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A new approach to the selection of sales staff

Hugh G. Clarke

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Problems with selection procedures for sales staff are discussed. It is difficult to assess the variety of characteristics required for success in sales in an interview, but most interviewers undervalue information that can be gained from direct observation. The author proposes the use of 'action profiling', to assess personality based on body movement. Careful observation of postural movement (big body movements) and gestural movements (smaller limb movements) can provide information on motivational characteristics (assertion) and task orientation (perspective) of individuals. A brief overview is given of research on the relationship between body movement and personality, and the author gives his adaptation of these theories to interpreting behavioural-action tendencies in sales staff. It is proposed that action profiling techniques, although still in an early stage of development, could make a valuable contribution, in conjunction with existing techniques, to improved selection of 'the right person' for the sales job.

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Probleme wat met bestaande keuringspraktyke vir verkoops personeel ondervind word, word bespreek. Dit is moeilik om die verskeidenheid van persoonlikheids eienskappe wat nodig is om sukses met verkope te behaal, in 'n onderhoud te evalueer, maar die meeste onderhoudvoerders onderskat die waarde van inligting wat deur direkte waarneming verkry kan word. Die outeur stel die gebruik van 'aksie-profiel' voor om persoonlikheid op grond van liggaamsbewegings te beoordeel. Versigtige waarneming van houdingsbeweging (groot liggaamsbewegings) en gebaarsbeweging (kleiner ledemaatsbewegings) kan inligting oor motiveringseienskappe en taakoriëntering van individue verskaf. 'n Kort oorsig word gegee van navorsing oor die verwantskap tussen liggaamsbewegings en persoonlikheid en die outeur gee sy aanpassing van hierdie teorieë vir die interpretasie van gedrags-aksie neigings in verkoops personeel. Dit word voorgestel dat aksie-profiel tegnieke, alhoewel nog in 'n vroeë ontwikkelings stadium, 'n waardevolle bydrae saam met bestaande tegnieke tot verbeterde keuring van 'die regte persoon' vir die verkoopstaak kan maak.

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Introduction

There is little doubt that selection procedures for sales staff in many South African companies are inadequate. Often, the screening process is haphazard; interviewers do not properly assess whether the applicant has the necessary ability and skills for the job; there is frequent employee misplacement; and staff turnover is high. Small wonder that sales productivity is low in so many industries.

The question is — why is this so? Why cannot companies employ applicants who have the right ability, experience and personality for the job?

The answer lies perhaps not so much with the inadequacies of interviewers but with the actual screening techniques. Theoretically, selecting the right person for the job is a straightforward task. You analyse the job requirements, set performance parameters, and select individuals whose characteristics match job demands . . . but it is not that simple! For one thing; what *are* the specific characteristics that are required by the job? For a second; how do you assess that your applicant *actually has* these characteristics, and will display them in the job situation?

Difficulties of employee assessment

The major problem of employee screening and selection is that it is not completely scientific. There is no 'press button' magical way of picking the right employee simply because there are hundreds of intervening variables that can determine an individual's sales performance. To list just a few: personality, selling style, company policy, buyer motivation, individual incentives, communication channels, negotiating ability, business climate, managerial support, decision-making procedures, and many, many more.

Fichte, the German philosopher said: 'The type of philosophy a man adopts depends upon the type of man he is'. Similarly, the type of retail outlet, the type of article to be sold, the type of buying risk, etc., may determine the type of salesman required by that business situation. Each selling situation has its unique requirements and the encyclopaedia salesman, car salesman and cosmetic saleswoman may have little in common.

So — how does a company select the successful salesman or saleswoman? What characteristics does the recruiter look for?

Characteristics of the Successful Salesman

If we had to list the requirements for an 'ideal' salesman we might come up with something like this: alert, observant, good use of voice and speech, cheerful, helpful, well-groomed, considerate, cooperative, courteous, honest, enthusiastic, self-controlled, responsible, interest in others, confident, tactful, dependable, loyal, liking for people, imaginative, good memory, industrious.

Clearly, not all these characteristics can be assessed in the job interview. It is impossible to evaluate 'memory', 'dependability', 'tactfulness', 'responsibility', etc. by *talking* to someone. And the interviewer should not be misled into thinking that job application forms provide all the answers. They do not.

However, the interview can give the interviewer useful insights into the applicant's suitability, for example alertness, grooming, cheerfulness, enthusiasm, posture, industry, and so on — these insights being gained directly from observation of the applicant.

