

## Forward . . . Sell!

### New research shows that job candidates with a military background have outstanding sales-related traits

Want a salesperson who will thrive when your competitors are pouring it on? Need someone who will concentrate on improving sales of your core products? An individual who will focus on quantifiable short-term goals?

Seek applications from military veterans.

In a groundbreaking research project completed last fall, veterans who had expressed interest in sales careers outscored their non-veteran counterparts in measurements of traits that correspond to those requirements. The HR Chally Group, a sales-benchmarks and career-development firm located in Dayton, Ohio, conducted the study with the cooperation of RecruitMilitary, LLC, a Cincinnati company that helps veterans find civilian jobs.

The project also showed that veterans would excel in working at the heart of the sales process. By “the heart,” Chally refers to step (2) of the following process:

- (1) the pre-sale, which focuses on marketing and promotion
- (2) the actual sale, focused on qualifying and closing
- (3) the post-sale, focused on customer support

#### Proceed with caution

Corey E. Miller, PhD, who led the project, urges caution in interpreting this last result. “The research does not suggest that veterans would do poorly in marketing or customer support,” he explains. “Rather, they would be less likely to have an advantage over non-military candidates in those areas than in the areas of qualifying and closing.” Miller is a Chally Industrial Organizational Psychologist and an assistant professor of psychology at Wright State University in Dayton. Assisting him in the study were doctoral candidates Esteban Tristan and Megan K. Leasher.

Miller advises similar caution in comparing groups of veterans: “When we say, for example, that more military experience translates into stronger sales competencies, we are not telling

employers to steer away from individuals with relatively little military experience.”

#### Study goals

The main goal of the project was to find and measure differences in sales-related traits between two sets of candidates for sales positions: (1) individuals with military experience and (2) individuals lacking that background.

The study also measured:

- differences between military officers and enlisted personnel
- differences between individuals who served in the armed forces for 20 or more years and people with 5 or fewer years of service

Chally specializes in business development, focusing on world-class sales practices as well as employment and organizational assessment and development. The firm collects data from job candidates, employees, and customers of client organizations, then interprets the data to predict both individual performance and the market dynamics that the organizations must address.

“But in this case, we were our own client,” said Howard P. Stevens, chairman and CEO of Chally. “With the military experience receiving increased public attention due to the international situation, we felt we should collect some solid data on how that experience translates into civilian occupational skills—particularly specific sales skills, one of our prime areas of commercial involvement.”

#### 250 people, 288 questions

For data on non-military candidates, Miller and his colleagues used Chally’s archive of studies of more than 150,000 applicants for sales and other organizational positions. Chally has been building and refining the database for over 30 years. Military experience has not been a factor in compiling it.

**For the military data,** Miller’s team surveyed people who were registered in RecruitMilitary’s database of job candidates and

had expressed interest in a sales career. That database consists mostly of individuals who are transitioning out of the armed forces and veterans with varying amounts of business experience. Candidates join the database to access job postings and to make themselves available to employers that search the database.

To implement the survey, RecruitMilitary e-mailed messages to candidates who had expressed an interest in sales, inviting them to take a free assessment of their sales capabilities. The invitation explained that Chally would conduct the assessment electronically and then send participants free summaries of their results.

“We were delighted to participate with Chally in this project,” said Drew Myers, president of RecruitMilitary and a former captain in the Marine Corps. “We have long known that veterans possess characteristics that are well-suited to sales. Our company regularly places veterans in sales positions via our on-line operations and our contingency recruiting business. Now we can quantify the linkages between military experience and sales success.”

**The assessment** consisted of 288 multiple-choice and yes-or-no questions; Chally used the first 250 completed assessments for the study. The researchers measured the candidates’ responses on 150 scales that Chally had been using to compile sales and management profiles for its clients.

The team used a margin of 10 or more percentage points as a basis of comparison. For example, on the scale, “Focus on resolving customer problems,” non-military sales applicants scored higher than 44.17% of all applicants in the Chally archive, the individuals in the RecruitMilitary sample scored higher than 66.77% of all applicants in the Chally archive, and so the difference was 22.60%. Based on that difference, the researchers concluded that veterans are more driven than non-veterans to succeed by removing customer barriers to the sales process.

### **Military vs. non-military**

Chally also found that military candidates have four additional advantages over their non-military counterparts.

- On the scale, “Cordial communication style,” the veterans outscored the non-veterans, 65.92% to 49.51%, for a margin of 16.41%.

