

Military Officer Career Preparation: Sales

A career in sales can be a challenging but very rewarding field for former military leaders. A successful salesperson should be driven, able to work autonomously, an achiever, and somebody with outstanding communication and presentation skills. You should be goal-oriented. Companies want driven individuals to be the “face” of their organization.

A sales career can be very rewarding financially. Typically, a top performing individual in sales can make more than his or her counterpart in the Operations or Management fields. Sales is a pay-for- performance field. The better you perform, the more you earn.

Sales is a very autonomous career. You may work for a company as part of a sales team, but getting the job done daily is strictly up to you. Research, client calls, scheduling, presentations, follow-up, and closing a deal are ultimately driven by you alone. An individual’s success in sales is primarily defined by his or her personality, drive, ability to influence people, and time management skills.

Why Sales?

Sales is not a career field most military leaders immediately consider as an option during their transition from the military to civilian life. As military leaders, we tend to gravitate naturally towards operations, management and project management - because that is what we are comfortable with. But, those things that made you a great military leader are exactly what make a good sales representative: your intelligence, drive, your goal-oriented and competitive nature, great communication skills, strong interpersonal skills, a desire to be the best, and a desire to be challenged. Why not sales? We strongly recommend that you at least explore the option. Here are the facts:

Compensation

You are almost certain to make more money in sales than in most management or operations positions. Companies need to sell products or services to survive, and reward successful sales people extremely well. The compensation is designed to reward and retain performers. The better you do, the more you earn. Professional level sales roles are paid a base salary + commission and usually include benefits like car and cell allowances and an expense account.

Route into Executive Leadership

85% of chief executives and senior managers either started their career or have spent some time in their career in sales and felt that their roles in sales were critical to their professional development and career progression. It gives you an appreciation of what happens at the ‘tip of the spear’—at the customer interface. As a military officer, you have already developed leadership skills and have solid leadership experiences. After performing well in a sales role, former military officers are routinely selected for promotion into leadership positions faster than their peers. Not all great sales people are good leaders; this can be a great advantage to you starting a new career.

Personal Control

In general, you are in control of your schedule. You make your own appointments, and run your own day the way you think is best. As long as you are producing positive results and meeting or exceeding your established goals, you have the freedom to set your own schedule.

Job Security

Companies know that successful sales people are not expendable. If you were to lose your job, or choose to leave it, it is relatively easy to get a new job if you can demonstrate a 'track record' of success in sales. A successful sales person should always be able to get a job and make a living. Sales is also a great way to build your reputation inside your company. The CEO will know who the top sales representatives are within their organization.

Helping Others

Sales is about assisting others in achieving their goals and solving their problems by introducing your company's products and services. It is not about forcing others to buy goods and services that they do not want. Sales is about working diligently to discover areas where your company's products and services will add value, having a clear understanding of the needs and desires of your customer, and then working to fill these needs. When done properly, problem solving in this way will earn their respect, gratitude and their business.

Typical Positions

Listed below are some of the most common positions available to transitioning military officers in the Sales field:

Industrial/Technical Sales

Industrial or Technical Sales is a specialized business-to-business sale of generally high cost technical products (machinery, specialized equipment, etc.). Candidates should possess a strong sales profile and typically have some technical experience. The technical experience required can vary greatly from some basic technical aptitude to an engineering degree and hands on experience. Compensation generally consists of a base salary with commission or a bonus plan.

Pharmaceutical/Medical Sales

Pharmaceutical and Medical Sales are client focused sales careers with the primary end user being doctors and medical professionals. Candidates must possess a strong sales profile and outstanding communication and presentation skills. A strong technical or medical background is usually preferred. Both fields require significant preparation and research.

Outside Sales Rep/Account Manager

Most sales positions not mentioned above are generally classified as an outside sales representative. These positions are available across a broad swath of industries and while the products you represent vary widely, the position requirements do not - represent your company and products to clients in a professional manner through direct contact with potential clients. Strong communication skills and customer service skills are a must.

Career Progression

A position in sales can also open a lot of doors for you in the future within an organization. An individual with a successful sales background and strong leadership experience from the military can successfully move into a wide range of roles in other areas of the company such as training, brand management, marketing or operations. Some JMOs that enter a sales career when leaving the military choose to spend their entire career selling or in a sales manager role due to the great work/life balance that can come with a sales career, as well as the fairly unlimited earning potential.

Challenges

There is always a place for a sharp and enthusiastic sales person, and given the correct training and support, most bright people who are willing to work hard and learn will succeed in sales and make a better than average living. However, as in all things, every silver lining has a cloud or two.

