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Most people consider selling to be an art rather than a science: some people have it and some people don't. But this leaves a lot of uncertainty in what is often a company's most profitable department, and it makes managing a high-functioning sales force notoriously difficult. The prevailing thinking is that the amount of time salespeople spend with customers is the most important determinant of how much they are able to sell. But recent research has uncovered an even more powerful leading indicator: the size and quality of a salesperson's network *inside their own company.*

People analytics can help organizations learn more about what behaviors differentiate their most successful salespeople. At Workplace Analytics, we recently studied the sales force of a large B2B software company using six quarters of quota attainment data for a several thousand employees. We then correlated it against 18 months of Workplace Analytics-created People Analytics key performance indicators. These KPIs measure things like time spent with a customer or manager; the size and cross-functionality of an internal network; how important a given employee is within an internal network; time spent in the presence of senior leadership; and many others calculated anonymously per person.

We expected to have two phases to the study. The first would simply run the model against the entire sales organization without bothering to segment them in any way. This meant that people selling to small- and medium-sized businesses were lumped in equally with people selling through channels and large enterprise, and that Asia-Pacific was lumped into with Europe, the Middle East, and Africa, and everywhere else.

Our researchers assumed that no meaningful correlations would emerge at that level — it seemed obvious that the most effective sellers of simple low-priced items to SMBs in Asia would look quite different than North American seven-figure enterprise solution sellers. That's why phase two of the study would break

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employee populations down to these more similar groups and run the analysis again.

We didn't need the second phase.

It turns out that regardless of what you are selling, who you are selling it to, or where you happen to be in the world, success in selling is highly correlated with three things:

1. Spending enough time with customers and prospects
2. Having a large and healthy network in your own organization
3. Spending time with and getting attention from your manager and other senior people in your own organization

The first factor is trendy, and increasing time with customers is high on the priority list of most sales leaders and consultants. Unfortunately, simply increasing the amount of time your underperforming sellers spend with customers is unlikely to help much, and might actually hurt. Imagine a bad sales person who has tried to sell you something; now imagine spending twice as much time with them.

The second and third are a bit less obvious, but incredibly important.

Enterprise buyers are increasingly sophisticated and enter a sales process fairly well educated about their options. They are looking for someone that is credible, can understand their needs, and can address their questions and concerns quickly and competently. Doing this well requires a seller to be able to get the right people with the right expertise to the right place at the right time. It also requires them to know how to get the deal approved internally, have access to management when needed, and have a holistic understanding of what their entire company can offer to the buyer above and beyond the current transaction.

Take this example from the B2B company I described earlier. The top salespeople began the quarter by meeting with prospects. But as time went on, their time spent with customers declined while their internal networks grew.

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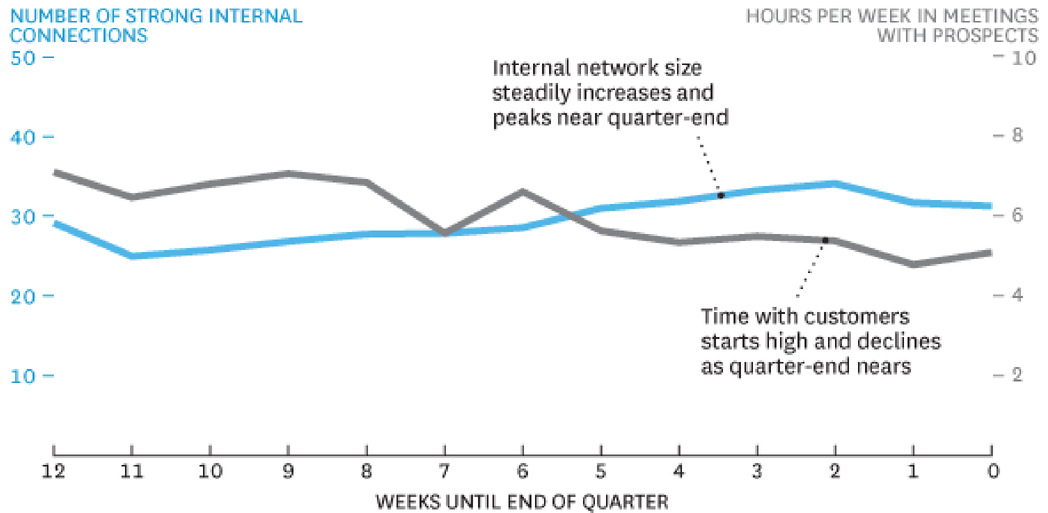

Underperformers exhibited similar trends, but the numbers were lower — they spent 25% less time with customers throughout, had 20% smaller internal networks, and spent 20% less time with senior-level managers.

To be sure, these characteristics can be hard to measure. But our study, which has been repeated multiple times with similar results, and others like it have proven these network and behavioral metrics to be highly predictive of sales effectiveness.

Even better, these metrics are actionable. Top performing reps typically don't know what they are doing differently than everyone else, and underperforming reps would prefer to be more successful, but don't know how. In addition, managers might not understand just how much their interactions (or lack thereof) with employees directly affect sales. Through people analytics metrics, companies can provide transparency up and down their entire go-to-market organization to give employees, managers, and executives a more granular set of ways to measure their activities and, more importantly, prioritize those that lead to success.

Ryan Fuller was the CEO and co-founder of VoloMetrix, a leading people analytics company acquired by Microsoft in 2015. Within Microsoft, Ryan leads a business unit focused on making organizational analytics capabilities broadly available. Previously he was a management consultant at Bain & Company.

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