

A Comparison of Scale Scores by Sales Candidates and Sales Employees

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It has long been assumed that candidates for sales positions take job-related assessments differently than do current employees of a firm. Candidates tend to present a more idealized version of themselves in their attempt to get a job. Employees are more likely to admit to problems. This study attempts to test this hypothesis and quantify what if any differences may exist between these two groups as they face job-related assessments. If there are differences, are they statistically significant? What measurements are more likely to be measured differently? If our hypothesis is proven true, the answer to these questions should provide a rationale for assessments creating and using different norms for candidates and employees to offset the possible inflation of scores.

The assessment is SalesKey®, a 247 item instrument designed to measure stable traits – personality characteristics, behavior patterns, vocational interests, and skill competencies – associated with job performance in sales. All scales report Cronbach's alpha scores between .7 and .9 .

A random sample of 957 assessments was chosen for this study. Of these, 692 were taken by candidates for a sales job and 265 were completed by currently employed salespeople.

Methodology

The first step was to test for the normal distribution of data to determine which statistical tests would be used. For a sample size of less than 2000, the Shapiro-Wilk test for normalcy yielded the information found in Figure 1.

Tests of Normality

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov ^a			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
Confidence	.088	66	.200 [*]	.979	66	.343
Energy	.077	66	.200 [*]	.983	66	.497
Goal	.171	66	.000	.912	66	.000
Initiative	.124	66	.013	.926	66	.001
Risk Sensitivity	.060	66	.200 [*]	.984	66	.541
Sales Identity	.142	66	.002	.905	66	.000
Standards	.121	66	.017	.976	66	.236
Coachability	.106	66	.065	.975	66	.194
Computer Skills	.269	66	.000	.803	66	.000
Creativity	.094	66	.200 [*]	.961	66	.035
Focus	.099	66	.184	.931	66	.001
Multi-Tasking	.105	66	.069	.969	66	.095
Patience with Complexity	.111	66	.042	.938	66	.003
Intentions	.255	66	.000	.720	66	.000
Analyzing	.112	66	.037	.953	66	.014
Controlling	.102	66	.082	.971	66	.120
Empathizing	.053	66	.200 [*]	.988	66	.785
Performing	.064	66	.200 [*]	.983	66	.480
Canvassing	.087	66	.200 [*]	.964	66	.053
Networking	.122	66	.016	.942	66	.004
Presentation	.137	66	.004	.918	66	.000
Referral	.208	66	.000	.873	66	.000
Telephone	.144	66	.002	.912	66	.000
Up-market	.164	66	.000	.862	66	.000

a. Lilliefors Significance Correction

*. This is a lower bound of the true significance.

Figure 1

Student's independent samples *t*-test was performed on those scales showing a normal distribution but unequal variance due to the difference in sample size and Wilcoxon Mann-Whitney U tests (converted to Z scores) were run on non-normal distributed scales.

Findings

Table 1 (following) summarizes the findings of these tests.

Scale Name	Statistic	Probability
Confidence	t=4.79	p<.001
Energy	t=5.82	p<.001
Goal	Z= -5.78	p<.001
Initiative	Z=-5.29	p<.001
Risk Sensitivity	t=.105	p=.92
Sales Identity	Z=-5.72	p<.001
Standards	t=.81	p=.40
Coachability	t=3.01	p=.003
Creativity	Z=-4.65	p<.001
Focus	Z=-5.07	p<.001
Patience with Complexity	Z=-3.54	p<.001
Analyzing	Z=-1.33	p=.19
Controlling	t=5.89	p<.001
Empathizing	t= -.77	p=.44
Performing	t=4.33	p<.001
Networking	Z= -2.33	p=.02
Presentation	Z=-3.60	p<.001
Referral	Z=-6.99	p<.001
Telephone	Z=-7.65	p<.001
Up-Market	Z=-5.31	p<.001

Table 1

Discussion

Sales candidates score higher than sales employees on all scales but one (Empathizer). Of the 20 scales examined in this study, sixteen (80%) are different at statistically significant levels (p<.05). These differences show up in all four Levels of sales development, but most markedly in Levels 1 and 4. Level 1 scales attempt to answer the question, “Will this individual make enough contacts to reach his or her personal goals?” The only Level 1 scales not affected were Risk Sensitivity and Standards. The candidate is going to inflate his or her answers about Energy, Confidence, being Goal directed, having Sales Initiative, and a positive view of a sales career. The sales employee presumably answers with a more realistic and candid view of his or her current attitudes.

Level 2, the Training and Management Index, is somewhat less affected by item inflation by candidates but the effect is still significant. People looking for a sales job tend to present themselves as more Focused than they probably really are and better team-players (Coachability) than employees who may use the assessment to make a statement about their current training and management.

Level 3 deals with the emotional needs of individuals -- the universal innate drives that foster specific sales-related behaviors. The two “introverted” scales (Analyzer and Empathizer) are not affected. Introverts, whether candidates or employees, responded to the assessment in more considered ways than did their Performing and Controlling counterparts. Extroverts appear driven to present themselves in the best possible light when initially establishing rapport, but are the quickest to modify their behaviors after first impressions have been made.

Level 4 are the scales that measure attitudes and aptitudes toward various types of clients and client contact. The biggest differences between sales candidates and sales employees are found on the Telephone and Referral scales. Of the five Level 4 scales included in this study these are the most universal to any sales job. Making group presentations, networking, and marketing to upscale clientele are not usually as critical to getting and staying hired as are using the phone and asking for referrals on a consistent basis.

Conclusions

This study confirms the hypothesis that candidates for sales jobs are significantly more prone to over-state their abilities and aptitudes than are sales employees. Most prone to this inflation are those measures that are sales specific and typically associated with the stereotypical salesperson (Energy, Confidence, Goal-driven, good on the phone, able to ask for referrals, etc.) Behaviors that impact the individual’s training and management costs appear to be the least affected, but are nevertheless still inflated by candidates.

This study concludes that sales tests given to both candidates and employees should be normed to different populations: those who are hoping to get a job and those who may already be employees of the Company. A one-size-fits all assessment will certainly portray an inflated portrait of candidates’ abilities and skills and a more pessimistic view of employees.