Preferred attributes of sales people in the engineering industry of South Africa

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ABSTRACT

This research aimed to identify the preferred attributes by technical buyers of sales people in the engineering industry of South Africa.

Suppliers of technical products and services to the engineering industry of South Africa are facing increased pressure with regard to foreign competition as well as a general price squeeze from the industry due to the decline in global commodity prices. Given the complex nature of the industry, both technically and commercially, sales people in this sector have been identified as key differentiators between success and failure. A substantial amount of research is available that indicates the importance of understanding customer preference and it follows that a solid understanding of customer preferences and the role of the relationship between seller and buyer is vital for sales people to increase success and overall performance within the context in which they operate.

A thematic content analysis was conducted on the responses and information gathered from semi-structured interviews involving 12 organisational buyers active in the engineering industry of South Africa. The themes and common attributes identified across all respondents led to a deep understanding of the issues, resulting in a prioritised list of attributes that these buyers prefer in the sales people that they deal with.

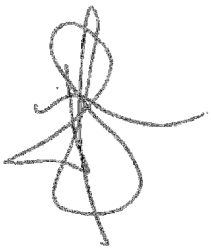
The research found that ‘technical and product knowledge’ is the most important attribute of sales people, preferred by organisational buyers in the engineering industry of South Africa. ‘Ability and willingness to solve problems’ and ‘thoroughness and follow through’ were found to be second and third most preferred attributes respectively. These, as well as another ten attributes, are discussed in detail in the study.

The key finding from this research was that suppliers of technical products and services need to equip their sales teams with the preferred attributes identified by these buyers to further differentiate their approach and be in a position to meet

customers preferences with regard to sales person attributes, if they wish to increase sales.

DECLARATION

I, David Claassen, declare that this research report is my own work, except as indicated in the references and acknowledgements. It is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Business Administration at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in this or any other university.



David Claassen

Signed at ……Sandton…….....

On the ……28th…… day of ……October…… 2015

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Purpose of the study

The purpose of this research study was to identify the preferred attributes of salespeople in the engineering industry in South Africa from the perspective of organisational buyers active in the sector.

1.2 Context of the study

An understanding of selling and relationships, and how these two affect each other, is not a new science. The following statements were found to be accurate over 20 years ago and still hold true today. Perceptions and expectations of buyers are key elements to be understood by salespeople in order to maximise relationship building opportunities (Walter, Ritter & Gemunden, 2001), which according to the literature should increase the success rate (Hawes, Mast & Swan 1989). Sales management and, in turn, the entire sales force should therefore structure their thinking around these principles in order to increase their success. A customer-focused approach is therefore discussed in detail in this report.

Customer-relationship selling continues to emerge as a significant selling strategy (Schwepker, 2003). Understanding customer preference is an important aspect of this strategy; therefore, a solid understanding of customer preferences and the role of the relationship between the seller and the buyer is vital for salespeople to increase their success and overall performance within the context in which they operate.

This study attempted to identify the required attributes of salespeople in the South African engineering industry, with a particular focus on the mining industry, and to evaluate the relative importance of these attributes to the buyers from engineering companies specifically.

Engineering companies such as DRA Mineral Projects, TWP Worley Parsons, Aurecon, Zest Energy and MDM Engineering provide engineering services to a host of South African, Australian and Canadian mining companies. Africa is seen as a major growth area following the decline in the South African mining industry. Rich in almost all commodities, from platinum and gold, to diamonds, iron ore and copper, as well as a host of base metals, Africa has unprecedented potential (SAIIA, 2012). The continued global pressure on commodity prices has necessitated mining companies to search for better ways to manage operational costs and more cost-effective ways to implement capital projects.

These engineering companies are constantly designing new process plants with newer technologies to achieve these targets. By deploying value engineering, they are constantly redesigning and rethinking existing designs to achieve increasingly efficient ways of processing minerals in order to drive capital cost down and increase operational efficiency.

These companies procure various technical products and services from sub-suppliers to build these process plants and in this context it is imperative for these engineering companies to be constantly up to date with the latest technological innovations of suppliers and to incorporate these into their designs. These suppliers operate in a business-to-business (B2B) marketing sphere and invest heavily in their salesforce to build relationships with engineering and mining companies, as well as to provide up-to-date feedback on research and development improvements that can be implemented in new projects.

Therefore, the salesforce fulfils a substantial role in deciding which products and services are used on these new projects and how they are implemented. In essence, individuals with a unique blend of engineering and salesperson attributes make up this salesforce. These people often have titles like ‘sales engineer’ or ‘project sales engineer. The function of this particular individual is much greater than providing a commodity-like product whereby delivery and price are the drivers. Instead, he/she is involved in the entire project delivery process.

Typically, the project process and salesperson involvement will be as follows:

- *Design phase:* This initial design phase would see the engineering company designing a process plant, for example. During this phase, it is imperative for the sales engineer to be able to identify all opportunities that may be available. It may sometimes even necessitate a joint design to suit the application and products available. Generally, once a design is complete, enquiries for solutions are handled by the sales engineer and his/her internal team to ensure the correct solutions are offered and other important aspects are attended to, such as price, delivery, etc.

- *Execution phase:* During this phase, the sales engineer is responsible for ensuring that the products and solutions being delivered are according to specification and adhere to the relevant safety and quality protocols of the given mine/industrial building.

- *Commissioning phase:* The sales engineer's main function, at this stage, is co-ordination. Generally, there is a team of experts that would ensure the correct installation and commissioning of the various products and solutions, while the sales engineer ensures the correct coordination of the various teams.

In this context, it is worthwhile investigating which attributes are most important from the engineering and mining company's perspective in order to create worthwhile and meaningful differentiators for the salesforce.

1.3 Problem statement

1.3.1 Main problem

The problem that this research seeks to address is that little is known about the attributes that organisational buyers prefer in the sales-persons that service them. This problem was researched in the South African engineering industry.

1.4 Significance of the study

The study filled a gap in the relevance of theory-based sales attributes, compared to practical attributes, required in the engineering and mining industry. It recorded attributes preferred by organisational buyers as opposed to the perceived attributes of suppliers to the industry.

This study provided a customer-oriented approach with regard to cultivating salesforce attributes required in the specific market and it could help dispel any preconceived ideas and biases that currently exist in major supplier organisations in the industry. The study offered insights into customers' buying preferences.

The study provided guidance to owners, shareholders, managers and sales managers of existing suppliers to the engineering and mining industry in South Africa. By obtaining this knowledge and successfully implementing it, it was hoped that further differentiators could be discovered by understanding customer requirements.

This study built on existing academic research and offered another platform for other industries, locally and abroad.

1.5 Delimitations of the study

The following were delimitations of the study:

- The engineering industry comprises a vast number of sectors, including construction, infrastructure, oil and gas, water works, power stations, marine, manufacturing, sugar, food processing, and paper and pulp. This study was limited to the mining industry.
- The study did not attempt to identify and measure business management techniques or sales techniques, but rather salesperson attributes preferred by customers of these suppliers.

- The study was limited to South African engineering companies and did not take into consideration other regions with particular strengths in this area such as Australia or Canada.

1.6 Definition of terms

- *OEM:* Original Equipment Manufacturer.
- *Process plant:* A facility designed, built and implemented to process various commodities from ore state to refined state.
- *Salesperson attributes:* This refers to the specific qualities of a person that customers' value and that create differentiation between salespersons.

1.7 Assumptions

- It was assumed that respondents were informed and had sufficient knowledge about their business preferences and that this reflected their unbiased and unprejudiced preferences.
- It was assumed that respondents had knowledge of salesperson attributes in the general sense of the concept.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

Literature reviews synthesise and examine literature and current academic knowledge on a particular topic, according to Bryant et al. (2003). Further to this, literature reviews provide descriptions of previous subjects, outline gaps and identify and build on emerging theories.

The first part of this literature review is composed of three major concepts, namely organisational buying behaviour, customer relationships and sales attributes and selling skills.

The second part reviews the literature on the importance of relevant salesperson attributes. A summary of the review is presented and an attempt made to link the literature reviewed around salesperson attributes and their relative importance in terms of purchasing decisions.

In conclusion, research propositions are derived from the literature review.

