



Are Britain's sales skills competitive in a global context?

THE 2014 UK SALES SKILLS AUDIT

Audit conducted by

sales
assessment
.com



in conjunction with



Executive Summary

The 2014 UK Sales Skills Audit probed how well Britain's core sales skills stack up against an international benchmark covering several developed economies across the English-speaking world, including the United States, Australia and South Africa, in addition to the UK.

The audit was conducted by SalesAssessment.com in conjunction with Sales Initiative magazine as a series of online assessments conducted in five modules:

1. Customer Contact;
2. Engaging the Customer;
3. Negotiating and Closing;
4. Information and Activity Management; and
5. Business Skills.

The audit identified several areas where UK salespeople tended to lack key sales skills – notably “Communication” and “Engaging the Customer”. For instance, some 54 per cent of those surveyed were below the global benchmark for “Communication”. In contrast, only 38 per cent achieved the standard, while a further 8 per cent were deemed to be highly skilled.

Similarly, 60 per cent of participants were identified as having “skills below the level required to enable effective selling” when “Engaging the Customer”, with 36 per cent at or above the benchmark and a small cohort of 4 per cent who enjoyed “very highly developed skills, well above what would normally be expected”.

Drilling down further, the audit found that 55 per cent of salespeople were below the benchmark for “Matching customer needs to products or services”; 73% fell down on “Awareness of competitors”; 64 per cent were not up to scratch when it came to “Understanding the customer's needs”; and 55 per cent were below par in the categories “Testing and challenging assumptions” and “Keeping abreast of new products and services”.

UK Sales Skills



General Business Skills

**69%
ABOVE
AVERAGE**



Understanding customer needs

**64%
BELOW
AVERAGE**



Awareness of Competitors

**73%
BELOW
AVERAGE**



Not unexpectedly UK salespeople fared particularly badly in the “Paperwork management” element of the “Information and Activity Management” module of the audit: a mere 33 per cent scored above the benchmark. They were also distinctly average in relation to “Achieving goals, objectives and targets”, giving cause for concern over their ability to deliver against sales targets.

British skills were more competitive, however, in areas related to more general “Business Skills” (66 per cent at a level that would make them successful; 4 per cent were excellent) – something that might be expected in an advanced economy where there is significant investment in learning and development. Breaking the data down further, participants were best at “Problem solving” (74 per cent above average, 4 per cent excellent) and “Self-management and professionalism” (65 per cent above average but none at the highest level). UK salespeople also performed well in terms of “Resilience and follow-through”, with 52 per cent above average and a creditable 13 per cent showing up as excellent.

As a robust yet relatively inexpensive and quick-to-administer assessment, the Sales Skills Audit has the capability to become the hiring tool of choice for recruiters seeking to assess candidates’ core sales skills or for employers needing to identify skills gaps when planning development programmes.

At the same time, because the audit maps to relevant NVQs and is endorsed by the Institute of Sales & Marketing Management (ISMM), it offers the potential to provide recognised accreditation for members of the UK sales community in the form of a “sales skills passport”, certifying that holders have the full set of up-to-date core sales skills. This would be fully transportable across different industry sectors.

Key Strengths

GOOD

BUSINESS SKILLS
PROBLEM SOLVING
SELF MANAGEMENT & PROFESSIONALISM

AVERAGE

ACHIEVING GOALS
COMMUNICATION
INFORMATION MANAGEMENT

POOR

ENGAGING THE CUSTOMER
UNDERSTANDING CUSTOMER NEEDS
AWARENESS OF COMPETITORS
KEEPING ABREAST OF NEW PRODUCTS & SERVICES



Introduction

Down the years, talent management within the sales organisation has been considered something of a 'dark art' – salespeople have traditionally been seen as a 'law unto themselves', often perceived as a group of maverick individuals who prefer to fly by the seat of their pants. But, so long as they achieved results and reached their targets, who was to argue?

Of course, immediate problems arise when salespeople fail to hit their numbers. Furthermore, there are considerable costs involved in hiring and employing salespeople, and an obsessive desire for autonomy can lead to operating inefficiencies and missed opportunities for employers.

