



The Career Hacker's Guide To

# Sales Careers

# It was only a few hours after my college graduation ceremony had ended.

I was standing in a crowded bar with dozens of my peers, celebrating, when I heard someone a few groups over make a claim so bold I've never forgotten it: *"I didn't go to college just so I could get a job in sales."*

At the time, I didn't really know much more about sales than what I'd already experienced firsthand selling ad space door-to-door for a campus newspaper (which was brutal but taught me a ton of really valuable career lessons).

But the little I did know then was exactly why that statement struck such a nerve: sales is not easy.

Pretending that sales is something just anyone can do—and do well—is not just wrong, it's an obvious admission of a misunderstanding of what sales really is and what it takes to succeed.



Sales can be tough. It's not for everyone. But it's not just for extroverts. Nor is it just for people who didn't go to college. In fact, some of the best salespeople I know are both highly analytical and highly intelligent. Regardless of your background or makeup, a career in sales offers incredible upside—both in personal development and in earning potential.

Sure, the person who can walk into any room and thirty minutes later walk out with 10 new friends has some really valuable raw material. If that describes you, sales might be a great place to consider starting your career.

But a desire to help other people and a willingness to learn specific behaviors are both more important than your personality in sales.







If you enjoy interacting with people, connecting solutions to problems, and like hitting goals or have a competitive edge, sales might be a great place to launch your career.

But even if none of that describes you, sales still provides a great starting point for anyone who's interested in learning the fundamentals of business and is serious about working hard.

“ Great salespeople are relationship builders who provide value and help their customers win.

— Jeffrey Gitomer

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# So . . . what is sales, anyway?

Sales tends to get a bad rap. But it shouldn't—at least, not when done well. The best kind of sales is prescriptive or consultative. Someone in the world has a problem they're not yet sure how to solve, or one they're maybe not aware of yet.

Great salespeople can identify the people who have a legitimate felt need and build a relationship around filling that need the best way possible.

In its most simple form, sales is about two parties exchanging value for mutual benefit. It's not about duping people. It's not persuading people to spend money they don't have on things they don't want or need.

Sales done well is about helping other people get closer to what they want.



It's almost similar to the role of a physician—assessing someone's issue, diagnosing it properly, then prescribing a remedy.

Sales done well means executing the process of helping people achieve a better life. As a [brilliant economist](#) once put it, there are three conditions that stand in the way of us humans taking action:

1. ***Unease or dissatisfaction*** with our present state
2. ***A vision*** of a better state
3. ***A belief*** we can reach that better state

Sales done right takes people by the hand and guides them through that discovery process so they can achieve whatever is standing in the way of where they are and where they'd like to be.

It doesn't matter what industry or type of sales you're in—the basics of it remain the same. And if any of that piques your interest, then a career in sales just might be worth exploring.

# Career paths in sales

If you search a jobs board, you'll probably find dozens of different titles for sales roles.

It appears under a variety of different names—in tech, titles like Sales Associate, Sales Development Representative, Business Development Representative, and Inside Sales are all common.

The titles are a bit vague, but basically they indicate where the role fits within an organization and the type of sale. Once you're familiar with the different titles, you may begin to notice trends.

Most startups or tech companies have an “inside” sales team for their product. This team works inside the company—but they contact people outside the organization. This usually involves a high-frequency of phone calls and emails.

Contrast that with outside sales and business development, which usually involves some element of face-to-face sales. In many cases, outside sales reps cover a specific territory, and the product they're selling involves more direct conversations.

Usually business development involves identifying partnership opportunities or deals that are larger than normal sales deals. They often have strategic advantages for a company: Imagine a payroll company partnering with an accounting software company—both companies could benefit from accessing each others' customers and offering their services together.