Hard Work

A successful career in sales requires hard work and a strong overall work ethic. If it were easy, more people would be doing it. It is commonly said that for every one person who says 'Yes!', there are nine who say 'No!'. If you need to find five people a day to say 'Yes', you will have to talk to fifty people a day. If you aren't extremely motivated and don't have a great work ethic, a career in sales is likely not for you.

Results Matter

Sales is a profession where you are judged almost exclusively by your results. Being a 'nice guy' does not cut it, on its own. You will be expected to achieve certain levels of performance, and if you do not do this, you will be counseled, and may even lose your job. You must be goal oriented, organized and self-motivated. If that doesn't describe you, you should not consider a career in sales.

Disappointment

As mentioned above, a lot of people will say 'No!' and will not be interested in the products or services that you are offering them. If you are the sort of person who will take these disappointments to heart, then do not consider a career in sales. You must be able to handle rejection and disappointment.

On Call

In many cases, as the Sales Person, you will be the smiling face of the company you represent. In fact, apart from the driver who delivers the products you have sold, you may be the only person from your company that your customer knows in person. So, when things go wrong, as they sometimes do, it will be you that the customer calls, demanding satisfaction, even if it is after hours.

But remember, no matter what job you hold in business, you spend a lot of your time selling: selling ideas to your bosses, your colleagues, your juniors, your suppliers and your customers. Spending time in sales prepares you to communicate effectively, and to 'win friends and influence people' (Dale Carnegie).

Getting Started on Your Career Search

Getting your career search started can be an extremely stressful time in your life. The Orion Talent Team is here to help and we have built this document to serve as a guide. Now that you have an overview of our services and the types of positions that we recruit for, we will dive into developing your resume and interview skills.

Sales Interview Preparation

In general, sales is a critical component of any corporation. Without an aggressive, self-motivated, professional sales force promoting a product, there would be no reason to have a manufacturing facility or logistics infrastructure. As a sales representative for a given company, you begin the actual business cycle between customer and vendor. While a sales career is significantly different than a management career, you will find both sales and management interviewers are looking for the best talent for their companies. However, a career in sales typically involves working in a more dynamic and less structured environment than a career in management. Therefore, candidates interested in sales must be able to deal with change and think well on their feet.

Your goal in sales is to gain access to potential clients and artfully influence them to commit to buying your products. Accomplishing that goal is the key to your professional success as a sales person and how you will ultimately be evaluated. Sales is a performance oriented career where your success is measured and evaluated as it relates to the corporate bottom line. Nowhere in business will you find more readily identifiable goals than in sales. Every action and effort in sales must have a purpose, and that purpose is measured in dollars.

Sales is a very autonomous career. You may work for a company as part of a sales team, but getting the job done on a daily basis is strictly up to you. Research, client calls, scheduling, presentations, follow-up, and closing a deal are ultimately driven by you alone. An individual's success in sales is primarily defined by his or her personality, drive, ability to influence people, and time management skills.

As you move through the interview process for sales, remember that the companies are looking for the next generation of professionals to grow their business. They need superior talent and are willing to search long and hard to find the right "fit". During an interview, you must convince the interviewer that you have a record of performance and success, outstanding drive and motivation, the ability to work autonomously, that you are goal focused, are a problem solver, are intelligent and creative, possess strong presentation skills, and are a very competitive individual. If you can prove that you possess these attributes, you will be successful.

How to Prepare

Before you enter a sales interview, you must do four things:

- (1) Research yourself
- (2) Research the company
- (3) Develop a plan for your interview

Research Yourself

Self-analysis is a critical component of sales interview preparation; your resume and military evaluation reports are good resources for this portion of your preparation. You must know your resume and be able to talk about your entire career from college to present. It is critical that you have specific examples that add depth to your answers. Ensure you are prepared to talk about the following topics (all are key attributes companies are looking for in a successful salesperson) and have examples that support each:

- Selling and influencing a situation (This is the key question because you may not have previous sales experience. You need to have examples of times you did “sell”)
- Leadership
- Performance oriented mindset
- Demonstrated, quantifiable successes
- Drive and motivation
- Autonomous decision-making
- Goal focused problem solving
- Intelligence and the ability to learn
- Creativity and innovation
- Rapport building skills and the desire to work with people
- Aggressiveness and competitiveness
- The desire to win
- Integrity and ethics
- Persistence and dedication
- Time management

Self-analysis exercise

An easy way to perform a self-analysis is to start with your resume and a sheet like the one in Section 4. Divide it into the following four sections: (1) Accomplishments and Strengths, (2) Failures and Weaknesses, (3) Selling Change, and (4) Hobbies and Drivers.