What is not appreciated by most interviewers is the *amount of information to be gained about the applicant from direct observation*. Indeed, direct observation can tell you whether you are employing a thrustful, aggressive, dynamic salesman, or not. It enables you to choose salespersons who develop forward momentum and who will be active on the job. It enables you to avoid the 'pie-in-the-sky' armchair salesman who works out brilliant strategies for getting the business, but never gets the business.

These are substantial claims to make for direct observation - so let us examine their validity. To do so, we need to discuss 'action profiling' techniques.

What is 'action profiling'?

'Action profiling' is a relatively new technique which assesses personality based on body movement. It recognizes that man is a psycho-biological process: that *how* he behaves reflects *what* he is.^a

Unfortunately, it is outside the scope of this paper to give a detailed analysis of how body movement expresses character. Suffice it to say that big body movements (postural movement) is reflective of character and internal motivation, while smaller limb movements (gestural movements) are usually learned or acquired often within a culture and often reflect behaviour deemed momentarily expedient. Posture and gesture are frequently merged in one movement.

Behaviour and personality

The link between how a person behaves, (that is his physical movement), and his personality, while undeniable, has not always been clearly stated by 'body language' proponents. It becomes clearer if we examine the definition of (motivated) behaviour, that is '*energy released* in the form of a drive directed towards a goal'.

This definition suggests that there are two components to human behaviour:

- the *motivational characteristics* of the individual: how much effort or energy is released in order to reach a goal? (Assertion)
- the *task orientation* of the individual: in what way is this energy released; how does the individual define his goal and set himself objectives? (Perspective)

Motivational characteristics (assertion)

Rudolf Laban, in his classic book *Effort*¹ suggested that energy can be released by the body in specific ways — slowly or quickly; with force or gently; in an uncontrolled manner or in a controlled manner; directly or indirectly.

Through industrial studies conducted in England during the Second World War, he found that there were four components of movement — focus, pressure, time and flow; each of these *effort* elements having two qualitative limits (or parameters). For example: focus of attention could be direct . . . or indirect; pressure could be heavy . . . or light; and so on.

Through his studies Laban came to recognize that a person's energy-release patterns — dynamic, brisk, slow, controlled, nervous, etc. — were somehow related to personality.

Task orientation (perspective)

Despite this perception, Laban did not specifically link the 'effort component' to personality. This honour belongs to Warren Lamb (1965) who extended Laban's analysis to a study of how the individual *shapes* — gives directional focus to — his effort movements. He did this in terms of the three space dimensions, namely height (rising/falling), width (spreading/enclosing), inclination (advancing/retreating).

Practical research

In a number of practical studies, Lamb^{2,3}, and later his collaborator Pamela Ramsden⁴ showed the relationship between body movement and personality. They concluded that each *individual* has an 'action profile' or 'signature' that is exclusively his or hers. They also found *general* types of personality profile which occur again and again.

Lamb and Ramsden then applied their findings to *group behaviour*: in particular, to management behaviour and team building. For example: they assessed 'top management' in a number of organizations and concluded that 'ideal combinations of personalities could, and should, be merged together to form a "top team"'. Notably, they were able to pinpoint individual management strengths and weaknesses and make recommendations for a 'balanced', fully-integrated management team in which the skills and abilities of all the executives were used to the full.

It should be mentioned here that Lamb and Ramsden's research into personality through 'body movement' is not entirely new. Other researchers, for example, Kretschmer⁵ and Sheldon^{6,7,8} have linked 'body' and 'personality' but in a slightly different context. Kretschmer and Sheldon's research is based upon *static* (non-moving) models, studies of anatomical body shape or physique, while Lamb and Ramsden's is *dynamic*-based, analysing actual physical movement.

^aTo the author's knowledge, this is the first paper in this country to discuss this technique and its application.

Behavioural action studies

Specifically, Lamb and Ramsden assess 12 key behavioural action tendencies through an assessment of 'body movement'. (For a discussion of these, please refer to the references.) Six of these factors relate to an individual's action motivation; three to his or her social interaction; and three are measures of potential activity. Table 1 shows these behavioural action tendencies as adapted by the author for salespeople:

Table 1 Key behavioural action tendencies (salespeople)

A. Individual action motivation	
1. Investigating	(product knowledge, fact-finding, etc.)
2. Exploring	(looking for alternative sales possibilities)
3. Determining	(having firmness of purpose)
4. Confrontation	(having recognition of immediate needs of company)
5. Deciding	(seizing opportunities)
6. Anticipating	(assessing consequences of sales action)
B. Social interaction motivation	
7. Communicating	(inviting and imparting knowledge and information)
8. Presenting	(influencing, persuading, making a positive demonstration)
9. Operating	(spurring people on to action)
C. Measures of potential activity	
10. Dynamism	(drive in terms of exertion)
11. Adaptability	(readiness to change one's own position and attitudes)
12. Identifying	(of self with organization, its personalities, methods, aims, etc.)