Making heads and tails of all these different paths can be a pain. So, to help, here's an outline of common career paths in sales:

## Positions

**Entry-Level Positions**

**Mid-Level Positions**

**Sales Manager/  
Director Positions**

**Sales VP Positions**

**Sales C-Suite Positions**

## Common Roles

Sales Development Representative (SDR), Business Development Representative (BDR), Inbound Marketing Representative, Lead Response, Outbound Sales, Inside Sales, Outside Sales, Sales Agent, Sales Associate (SA), Sales Consultant, Sales Operations

Account Executive (AE), Sales Executive (SE), Account Manager (AM), Senior Sales Representative, Sales Operations Lead, Sales Engineer, Technical Sales Representative, Enterprise Sales Representative, Enterprise Account Executive

Sales Manager, Regional Sales Manager, Sales Lead, Sales Trainer, SDR Trainer, Director of Sales, Sales Operations Manager, Director of Sales Operations

VP of Sales  
VP of Sales Operations  
SVP of Sales  
VP of Revenue  
Head of Sales  
Sales Leader

Chief Revenue Officer  
Chief Operating Officer  
Chief Growth Officer  
Chief Sales Officer

## Average Years of Experience

0-3+

2-5+

3-7+

10+

10-20+

## Average Income

Base Pay:  
\$36k-\$57k

Mean:  
\$44k

Commission:  
\$3k-\$26k

Base Pay:  
\$34k-\$89k

Mean:  
\$53k

Commission:  
\$3k-\$51k

Base Pay:  
\$39k-\$113k

Mean:  
\$60k

Commission:  
\$5k-\$56k

Base Pay:  
\$79k-\$205k

Mean:  
\$140k

Commission:  
\$10k-\$103k

Base Pay:  
\$117k-\$296k

Mean:  
\$196k

Commission:  
\$34k-\$205k



# How much money do sales people make?

Another added benefit of sales is it's a role that offers a very tangible relationship between results and income.

Because of the nature of the role, there is often a very objective measure for everything—ranging from activity metrics (like how many phone calls per day or week you make) or the average time it takes to get promoted, to the monthly or quarterly revenue quotas attached to a specific role.

As daunting as that might sound, it can make calculating your earning opportunity very black and white.

Most sales roles, especially in software sales, operate on a base salary and on-target earnings (OTE) model. In other words, the role has an income floor and a target to shoot for.

The salary is usually lower than other entry-level roles, but it offers the upside of commission. On-target earnings essentially outlines achievement targets and the commission structure for hitting goals.

Another word on commissions: a lot of organizations also add other features to the compensation mix to drive performance, like accelerators or spiffs. Accelerators are basically increased commission rates for all sales above your quota (think of it like overtime pay on steroids). Spiffs are another feature that can act as a bonus for certain goals—like selling a specific product or achieving a certain percentage above quota, as examples.

Income is often weighted for the first several months a sales rep is starting in a new role. This period

is commonly referred to as “ramp up time”—which basically means the amount of time it takes for you to learn the role and achieve full productivity. This is a great way to help reps put food on the table while they’re still learning. Usually these decline over a period of the first three to six months in a role.

Wow. Sounds like only upside, right? Well, don’t let anyone fool

you into thinking it’s an easy job you’ll for sure get rich doing. Sales takes a lot of work—and the best salespeople I know are masters of executing process. But if you succeed, your earning potential is off the charts.

Here’s a breakdown by experience level of some common income ranges for sales positions, courtesy of Payscale:

## Average Income

Entry	Manager	Director	VP	C-Suite
Base Pay: \$36k-\$57k	Base Pay: \$34k-\$89k	Base Pay: \$39k-\$113k	Base Pay: \$79k-\$205k	Base Pay: \$117k-\$296k
Mean: \$44k	Mean: \$53k	Mean: \$60k	Mean: \$140k	Mean: \$196k
Commission: \$3k-\$26k	Commission: \$3k-\$51k	Commission: \$5k-\$56k	Commission: \$10k-\$103k	Commission: \$34k-\$205k

See more details on the Payscale reports for [entry](#), [manager](#), [director](#), [vice president](#), and [C-suite](#) sales salaries.

# How to get started in software sales

If you've read this far, chances are you want to know how the sausage is made—which is exactly what this section is about: how you can set yourself up to land your first sales job, even if you have zero relevant experience today.

