy](#)

I recently heard the saying 'Never try to teach a pig to sing' on a cable business news program. I started laughing at myself, remembering how many times I have tried to do this and how often I have seen clients and others putting employees into positions in which they have little chance of excelling.

How often are we trying to force an employee to be something that they are not? They may have no natural talent at it, and probably little interest. Yet we insist on trying to force a square peg into a round hole? For example, some people think anyone can do sales. I want to see that singing pig!

I frequently see business owners trying to force employees into jobs where the employee has no natural talent to be successful in the position. I understand there are situations where employees are moved out of a job because they are not doing well, and given another position to see if they sink or swim. I am not addressing those situations.

Some believe they can train employees to build skills and magically they will become an expert even though the person has no natural talent. This creates a lot of "OK" employees, but few rainmakers who truly break through goals and quotas. It is the experts and rainmakers that move an organization forward and help set themselves and their employers up for success.

I recently read the book "Now, Discover Your Strengths" by Marcus Buckingham. The book reinforces the philosophy I live by; build your strengths so you have something solid to offer, and work with your weaker areas as best possible. Find a career where your strengths can shine. The book is very interesting, in that it offers

an online test of your own strengths. I found mine to be very accurate and supported a person who works as a rainmaker for an occupation.

Sometimes people think anybody can sell. My philosophy is actually that “everybody sells” because most employees affect the revenue or reputation of a company which results in affecting the revenue. However, not everyone can sell as a full time career job.

When I started working with a long term client, they insisted that if I spent enough time with one of their executives, he would become a rainmaker. I approached the challenge with all my heart and energy. A few sessions into the challenge, I reported to the CEO client that he had no natural tendency toward excelling in sales. We restructured the strategy allowing another person to lead the sales effort, and asked him to simply renew and grow his divisions’ revenue. By doing this, we allowed him to focus on his strengths and excel. The division and the company has since grown every year, and they have quadrupled in size since I started working with them. They are still growing this year by 20 percent in this challenging economy, where others are losing money.

What do we do when we truly like an existing employee but their strengths do not appear to fit into the specific job they are doing? I see that situation frequently, where companies put someone in sales or business development from another department.

Management considers the person to be a “nice person who gets along well with people and people like him,” So they move him or her into sales. Perhaps the employee works in operations, training or marketing, and wants to try sales. I suggest providing a ‘trial’ for the person in the coveted position to see how fast they learn and their natural instincts. Create expectations so the person knows what they must do to show success in the new job with a specific timeline. Then be tough and say no if it is not working.

One technology company I worked for had a history of moving engineers into sales without any sales background. For 30 years, the sales group waited for the phone to ring and responded when calls came in because they were not salespeople. They had no natural interest in people, no interest in other people’s goals, no warmth or ability to develop a business relationship easily.

Then they hired a new sales VP, and he hired me into the group. I was the first salesperson who was not an engineer. I applied proven sales skills to my job and achieved selling \$45 million on a \$3 million quota. Can you imagine what the company’s performance could have been over those 30 years if they hired people with actual strengths for that position?

I recently was hired to work with a group of salespeople who had “OK” performance at 93 percent to 98 percent of quota. Management’s idea was to bring average performers up a few levels. By working on their individual strengths within the sales role, they were able to make significant strides forward. This group is now leading the company on individual sales performance, with some positioned to end the year closer to 150 percent. This is an excellent example of building on strengths with the right natural talents for a job.

We should ask ourselves “am I putting the wrong person into sales jobs? Can this person really sell just because they know their product?”

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