- On the scale, “Competitive approach,” the veterans finished ahead, 59.12% to 43.02%, for a margin of 16.10%.

- On “Accountability for core business results,” the veterans scored 68.72%, and the non-veterans scored 55.31%, for a margin of 13.41%.

- On “Focus on near-term results through incremental gains,” the scores were: veterans 64.68%, non-veterans 51.87%, margin 12.81%.

Rex Caswell of LexisNexis Group, a client of RecruitMilitary, says that his experiences in hiring, training, and supervising veterans match these findings point-by-point. Caswell, himself a Navy veteran, is Vice President of Sales—North American Legal Markets. He heads the Outbound Sales operation, in which salespeople prospect and close new business with small legal firms via telephone.

**The focus on resolving customer problems** can be traced back to military training, Caswell believes. The key is dealing immediately and decisively with the problem at hand. Caswell says, “Their attitude is, ‘There’s a problem, let’s figure out how to fix it. Let’s let go of what happened in the past. I’m here to fix the problem for us.’”

RecruitMilitary also benefits from this focus, says Myers. “We hire only military veterans as account executives and recruiters,” he explains. “We need their familiarity with military occupations, military life, and the changeover to a civilian environment. Their focus on resolving customer problems is a big plus.”

**“The finding on communication style** fits our veterans to a T,” says Caswell. “Our veterans treat their customers with the utmost courtesy; and, when they ask questions to move the sales process along, they do so without being aggressive or abrupt.”

**A competitive approach and accountability** make former military officers highly successful sales managers in Caswell’s operation. “First and foremost, they are accountable,” he points out. “They understand and manage to results without excuses and without failure. They find a way to meet their quotas despite high competitive obstacles. Additionally, they understand the value of ongoing training. Of all my managers, the ex-officers spend the most time personally training and coaching their people to increase proficiency and results.”

Among Caswell’s sales teams, the morale and spirit of those managed by former officers rank highest. “Sales managers with military experience take care of their people,” Caswell says. “They issue clear directives, state their expectations plainly, and work with their people to solve problems as sales/customer situations change.”

A combination of a cordial style and a competitive approach is the right blend at Guidant Sales Corporation, an Indianapolis-based provider of cardiovascular products such as stents, defibrillators, and pacemakers. Guidant representatives call on cardiologists, electrophysiologists, and surgeons.

“Relationship development and strong sales skills are essential for us,” says Jeff Kordenbrock, Guidant’s Manager for Recruiting and Internal Talent Management, and a former Army captain. “Our business is highly competitive, and our customers are extremely busy. We need personable individuals who can keep customers up-to-date on our highly technical products, often working within a tight time frame.”

Guidant has had excellent success with former junior military officers (JMO’s—lieutenants and captains in the Army, Air Force, and Marine Corps, ensigns and lieutenants in the Navy and Coast Guard). “Our reps are on call just like the physicians who are their customers—24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year,” says Kordenbrock. “The reps work closely with the physicians, directly consulting with the physicians about their patients. So when patient needs arise, they have to be there—and they are. They’re used to that measure of accountability, and the stress that goes along with it, because of their military background.”

### Officers vs. enlisted

In the comparisons between officers and enlisted personnel, the significant scores were:

- *Decision-making efficiency:*  
Officers 51.39%, Enlisted 39.62%, Margin 11.77%
- *Promotes growth through innovation:*  
Officers 55.16%, Enlisted 43.82%, Margin 11.34%
- *Independent and responsible:*  
Officers 65.61%, Enlisted 55.35%, Margin 10.26%
- *Need for close relationships/demonstrates loyalty and commitment:*  
Officers 60.77%, Enlisted 50.61%, Margin 10.16%
- *Team orientation:*  
Officers 57.96%, Enlisted 47.32%, Margin 10.64%
- *Self-assurance:*  
Enlisted 56.36%, Officers 44.41%, Margin 11.95%

**Decision-making.** The Chally team concluded that officers are comfortable making decisions when not all options can be evaluated thoroughly or when information must be organized quickly and intuitively. By contrast,

enlisted personnel tend to be comfortable taking the time they need to investigate all potential options thoroughly before deciding.

“This research tells me that an officer would tend to be more suitable for a position that requires quick decisions without complete information,” Miller commented. “An enlisted person might fit a position working with sales prospects on which a great deal of information is readily available.”