First, I think it's necessary to outline some of the most common activities entry-level sales people spend the vast majority of their time on—so we can talk about specific steps you can take to demonstrate the skills that go along with those activities.

On the right we have a common breakdown of how entry-level sales roles at tech companies might spend their time on any given day.

## Common daily activities

- Daily sales standup to discuss deals in their pipeline
- Prospecting and list building
- Researching prospects to personalize outreach
- Cold calling and emailing
- Following-up with prospects
- Scheduling demos with account executives
- Populating a CRM with prospect information
- Responding to inbound phone calls from webforms
- Searching LinkedIn or other platforms to connect with prospects
- Tracking and maintaining records on the day's activities

This isn't a perfect list—but it's a solid starting point for the steps we're going to talk through about how you can get started. If you read the list closely, hopefully you noticed a theme: most activities make use of a tool in addition to a sales rep's manual effort.

So, in order to prove you've got what it takes to land your first sales job, I recommend demonstrating just that: a basic familiarity with tools, in addition to the ability to leverage them.

Below, I've outlined a number of different specific tactics you might try (and document) in order to prove to a hiring manager you're worth considering for a sales job—even if you have no experience.



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*The following exercise is to prove you can identify the value proposition of a product and who it benefits—a useful skill in sales.*

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First, go visit the website of a company that interests you. Bonus points if it's a company that's actually hiring for entry-level sales roles. But it doesn't matter if they're not—this is just an exercise you can repeat.

Spend some time reading

through their products, pricing, and any customer testimonials. Take notes. Try to hone in on exactly who their customers are—not just what companies, but who might be the person at their customer companies that makes the buying decision.

(For example, a company that sells marketing software might be focused on selling a product that makes the lives of marketing

associates at startups easier, but the actual decision maker is the VP of marketing. That's something you'd want to note.)

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*This next exercise is to prove you can perform basic lead and prospect research—a big part of an entry-level salesperson's job.*

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Once you've got some basic notes, I'd recommend coming up with some ways you might be able to get in front of that type of customer.

This is where the tools and systems will really come in handy.

For instance, if you want to find marketing associates at startups, there are great resources for that—go check out LinkedIn and AngelList and run some searches for titles. Take note of your results and refine your search terms until you get the results you're after.

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*This third exercise demonstrates your ability to transform search results into useable leads—which is how reps at many early-stage companies get their lists of people to contact:*

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Now, turn your research into a usable set of leads. That basically means figuring out how to extract the contact information from a platform like LinkedIn and

getting it into readable format for your CRM software. To do this, I'd recommend adding a few tools to your belt—like LeadIQ, ZoomInfo's ReachOut, Hunter.io,

WhitePages, and Google Sheets or Excel. Essentially, you want to go from search results on LinkedIn or AngelList (or whatever platform) to a .csv file that has a name, title, company, email address, phone number, and any other valuable information you can extract.

Getting all of this information cleanly into a dataset—as a .csv—makes it possible to easily import this to your CRM, then plug it directly into a sales process. To do this, check out or install

one of the tools above (like the browser extension of LeadIQ or ReachOut). Then, as you're performing searches, use the tool to capture contact information. Most of these tools offer a free trial, so use all of the credits you can. Once you've used your credits, go look at the list and download it to a Google Sheet or Excel file. Make sure the data is clean (all the phone numbers are in the same format, etc.).

And that's it. We'll use this in a later step.

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*The next exercise is to show you can think linearly about a sales process for a specific type of potential customer—this is where you can really earn some points!*

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Using the information you've collected so far—like the type of company who might buy the product the company you research is selling and your list of potential customers—draft up

a plan for how you'll reach out to those people, what you'll say, and how many times you'll contact them. You don't have to perform these actions right now—this just proves you can think through it.

For example, you might come up with a plan that involves five attempts to contact them by email, phone, and LinkedIn over a ten-day period.

Here's what that might look like in application:



### **Day 1**

A short and sweet cold email that asks what type of software/tool they're using to solve a specific problem—and if they're not the right person to answer the question, asking if they'd be willing to introduce you to the right person.