- In section one, look at each job on your resume, and list as many successful accomplishments as you can for each position. For each accomplishment, list the personal attributes (strengths) that made you successful. A single word or short sentence is sufficient. This will help you identify all of your accomplishments and strengths.
- In section two, look at your resume and identify where you have failed. It is probably not listed there in black and white, but we all have failed somewhere. A failure does not have to be catastrophic. It just needs to be something where you didn't achieve a 100% success. It must, however, be significant and something that you grew from professionally. List the failure and the personal attribute or shortcoming (weakness) that was the root cause. Also, identify the professional lesson you learned as a result of that failure.

- In section three, look at your resume and identify any positions where you had to implement change and present (sell) your idea. Next to that, list any objections that were raised during your presentation and how you overcame those objections. Identifying specific examples where you presented something and then overcame objections/resistance is critical to success in a sales interview.
- In section four, list what you like to do in your spare time. What are your hobbies? Then list things you want to do in the future (trips, investments, family goals, etc.) and why you want to do them. This list will help you identify what you enjoy doing, the drivers in your career search, and personal goals.

Research the Company

Researching a company prior to your interview is critical. Most of the information you need for interview preparation can be found on the corporate website. Professional journals, Google, Fortune Magazine, and the Wall Street Journal can also be excellent resources. At a minimum, companies expect you to have visited the website and know some basic information about the company. When possible, meet with a local sales representative and ask them questions about the position and industry that can help you in an interview, or meet with businesses that buy the company's products to gain their insight. When researching a company prior to your interview, make sure you are familiar with the following information:

- Corporate Structure (headquarters location, size, divisions, international or domestic, public or private)
- Product lines and services
- Products under research & development
- Top competitors
- Trends pertinent to the company and industry

Develop a Plan

Once you have researched a company and done some self-analysis, you must develop a plan for your interview. Using your company research, identify three key attributes that you must convey to an interviewer to land the job. Think of these attributes as the theme for your interview. Using your personal research, match your strengths with those key attributes and identify specific examples to support your answers. Do not go into a sales interview without a good plan.

The Sales Interview

Interviewing for sales is typically a multi-step process involving anywhere between two to six interviews. Some companies require a sales candidate to conduct a field ride as part of the interview process. A field ride is an interview that allows you to shadow a sales representative during a typical day.

Always arrive early to the interview location because being late to an interview simply says you will be late to sales calls. The setting is usually professional, but comfortable. The interviewer is interested in setting a scene where he can get to know you. This may take place in a formal setting such as on-site at the company or in an informal setting such as an airport

business center or hotel lobby. Do not let the setting influence you. Remember, sales is a social as well as a professional career. Flexibility and adaptability are as important to sales as the close.

Relax prior to the interview and be prepared to answer the questions. Have a plan. Look sharp and make a good impression; sales is about your presentation skills and your appearance is a key component of that skill set. The tone of the interview is often conversational with the most successful candidates being the individuals who can professionally and smoothly engage the interviewer in a dialogue about themselves and the company. Building rapport is key. Keep in mind that you are being evaluated the entire time, from the time you knock at the door until you exit.

Sample Sales Questions

Success in professional sales interviews hinges on your ability to communicate effectively using specific examples. Questions typically focus on three areas: your personal attributes, your professional experience, and your knowledge of the company and sales. The list of questions below is by no means comprehensive, but should be a good starting point for you as you prepare for a sales interview. Practice these questions until you are comfortable verbalizing them. If you are asked something you weren't prepared for, be flexible and think on your feet!

Why are you interested in sales?

Focus on your competitive nature and intrinsic motivation under challenging conditions. Make clear that you want to contribute to the success of the business by impacting the bottom line. Express how you thrive in an environment where you can be directly rewarded for your performance.

What have you done to prepare for a sales position?

You want to express how you have taken the initiative to lay the groundwork for a sales career. Mention any of the sales books you have read, discuss what you learned on a ride-along (field ride), and explain what type of product research you have conducted. Companies want to see that you have taken the initiative to prepare for a new career and have a true interest in their company.

Describe a time you sold an idea to another individual.

Be prepared to make a connection between your military experience and a possible sales situation. Ideally, select an answer where you had to sell either your supervisor or your peers on a plan or course of action. Clearly articulate the steps you took to present the idea, follow up with the result, and how your idea was implemented.

How competitive are you?

Start out by stating you are very competitive and transition into your examples. Have several concrete examples to support your statement and use numbers and facts to compare yourself with others to express your competitive nature. Convey that you have a history of setting high goals for yourself and how you attain them with purpose.

When was the last time you faced resistance and what did you do to overcome it?

Ensure that you have a recent example (within the past 2 years) that demonstrates how you were able to overcome

adversity. Make sure you show how you were able to persevere and accomplish your goal. Lay out the situation, walk through the task you were trying to accomplish, express the specific actions you took to overcome the resistance, and the final result.

Sell me this Pen.

