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Branch Manager/Recruiting

Secrets to a Successful Support Staff

By Leslie J. Thompson

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The right administrative team can substantially increase the bottom line for your branch. Learn how to find quality sales assistants and keep them happy for the long term.

They're the front line of every office, serving clients, streamlining processes and keeping operations running smoothly to let advisors focus on building their business. They are the support staff, and smart managers know they couldn't run a branch without them. Unfortunately, many managers fail to recognize just how much their administrative team adds to the success of their office, and they lose quality associates as a result. "I believe that sales assistants are the most [underutilized resource](#) that any company has," says Matt Rea, Regional Director for H&R Block Financial Advisors in Scottsdale, Arizona. "The organizations that embrace and empower their support staff...will outperform the average companies. That will separate a good office from a great office," he says.

So, how do you find quality administrative support and [minimize turnover](#)? The secret lies in knowing how to properly evaluate candidates, set them up for success, and inspire them to do their very best work.

Have a hiring process

Too often, managers seeking a sales assistant will make a [hasty hire](#) or simply go with their gut. But, finding the right person for the job takes time and forethought. You need to have a set process for assessing applicants and use the same criteria for each candidate. The following pointers will put you on track to making the right choice.

- **Evaluate skills.** Sales assistants handle the bulk of operational tasks in an office, and therefore must be well-versed in several software programs to do their job effectively. But simply asking about their skills won't tell you how good they are, notes Greg Saukulak, managing director of the Execu|Search Group, a Manhattan-based recruiting firm.

"I've interviewed people who have said they're great with Microsoft Excel, and they do horribly. I've also had people who have said they don't know it very well, and they ace it," he says. To get an objective assessment of their proficiency, Saukulak recommends having each candidate complete a standardized test on any programs that are essential to the job.

- **Consider character.** Of course, administrative skills alone don't make for a good sales assistant. Because they interact daily with clients, they need to be outgoing and inclined to take initiative. Moreover, if a candidate's personality doesn't fit the office dynamic, they won't be effective, says Carol Hausler, founder and president of re:think, a Dallas-based consulting firm that specializes in staff development and training.

She recommends using a [personality test](#) to determine whether the applicant's interests and character traits are well-suited to the job responsibilities and the branch culture. Says

Hausler, "It costs you a little bit to have an assessment done ahead of time, but what does it cost you in lost training time and productivity if that person doesn't work out in three to six months?"

- **Ask behavioral questions.** Similarly, many managers draw conclusions about a candidate based on the person's previous job experience. But, this only gives you half the picture. During the interview, you need to determine not just what a candidate can do, but how they do it, says Hausler. She recommends asking open-ended questions that require more than a "yes" or "no" answer. For example, rather than asking if someone has good organizational skills, ask how they like to organize their workspace, or how they manage multiple projects simultaneously.

In addition, have candidates provide examples of how they would handle a specific situation, says Saukulak. The answers will [provide insight](#) into their work style and help you avoid the wrong fit.

"Ultimately, you may have the most capable individual, but they may be suited for a [different] environment," he explains. For example, someone who is independent and self-directing can feel stifled in a highly structured workplace, whereas a person needing a lot of direction would not do well in a dynamic, fast-paced branch.

- **Involve others.** Fred McLaughlin, Senior Vice President and Branch Manager for Robert W. Baird & Co. in Nashville, recommends getting input on applicants from other people in the firm, both within and outside of your branch.

He explains, "I cannot just [indiscriminately hire](#) a financial advisor. They've got to go through compliance and senior management and have a background check. So, I look at it the same way if I were to hire a sales assistant." McLaughlin suggests asking producers, administrators, and even other branch managers to participate in the interview process. "You have people in your firm that have either done this role or know somebody that has," who can help you identify the right person for the job, he says.

- **Don't cut corners.** Early in his career, David McDonald made the mistake of putting salary ahead of character when hiring administrative support. He quickly learned that, as with jewelry and cars, quality comes at a price.