2.2 Background discussion

Consumer and industrial markets differ due to various factors, according to Kotler and Keller (2006). Some of the main differentiators are industrial markets having fewer buyers, in addition to larger buyers and close supplier-customer relationships.

Therefore, marketing to industrial consumers should be conducted in a markedly different manner to that of consumer markets. This is termed B2B marketing, a process that requires a relationship-centred approach to all facets of marketing. Kotler and Keller (2006)

With this approach in mind, the opinion of the researcher is that, it is of utmost importance for companies wishing to market in this space to understand what salesperson attributes are most preferred by their customers as well the relative importance thereof. If the success of marketing in this space is centred on relationship building, then it makes sense to understand as many relational aspects as possible in order to improve its success.

The first concept that requires understanding is B2B marketing, the focus being on organisational buyer behaviour. Knowledge of purchasers' requirements, their particular context as well as their objectives, is the first step in comprehending their preferences (Ingram, LaForge & Nichols, 2002).

The second concept is customer relationships. As a salesperson in the industrial sector, success hinges on the ability to build customer relationships (Anderson & Kerr, 2001). A key concept of a relationship is for one party to understand the other party in order for a mutual respect to be present and a mutual benefit to be realised from the relationship. In addition, cognisance of what behaviour is valued and the level of sensitivity for persuasiveness (Stone, Woodcock & Wilson, 1996) is required. With this premise in mind, sales attributes can be derived from a review of this area.

The third aspect to be analysed is sales attributes and selling skills. By reviewing these items, information is obtained regarding the skills required by a salesperson to ensure his or her effectiveness.

Lastly, previous research is reviewed for an understanding of similar research done, albeit in different industries, as it is beneficial to consult similar material and to look for linkages where relevant.

To summarise, it is important to understand the different levels of preference, context and objectives throughout the buying chain in a B2B situation. Further to this, comprehension of key aspects related to these business relationships is necessary, namely: building relationships, maintaining relationships and using relationships for the mutual benefit of both parties. Kotler and Keller (2006)

Finally, ratification of preferred sales skills and attributes could improve sales and increase markets in the industry.

2.2.1 B2B and organisational buyer behaviour

Salesperson attributes are not covered extensively in literature on organisational buyer behaviour. However, an unpacking of the broader perspectives mentioned, namely B2B and buyer behaviour, follows.

B2B

Consumer and industrial markets differ in various areas, according to Kotler and Keller (2006). Some of the differentiators found by the authors are:

- *Fewer buyers:* There are far less buyers in the industrial market than the consumer market and therefore salespeople deal with fewer buyers.
- *Larger buyers:* The few buyers in the industrial space do more purchasing than the individual buyers in the consumer space. They buy goods for various uses in their organisations.
- *Close supplier-customer relationships:* Close relationships are required in the industrial space in order for salespeople to understand the requirements of customers and to be able to provide support throughout the sales process. A good understanding between the buyer and seller is required to facilitate this process. Different customers have different needs and it is up to the salesperson to understand these and alter the approach to suit the customer.

To be successful in this space it is critical for salespeople to understand their customers' business as well as the differing needs of each of these customers. Kotler and Keller (2006) It is also important for salespeople to know where these buyers fit into the organisation and its decision-making ladder, which often differs between companies.

To gain further insight into the behaviours of buyers, it is necessary to investigate the topic of organisational buyer behaviour.

Organisational buyer behaviour

Albeit a very old model, the Robinson, Faris and Wind (1967) model discussed in this text is still largely relevant in this context. Three conceptual models were reviewed for this paper (Robinson et al., 1967; Sheth, 1973; Webster & Wind, 1972). The Robinson, Faris and Wind model (Robinson et al., 1967) was selected based on its simplicity and can be described as an industrial buying process model which includes the Buygrid framework. This analytical tool is three-dimensional and, through these dimensions, highlights factors that affect purchasing decisions:

- *Information needs:* The volume and quality of the information needed by the buyer to make a good decision.
- *Alternative options:* The seriousness of the buyer when he or she considers all alternatives and the quality and quantity of the alternatives presented to him or her.
- *Newness of the task:* How familiar the buyer is with the purchasing task. The level of uncertainty will affect how much information and the number of alternatives required.

There is a link between these factors and the observations of the salesforce, according to the Buygrid framework researched by Anderson, Chu and Weitz (1987).

Robinson et al. (1967) found that where buying centres are large, buying decisions are slow. With a large hierarchy of decision makers, the process is sometimes stifled by varying buyer preferences and objectives, which could hinder the process. Another finding was that technical personnel influence buyers more than purchasing agents do. It is therefore important for the salesforce to understand the hierarchy and to build relationships throughout to ensure that the correct information is shared across the board.

Research completed by Anderson et al. (1987) suggested a similar theme, albeit from a reverse perspective. They found that small buying centres are quicker to make decisions. The small centres focus on price and delivery, once the most appropriate product, offering the correct solution, is selection. In this situation, it follows that as long as the salesperson is persistent and the buyer is kept informed of the latest developments, a successful business should be maintained. From this research, it is clear that there is a need for customer-salesperson interaction, with decisions affected by these positive or negative interactions as a result.

A further trend to consider in organisation buyer behaviour is the global purchasing strategies of organisations (Hult, Ketchen & Nichols, 2003). Sometimes it is possible for decisions to be affected by people that the salesperson has not had an opportunity to build a relationship with, for example from another country. Through experience obtained by the researcher over a few years, it has become clear that organisations are moving towards global purchasing strategies to further reduce costs by negotiating with global suppliers in order to get lower pricing due to global spend. This requires further investigation that is not covered in this study, however is important to note.

Based on this review it is clear that various factors can be derived and linked to salesperson attributes. There is a need for information and alternative options, which can be associated with education (engineering specific), understanding engineering applications, and the product scope of the company and where to apply these in order to offer alternative options from within, thereby limiting competitor activity. Physical interactions and mutual adaptations are further factors that can be linked to salesperson attributes.

2.2.2 Customer relationships

Weiser (1995) suggested that it is more costly to acquire new customers than it is to retain existing ones. In addition, existing customers often purchase more than new customers. With this in mind, the importance of building relationships

and creating new relationships within organisations currently purchasing should be prioritised.

Customer-supplier relationships have become strategic for both parties as the customer feels he or she benefits from a close relationship from a financial point of view as well as from a support point of view, and the supplier feels he benefits from the relationship by selling more product and services (Wilson, 1995).

2.3 Preferred salesperson attributes and selling skills

The purpose of analysing both preferred attributes and selling skills is to highlight the differences and to create clarity between the two, as a buyer may interpret specific selling skills as attributes of the sales person.

Purchase decisions and sales performance are directly related to the attributes of sales people (Hadmark, Lindberg & Remahl, 2008). If a salesperson has positive attributes, as perceived by buyers, generally positive results will be obtained and vice versa. A salesperson's effectiveness is often influenced by how a buyer perceives him/her (Webster, 1968). Therefore, measures of salespeople can often be jaded by looking at sales ability exclusively. Current purchases and future potential purchases can be affected by buyers' perceptions of salespeople (Doney & Cannon, 1997).

According to Williams and Seminerio (1985), Young (2005), Hadmark et al., (2008) and Van der Westhuizen (2010), salesperson attributes preferred by organisational buyers were identified and are summarised in the following sections:

2.3.1 Ability and willingness to solve problems

An attribute identified by Williams and Seminerio (1985) was that a salesperson should be willing and able to solve the customer's problem within his own firm, in other words be an advocate for him. According to Young (2005), this attribute was identified as a top-five attribute, while it ranked first in the study completed

by Van der Westhuizen (2010) of salesperson attributes in the South African architectural aluminium fabrication industry. Regardless of the industry, this attribute routinely features as preferred and important from the buyers' perspective.

2.3.2 Thoroughness and follow through (competence and reliability)

According to Williams and Seminerio (1985), thoroughness and follow through give customers piece of mind and ensure attention is given to their challenges and that enquiries receive adequate attention. The mere feedback to customers in terms of the status of their query can be linked to positive follow through (Stone et al., 1996). Thoroughness and follow through were mentioned 10 times out of a possible 11 in a study completed by Van der Westhuizen (2010). This study found this attribute to be the most important and preferred by buyers across the spectrum of the South African architectural aluminium fabrication industry.