A longstanding problem has been that seemingly promising candidates fail to deliver once they are in post. Another has been how to allocate training and development efficiently to address genuine gaps in skills and competencies, rather than putting entire teams through costly one-size-fits-all 'sheep-dip' programmes that risk demotivating those who don't require certain elements. Underlying both these issues has been a persistent lack of objective criteria and tools for identifying which individuals have what it takes to perform successfully in a sales environment.

In recent years, a number of sales-specific assessments have emerged onto the market; however, they vary in quality and the most effective are too costly to use in routine recruitment situations.

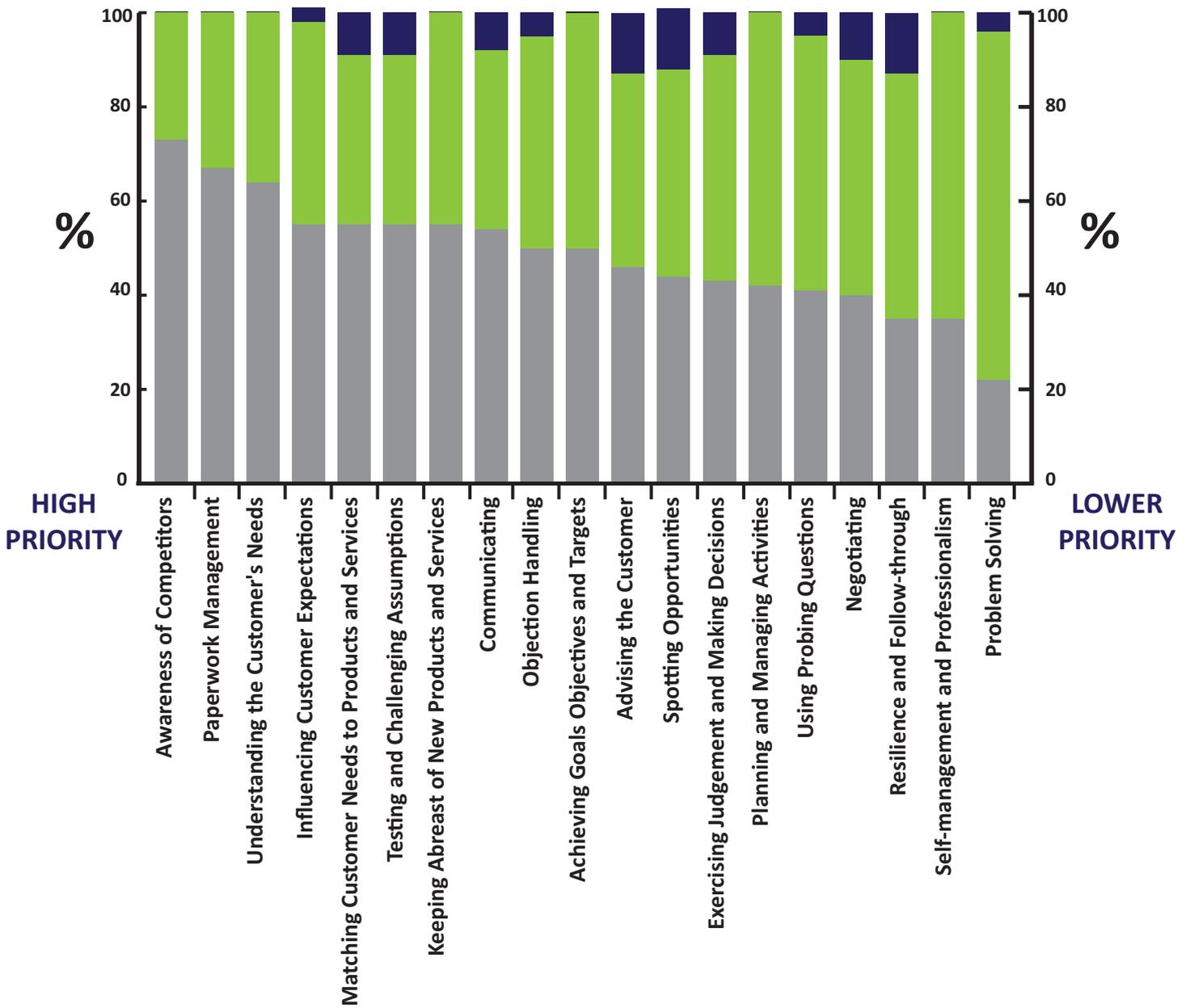
It's perhaps unsurprising then, that research supports the view of employers that Britain's sales skills are at best patchy. There are pockets of excellence but much remains to be done, as the UK Commission for Employment and Skills report UK Commission's Employer Skills Survey 2011: UK Results highlights. This research was based on a comprehensive survey involving 87,500 interviews with employers across all sectors and covering all sizes of employer. Rather worryingly for the potential performance of the UK economy, the report found sales to be the worst-performing profession with 56 per cent of employers stating that salespeople were short of basic customer-handling skills and 47 per cent reporting that they lacked job-specific skills.