The author wishes to point out here that while Lamb and Ramsden's basic framework is used in the following discussion, some of the distinctions — e.g. between 'action motivation' and 'task orientation' are his own hypothetical constructs, and are not drawn by Lamb and Ramsden.

The salesman's 'action profile'

Just as many salesmen use a routinized selling technique such as AIDA (Attention — Interest — Desire — Action) to 'sell' to the consumer, so the 'action profile' practitioner uses a similar technique — AIC (Attention — Intention — Commitment) in studying the salesman's 'body language'.

The general relationship between the 'mental' AIDA technique and the 'physical' AIC technique is as follows:

Selling technique (mental)	Action profiling (physical)
Attention	Attention
Interest }	Intention
Desire }	
Action	Commitment

Compare the above decision-making process with that defined by Herbert A. Simon.⁸ He stated that the decision-making process consisted of three steps:

- the intelligence phase — finding conditions calling for a decision;

- the decision phase — inventing, developing and analysing possible courses of action;
- the choice phase — selecting a course of action.

Now selling (or buying from the consumer's point of view) is an exercise in problem-solving. Typically, the customer has a *problem* — 'I have a back-ache' and seeks a *solution* which might be to go to the doctor or buy a firmer bed. The steps in solving any problem are usually given by management authorities as these:

- Problem recognition;
- Information gathering;
- Search for a solution;
- Evaluation of alternatives;
- Decision-making;
- Potential problem analysis.

It is possible to correlate this *mental* problem-solving process with *physical* body action. For example, in terms of 'body language', the individual who is, say, focusing attention on a problem is likely to show directing movements (sitting up and paying attention) with enclosing shapes (limited movement, concentration of purpose), and so on.

It is virtually impossible without videotapes, or actual demonstration, to show how the various phases of the decision-making process and physical action interrelate. Carol-Lynne Rose suggests that 'the action sequence (behavioural sequence) consists of two complementary processes — the actual assertion of effort, and the new perspective which the action itself creates'.⁹ Taking Warren Lamb's paradigm she shows that an individual who *investigates* a problem will (inevitably) *explore* new ideas for action, so that 'recognition of a problem' leads to 'information gathering'. Someone who is *determined* to find a solution to a problem will balance that assertive effort by getting the possible solution 'into perspective' (*confront* the facts) to see if it ties in with the hard realities of what is needed. Again, any *decision* that is made will be modified by consideration of *anticipated* problems that may occur upon implementing the solution.

In action profiling these physical efforts (assertion) and shaping (perspective) movements are assessed by a trained practitioner in order to determine an individual's behavioural style . . . and eventually to see if one behavioural style complements another (Top-team planning). Table 2 shows Lamb's model for studying behaviour with the traditional problem-solving steps superimposed by the author.

Note that individual behavioural differences come about both as a result of the amount of, and way in which 'energy is released' and the individual's 'goal perception' or 'task orientation'. It is quite possible, within this framework, to find two salesmen who could be classed as 'operators' who work in entirely different ways. Salesman A could be all-action — rushing around, opportunistic, impulsive, reactive. Salesman B could equally spend his time in action, but his methods might be more refined, organized and systematic. The difference lies not so much in *what* they are trying to achieve (their objectives and end-goals are the same), but in *how* they set about it (their methodology).

Part of this behavioural difference can be explained away in terms of each individual's personality and

Table 2 The problem-solving process (physical action)

Effort movements (Assertion)		Shaping movements (Perspective)
Energy release (How much?)	ATTENTION	Focus of direction (In what way?)
(1) Investigating (Probe, search, scrutinize, teasing out information, fact-finding).		(2) Exploring (Developing ideas for action; bringing new things into the area of attention).
(a) Problem recognition		(b) Information gathering
(3) Determining (Firmness of purpose, persistence against difficult odds).	INTENTION	(4) Confronting (Weighing up evidence, looking at realities and the real issues).
(c) Search for solution		(d) Evaluation of alternatives
(5) Deciding (Implementing ideas and selecting priorities for action).	COMMITMENT	(6) Anticipating (Post-decision analysis and perceiving likely consequences of action).
(e) Decision-making		(f) Potential problem analysis

dynamism, part in terms of the individual's action motivation and part in terms of task orientation. There is a synergy working here.

