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Five Hiring Decisions That Set Your Next Salesperson Up for Success

Five recurring hiring mistakes that can cost technology businesses time capital and commercial momentum.

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A senior sales appointment can be one of the most consequential decisions a technology business makes. The right leader can create a repeatable route to revenue build a stronger team and help a company enter its next stage of growth. The wrong appointment can consume time capital and momentum that are difficult to recover. The challenge is that an unsuccessful hire is not always the result of choosing a poor candidate. Sometimes the business has recruited for the wrong problem misunderstood the type of leadership it needs or set expectations that do not reflect commercial reality. Over 25 years working alongside technology businesses we ve seen these challenges at different stages: from seed funded startups establishing their first GTM function to scale ups professionalising sales and established companies entering new markets. The circumstances vary but five mistakes appear repeatedly.

1. Hiring for an impressive track record rather than stage fit

A leader who has managed a large international sales organisation may have an outstanding record. That does not automatically make them the right person to build a sales function from scratch. Early stage businesses often need someone who can sell personally test messaging define a process and recruit the first few people. A later stage company may need someone who can manage managers improve forecasting introduce operational discipline and coordinate multiple markets.

These are different jobs. Neither is inherently more valuable but confusing them can be costly. A familiar mistake is appointing a senior executive because they have held the desired title at a recognised company without exploring the conditions in which they succeeded. Did they inherit an established brand and strong inbound demand? Did they build the sales motion themselves? How much support did they have from marketing RevOps and customer success? Before writing the brief define the work that actually needs doing over the next 12 to 24 months. Then look for evidence that the candidate has done comparable work in a comparable environment.

2. Recruiting before defining the GTM strategy

A new sales leader cannot compensate indefinitely for a business that has not decided whom it serves why customers buy or how opportunities become revenue. An unclear ICP undefined sales motion or inconsistent qualification process creates ambiguity. One salesperson may be selling to enterprise buyers while another pursues small businesses. Forecasts may be based on activity rather than evidence. Success may depend on the instincts of a founder or one exceptional individual rather than a repeatable approach. None of this means a startup must have a fully developed sales machine before hiring. Often building the machine is precisely the job. But that needs to be explicit.

Are you recruiting someone to discover and validate the sales motion someone to turn an emerging motion into a repeatable process or someone to scale a model that is already working? Each requires a different profile mandate and measure of success. Getting clear on that distinction before approaching candidates saves time and helps ensure the new leader is being recruited to solve the right problem.

3. Setting expectations that don t match commercial reality

It s easy to build a compelling growth plan in a spreadsheet. Delivering it is another matter.

Founders and boards may expect a new VP Sales or CRO to increase revenue quickly even when the average sales cycle is long pipeline coverage is weak or the business lacks the resources needed to execute. Targets should be informed by conversion rates sales cycles deal values pipeline quality and the time it takes to recruit and develop a team. Where historical data is limited assumptions should be identified and tested rather than treated as facts.

Authority matters too. If a leader is accountable for revenue but cannot influence hiring pricing territory design or the tools the team uses there is a mismatch between responsibility and control. The better question is not simply What number should this person deliver? It is What conditions would make that outcome achievable and which of those conditions can this person actually influence?

4. Underestimating the full commercial cost of a failed hire

Salary bonuses and recruitment fees are visible. The wider cost of an unsuccessful senior appointment is often less obvious.

Consider the months spent defining a role interviewing candidates and onboarding a leader. Add the management time invested in supporting them the initiatives that stall the pipeline that does not materialise and the uncertainty experienced by the wider team. If the appointment fails the business may need to repeat the entire process. For a scale up working towards a funding milestone or an established company entering a new market the lost commercial momentum can be more damaging than the direct employment costs.

That does not mean avoiding ambitious appointments. It means treating them as strategic investments and assessing the downside as carefully as the potential upside. Before committing agree what success looks like at three six and twelve months. Separate outcomes the leader controls from those dependent on product market conditions or wider organisational decisions. And consider what an alternative might look like: a different seniority level a hands on builder or in some circumstances fractional leadership while the commercial model develops.

5. Losing the right leader through a poor recruitment process

Even when a business understands exactly whom it needs it can still lose the strongest candidates through the way it recruits. Long gaps between interviews delayed feedback changing requirements and an unclear decision making process all create friction. Senior candidates are assessing the company as carefully as the company assesses them. A disorganised process can raise doubts about leadership alignment and the ability to make decisions. A thorough process is important especially for a senior commercial appointment. But thoroughness is not the same as adding interview stages without purpose. Each conversation should have a clear objective and stakeholders should agree in advance what they are evaluating and who has the final decision. Businesses also need to sell the opportunity. Strong candidates want to understand the strategy the market the leadership team the resources available and the scope to make a meaningful impact. An interview that only interrogates their CV misses half the conversation.

Set a realistic timetable. Communicate promptly including when there is no decision yet. Give substantive feedback. And make sure candidates meet people who can explain not just the challenges but why the opportunity is worth pursuing. The best recruitment processes assess carefully while building conviction on both sides.

Making the right decision before the search begins

There is no formula that guarantees a successful senior hire. But many expensive mistakes become more avoidable when a business is clear about its commercial position the problem it needs to solve and the type of leader best equipped to solve it. For a seed funded startup that may mean choosing a builder who can establish the fundamentals. For a Series A or B scale up it may mean formalising processes and building management capability. For an established business it may mean leadership that can navigate complexity and support expansion into new markets.

The important point is to hire for the next stage of the journey not simply for the most impressive career history.

Before making your next senior Sales or GTM appointment

Use the free GTM Hiring Risk Assessment to consider the commercial position potential risks and conditions for success before you appoint.

Explore the assessment

What's next for your team?

Got a plan in mind a few ideas or just a question? Let's talk it through.

Contact Certus info@certusrecruitment.com