The recently inaugurated annual UK Sales Skills Audit now offers a more highly targeted – and entirely objective – way to assess and track the extent of the gaps – as well as the areas of excellence – in core sales skills across Britain's sales community on an annual basis.

Key to chart

Blue represents high levels of skill;
Green represents above global average;
Grey represents below global average.

Development Priorities for UK Plc – ordered by priority



Methodology

The UK Sales Skills Audit works as a relatively short-duration, globally benchmarked, online assessment designed to test the common skills needed in any sales-related job across all the disciplines – retail, B2B, inside sales and field sales – and at any level from first job up to sales director or strategic sales specialist (where core sales skills are still required in addition to a more advanced skill set). Most importantly, it has the capability to identify any gaps in a salesperson’s skills. The skills tested are those identified by the MSSSB (Marketing and Sales Standard Setting Body) and are aligned with relevant NVQs. The audit is endorsed by the ISMM.

The audit evaluates five core skills groups:

- 1. Customer Contact** – “Skills are about generating initial interest from the customer in your application, product or service, and starting the process of creating rapport.” This includes four skill areas: “Spotting opportunities”; “Using probing questions”; “Communicating”; and “Advising the customer”.
- 2. Engaging the Customer** – “Skills required to effectively engage the customer in conversation and start the process of qualification, with the objective of gaining an understanding of the customer’s needs.” The group is made up of five skill areas: “Matching customer needs to products or services”; “Awareness of competitors”; “Understanding the customer’s needs”; “Testing and challenging assumptions”; and “Keeping abreast of new products and services”.
- 3. Negotiating and Closing** – “Skills required to establish the value to the customer of the benefits, often involving simple financial metrics, and close the deal.” Three skill areas are relevant: “Influencing customer expectations”; “Negotiating”; and “Objection handling”.
- 4. Information and Activity Management** – “Skills required to work effectively and in an organised manner, with clear plans and reports, with the purpose of facilitating the achievement of goals and targets.” This group involves three skill areas: “Paperwork management”; “Achieving goals, objectives and targets”; and “Planning and managing activities”.
- 5. Business Skills** – “Skills required to establish personal and company credibility with the customer for the purpose of realising benefits from the relationship.” This final group of skills covers four areas: “Self management and professionalism”; “Problem solving”; “Exercising judgement and making decisions”; and “Resilience and follow through”.

It is important to note that the UK Sales Skills Audit is not a full assessment of an individual’s predicted performance in a specific sales role in terms of exact job specification, seniority or experience; it focuses only on generic sales skills and does not, for instance, address behavioural competencies or critical reasoning ability. Because of this, it offers a highly effective assessment of an individual’s grasp – or lack thereof – of the core sales skills needed in any sales role and, as such, is highly transportable across industries and different sales positions.

QUOTE

“Everyone’s talking about spending, but not enough people are talking about creating wealth – it’s salespeople who are creating wealth. With a professional approach, business skills – and sales skills in particular – can be developed. The belief that ‘anyone can sell’ is rubbish; it is an art, deserving of good training, thoughtful application and strategic targeting. Those who make things look easy, work harder, prepare more and take nothing for granted.”