2.3.3 Technical and product knowledge

All the studies that reviewed salesperson attributes list the importance of technical ability. Customers gain a sense of comfort knowing that the salesperson understands the product or service being sold and is able to provide expertise. This is of particular importance when the product being sold is complex in nature, such as those sold in the engineering industry, as opposed to commodity-based products (Van der Westhuizen, 2010; Young, 2005). This attribute was selected as the third most preferred and was mentioned 10 out of a possible 11 times in the study related to the South African architectural aluminium fabrication industry (Van der Westhuizen, 2010).

2.3.4 Ability to provide technical education

This is an opportunity for upfront sales, where salespeople can educate people entering the market and thereby gain 'industry spokesperson' status in his/her particular field. (Van der Westhuizen) 2010 A further benefit in this regard is that if buyers are educated in a particular product, it is highly probable that they will continue to purchase from those salespeople and various barriers to entry for competitors are created (Van der Westhuizen, 2010; Williams & Seminerio, 1985). This is an important aspect of sales in a technical environment however, the sales person is not necessarily the one required to provide it.

2.3.5 Market knowledge and industry experience

This attribute enables a salesperson to relate to customers and their needs. It also ensures the salesperson is able to keep customers up to date with the latest developments related to their industry (Hadmark et al., 2008). This attribute was found to be relevant in studies conducted by Young (2005), and Williams and Seminerio (1985).

2.3.6 Regularity of sales calls

This attribute refers to the frequency of sales calls performed by a salesperson. The interaction approach model developed by Hakansson and Wootz (1979) emphasised the need for interactions between sellers and buyers, thereby highlighting the necessity of frequent customer calls.

2.3.7 Preparation for sales calls

This attribute refers to the preparedness of the salesperson for meetings and the effect thereof (Van der Westhuizen, 2010).

2.3.8 Being easily contactable

This refers to the accessibility of the salesperson to the customer in order to solve problems, provide information and perform general sales tasks (Young, 2005).

2.3.9 Readily available information

The availability of technical or company information as a customer requests it (Van der Westhuizen, 2010; Young, 2005).

2.3.10 Trustworthiness

Trust is a critical attribute as customers need to feel comfortable that the salesperson provides them with accurate and truthful information, which they can use for business purposes, according to Hadmark et al. (2008). Customers prefer to deal with salespeople they can trust. They have to know they can trust a salesperson as false information, incorrect technical advice and inaccurate delivery times can have a ripple effect downstream on their operations and business as a whole (Van der Westhuizen, 2010).

2.3.11 Knowledge of customers' business

By understanding the customers' business, salespeople are able to see all possible opportunities and match their offering to the needs of the customer.

2.3.12 Empathy

The definition of empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings of others. This could be used by a salesperson to pre-empt a customer reaction and tailor his approach accordingly (Ingram et al., 2002).

2.3.13 Personal attention

Most people, not only buyers, appreciate personal attention. Giving personal attention, provides affirmation of the salespersons' commitment (Hadmark et al., 2008; Ingram et al., 2002).

2.4 Relative importance of salesperson attributes

Once an understanding of the preferred salesperson attributes is obtained, it is important to understand the relative importance of each attribute. This section looks at ranking these attributes. Very little previous research has been done in this area.

Table 1: Attributes of sales persons

Attributes	Sujan Weitz & Sujan, 1988	Anderson et al., 1987	Mayer & Greenberg, 1964	Hadmark et al., 2008	Robinson et al., 1967	Hakansson & Wootz, 1979	Young, 2005	Stone et al., 1996	Williams & Seminerio, 1985
Ability and willingness to solve problems							✓	✓	✓
Thoroughness and follow through				✓			✓	✓	✓
Technical and product knowledge			✓				✓	✓	✓
Ability to provide technical education		✓			✓				✓
Market knowledge and industry experience			✓				✓		✓
Regularity of sales calls						✓			✓
Preparation for sales calls									✓
Being easily contactable						✓	✓		

Attributes	Sujan Weitz & Sujan, 1988	Anderson et al., 1987	Mayer & Greenberg, 1964	Hadmark et al., 2008	Robinson et al., 1967	Hakansson & Wootz, 1979	Young, 2005	Stone et al., 1996	Williams & Seminerio, 1985
Readily available information					✓		✓	✓	
Trustworthiness				✓					
Knowledge of customers' business									✓
Empathy			✓					✓	
Personal attention	✓		✓	✓		✓		✓	

2.4.1 Ranking by general industrial purchasers

According to the average number of mentions, Williams and Seminerio (1985) ranked various attributes and recorded the following findings (Table 2). According to their study, thoroughness and follow through received the most mentions, with 65 percent, while technical education received the lowest number of mentions, with 7.4 percent. This study was done in a very general sense and its applicability to the engineering industry in South Africa will be discussed in Chapter 4.

Table 2: Mentions of attributes according to Williams and Seminerio, 1985

Rank	Factor	Average percent mentions
1	Thoroughness and follow through	65%
2	Knowledge of product line	59%
3	Willingness to go to bat for the buyer	54%
4	Market knowledge and willingness to keep the buyer posted	41%
5	Imagination in applying his products to the buyer needs	23%
6	Knowledge of the buyers' product line	18%
7	Diplomacy in dealing with operating departments	16%

Rank	Factor	Average percent mentions
8	Preparation for sales calls	12%
9	Regularity of sales calls	9%
10	Ability to provide technical education	7%

(Williams & Seminerio, 1985)

2.4.2 Ranking by buyers in the industrial chemical industry

In the study completed by Young (2005), problem solving was ranked as the most preferred attribute of the top-six preferred attributes while industry experience was least preferred. The top-six preferred attribute rankings are shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Top six preferred attributes according to Young, 2005

Rank	Factor
1	Problem solving
2	Technical knowledge
3	Efficient and follows through
4	Easy to contact
5	Has information and samples readily available
6	Industry experience

(Young, 2005)

2.4.3 Ranking by buyers in the aluminium industry of South Africa

Finally, the study completed by Van der Westhuizen (2010), identified the five attributes listed in Table 4 as the most preferred by buyers' in the aluminium industry of South Africa.

Table 4: Top-five preferred attributes according to Van der Westhuizen, 2010

Rank	Factor
1	Ability and willingness to solve problems
2	Thoroughness and follow through
3	Technical and product knowledge
4	Being easily contactable
5	Trustworthiness

(Van der Westhuizen, 2010)

2.5 Conclusion of literature review

The first aspects covered by the review were B2B and organisational buying behaviour. Key findings were that size, structure, complexities and specific needs change depending on various aspects, including the size of the purchase, type of

product or service purchased, new purchase or repeat purchase. By understanding all these aspects of industrial markets, a salesperson can tailor their approach to improve performance and increase success in various situations.

Customer relationships and the importance thereof were found to be critical. If understood correctly and used strategically, this aspect could become an important weapon in the salespersons armoury. A sense of trust is created in developing these relationships, and it was found that these relationships are mutually beneficial for buyer and seller alike.

Various sales attributes and skills were reviewed, in a broad organisational sense, to form a foundation for this study with regard to the preferred attributes of salespersons. These attributes form the basis of customer relationship building, and full comprehension of their importance would aid a sales person and company in tailoring their approach.

The attributes listed in Table 5 were compiled from the literature review. These attributes were identified as requirements for salespeople to be effective in a broad sense (Williams & Seminerio, 1985) as well as the industrial chemical industry (Young, 2005) and the aluminium industry of South Africa (Van der Westhuizen, 2010). This study tested their validity specific to the engineering industry in South Africa.

Table 5: Attributes tested in the engineering industry of South Africa

Rank	Attribute
1	Technical and product knowledge
2	Ability and willingness to solve problems
3	Thoroughness and follow through
4	Trustworthiness
5	Market knowledge and industry experience
6	Empathy
7	Being easily contactable

Rank	Attribute
8	Knowledge of customers business
9	Personal attention
10	Ability to provide technical education
11	Regularity of sales calls
12	Preparation of sales calls
13	Readily available information

2.5.1 Research question

- Which salesperson attributes are preferred by organisational buyers in the engineering industry of South Africa and what is the relative importance of these?

Industry stakeholders could interpret the results of the research question to understand their customers and improve sales performance. Furthermore, it could be used to inform salespersons recruitment practices.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research objective was to identify attributes of sales people preferred by organisational buyers in the engineering industry of South Africa.