### **Day 3**

If there's no response to your email, then a cold call to the contact with the goal to learn what software/tool they're using and how much they're paying (bonus points if you can get them to schedule a demo or a more in-depth call)

### **Day 4**

If no response, another cold call

### **Day 7**

A response to your first email, reiterating the question

### **Day 10**

A LinkedIn connection request with a short message

Again, you don't necessarily have to run this process—this exercise is more about showing you've thought through what a successful process might look like. (Bonus points if you actually write out each of the email/LinkedIn messages or a short script for

the phone call. Even more bonus points if you actually attempt to sell something while running your process.)

At the end, put together an outline of the process you came up with. We'll use this in the final step: how to actually apply.

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*Finally, in this exercise, we'll outline how to actually go about getting the job you're aiming for.*

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Assuming you've run the above process for a specific company, now it's time to bring all the steps together. I recommend using two tools to highlight everything you've done in this exercise: Google Slides and Loom.

Start by creating a new slide deck. Add the company's logo and colors to the cover slide with your name and the role you're interested in. Example: "Hey Acme Corp., I'm Mitchell, and this is why I'll crush it as an SDR."

Bonus points: to take this to the next level, go use LinkedIn to try to figure out who the hiring manager for the company might be (even if it's just your best guess). Then address the presentation to that individual. It makes it feel even more personal.

Then, in a few slides, outline what you like about the company, why what they do matters to you, and how the skills they ask for translate well with your existing skills (even if you don't have a



ton of experience). Then, spend two to three slides outlining the results of the exercise you put together. Don't go too into the weeds here—you'll cover this in the Loom video. Then, on a final slide, add how they can get in touch with you.

Once you have your deck finished, hop on Loom, and record yourself on-camera talking through the slides. Explain the content, and go into a little more detail about what you learned through the exercise and how you can apply that to be successful in the role.

Then, last step—this is critical: after you send in your application, go back to LinkedIn, find the person you think might be the hiring manager, message them and share your video, slides, and the lead list you created. While you're at it, go ahead and send an email as well (“I want to make

sure you saw this”). Then, if you don't hear anything back, follow up every 24-72 hours until you hear something.

This is sales—so you're trying to get a response (even if it's a “no”). If you can prove you're capable of persevering through rejection until you hear something, then it's a good signal. Sure, use your judgement, and try not to be annoying. But remember, if you don't have any experience, leveraging your effort and willingness to work hard can both be secret weapons.

So I know that's a lot of information. But I promise you, running that exercise until you get results will do more than just land you a job—it will provide you a solid base of learning about the fundamentals of sales that will translate directly into the job once you land it.

# The skillset for a career in sales

Contrary to popular belief, sales is not all about talking. Sure, the ability to hold a conversation and pick up the phone to call a total stranger is valuable. But listening and understanding a potential customer's needs are equally, if not more, important to being effective in sales.

Awareness is also a great soft skill in sales. How do people perceive you? Can you read a room

or social cues well? This is also a valuable tool in your sales kit.

Other useful skill sets include the ability to present, articulate communication, time and task management, the ability to create or manage workflows, a level of comfort on phone or video calls, written and verbal communication, and a high level of emotional intelligence.

“ Sales is about a mutual exchange of pleasure. The first keyword is mutual, and the second pleasure. When a transaction between a seller and buyer takes place, it isn't because the seller is greedy and the buyer is stupid. Buyers are not stupid; they know exactly what they're doing. And what they're doing is giving you something you want (money) in exchange for something they want (what you sell).

— Ash Ambirge, [You Don't Need A Job, You Need Guts](#)

Here's a bulleted list of useful sales skill sets (though not all are required out of the gates).