**LORD DIGBY JONES;
ISMM SUCCESSFUL
SELLING CONFERENCE
2013**

2014 Sales Skills Audit results in detail

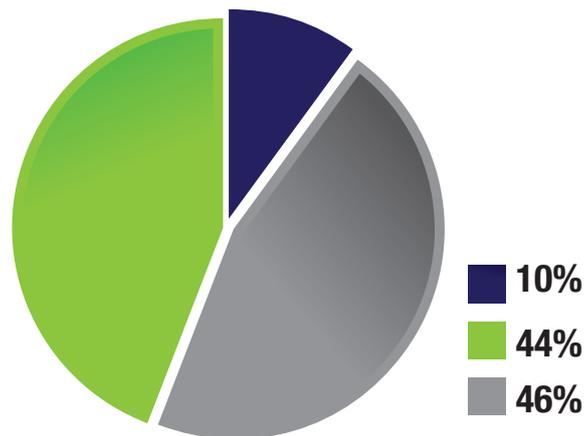
Customer Contact

Overall, “Customer Contact” skills presented a mixed picture, with some serious gaps in UK salespeople’s abilities showing up. The good news is that 10 per cent of people are very highly skilled in this area; 44 per cent are at a level that enables them to be effective in a sales role, but 46 per cent of people surveyed are lacking key skills.

Perhaps a surprising area of weakness identified by the 2014 UK Sales Skills Audit relates to “Communication” and areas around “Customer Contact”. It turns out that many sales people are surprisingly poor at communicating, despite the traditional view that sales professionals are somehow blessed with the “gift of the gab”: some 54 per cent of those surveyed were below the global benchmark for “Communication”. Only, 38 per cent achieved the standard and a further 8 per cent were deemed to be highly skilled.

In contrast with the “Communication” results are the far better figures for “Using probing questions” – 54 per cent were above average and 5 per cent were highly skilled.

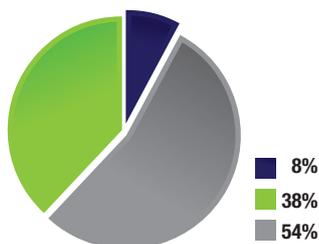
Customer Contact Summary



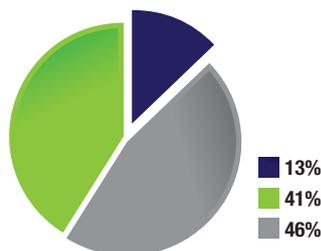
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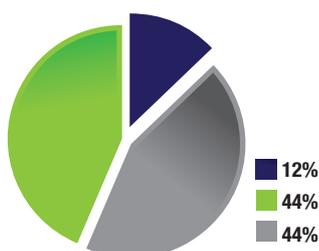
Communicating



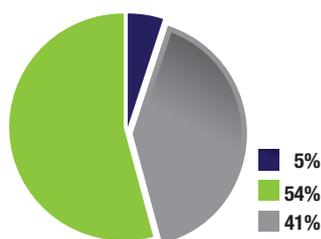
Advising Customers



Spotting Opportunities



Using Probing Questions



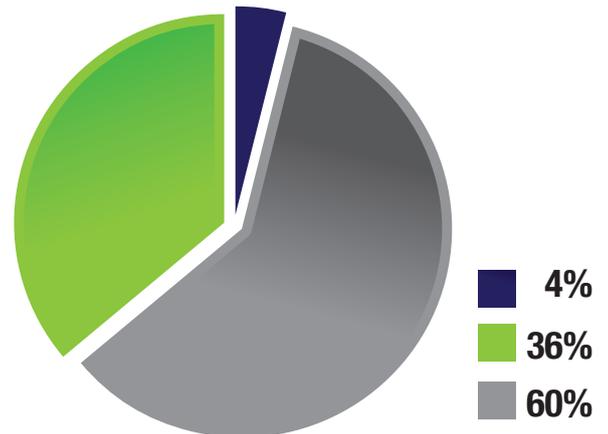
Engaging the Customer

This is perhaps the most troublesome area in terms of Britain's core sales skills. Overall, 60 per cent of salespeople who participated in the survey were flagged up as having "skills below the level required to enable effective selling" when "Engaging the Customer", with 36 per cent at or above the benchmark and a small cohort of 4 per cent who enjoyed "very highly developed skills, well above what would normally be expected".

Breaking down the figures a bit more, the audit identified that 55 per cent of salespeople were below the benchmark for "Matching customer needs to products or services"; 73% fell down on "Awareness of competitors"; 64 per cent were not up to scratch when it came to "Understanding the customer's needs"; and 55 per cent were below par in the categories "Testing and challenging assumptions" and "Keeping abreast of new products and services".