The methodology selected for the research is qualitative, since the study is exploratory in nature (Creswell, 2003). Furthermore, a qualitative approach was thus deemed suitable as the study was particularly concerned with understanding multiple perspectives of different individuals (Leedy & Ormrod 2005; Williams, 2007).

3.1 Research methodology/paradigm

Qualitative research is particularly suited to research that is exploratory in nature (Creswell, 2003; Carrie, 2007). Moreover, qualitative research studies typically suit the following purposes (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005; Williams, 2007):

- To reveal the characteristics or qualities of people, processes, relationships, systems, and even situations;
- To gain new insights in respect of the phenomenon being studied;
- To develop new concepts about a phenomenon;
- To ascertain the problems that exist within a phenomenon;
- To test the validity of certain claims, theories or generalisations; and
- To evaluate the effectiveness of certain policies, practices or innovations.

Weaknesses of qualitative research include the following (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005; Miles, 1979; Yin, 1994):

- Lack of structure;
- Lack of objectivity;
- Relatively small samples;
- Lack of numeric data;
- Limited amount of established guidelines; and

- Lack of clear data analysis conventions.

3.2 Research design

A semi-structured interview approach was followed, which allowed some flexibility in terms of eliciting views and opinions from the interviewed respondents. The objective of these interviews was to develop an understanding of preferred salesperson attributes according to the respondent, to present some attributes found in literature and initiate a discussion into how these fit into the thinking of the respondents. Questions around reasons for their preferences assisted with an in depth understanding of these preferences.

The interview process consisted of 12 interviews with organisational buyers of South African engineering companies. Each interview was recorded for back-up and review purposes.

As the interviews were semi-structured, an interview guide was used. The interview provided an initial opportunity for participants to share and provide attributes of salespersons' that are preferred, as well as which attributes they believed to be most important. The discussions were not led by the researcher and allowed for as accurate information as possible to ensure as legitimate a reflection of the industry as possible. The interview discussion included respondents' ranking of their top-five attributes, as per Table 5. Lastly, respondents were encouraged to provide some form of justification for their chosen attributes.

The purpose of interviewing these respondents was not merely to obtain a list of preferred attributes that would match the literature review, but also to gain content surrounding the specific industry and to test previous work done in other industries.

An advantage of interviews, according to Creswell (2003), is that they offer an opportunity to alter and manage the questioning process and provide a measure of flexibility in the process.

Limitations to be aware of with the interviewing process include (Creswell, 2003; Hussey & Hussey, 1997):

- *Researcher presence biasing responses:* This is an inescapable reality using the interviewing process for research. An attempt to create the most comfortable environment and allow the respondents an open forum to discuss their preferences without bias was made.

- *Location biases:* Sometimes results can be biased by the location selected for the interview. This was not a problem with this research as the interviews were conducted at the respondents' offices.

- *The provision of 'indirect' information to respondents*: No indirect or suggested information was provided to the respondents.

- *The ability of respondents to articulate their opinions:* This is another inescapable reality. However, while it is naïve to assume all respondents would be able to articulate themselves perfectly, every effort was made to understand each respondent. Each interview was recorded and any information that was not perfectly clear was played back to the respondent providing an opportunity to amend it.

3.3 Population and sample

3.3.1 Population

The population for this research included organisational buyers of South African engineering companies. Typically, these companies operated predominantly in the African mining industry.

There were no limitations as to age, race, gender, education background and previous work experience. However, it would be necessary that members of this group be currently employed as decision-makers in the procurement process.

3.3.2 Sample and sampling method

A sample of convenience was used. These were not random and were selected based on their influence and understanding of the research topic. A sample of 12 organisational buyers was drawn. A significant effort was made to include as demographically diverse a sample as possible. A list of potential respondents is provided in Table 6.

The organisational buyers included in the sample were based in companies with headquarters in the Gauteng provincial area for ease of conducting the research, as well as due to time constraints. This location convenience is not expected to affect the research data as most of the prominent engineering companies in South Africa are headquartered in this province.

Convenience sampling as opposed to random sampling was employed as potential respondents need to be easily accessed (Creswell, 2003).

Table 6: List of potential respondents

Number	Institution	Respondent	Title
1	DRA Mineral Projects	Richard Anderson	Project Engineer
2	TWP Worley Parsons	Hamanth Ramlatchman	Lead Electrical Engineer
3	E n I Electrical	Mike Kelly	Project Engineer
4	Ardbel JV	Khumi Mokgabudi	Project Engineer
5	MDM Engineering	Jonathan McDermot	Lead Electrical Engineer
6	SMP Projects	Brandon Russell	Project Engineer
7	Bateman Projects	Tony Lowth	Lead Electrical Engineer
8	Thyssenkrupp Polysius	Dr Wilfred Barkhuizen	Electrical Engineer
9	Ardbel JV	Kris van der Walt	Electrical Engineer
10	Outotec SA	Jimmy Loucas	Engineer
11	DRA Mineral Projects	Peter Willcock	Senior Electrical Engineer
12	TWP Worley Parsons	Megan Keefer	Electrical Engineer
13	Aurecon	Pogiso “Heaven” Modise	Senior Electrical Engineer
14	Senet Projects	Anton Preston	Electrical Engineer
15	MDM Engineering	Ross Manning	Project Director

Number	Institution	Respondent	Title
16	WSP Projects	Richard Baard	COO
17	CAI Consultants	Altaf Cuzzie	Buyer
18	Zest Energy	Alastair Gerrard	Project Engineer
19	Metix	Wynand Moolman	Mechanical Engineer
20	Metix	Bradley Nguma	Electrical Engineer
21	Electro Projects	Dirk Appel	Electrical Engineer
22	Anglo American	Cynthia Kirkby	Supply Chain Manager
23	DRA Mineral Projects	Nicolette Ott	Electrical Engineer
24	MDM Engineering	Bruce Stephenson	Electrical Engineer

3.4 The research instrument

A semi-structured interview was conducted, a list of questions was used to probe the respondents with regard to their perceptions of preferred attributes while providing the respondent a significant amount of leeway in his/her responses (Bryman, 2004).

The interview commenced with a formal introduction and a brief background to the research and its objectives. The respondent was allowed to discuss freely the attributes they personally prefer. A list of attributes was presented to the respondents and they were given an opportunity to reassess their preferences and comment further, particularly where a deeper understanding of a certain perspective was required, or in instances where the respondent did not provide sufficient information on a certain attribute. Following this, the respondents were provided with the outcome of research conducted locally in different industries by Young (2005) and Van der Westhuizen (2010) and the attributes identified and listed in Table 5. Respondents were asked to select their top-five attributes and rank these according to which are most important in their view. Lastly, respondents were asked to provide a justification as to their ranking of the top-five attributes. A sample of the research instrument is included in Appendix A.

3.5 Procedure for data collection

The potential respondents were contacted directly by telephone to inform them of the research and invite them to participate in an interview. At this time, information on the purpose of the study, the subjects to be covered and the research process, including the expected duration of the interview, was provided.

Upon the acceptance by the respondent, a meeting time and location to conduct the interview was arranged. In instances where respondents declined to partake in the interview, alternative respondents were approached. Respondents were offered a copy of the research report.

The semi-structured interview process took place at the respondent's offices. This was the most convenient for the respondent and the familiar surroundings allowed the respondents to feel more at ease in talking to the researcher. Upon consent of each respondent, the interview was recorded, notwithstanding the potential risk of respondents' becoming alarmed or self-conscious at the prospect of being recorded (Bryman, 2004). In addition, handwritten notes were taken during the interview.

The researcher's presence may have altered the responses somewhat (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005); therefore, the respondents were not led in their responses, and every effort was made to facilitate open discussion around the research questions.

3.6 Data analysis and interpretation

The data analysis technique that employed was a thematic content analysis. A thematic analysis closely resembles content analysis in that common and recurring themes are identified in the data (Burns, 2000). Content analysis is defined as "a detailed and systematic examination of the contents of a particular body of material for the purposes of identifying patterns, themes or biases"

(Leedy & Ormrod, 2005, p. 142). In this instance, the content analysis was conducted on the information gathered during the semi-structured interviews.

Information gathered from interviews with respondents was analysed from the recorded audio and used to construct the main findings of this research. With the use of tables, the key attributes and/or themes from the interviews were identified.