Selecting the right person for the job

Traditional selection techniques do not assess how the individual tackles a job — whether he plans and executes well, what his work patterns are like. Tests like 'In-basket exercises' merely assess the applicant's priority orderings — to see if the applicant can identify which tasks should be tackled first and in what sequence. Such techniques assess the applicant's logic, not his motivation. They do not provide information as to whether the salesperson is going to sit on his backside doing nothing unless 'kicked'? Whether he is a go-getter? Whether he will display initiative in getting the business?

'Action profiling', at the least, can help ensure that the applicant has the 'right' characteristics required by the job in the right proportion and will succeed.

What are the right proportions? Clearly this is a *management decision* depending upon the type of product, type of customer and type of skills required. Management might decide, for example, that the ideal salesman's profile should be low on conceptualizing, high on activating. Contrast this with the research chemist, systems analyst, or strategic planner, where thinking about the business and all its problems/opportunities is of vital importance, activating less so.

When drawing up the 'ideal' profile, it should not be forgotten that selling requires a two-way interaction between the salesperson and customer and there are two parameters by which one can judge the likely success of the salesman or saleswoman:

- the *individual* requirements necessary to succeed;
- the *social* requirements necessary to succeed

Both are crucial.

Lamb's research has indicated that the customer is helped along the way to a buying decision by the salesman in the following way:

Action sequence	Customer's need motivation	Salesman's action response
Attention	Need for communication	Asks questions and gives information about products
Intention	Need to clarify ideas	Establishes needs and demonstrates products
Commitment ..	Need to buy	Reaches agreement and handles any objections

The above is the pattern of most successful sales interviews: the salesman asks the customer questions (fact-finds) and looks for a suitable item to satisfy the customer's need (product selection). He *communicates!* Once he has established what the customer wants, he demonstrates the ideal product to the customer. He *presents!* And only once the salesman and customer have reached agreement that this is the right product, can the salesman write up the order. He *operates!* The ideal sequence therefore is communicate — present — operate.

What happens if the salesman immediately recognizes what the customer needs and tells that customer what he/she should buy. Will he be successful? Quite likely not! As the old adage says 'telling is not selling'. A one-way sales pitch from the salesman to the customer will not get the customer involved in the buying situation.

In short, if the salesman is not socially sensitive and responsive, he is unlikely to succeed as a salesman, no matter how excellent his other personal characteristics and work habits are. Action profiling can not only provide valuable information about the individual's work habits, but also how socially sensitive (open or closed) he is.

The need for action profiling

At the present time countless thousands of rands are spent on employing salesmen who fail, without really

knowing why they fail. In order to improve the less successful salesman's proficiency a great number of training programmes have been developed to improve selling skills.

But this, surely, is putting the cart before the horse? Of even greater importance than knowing *how* to promote the buying decision (i.e. selling skills) is *who* should be doing the selling. The selection of the *right* sales staff with the *correct* personality profile seems crucial to any organization that wants to boost its sales turnover. In short, step one is get the right person for the job. Step two then is give the proper training linked to identification of individual training needs.

Action profiling helps to select better candidates through a study of the applicant's physical behaviour patterns in the selection interview. In particular, it attempts to answer these three questions:

- What is the salesman's Action Motivation? How does the salesman's individual motivation system operate? Is he a 'thinker' or a 'doer' or some combination of these?
- What is the salesman's Task Orientation? How does the salesman tackle tasks — with care and forethought, or is there overly precise analysis, or does he rush into things and commitments?
- What is the salesman's Social Interaction Motivation? How well does he get on with others? Does he encourage a social 'give and take' or does he force up barriers?

No great claims are being made for this technique, as yet in its infancy, and it should therefore be used and researched in conjunction with other existing techniques. Nevertheless, there seems to be a need for more publicity and greater application in particular, of Lamb's contribution to current personnel theory.

Possible results? Greater job satisfaction for the sales staff (through correct placement); increased sales for the company (through better salesman/customer relationships); and greater benefits for the selling industry as a whole (through increased personnel efficiency and effectiveness).

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