The fact that 73% of those surveyed did not have the skills to recognise the potential impact competitors could have on the likely outcome of their opportunities is a major cause for concern. Perhaps even more worrying is the 64% figure for those who did not have the skills to effectively understand their customer's needs. Furthermore, there were no highly skilled people in this area.

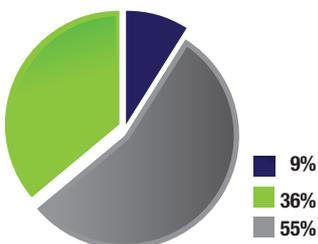
Engaging the Customer Summary



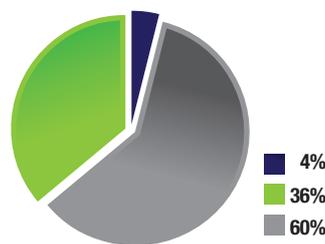
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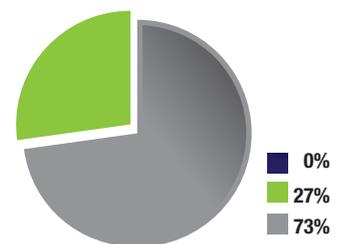
Matching Customer Needs to Products or Services



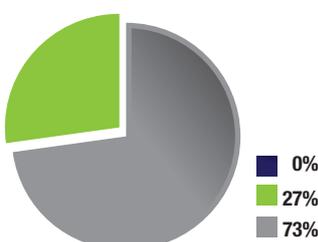
Understanding Customer Needs



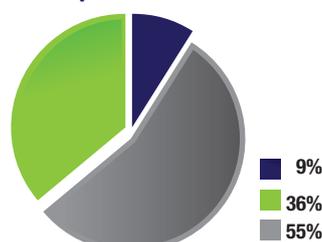
Keeping Abreast of New Products & Services



Awareness of Competitors



Testing & Challenging Assumptions

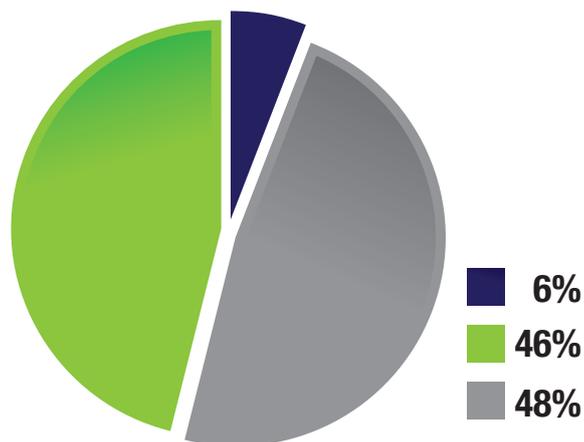




Negotiating and Closing Summary

Negotiating and Closing

Some 55% of salespeople reviewed reported themselves as below average at “Influencing Customer Expectations”. However, there was better news from the other skills elements: 50 per cent were up to scratch when it comes to “Negotiating” and 10 per cent were deemed excellent; the corresponding figures for “Objection handling” were 45 per cent and 5 per cent respectively. Overall, 48 per cent were below average for this skills group, 46 per cent were at or above the benchmark and 6 per cent were included in the excellent category.



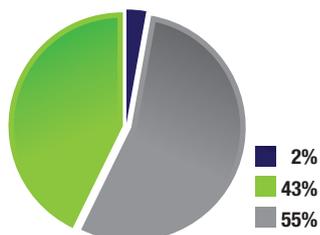
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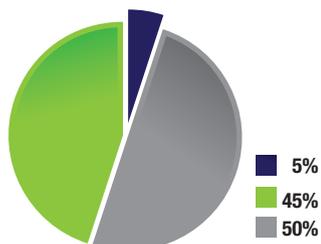
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Influencing Customer Expectations