The data from all the interviews was integrated into one document and the frequency of each specific attribute and/or theme tabulated. Unusual responses, which may signify differing views, were specifically noted. This process highlighted common themes and attributes identified across all respondents, and enabled the interpretation of the results and developed a deep understanding of the content.

Throughout the data analysis and interpretation process, the results were critically reviewed with due reference to the literature.

3.7 Limitations of the study

The research conducted faced a number of potential limitations:

- The research was exploratory in nature and only a limited number of respondents were interviewed.
- The methodology is limited by and to the researcher's abilities, integrity and sensitivity, and results may therefore be open to misinterpretation, whether intended or accidental (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). This is referred to as researcher bias. Strict procedures and a standard protocol were adopted in order to minimise and overcome this limitation.
- Engineering companies have different processes of order placement, and these differences could have produced different results.

3.8 Validity and reliability

Leedy and Ormrod (2005) provide a list of nine general criteria, based on significant prior research by a number of academics, as to evaluating qualitative research. These include:

[1] purposefulness;
[2] explicitness of assumptions and biases;
[3] rigour;
[4] open-mindedness;
[5] completeness;
[6] coherence;
[7] persuasiveness;
[8] consensus, and
[9] usefulness.

3.8.1 External validity

External validity refers to the extent to which the results of a study can be generalised against other external contexts (Leedy & Ormrod, 2001). As the nature of this study was not random, it is not possible to generalise the results. However, it could prove to be an informative study for people in the industry.

The study was conducted in the industry as it exists today. Members of the industry and their preferences were taken from practical situations, further validating the study (Leedy & Ormrod, 2001).

A representative sample was selected across the buying chain of the engineering sector, while culturally and diverse ethnic backgrounds were sampled (Leedy & Ormrod, 2001).

3.8.2 Internal validity

Internal validity refers to the extent to which the study's design and the data it yields allow accurate conclusions about cause-and-effect and the relationships within the data to be drawn (Leedy & Ormrod, 2001).

Internal validity can only be assured where the respondent is not influenced or led in any direction and can provide comments freely during the interview. Every effort was made to ensure all respondents were in a comfortable environment, not led in any way and understood the importance of their open and non-biased feedback.

CHAPTER 4: PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

4.1 Introduction

The presentation of results and the discussion of results have been combined to avoid unnecessary repetition.

The chapter therefore presents and identifies the key factors and themes stemming from the semi-structured interview process. A research question was derived from the literature review against which the research was conducted. The preferred attributes of salespeople from the perspective of technical people active in the engineering industry of South Africa were sought. The results and discussions stemming from the research are presented in order of perceived importance according to the respondents.

In order to determine the attributes perceived to be the most important, respondents were asked to select their five most important and to assign a value of one for the most important attribute and five for the least important attribute. To arrive at a composite score for each attribute, the scale was reversed so that attributes that were ranked as one were given a score of five and attributes ranked as five were given a score of one. In this manner, a prioritisation of attributes based on the highest number of votes each attribute obtained was derived. The findings according to the prioritised list of attributes are provided in Table 10. The ranking of the attributes provided interesting research material. However, even more interesting was the feedback obtained through discussion with each participant. This is discussed later in this chapter.

4.2 Demographic profile of interview respondents

Twelve interviews were conducted. Of the 15 potential respondents contacted, 12 indicated a willingness to be interviewed and three informed the researcher that they were unable, due to time constraints on current projects, to be interviewed. The initial research plan was to interview participants representative of a broad demographic spectrum. The interviews were conducted following an interview appointment schedule provided in Table 7.

Table 7: Schedule of interviews conducted

Number	Date	Institution	Respondent	Position
1	14 December 2014	DRA Mineral Projects.	Richard Anderson	Project Engineer
2	15 January 2015	TWP Worley Parsons	Hamanth Ramlatchman	Lead Electrical Engineer
3	15 January 2015	Ardbel JV	Khumi Mokgabudi	Project Engineer
4	19 January 2015	Zest Energy	Alastair Gerrard	Project Engineer
5	19 January 2015	Aurecon	Pogiso “Heaven” Modise	Senior Electrical Engineer
6	20 January 2015	DRA Mineral Projects	Peter Willcock	Senior Electrical Engineer
7	20 January 2015	MDM Engineering	Jonathan McDermot	Lead Electrical Engineer
8	21 January 2015	Matomo Projects	Megan Keefer	Electrical Engineer
9	4 February 2015	Senet Projects	Anton Preston	Electrical Engineer
10	5 February 2015	E & I Electrical	Mike Kelly	Project Engineer
11	6 February 2015	Ardbel JV	Kris Van Der Walt	Electrical Engineer
12	10 February 2015	Thyssen Krupp Engineering	Dr Wilfred Barkhuizen	Electrical Engineer

All the interviews took place at respondents' offices in Johannesburg, with the exception of two, which were conducted via telephone for convenience purposes, with interviews being conducted against the research instrument. A sample of the research instrument is included in Appendix A.

Prior to conducting the interview, respondents confirmed their willingness for the interview to be recorded. All interviews were recorded. A copy of the individual interview recordings can only be made available upon special request.

4.3 Results pertaining to the preferred attributes of salespeople in the South African engineering industry

Findings from the literature review and previous research identified 13 attributes that are seen to be preferred attributes of salespeople in the oil and gas as well as the aluminium industries of South Africa.

Table 8 provides a summary of respondents' ranking of the top 13 attributes. Attention is drawn to Table 9, which provides a reversed scale ranking of respondents' initial ranking in order to arrive at a composite ranking for comparative purposes.

The findings from Table 9 were rank-ordered according to their total score achieved and are presented in Table 10.

Table 8: Respondents' ranking of preferred attributes of sales people in the engineering industry of South Africa – original scale

Attribute	RA	HR	AG	HM	KM	MKf	PW	JM	MK	WB	AP	KvdW
Ability and willingness to solve problems	2	4	3	3		3	3	1	2	4	3	4
Thoroughness and follow through	1		5		4	2	1	5	3	3	1	
Technical and product knowledge		2	1	1	1	1	4	2		1		3
Ability to provide technical education												
Market knowledge and industry experience	3	5	2	2				3			5	
Regularity of sales calls												
Preparation of sales calls												
Being easily contactable	5			5	3	4	2		4			5
Readily available information												
Trustworthiness	4	1		4	2	5	5	4	5		4	2
Knowledge of customers' business			4		5					2		
Empathy									1	5	2	1
Personal attention		3										

Key: RA = Richard Anderson, HR = Hamanth Ramlatchman, AG = Alastair Gerrard, HM = Heaven Modise, KM = Khumi Mokgabodi, MKf = Megan Keefer, PW = Peter Willcock, JM = Jonathan McDermot, MK = Mike Kelly, WB = Wilfred Barkhuizen, AP = Anton Preston, KvdW = Kris van der Walt

Table 9: Respondents' ranking of preferred attributes of sales people in the engineering industry of South Africa – reversed scale

Attribute	RA	HR	AG	HM	KM	MKf	PW	JM	MK	WB	AP	KvdW	Total
Ability and willingness to solve problems	4	2	3	3		3	3	5	4	2	3	2	34
Thoroughness and follow through	5		1		2	4	5	1	3	3	5		29
Technical and product knowledge		4	5	5	5	5	2	4		5		3	38
Ability to provide technical education													0
Market knowledge and industry experience	3	1	4	4				3			1		16
Regularity of sales calls													0
Preparation of sales calls													0
Being easily contactable	1			1	3	2	4		2			1	14
Readily available information													0
Trustworthiness	2	5		2	4	1	1	2	1		2	4	24
Knowledge of customers' business			2		1					4			7
Empathy									5	1	4	5	15
Personal attention		3											3

Key: RA = Richard Anderson, HR = Hamanth Ramlatchman, AG = Alastair Gerrard, HM = Heaven Modise, KM = Khumi Mokgabodi, MKf = Megan Keefer, PW = Peter Willcock, JM = Jonathan McDermot, MK = Mike Kelly, WB = Wilfred Barkhuizen, AP = Anton Preston, KvdW = Kris van der Walt

Table 10: Ranked preferred attributes of sales people in the engineering industry of South Africa

Rank	Attribute	Final score
1	Technical and product knowledge	38
2	Ability and willingness to solve problems	34
3	Thoroughness and follow through	29
4	Trustworthiness	24
5	Market knowledge and industry experience	16
6	Empathy	15
7	Being easily contactable	14
8	Knowledge of customers business	7
9	Personal attention	3
10	Ability to provide technical education	0
11	Regularity of sales calls	0
12	Preparation of sales calls	0
13	Readily available information	0

The order as per the ranking exercise was supported by the views, opinions and statements provided by respondents during the interviews conducted.

