

Why Filling Sales Vacancies is Like a Pressure Putt *Lessons from the 2012 Ryder Cup collapse*

By John Hoskins, Co-founder, SalesGenomix



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For those of you who play any game — physical (tennis) or mental (bridge) — you know all too well that the difference between winning and losing is often a single stat; “errors made.” Sometimes these are forced by some clever move on the part of your opponent(s), but typically in the final analysis it is the “unforced” error that does you in most.

The 2012 Ryder Cup was no exception. The United States went into Sunday’s play with the most substantial lead they ever enjoyed in the tournament’s 39-year history. The Europeans were so far behind that the US field had to win only 4.5 of 12 matches played to bring home the cup. That seemed so likely that the Vegas odds favored the US by a long shot. Sadly, the ending was an unthinkable result in favor of the Europeans with the US securing only 3.5 points — less 1/3 of the total opportunities to win.

What transpired in Chicago on that beautiful fall day at Medinah Country Club was a train wreck of unforced errors. The Europeans snatched victory from the jaws of defeat and kept the coveted Ryder Cup for 2 more years. It was the final holes of the match, the 17th and 18th, where the US players repeated the same mistakes over and over: hitting tee shots on 17 left of the pin, often off the green, and into a bunker to avoid the water right, overcooking approach shots on 18 that flew past the pin, making it nearly impossible to take the hole. At one point Johnny Miller announced 7 players in a row making the same unforced error.

But how does this relate to hiring sales reps and managers? The key ingredients that go into cooking up a good run of unforced errors are similar:

1. Pressure to perform with high stakes can muddy your decision-making skills.

The US team’s final 3 players would undoubtedly be considered 3 of the best putters on tour: Furyk, Stricker, and Woods. However, as they entered the final holes of play each knew that the weekend had come down to their ability to perform. The outcome of the entire 3 days of play was squarely on their shoulders. The result? Each missed makeable final putts on the last hole to lose or tie their match and essentially allowed the European team to pop the champagne corks.

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Sales managers who lose a rep are under pressure to perform. Quotas don't go away. The VP doesn't say, "Oh don't worry about that territory's number. I got you covered. I'll lower your target for the year." Bob Means, a sage in the field of sales recruiting, once described this pressure: When an open slot in the team occurs, it almost always pressures the hiring manager to find any candidate fast. A large bird can walk into the office and look like a high-performing sales rep. The manager knows that if they don't fill the territory fast, the odds of making bonus, going on this year's incentive award trip, and being on stage at the annual sales meeting are fading away. The theme song becomes ZZ Top's "Got Me Under Pressure."

2. Time to decide and execute is limited.

Often an unnatural set of circumstances causes us to rush to decide, fogging our judgment. We rely more on the subjective feeling of what to do, maybe even shooting from the hip versus slowing things down and using more objective decision criteria. In golf there is a clock, and when you are on the clock and the pressure to perform is on, it's a formula for disaster. You start to play "not to lose." Your confidence gets shaken and you make bad decisions. Now those who watched the painful preparation and over-analyzing by Furyk would tell you they were frustrated by his deliberate reading and over-reading of the putt. But the other extreme was the slap shot by Woods at the end, after it was a done deal, which made you want to strangle him for missing his shot to at least tie the points.

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The more time that goes by the higher the odds that the front-line manager will go home and tell their family that the Hawaii trip with golf included is off this year. Maybe you can tolerate an open territory for a month, but 2 months is iffy and at 3 months you're cooked. You essentially have to reassign the quota to the rest of your team, usually to your top performers, and fair or not, time is not on the hiring manager's side. It means in the selection and interviewing process you have a motivated buyer (the sales manager) meeting with a motivated seller (the candidate) and chaos occurs. One Xerox colleague of mine used to say, "What's better: bad breath or no breath?"

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3. Faulty evaluation: Subjective assumptions absent objective fact-based criteria.

If only the US team could have had the benefit of the announcers' more objective commentary. They talked about how the putts broke earlier in the round. They drew a line on the screen marking the perfect path for the putt or the flight of the ball. They even used computer-based graphics that were more precise. But, absent science in their decision-making, the players used their subjective interpretation of the situation, committed to their line, stroked the ball — and made an unforced error.

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Absent the science of a good, predictive, assessment tool, a costly hiring mistake leads to months of no sales productivity. Tens of thousands of dollars are wasted on training and salaries, a virtual time warp for the manager who has to coach the rep out of their job through the traditional PIP process. You must document your conversations, 30-day warnings, 90-day improvement plans,

and then severance. The team morale is affected, clients complain of the revolving door on their account, and competitors call on prospective accounts with no barriers to their success. But gut feeling, pressure to perform, and pressure of time deal a death-blow to the sales manager who allows these conditions to impair their judgment. Adding science to your decisions increases your odds by as much as 30% over conventional interviews.

The Solution



Hiring is a high-risk, high-reward decision for a sales manager. Pressure to fill the open slot can create faulty evaluations and snap judgments. The burning platform of a choice between probable death and certain death often has sales leaders choosing a sub-par candidate just to fill the open slot. A University of Michigan study indicated that hiring decisions made without the use of a valid predictive assessment tool were no better than the toss of a coin. You could literally line the candidates up against a wall, count 1-2, 1-2, 1-2, and take either group and be no more accurate.

“A wise sales leader has a discipline for recruiting.”

A wise sales leader has a discipline toward recruiting. Similar to the one that top sales reps have toward prospecting. Simply put, you should always be recruiting. The single biggest objection we encounter from prospects when presenting the [SalesGenomix talent discovery platform](#) is, “We aren’t hiring right now”. Makes you want to scream. First thought is really? Does that mean you aren’t recruiting right now? If their top rep walked in that moment and put their resume in, would they say, “Sorry, we aren’t hiring right now”. Sales managers are responsible for creating the 3 conditions for unforced errors. They face the pressures to perform, the time constraints, and the faulty evaluation methods by not keeping recruiting metrics that are due each Friday by 5 o’clock. When you have a solid sales-talent pipeline (like the one we help our clients build) and add science to your otherwise gut decisions, you derive 3 benefits:

- + **You minimize the pressure that leads to snap judgments.**
- + **You remove the time constraints with the bench strength of potential candidates waiting in the wings.**
- + **You virtually eliminate costly unforced hiring errors by adding objective hiring tools to the selection process.**

You **can** predict success.

Good selling!

John

JHoskins@SalesGenomix.com