Objection Handling



Negotiating

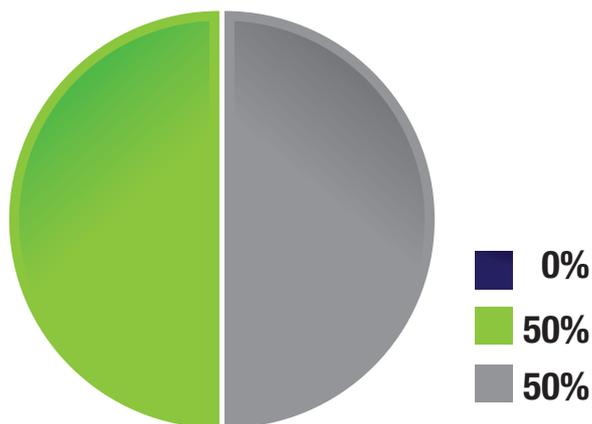




Information and Activity Management

This was another area of concern in terms of Britain's sales skills and potential to be competitive in a global context. Perhaps unsurprisingly, salespeople – who are traditionally reluctant to engage with paperwork or any kind of CRM system – fared particularly badly in the "Paperwork management" element of this part of the audit: a mere 33 per cent scored above the benchmark. That said, they were equally split above and below the benchmark for the skills group as a whole, aided by the fact that 58 per cent were above average for "Planning and managing their activities" – perhaps an indication that they have their own personal systems. However, they were evenly split – above and below average – in terms of "Achieving goals, objectives and targets".

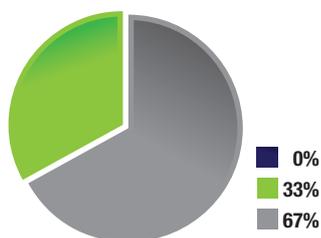
Information and Activity Management Summary



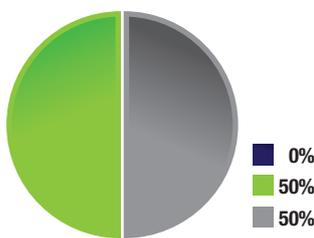
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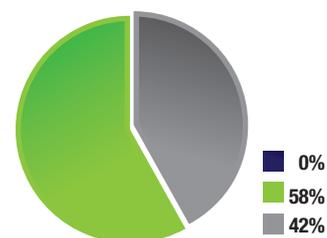
Paperwork Management



Achieving Goals; Objectives and Targets



Planning and Managing Activities



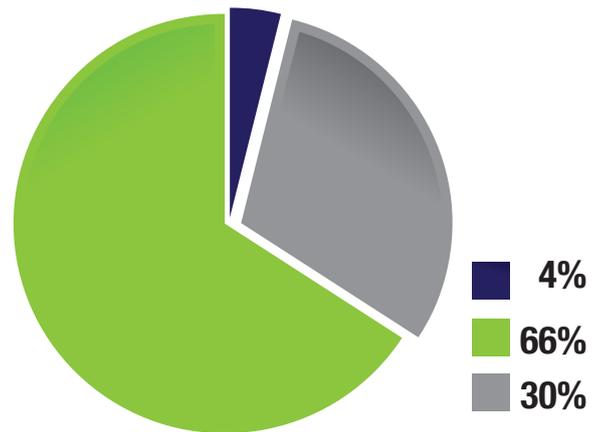


Business Skills

There was better news from this section of the audit. As you might expect from citizens of an advanced economy, participants performed well in the “Business Skills” survey, with 66 per cent of them at a level of skill that would make them successful; 4 per cent were excellent, while only 30 per cent failed to meet the benchmark.

Of the elements, participants were best at “Problem solving” (74 per cent above average, 4 per cent excellent) and “Self-management and professionalism” (65 per cent above average but none at the highest level). UK salespeople also performed well in terms of “Resilience and follow-through”, with 52 per cent above average and a creditable 13 per cent showing up as excellent. They fared less well in terms of “Exercising judgement and making decisions” with just under half (48 per cent) achieving the benchmark; nevertheless, 9 per cent were excellent in this category and only 43 per cent were below the benchmark.