4.4 Analysis of results pertaining to the preferred attributes of sales people in the engineering industry of South Africa

4.4.1 Technical and product knowledge

This attribute received the highest number of votes from respondents, with five first-place rankings, two second-place rankings, one third-place ranking and a final fourth-place ranking, making for a total score of 38. This attribute jointly scored nine ‘hits’ with the third ranked attribute, thoroughness and follow through.

Table 11: Technical and product knowledge votes

	HR	AG	HM	KM	MKf	PW	JM	WB	KvdW	Final score
Initial ranking	2	1	1	1	1	4	2	1	3	
Reversed ranking	4	5	5	5	5	2	4	5	3	38

Key: HR = Hamanth Ramlatchman, AG = Alastair Gerrard, HM = Heaven Modise, KM = Khumi Mokgabodi, MKf = Megan Keefer, PW = Peter Willcock, JM = Jonathan McDermot, , WB = Wilfred Barkhuizen, KvdW = Kris van der Walt

Every respondent mentioned this attribute during the discussion, even though three never ranked it in their top-five. Richard Anderson (personal communication, December 14, 2014) was one of the respondents not to rank this attribute in his top-five but stated the following: *"While it is important for the salesperson to have basic product and technical knowledge, it is often overlooked by him as long as the salesperson knows where to find the correct information and does so accurately and timeously".* The importance of this attribute was, however, highlighted by many respondents as the most important attribute, with five first place rankings confirming this.

Khumi Mokgabodi (personal communication, January 15, 2015) made a compelling statement while discussing the technical and product knowledge of a salesperson: *"How can I put my trust into a solution that the person selling it to me has limited or no knowledge about?"* She further added that: *"The salesperson's knowledge of the products and solutions he/she is selling displays confidence in the fact that they know for sure what they are offering is correct for my application"*. Hamanth Ramlatchman (personal communication, January 15, 2015) stated the following: *"Engineers count on the salesperson to understand the application requirement and on them having the ability to recommend or suggest products and solutions that would suit this requirement",* as well as adding that *"engineers need to be confident that the information received from salespeople can be transferred to their clients with confidence as there is often not enough time for them to test products for each application".* From these statements it is clear that, for a salesperson to add value and be successful in

this industry, he/she is required to have a technical understanding of the products being sold and their related applications.

Megan Keefer and Dr Wilfred Barkhuizen went further than this and suggested that salespeople in their field should have some sort of tertiary technical qualification as a minimum to be effective in the industry. Megan Keefer (personal communication, January 21, 2015) stated: *"My expectation when dealing with a salesperson is that they at least have some tertiary education in the field of engineering. Otherwise it will be difficult for me to discuss my requirements and, frankly, could waste my time"*. Dr Wilfred Barkhuizen (personal communication, February 10, 2015) echoed this: *"We are in an industry which makes use of engineering principles to provide a solution to our clients. Our suppliers are an extension of this by supplying us with engineered products to suit; therefore the salesperson first needs to understand the engineering principles of the entire package before they can recommend a solution to suit, and this understanding requires at least some engineering education"*.

It is clear from the respondents' comments that technical and product knowledge was an important attribute of a salesperson focusing on the South African engineering industry. This also confirms the findings of the literature review.

4.4.2 Ability and willingness to solve problems

This attribute received the second highest number of votes from respondents, with one first-place ranking, two second-place rankings, five third-place rankings and three fourth-place rankings, making for a total score of 34. The factor scored the highest number of 'hits', 11, with only one respondent not including it in their list of top-five attributes.

Table 12: Ability and willingness to solve problems votes

	RA	HR	AG	HM	MKf	PW	JM	MK	WB	AP	KvdW	Final score
Initial ranking	2	4	3	3	3	3	1	2	4	3	4	
Reversed ranking	4	2	3	3	3	3	5	4	2	3	2	34

Key: RA = Richard Anderson, HR = Hamanth Ramlatchman, AG = Alastair Gerrard, HM = Heaven Modise, MKf = Megan Keefer, PW = Peter Willcock, JM = Jonathan McDermot, MK = Mike Kelly, WB = Wilfred Barkhuizen, AP = Anton Preston, KvdW = Kris van der Walt

Williams and Seminerio (1985) described the ability and willingness to solve problems as "the willingness to go and bat for the buyer within his own firm" (p. 75), and in this study identified it as a key attribute of a salesperson. Both Young's (2005) and Van der Westhuizen's (2010) studies on preferred attributes of salespeople in the industrial chemical industry and aluminium industry of South Africa respectively identified this attribute as one of the preferred top-five attributes.

Significantly, various respondents interviewed discussed this attribute as very important for salespeople. All respondents mentioned this as an important attribute independently of the list of attributes shared with them. Peter Willcock (personal communication, January 20, 2015) highlighted the importance of this attribute: *"it is vital that the salesperson has the ability to take enquiries and queries from the engineering team and walk them through the necessary steps within their organisation".* Richard Anderson (personal communication, December 14, 2014) commented, *"The ability to provide technical and commercial assistance is only a small part of the requirement of the salesperson. Of much greater value is the ability to walk the engineer through the process of dealing with their organisation".* Further to this, he added: "*Time is limited when executing these projects, so a salesperson that correctly interprets the requirement and communicates it effectively and efficiently within his team is a valuable asset".*

Khumi Mokgabudi (personal communication, January 15, 2015) exemplified the importance of this attribute: *"In the engineering environment, particularly the*

project environment, change in technical requirements, deadlines and scope is inevitable. Therefore the ability and willingness of the salesperson to coordinate these changes within their organisation is vital to avoid delays and unreasonable cost implications". This sentiment was echoed by Jonathan McDermot (personal communication, January 20, 2015): *"There are multiple, simultaneous challenges that engineers face during project execution, and it helps tremendously if the salesperson from a particular organisation removes challenges by solving the problems related to his supply with limited or no input from the engineer"*. Mike Kelly (personal communication, February 5, 2015) added, *"The ability of the salesperson to solve problems and co-ordinate the resources within his organisation takes some pressure off the engineer and allows him to focus on other aspects of the project that require his direct involvement".*

As can be noted from the respondents' comments, their views on the ability and willingness to solve problems tied in closely with the literature review.

4.4.3 Thoroughness and follow through

This attribute received the third highest number of votes, with three first-place rankings, one second-place ranking, two third-place rankings, one fourth-place ranking and two fifth-place rankings, making for a total score of 29. The attribute scored the third highest number of 'hits' jointly with technical and product knowledge, with a total of nine.

Table 13: Thoroughness and follow through votes

	RA	AG	KM	MKf	PW	JM	MK	WB	AP	Final score
Initial ranking	1	5	4	2	1	5	3	3	1	
Reversed ranking	5	1	2	4	5	1	3	3	5	29

Key: RA = Richard Anderson, AG = Alastair Gerrard, HM = Heaven Modise, KM = Khumi Mokgabodi, MKf = Megan Keefer, PW = Peter Willcock, JM = Jonathan McDermot, MK = Mike Kelly, WB = Wilfred Barkhuizen, AP = Anton Preston

Five respondents included this attribute in their list of top-five attributes independently of the ranking table provided and according to their perspective regarding preferred attributes of salespeople.

A common theme regarding this attribute presents itself through comments made by respondents specifically related to accuracy of information transmitted through the organisation. Megan Keefer (personal communication, January 21, 2015) stated, *"I need to know that the salesperson I am dealing with accurately transmits my requirement to other members of his organisation and that he will follow it through to the end, while ensuring he responds within the timeframe given"*. Richard Anderson (personal communication, December 14, 2014) commented: *"Time is money, particularly in this industry, so it is vitally important that the salesperson correctly interprets my request and follows it through; this frees me up to channel my energy to other aspects of the project".* He added: *"I don't expect the salesperson to have answers to everything immediately, as long as he can find out and respond in time for me to make a decision".*

Alastair Gerrard (personal communication, January 19, 2015) remarked, *"It is pointless for a salesperson to send standard responses into the market without understanding our needs. We require thorough responses to our requirements and custom solutions where possible".*

In the literature review, it was found that this attribute is important as it gives piece of mind to customers; salespeople who can accurately process their enquiry and ensure it is followed through adequately. Customers require competence, accuracy and reliability from a salesperson as their downstream service levels depend on it (Van der Westhuizen, 2010).