This question can be asked with any product, but the pen is the most common. The key is to show the interviewer that you understand the basics of sales. Do not begin describing the pen's features and qualities. Ask the interviewer questions about what he or she is looking for in a pen. What type, size, quantity? Qualify the interviewer's needs, and then present the features of your pen that fit the "client's" need. Remember to close them and ask them for the sale!

Closing is Imperative.

In a sales interview, you must be prepared to "close" the interview. Anyone in sales knows that they have to ask for the order or try to gain some commitment from their client in order to move the process forward. You could have a great interview, but if you do not try to close it, the sales manager is going to notice and begin to question whether you will be able to close once you are hired. You can lead into your close naturally by asking questions. Ask or confirm what the next step is in the hiring process. You can also ask if the manager sees you as a good fit for the role or if there is anything about your background they have any questions about. If they think you are a good fit, then you can confirm your interest in the opportunity and ask if you can schedule the next interview now. If they have any objections, you still have a chance to overcome them.

Additional Sales Questions

Personal Attributes

- Describe a situation in life where your request / demand was rejected. How did it feel? What did you do?
- Describe an experience in which you felt you gained something because you persisted long enough and saw it through to success.
- To what or whom do you compare yourself?
- What is the one thing that really motivates you?
- I am... (Fill in the blank with traits)
- How do you feel when you lose?
- What are your three greatest weaknesses?
- What are your three greatest strengths?
- What has been your greatest disappointment?
- Describe a time that you have...
 - Demonstrated creativity
 - Took initiative
 - Worked without a lot of direction
 - Sold an idea to another individual (discuss how you convinced that other individual)
 - Set a goal for yourself and the steps you took to achieve it

- In 60 seconds list as many descriptors of yourself as possible.
- What do you do in your spare time?
- Define stress. How do you relieve stress?
- Define pressure. How do you relieve pressure? Is pressure different from stress?
- How do you impact your family, your friends, your associates?
- Do you prefer to work alone or with others? Why? (Measures Ego & Drive)
- Would you prefer to follow the rules or make the rules? (Measures Ego & Drive)
- What has been the toughest decision you ever had to make?
- Have you ever been aggressive to the point where you pushed someone too far?

Professional Experience

- What is the most difficult aspect of your current position?
- Why have you been successful in the past?
- Under what conditions do you work best?
- What do you consider your most significant achievement?
- What is the most stressful situation you have encountered in your current position? How did you handle it?
- How are you measured where you work? How do you work with your peers?
- Explain how your boss would describe you.
- What are the two toughest decisions you have had to make? Which was the best decision? Which was the worst?
- What are some of the additional responsibilities you have taken on recently that are not in your job description?
- What is the most striking fact about your present company?
- Do you see yourself in your current job 6 months from now?
- What has been the biggest disappointment in your professional career(s) to date?
- What was the most important thing you learned from your last job?

Sales Knowledge

- Why Sales?
- Why should I hire you over an individual with sales experience?
- Do you like to control the conversation in selling?
- When was the last time you faced resistance and what did you do?
- What have you done to prepare yourself for pharmaceutical / medical equipment selling?
- What are the top two attributes you bring to the company?
- If your sales were published to the sales force, would you like them published: Weekly, Monthly, Quarterly, Annually?
- What are your goals for the month of _____?
- When do you decide what you will do each day? How do you do it? How do you track it? Show me tomorrow.
- Tell me the last self-improvement book you read or tape you listened to?
- Tell me the last Sales book you read or tape you listened to?
- Tell me about my company and pharmaceutical Sales. (You must cover: Company, Product Line, Typical Sales Day, R&D efforts)

- How do you continue to improve your skill level? In what continuing education or personal activities do you participate?
- How do you go about understanding and learning technical information quickly? What methods do you use?
- How long did it take you to become familiar with the technical information needed to sell your current product or services? What methods did you use? How might you improve your learning?
- What methods do you use to keep informed of what is going on in your area of responsibility? What are their benefits? Why do these methods work for you?
- What methods of learning (reading, audiovisual, computer/CBT, classroom, etc.) do you find most productive for you? What methods do you least prefer? How do you adapt to different learning situations?
- What ongoing systems or habits have you established to get information on a regular basis? Describe some results of these systems or habits.
- What sources of information do you use to keep up with what is going on in the organization? How do you use this information?

Reading

For a sales interview, it is particularly important that you read as much as possible prior to interviewing. Most transitioning officers have no prior sales experience, so you must make up for your lack of experience with knowledge of the industry. Interviewers can tell a well-prepared candidate from a poorly prepared one. A well-prepared candidate can demonstrate good overall understanding of the industry. Select two or more of the books on our [comprehensive reading list](#) as a good starting point for your career in sales.

For more information on Sales, [listen to our podcast](#) and view our pre-recorded [Sales Prep Webinar](#) online.