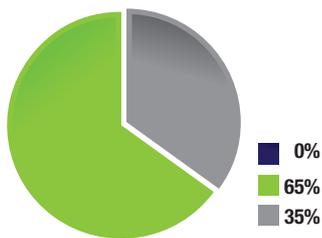
Business Skills Summary



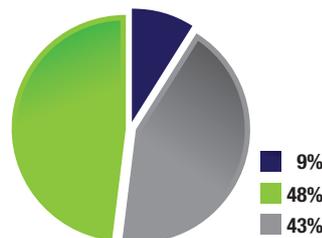
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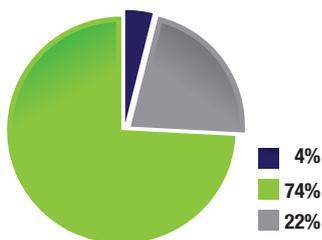
Self Management and Professionalism



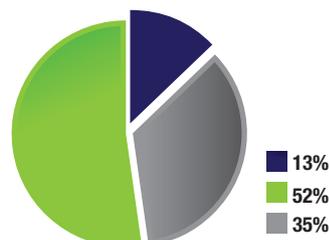
Exercising Judgement



Problem Solving



Resilience



Implications

Because the Sales Skills Audit by definition measures sales skills, it also helps to build up a background picture of the focus and extent of sales training activity in relation to those skills within the UK. For instance, one insight that can be derived from the results reflects the relative lack of training salespeople have been receiving in the critical area of 'Engaging the Customer'. This is a key area influencing the accuracy of sales forecasts, yet the survey results suggest the least amount of L&D activity is put into this area.

Similarly, the relatively poor performance in relation to 'Communication' skills may reflect a specifically British cultural and educational phenomenon compared with the United States, say, whereby UK children traditionally have not been brought up to communicate from an early age with the same facility as their peers across the Atlantic.

Another factor could reflect poor training in 'active listening' – summarising information and using language which is familiar and acceptable to an audience who may have a variety of cultural and knowledge backgrounds – or may simply be the consequence of too many salespeople preferring to remain on "transmit" rather than "receive". Nevertheless, there was a more positive picture around the associated element of "Using probing questions" because this particular skill has been taught well by sales trainers in the UK.

The recorded lack of communication skills is potentially serious because it implies that salespeople are failing to convey information and ideas in a way that ensures customers and stakeholders understand their message. However, the more encouraging picture around "Using probing questions" demonstrates that where training is of good quality it has a positive effect on the level of skills surveyed.





Applications of the audit

As a result of the Sales Skills Audit's ability to test for the presence or absence of the core skills needed to succeed across many different sales roles, it delivers considerable power and flexibility for talent managers, sales managers and individual salespeople. It offers three principal applications, two of relevance to talent managers and one of benefit to the wider population of sales professionals.

Hiring candidates with core sales skills – Because the Sales Skills Audit is both quick to complete and inexpensive to administer, it has the potential to become the industry-standard tool for recruiters looking for concrete evidence of relevant sales skills beyond that offered by candidate CVs. Furthermore, because it is applicable across industries and roles, it enables recruiters to look beyond candidates with experience in a specific industry.

Planning Learning & Development – The audit identifies weaknesses and highlights skills gaps, which can be addressed through effective, well-targeted, training programmes. As a powerful tool for talent managers, it enables L&D professionals to plan ahead and manage sales talent more effectively, helping them to address weaknesses in new hires, onboarding them more quickly and effectively, refreshing the skills of existing sales talent, and establishing an organisation-wide global benchmark for sales skills.

Skills passport – Recognised evidence that an individual has strong core sales skills simplifies the process of identifying the right talent from an employer's perspective. Consequently, such accreditation becomes an invaluable 'badge' for individual sales talent wishing to promote their own skills; it delivers the potential to boost the career of badged individuals by acting as a 'sales skills passport' certifying that holders have the full set of up-to-date core skills necessary to perform in a variety of sales roles. Moreover, because the skills assessed are applicable across industries and different sales roles – and assessed against a global benchmark – this passport should enable salespeople to transfer between geographies and industry sectors with greater fluidity.



Future steps

The Sales Skills Audit will be conducted on an annual basis by Sales Initiative magazine and SalesAssessment.com, with the aim of producing an annual 'state of the nation' report on Britain's sales skills in comparison with a global benchmark. It will offer a clear picture of where potential improvements can be made and offers sales training providers a focus for the design of future development programmes.

Future audits will also have the opportunity to cover more advanced sales skills as additional sales skills survey modules are developed.

Individuals and organisations interested in participating in the 2015 audit are invited to register their interest at www.salesassessment.com/uksalesaudit. The next survey will open in August 2014.