4.4.4 Trustworthiness

This attribute received the fourth highest number of votes, with one first-place ranking, two second-place rankings, four fourth-place rankings and three fifth-place rankings, making for a total score of 24. The attribute scored the second highest number of 'hits' jointly with technical and product knowledge.

Table 14: Trustworthiness votes

	RA	HR	HM	KM	MKf	PW	JM	MK	AP	KvdW	Final score
Initial ranking	4	1	4	2	5	5	4	5	4	2	
Reversed ranking	2	5	2	4	1	1	2	1	2	4	24

Key: RA = Richard Anderson, HR = Hamanth Ramlatchman, HM = Heaven Modise, KM = Khumi Mokgabodi, MKf = Megan Keefer, PW = Peter Willcock, JM = Jonathan McDermot, MK = Mike Kelly, WB = Wilfred Barkhuizen, AP = Anton Preston, KvdW = Kris van der Walt

Eight respondents included this attribute in their list of top-five attributes independently of the ranking table provided and according to their perspective regarding preferred attributes of salespeople.

Of 12 respondents, 10 ranked this attribute in their top-five list of attributes from the table presented to them. The two respondents that did not rank this attribute, Alastair Gerrard and Dr Wilfred Barkhuizen, believed that this is not an attribute worth ranking as it is the minimum expectation for anyone with which they do business. Alastair Gerrard (personal communication, January 19, 2015) stated, *"Trustworthiness is a bare minimum when dealing with any supplier in our business. It is something that is easily measurable and easily found out, in which case the risk outweighs any benefit of dealing with the person and we simply request a different salesperson or change suppliers completely*". Dr Wilfred Barkhuizen added, "*Trustworthiness of a salesperson should be a given. If this is proven otherwise, we simply won't engage with that individual or company"*.

Hamanth Ramlatchman (personal communication, January 15, 2015) ranked this as his most preferred attribute; independent of the list provided initially and then as his most preferred from the list options given to him. He was unequivocal in his justification of this ranking*: "We invest a large sum of money and time in the products/solutions recommended by the salesperson, and therefore trust is of utmost importance. The trustworthiness is a direct reflection of the organisation he represents".* He added: *"One instant of mistrust between the engineer and the salesperson has the potential to tarnish the image of the organisation as a whole".*

Khumi Mokgabudi (personal communication, January 15, 2015) linked this attribute to the importance of relationship building between the engineer and the salesperson: *"It is very important for an engineer to have a good relationship with the salesperson and trust is a key aspect in any positive relationship"*.

This ranking of this attribute, as well as the comments made by various respondents, correlates with Van der Westhuizen's (2010) study relating to preferred attributes of salespeople in the aluminium industry of South Africa, as well as the findings by Hadmark et al. (2008).

4.4.5 Market knowledge and industry experience

This attribute received the fifth highest number of votes from respondents, with two second-place rankings, two third-place rankings and two fifth-place rankings, making for a total score of 16. The attribute scored the sixth highest number of 'hits'.

Table 15: Market knowledge and industry experience votes

	RA	HR	AG	HM	JM	AP	Final score
Initial ranking	3	5	2	2	3	5	
Reversed ranking	3	1	4	4	3	1	16

Key: RA = Richard Anderson, HR = Hamanth Ramlatchman, AG = Alastair Gerrard, HM = Heaven Modise, JM = Jonathan McDermot, AP = Anton Preston

Richard Anderson and Heaven Modise mentioned this as an important attribute independently of the ranking table provided.

A theme emerged from the discussion with a number of respondents with regard to the importance of understanding the market and industry to be able to recommend the correct products and solutions. Khumi Mokgabudi (personal communication, January 15, 2015) and Heaven Modise (personal communication, January 19, 2015) reinforced this theme stating respectively "*This should be a given. If the salesperson does not know the market or have*

industry experience, he won't be in a position to recommend fit-for-purpose solutions". "The salesperson has to understand the market in order to provide suggested products that would suit the applications". Alastair Gerrard (personal communication, January 19, 2015) provided additional relevance: "*It is important for the salesperson to be up to date on the market environment as the product he/she is selling may not be seen as a prioritised solution to engineers for a specific application"*. Further to this, he added: *"It is also important for the salesperson to understand the customer requirements regarding budget and technical trends in the industry in order to offer relevant solutions".*

Feedback received from respondents, as well as the fact that it forms part of the top-five attributes preferred by this particular industry, correlates with the findings in the literature. It is important to note that in the study of the aluminium industry of South Africa (Van der Westhuizen, 2010), this attribute was not identified as a preferred attribute, with doubts raised as to its importance in a study conducted by Mayer and Greenberg (1964), albeit the relevance of these findings could be outdated. Given the relatively low number of votes received for this attribute, research should be done into other industries to test its validity.

4.4.6 Empathy

This attribute was ranked sixth by respondents, with two first-place rankings, one second-place ranking and one fifth-place ranking, making for a total score of fifteen. The attribute also scored the third lowest number of 'hits' with a total of four.

Table 16: Empathy votes

	MK	WB	AP	KvdW	Final score
Initial ranking	1	5	2	1	
Reversed ranking	5	1	4	5	15

Key: MK = Mike Kelly, WB = Wilfred Barkhuizen, AP = Anton Preston, KvdW = Kris van der Walt

Surprisingly, while the attribute was only ranked in the top-five by four respondents, three of the four ranked it very highly. Nonetheless, the importance of empathy was alluded to by respondents when providing their personal perspectives. In many cases, the concept of empathy was inferred rather than mentioned outright. Kris van der Walt (personal communication, February 6, 2015) referred to it as the most important attribute: *"It is most important for a salesperson to have an in-depth understanding of the place I find myself in with regard to the requirement I have. When I ask for specific information or a specific deadline to be met, it's because I am under pressure to produce".*

Respondents' views of empathy as an important attribute were varied, but most shared the view that there are more important attributes preferred for salespeople. This corresponds well with the study conducted by Van der Westhuizen (2010), where empathy only received four mentions from a possible eleven.

4.4.7 Being easily contactable

This attribute was ranked seventh by respondents, with one second-place ranking, one third-place ranking, two fourth-place rankings and three fifth-place rankings, making for a total score of 14. The ranking scored seven 'hits'.

Table 17: Being easily contactable votes

	RA	HM	KM	MKf	PW	MK	KvdW	Final Score
Initial ranking	5	5	3	4	2	4	5	
Reversed ranking	1	1	3	2	4	2	1	14

Key: RA = Richard Anderson, HM = Heaven Modise, KM = Khumi Mokgabodi, MKf = Megan Keefer, PW = Peter Willcock, MK = Mike Kelly, WB = Wilfred Barkhuizen, KvdW = Kris van der Walt

Just over half of the respondents ranked being easily contactable as a top-five attribute by. However, the ranking score was generally low. The consensus was that as long as the engineer knows who to contact or where to find the information required, it is not necessary that the salesperson be easily

contactable. Richard Anderson (personal communication, December 14, 2014) stated, "*As long as the salesperson gets back to me with the necessary information, in a reasonable timeframe, it is not vitally important".* Peter Willcock (personal communication, January 20, 2015) mentioned, *"I don't expect the salesperson to be contactable immediately as long as he responds with urgency or points me in the right direction with regard to an alternative source for the info I require".*

This is in contrast to the Van der Westhuizen study (2010), which ranked this as a top-five attribute preferred in the aluminium industry of South Africa. The respondents interviewed were of the opinion that if information is readily available and they knew where to find it, and that the salesperson responds to them in a reasonable timeframe, this attribute is not one of the most preferred.

4.4.8 Knowledge of customers' business

This attribute was ranked eighth by respondents, with one second-place ranking, one fourth-place ranking and one fifth-place ranking, making for a total score of seven. The attribute scored three 'hits'.