**Innovation.** Kordenbrock values the ability of JMO’s to work in an innovative environment. “We are continually creating new products,” he explains. “At any given time, nearly two-thirds of our revenue comes from products less than 12 months old. The JMO’s have a desire to learn the products—and the business.”

**Working relationships.** Miller and his associates found that officers tend to initiate friendships in the work environment. Enlisted personnel tend to be more formal, and they prefer somewhat distant working relationships. Thus, officers tend to be a better fit for positions that require much customer contact—or a “high-touch” type of sales work.

**Team play** at Guidant is especially important in geographic areas where there are high concentrations of medical specialists providing cardiovascular treatment. “We have many Guidant representatives in these areas,” says Kordenbrock, “and they all need to work closely together. They need to cover for each other when one of them is completely occupied but another customer needs to see a rep.”

**Standards of success.** The Chally study indicates that officers tend to measure their success in terms of the goals of their employers. Among enlisted personnel, however, there is a tendency to use their own goals. These goals may tend to be more demanding than those of the employers.

Setting high goals is praiseworthy, but Miller offers a word of caution: An individual who works against a high, internally imposed standard may not focus his or her effort optimally to meet multiple goals of the employer. “Yet, this may be less of a selection issue than a management issue,” he says, “because all veterans have high performance standards. A good manager will take the time to help develop individual performance goals to maximize effectiveness.”

At LexisNexis, Caswell reports excellent performance among former enlisted personnel. “My three sales reps who are ex-enlisted military have achieved over 100% performance each year

they have been on the job,” he says. “They exhibited a ‘can-do’ attitude from their first day on the job. Moreover, their mere presence on a sales team has greatly contributed to the team’s motivation. They are the informal leaders.”

### **Experienced vs. inexperienced**

The phase of the investigation that focused on military experience turned up some highly specific results: For example, individuals with more than 20 years of military experience would tend to use trial closes early in a sales situation to assess customer readiness to buy. People with 5 or fewer years of military experience, by contrast, would prefer to wait longer before asking the customer to buy—to avoid coming across as too pushy. This comparison suggests that individuals with more military experience may fit better into positions in which the sales cycle is fairly short, and in which buyer readiness can be determined early in the sales call.

The more experienced group is also comfortable taking the time to prepare an organized, well-thought-through presentation, while the relatively inexperienced group would prefer to share information more spontaneously.

In addition, the study showed that individuals in the 20-plus group are comfortable cutting through administrative red tape to obtain results. The less experienced are comfortable achieving results by working within the boundaries of the system. “We’re not suggesting that the more experienced individuals would break any rules,” Miller explains. “Instead, they would tend to get on the phone and ask the manager for some slack on a small issue when they are dealing with a very large customer.”

Military personnel are willing to help their buddies at work, but the two groups have different preferences. The more experienced personnel prefer to share their expertise with colleagues who have already mastered the basics and seek advanced learning. The relatively inexperienced people are comfortable coaching novices by addressing basic issues.

**The significant scores** for this phase of the study were:

- *Ability to close in product sales:*  
20 or more 54.14%, 5 or fewer 42.40%, Marg. 11.74%
- *Making formal sales presentations:*  
20 or more 52.26%, 5 or fewer 39.70%, Marg. 12.56%
- *Dedicated to achieving results:*  
20 or more 64.44%, 5 or fewer 52.20%, Marg. 12.24%
- *Positive attitude/  
effectively manages frustration:*  
20 or more 54.33%, 5 or fewer 42.64%, Marg. 11.69%
- *Qualifying prospects in a concept sale:*  
20 or more 54.49%, 5 or fewer 39.08%, Marg. 15.41%
- *Focused on job effectiveness and efficiency:*  
20 or more 60.25%, 5 or fewer 44.76%, Marg. 15.49%
- *Takes positive approach to customer concerns:*  
20 or more 74.71%, 5 or fewer 63.58%, Marg. 11.13%
- *Willingness to serve all types of customers:*  
5 or fewer 53.82%, 20 or more 40.11%, Marg. 13.71%
- *Focused on quantitative results:*  
5 or fewer 65.70%, 20 or more 55.18%, Marg. 10.52%

Chally will continue the military study. “We like to make comparisons,” explains Chally CEO Stevens. “With more participants, we will be able to make more specific comparisons and thereby bring more value to the marketplace. Further down the line, we will use this database to conduct research with veterans on competencies related to entrepreneurial ventures and management.”

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