- Written and verbal communication
- Ability to handle rejection
- Phone skills
- Calendar management
- Proficiency with calendar and calendar management software
- Familiarity with CRM software
- Familiarity with Sales Enablement software
- Prospecting
- Ability to perform research on markets & companies
- Active listening
- Ability to speak to complete stranger
- Basic proficiency with email and office suite tools
- Copywriting
- Time management
- Task management
- Natural curiosity
- Product knowledge (or the ability to learn quickly)
- A desire to improve
- Ability to follow processes & improve them
- A general understanding of how businesses work

# The successful salesperson's toolkit

Beyond soft skills, a broad range of proficiency in different sales tools and software—added with the ability to quickly learn—will also serve you well. To dive deeper into what that looks like

in tangible terms, we've highlighted some of the most popular softwares and tools sales teams at startups use to manage their deal flow on a day-to-day basis. Click any tool to see the website.

## Prospecting



## Engagement



## Relationship management



## Validation



## Miscellaneous



# Resources for learning more about a career in sales

We could create a ton of other helpful content around sales, but I don't think that's the most useful approach for you.

What's better, in my opinion, is showcasing all of the resources from the people who do it best—so you can pursue your learning on your own terms.

Of course, we're here to help in any way we can. But we're not the hero in your career story—you are.

So, to help you take the next step toward starting a career in sales, we've put together a list of some of the best resources already available to you for free on the world wide web—from podcasts and books, to thought leaders and companies.

[Podcasts](#) • [Books](#) • [Leaders](#)

*P.S. Want to accelerate your career? Learn software sales in under twelve weeks through preHRED's [Science-Based Sales program](#).*

*P.P.S. MockQuestions has a good collection of, well, [mock questions for sales-related job interviews](#).*

## The best sales podcasts to start your career

Good news for you, sales is a really popular topic people of every level talk about a lot. Which means there are a ton of great

learning resources readily available for you to add to your favorite podcasting app so you can learn on the go.