"I hired what I could hire cheap, and you end up paying for it in the long run," admits McDonald, who today oversees 17 advisors and 12 sales assistants in the Louisville, Kentucky branch of Hilliard Lyons, Inc. The office also includes a receptionist, wire operator and compliance administrator. McDonald now looks for candidates who demonstrate a strong work ethic and take initiative, and he avoids job hoppers or anyone with a questionable employment history.

"Get the best people you can," he advises. "You've got to stay within a budget, but I'm not going to let \$3000 stop me from getting a quality person."

Keep your staff happy

Once you have found the ideal candidate, you want that person to stick with you for the long run. The key is to establish clear goals, empower associates, and [reward their efforts](#). Follow these three tips to ensure your support staff stays happy and functions to its full potential.

- **Define expectations.** Provide new client associates with clear directives about what they are expected to accomplish, not only in terms of their day-to-day responsibilities or special projects, but also the time frame in which they are expected to complete their work.

"Whenever I meet with a sales assistant, I talk about what a successful support person looks like in my eyes, and what my vision is for that role," says H&R Block's Matt Rea. Be sure to ask for feedback, so you can verify that your expectations were heard.

Also, take the time to demonstrate the systems and procedures that are currently in place, or have a new associate shadow another sales assistant for a few days to learn the ropes. Don't be afraid to let someone make mistakes, says Greg Saukulak, as long as it's clear that they are asking questions and learning from the experience.

- **Foster communication.** The most common mistake managers make is the failure to communicate consistently with their people, says Matt Rea. He notes, "You can't train or manage without dialog."

Rea meets with the five sales assistants in his branch once a week and makes a point of checking in with them individually whenever possible. By asking about their work, he can not only ensure the associates are achieving their goals, but also [get their input](#) on ways to grow the business.

"I find that a lot of managers out there don't empower their sales assistants," he says. "They don't trust them or give them the opportunity to provide feedback where you can learn from it and improve processes."

Giving associates permission to find solutions and take initiative gives them a sense of ownership in the business and motivates them to do their best work.

- **Reward based on merit.** Having a consistent dialog also helps ensure that sales assistants are recognized for their achievements, and not given a pat on the back simply because they look busy, says Rea.

"Often, managers will reward [employees] because they see that somebody's putting in a lot of effort, but they may not be operating efficiently," he notes. He suggests managers collaborate with the financial advisors and sales assistants collectively to create milestones and agree on what success looks like.

"When you reach those milestones, you can reward them, and it keeps them involved and striving for something better," he says.

Hilliard Lyons' David McDonald makes sure that each of the 17 financial consultants in his branch bonuses their sales assistants based on performance. The sales assistants know that as they achieve their goals, their income grows.

But, handing out small [tokens of appreciation](#) to recognize exceptional performance can also go a long way toward boosting morale and gaining the loyalty of your support staff.

"Some people are motivated by a phone call or a hand-written note," says re:think's Carol Hausler. Others appreciate a personalized gift, like a spa package or tickets to a sporting event. Even gift cards for \$10 or \$20 can be powerful incentives in a busy office environment.

By hiring smart, keeping an open line of communication, and rewarding achievement, managers can be confident that their support staff will foster the success of the branch. Moreover, they will feel like [valued members](#) of the team and give 100 percent to their work every day.

"They are not only doing the job that's expected of them, but they're proactive—they look for opportunities to help the advisors grow their business," says Matt Rea. The payoff, he notes, goes well beyond the bottom line. "There's nothing more rewarding as a manager than having a group of people that you really enjoy, and every single person is working to the best of their abilities," he says. "It makes coming to work a joy."

Leslie J. Thompson is a Dallas-based freelance writer with more than 12 years' experience reporting on the financial services industry. She has also worked as a marketing consultant for major securities firms and independent financial planners.

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