# The Pay Is High and Jobs Are Plentiful, but Few Want to Go Into Sales; The work has changed in recent years, but young workers may associate it with high-pressure tactics; 'talent is limited'

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## FULL TEXT

Salespeople make good money and get to help customers solve problems. So why doesn't anybody want to do the job?

Demand for sales roles has shot up as companies emerging from the pandemic switch to growth mode , but recruiters say they struggle to convince people to make sales a career.

ZipRecruiter, an online job platform, shows the number of sales roles advertised has risen steadily this year, up 65% to more than 700,000 open positions around the U.S., after big layoffs decimated the field at the outset of the pandemic a year ago.

The struggle to find sales hires predates the pandemic and may have more to do with the types of roles people are comfortable taking these days than it does with a shortage of workers. Images of glad-handing car salesmen or "Mad Men"-style account representatives are hard to shake, recruiters say, adding that early-career hires aren't always attracted to positions where success is measured in new business brought in.

Sales roles also may not be top of mind for new grads because few colleges offer sales-specific degree programs, they add.

"People don't go to school and think, 'I'm going to be in sales,'" said Howard Brown, CEO and founder of ringDNA, a software provider for sales workers. "It's the lifeblood of every organization, but talent is limited."

Keith Wolf, managing director of Houston-based recruiting firm Murray Resources, said the number of sales jobs advertised by his clients between January and May is double what it was for the prior five months.

Mr. Wolf said many young workers assume that sales work means convincing customers to buy with high-pressure tactics, and are turned off. Sales has dramatically changed in recent years, he says, shifting from cold calls to potential customers to consulting with companies that often seek out products.

Changes in sales accelerated during the pandemic, and businesses are trying to entice more people into the job by demonstrating that they don't have to operate in a pressure-cooker environment (or work the phones ) the way sales workers once did.

"It's really transformed over the years from someone pounding the phones—used car salesman comes to mind," Mr. Wolf says. "It's much more problem-solving and working with clients now. Most college-educated sales roles have become much more consultative."

Many take a detour into sales after their original career plans changed.

Fredric Brasher, a 26-year-old former engineer in Houston, works at Daikin Applied Americas, which manufactures heating, ventilation and air-conditioning products that he helped design. Seeking a new challenge to shake up his work life, he started paying more attention to the sales team's interactions with the engineers. After hearing about their sizable commissions, he decided to give sales a try.

"You can make quite a bit of money as an engineer but, in my experience, it takes longer to get to that level," Mr. Brasher says, adding that his pay has jumped more than 60% since switching to Daikin's sales side last August.

Sales representatives who sell technical and scientific products and services to businesses earned a median annual wage of $108,830 in 2020, according to the U.S. Labor Department.

Working in sales wasn't something Mr. Brasher envisioned for himself while studying mechanical engineering at Baylor University a few years ago, but now many of his engineering-major friends from college are following his path to sales as a faster way to a bigger paycheck.

Chris Kaufield, chief revenue officer at Bellevue, Wash.-based software company Alitheon, Inc., plans to triple his sales staff this year. Clients like to do their own research about the products they buy, which means sales representatives have to flex their soft skills rather than read a script, Mr. Kaufield says.

"The new template for a salesperson is not about cold-calling. It's not mechanical," he says. "You have to be empathetic and deeply curious" about clients' businesses.

Adam Flomenbaum, a Seattle-based senior client partner at Twitter who sells the social-media company's advertising services to businesses, says he wouldn't have pursued a career in sales if it meant cold-calling 60 to 70 people a day while trying to hit unrealistic deal targets. His role is more about walking customers through what Twitter's advertising products can and can't do for them, he says.

"You are trying to be a partner," he says.

Liberal-arts majors tend to make good salespeople, especially in tech, Mr. Flomenbaum says, because of their writing, reading and communication skills, especially as roles are more focused online.

Amber Hus dreamed of working in entertainment when she enrolled at the University of California, Los Angeles in 2017 as a communications major. An internship at a Los Angeles public-relations firm left her disillusioned. Another internship, in business development at Spark &Bloom Superfoods, had her reaching out to local grocery stores and gyms about carrying the allergy-friendly snacks. The 24-year-old says she loved the customer interaction so much she decided to try sales upon graduation.

After dozens of interviews, she settled on a full-time sales job at ringDNA, a position that doesn't involve making phone-call quotas or other hard-sell tactics.

"It was more problem-solving, being a good listener and asking questions, rather than the 'smile and dial'," she said, referring to unsolicited cold-calling.

The pandemic changed sales in several permanent ways, according to a new report from McKinsey &Co. Sales that used to be sealed with a handshake quickly moved online and now 20% of clients surveyed by McKinsey say they hope to return to in-person sales.

Mark Cope, the senior vice president of sales and customer experience at CentralReach, a company with offices in New Jersey and Florida that sells electronic health-record and other management software, says his firm will expand its sales team by more than 30% this year. It recently opened up positions to remote employees. Recruitment is focused on junior sales people with potential instead of trying to court more experienced sellers, he adds.

"We look for curiosity and certain traits rather than experience," Mr. Cope says.

When interviewing, he asks job candidates to describe the last thing they taught themselves as a way to discern whether the person is likely to stick with a new concept until they master it.

"That's something companies are going to have to do to meet the demand," he says. "Look beyond experience and coach them up."

Write to Patrick Thomas at Patrick.Thomas@wsj.com

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