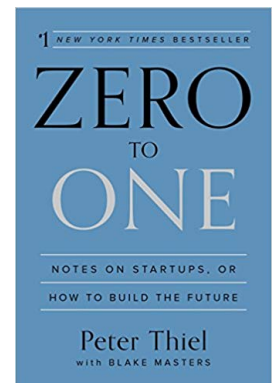
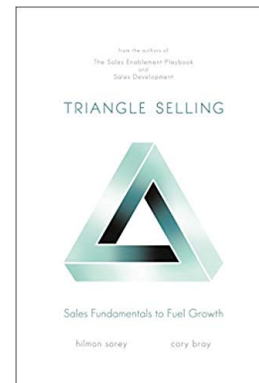
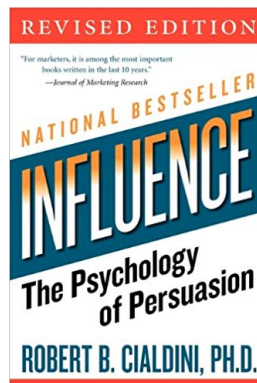
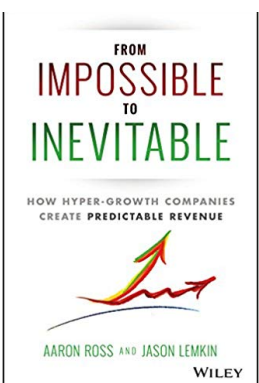
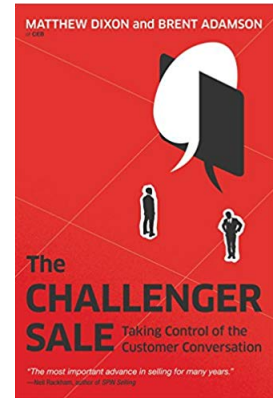
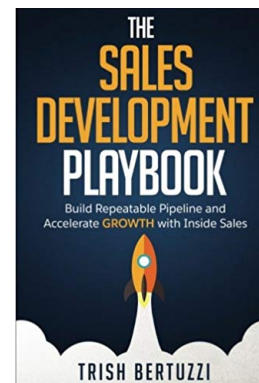
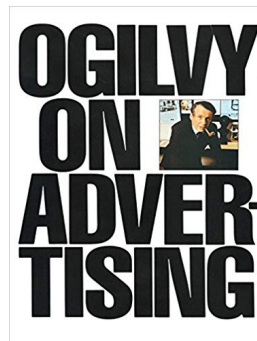
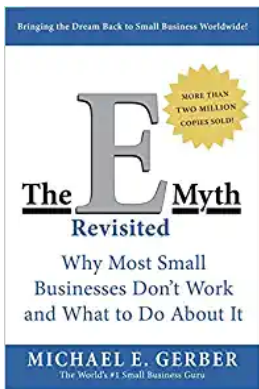
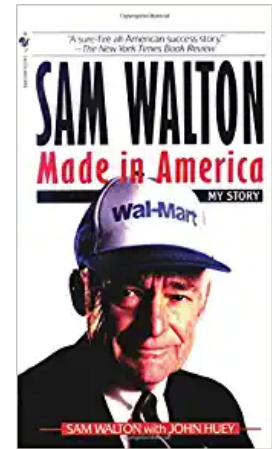
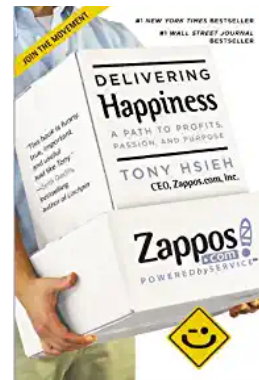
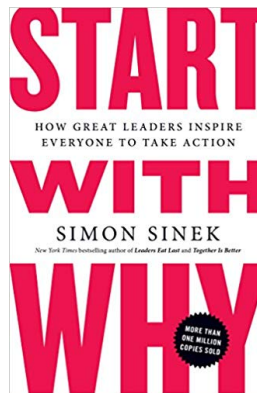
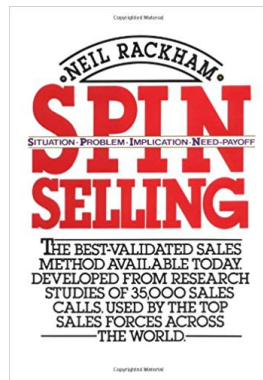
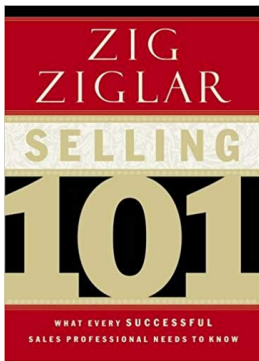
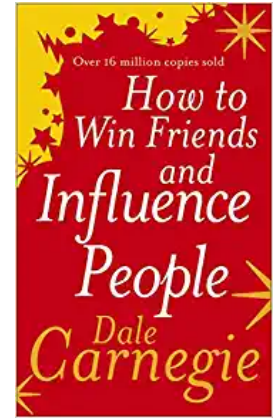
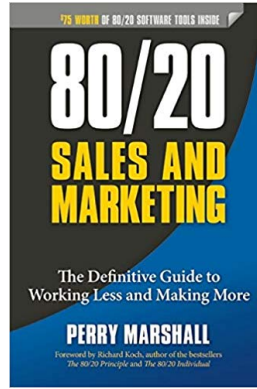
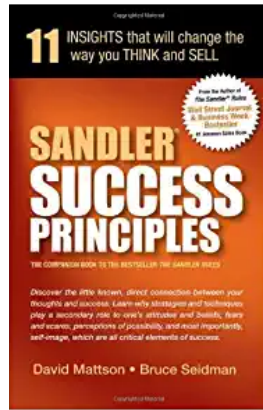
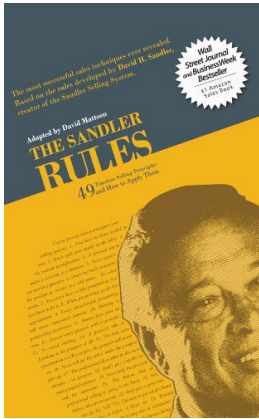
## The best sales books to start your career

There's no shortage of great books in the world—especially as it relates to building or growing a business. But even beyond your typical business books, you can find a ton of inspiration on how to better understand people, how they make decisions, and ultimately, how to sell better through a wide variety of books.

To give you a rundown, we've put together a list of some of our favorites to nudge you in the right direction.

So, without further ado, here's our essential reading list for every aspiring young salesperson in 2020.

Click any book to open a preview online.



# The best sales leaders to follow as you start your career

Sure, books and podcasts are great—but maybe you're like me and also like to learn from real people. Well, don't sweat it, because below we've put together a short list of some of our favorite sales leaders who are worth a follow.

Know someone who should be on this list? Tweet their name and why you like them to us [@HackingCareers](https://twitter.com/HackingCareers), and we just might add them.



Sam Nelson



Aaron Ross



Brian G.  
Burns



Jason M.  
Lemkin



Ali Mirza



Kevin Dorsey



Joshua  
Jordan



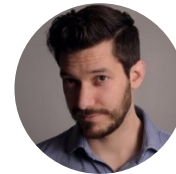
Jeremy  
Donovan



Kyle Porter



Mark  
Cranney



Marko Savic



Max  
Altschuler



Ryan O'Hara



Will Frattini



Zach Barney



# The best companies to work full-time in sales

It's not enough to just read about sales and understand it in theory. It's also helpful to be on the receiving end of a great sales process. So we wanted to high-

light a few companies who we think do it really well—so you can experience great sales firsthand (on- and offline).



You can't step foot into an Apple store without being greeted by someone. They let you play with their products. Plus, any time you need help, there's always someone only a few steps away.



Whether you drop by Drift.com or are on the receiving end of their emails, you get a sense they're actually interested in helping you do business better. It's very conversational and authentic.

HUSTLE

If you've ever received one of Sam Parr's emails, then you know what I'm talking about when I say The Hustle knows how to sell the sizzle, not the steak. Their free, daily newsletter covers a range of hot topics you will want to know about in startup sales.

NORDSTROM

Going into Nordstrom is a truly worthwhile and model sales experience—it doesn't feel like you're being sold to. It's an experience.



If you want a case study in consistency, look at Outreach. Their sales team is consistently knowledgeable and helpful, and cuts right to the chase. Truly a model company in B2B SaaS sales.



RealThread sells apparel online—competitive market, right? But their friendly, warm, and personal touch any time you interact with the team is one that makes this process easy and almost feel frictionless.

# Sales career success stories

If all of the above information is still not enough to convince you a career in sales might be worth considering, then check out some of the stories below from people in the real world who've launched their careers in sales—with and without experience.

## Luke Ruffing

[In this podcast episode](#), Luke covers what it was like to move across the country to join the sales team at a fast-growing start-up, how he got started, and how he leaned on his background in sports to help him find success.

## Kevin Cherrick

Kevin was on the hunt for a new job in sales—and he didn't want to wait for anyone to pick him. [This is his story](#) about how he turned three rejections into two job offers by taking control of his job hunt process.

## Robert Cohen

“Make it personal.” That's the mantra Robert stuck to on his job hunt—and it got him more than thirty interviews, multiple offers, and a remote sales job. [Here's his story](#) and the tips he has for other job hunters.

## Bradey Metz

On the hunt for a sales job, Bradley went heads-down on a six-step email and sales sequence—and ended up getting four to five interviews a week. [This is his story](#) on how he did it, as well as some templates and tips for running a sales job hunt like a sales process.

## Justin Murphy

For a guy who studied history in school, Justin didn't see a career in sales operations coming his way. But his love for strategy and a few handy connections led the way to two sales roles. [Here's what he shares](#) about how to break into the sales game with no experience.

## One last resource

This post is all about salespeople and their tips for winning great sales jobs—even without experience. Check it out to hear from a few awesome people who've won roles at Toggl, PandaDoc, preHIRED, and more:



[The Job Hunt is Sales: A Collection of Stories and Job-Hunting Tips from Salespeople](#)

# Final resources

Congrats on making it this far!

*Subscribe to the Daily Job Hunt newsletter. Join 200,000+ readers and get a kick in the inbox every morning.*

*Read the Career Hackers Manifesto: The core principles of discovering and doing what makes you come alive.*

# THE DAILY JOB HUNT

 careerhackers  
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*And check out the other career-hacking guides in this series:*