Table 18: Knowledge of customers' business votes

	AG	KM	WB	Final score
Initial ranking	4	5	2	
Reversed ranking	2	1	4	7

Key: AG = Alastair Gerrard, KM = Khumi Mokgabodi, WB = Wilfred Barkhuizen

Three respondents ranked this attribute as a top-five attribute from the list given to them. Interestingly, it was ranked by two respondents, independent of the list given to them, but not followed through once they had a list of thirteen attributes to choose from. Richard Anderson (personal communication, December 14, 2014) stated the following: *"Knowledge of my business is an important attribute,*

and something that would influence me in buying from a particular sales person", even though he did not include this attribute in his top-five from the given list.

4.4.9 Personal attention

This attribute was scored the lowest score and was only selected by a single respondent who ranked it third in his top-five.

Table 19: Personal attention votes

	HR	Final score
Initial ranking	3	
Reversed ranking	3	3

Key: HR = Hamanth Ramlatchman

Hamanth Ramlatchman (personal communication, January 15, 2015) stated: *"Personal attention should be part of the package, being a lead engineer on a mega project, it is important to have the assistance of a sales person down to a personal level, it links to honesty and support".*

Personal attention was only mentioned twice out of a possible 12 times in the study done by Van der Westhuizen (2010) and was therefore not found to be a preferred attribute in that particular industry. As found in the literature review, there are varying perspectives of personal attention as an attribute, and the findings of this research are in line with those found in the research done by Van der Westhuizen (2010).

4.4.10 Ability to provide technical education

This attribute received zero rankings by all respondents. The attribute did not score any 'hits' and justification for this was elaborated on and shared by three respondents.

Richard Anderson (personal communication, December 14, 2014) was direct in his response when asked why he believed this was not a preferred attribute: *"We*

are qualified engineers and the responsibility is on us to ensure we are adequately educated in out specific field as well as keep abreast with new developments, the sales person is responsible to equip us with technical knowledge on their products and applications only". This sentiment was shared by Kris van der Walt (personal communication, February 6, 2015) who commented, *"Being engineers, we need to understand a particular product and "plug" it into a complete engineered solution, so the only education we require from the sales person is directly related to specific product capabilities".*

Although Williams and Seminerio (1985) identified this as a valuable attribute, this research found the contrary. The importance of this attribute differs according to the type of industry in which the sales person is active.

4.4.11 Regularity of sales calls

This attribute received zero ranking by all respondents. The attribute did not score any 'hits' and feedback received during interviews were, interestingly, unanimous with many of the respondents' comments identical when asked for their opinion on the attribute.

Five respondents, Alastair Gerrard, Heaven Modise, Hamanth Ramlatchman, Megan Keefer and Khumi Mokgabudi commented that quality is far more important than quantity in their industry. The consensus among respondents was that they find it important to see sales people as and when necessary. While conceding the importance of being kept up-to-date on product developments, it was found that sales calls are not the most preferred way to be kept abreast of these.

4.4.12 Preparation of sales calls

Another attribute to receive zero ranking by all respondents was the preparation of sales calls. The attribute did not score any 'hits' and feedback received was that this was never an issue in their industry as preparation is a given. Megan Keefer (personal communication, January 21, 2015) stated, *"The engineering*

industry is a highly technical arena therefore it is impossible for sales people to engage with engineers on any level without being prepared".

4.4.13 Readily available information

This attribute received zero ranking by all respondents. The attribute did not score any 'hits' and the only feedback received during interviews was that it is not important for information to be readily and immediately available as long as the sales person knows where to get it and co-ordinates effectively with their team in expediting the required information.

This particular attribute was barely mentioned by the respondents and there was very little meaningful information forthcoming through the interview process besides the fact that it is not a preferred attribute of sales people in the engineering industry of South Africa.

4.4.14 Conclusion

According to the twelve respondents interviewed, the top-five attributes preferred by the engineering industry of South Africa are presented in Table 20.

Table 20: Top-five attributes preferred by the engineering industry of South Africa

Rank	Attribute
1	Technical and product knowledge
2	Ability and willingness to solve problems
3	Thoroughness and follow through
4	Trustworthiness
5	Market knowledge and industry experience

4.4.14 Other attributes

During the interview, further attributes were identified by respondents, which they believe to be valuable attributes of sales people active in their industry. These attributes are listed below in no particular order.

Flexibility

Six of the 12 respondents identified flexibility as an attribute they believe to be of value. *"The ability of the sales person, in conjunction with his organisation, to handle changes to the scope of the project is a key driver when deciding on a product or service",* Richard Anderson (personal communication, December 14, 2014). *"It is much easier and effective to deal with a sales person who understands his company and products and is able to be flexible in meeting our needs, than to deal with one that is rigid and slow to react",* Heaven Modise (personal communication, January 19, 2015).

An example of this flexibility was given by Kris van der Walt (personal communication, February 6, 2015): *"Very often, while executing a project, the quantity or rating of products changes, I would much rather deal with a sales person who is on top of things and has the ability to assist with urgency, the last thing I want to hear while under pressure on site, is that there is a long list of bureaucracy I need to endure before being assisted".*

Integrity

Closely linked to trustworthiness but differentiated in that this personal quality was identified by some respondents as an important attribute for anyone they deal with. Peter Willcock (personal communication, January 20, 2015) remarked, *"no matter how good the product or how competitive the company, I would simply refuse to deal with any sales person that lacks integrity, being a representative of the organisation, that would put them at risk too".*

Confidence

"Confidence in themselves and in their products is important, sales people need to look and act the part otherwise doubt is created in their ability and that of the product which immediately creates concern". Khumi Mokgabudi (personal communication, January 15, 2015).

Honesty

"There is never a project that runs perfectly well from beginning to end and equally never an engineered product that has run perfectly every time, in every application, a sales person needs to be honest and share these experiences and be honest about previous experiences, good and bad". Peter Willcock (personal communication, January 20, 2015).

4.5 Further information and interesting comments from respondents

The following further information of interest was recorded during the interview process.

- *Understanding of the term attribute:* The respondents understanding of the term attribute in this context was shared as a characteristic or feature inherent in a sales person in order to be successful in their business.

- *Function of the sales person:* All respondents agreed that the main function of the sales person is to represent his organisation and the products they sell to the best of his ability. Some interesting comments were made regarding the function of the sales person particularly in the engineering industry. Hamanth Ramlatchman (personal communication, January 15, 2015) stated, *"A main function of the sales person in our industry is to form a partnership with the engineering team and to support them from the initial stage of tendering right through to the implementation of the products on the project".* Further to this, Peter Willcock (personal

communication, January 20, 2015) added, *"A successful sales person in our industry is not one that sells a product or solution as if it is the first and last solution he/she will provide to us as there are many variables throughout the project lifecycle that determine if the products and organisation used were successful or not".* Heaven Modise (personal communication, January 19, 2015) stated, *"One of the main functions of the sales person is to present new products and developments for our consideration"*.

Attributes that would influence respondents to purchase from a particular sales person are:

- *"Delivering on promises with regards to deadlines and providing required information".* Heaven Modise (personal communication, January 19, 2015).
- *"Honesty, regarding product capabilities and shortfalls".* Khumi Mokgabudi (personal communication, January 15, 2015)
- *Flexibility*: Half of all respondents mentioned this as an important attribute as well as an attribute that would influence the buying process.

Attributes that would stop respondents purchasing from a particular sales person:

- *"Arrogance",* Heaven Modise (personal communication, January 19, 2015).
- *"Not keeping to his/her word",* Heaven Modise (personal communication, January 19, 2015).
- *"Little or no technical ability",* Megan Keefer (personal communication, January 21, 2015) and Peter Willcock (personal communication, January 20, 2015).

- *"Focus on criticising competitor products and pointing out weaknesses rather than focussing on own product strengths".* Kris van der Walt (personal communication, February 6, 2015).

4.6 Conclusion to the results and discussion

The research question for the research study was:

- Which salesperson attributes are preferred by organisational buyers in the engineering industry of South Africa and what are the relative importance of these?

Table 21 summarises the answer to this question based on the interviews with the organisational buyers in the research study.

Table 21: Ranked attributes of sales people in the engineering industry of South Africa

Rank	Attribute
1	Technical and product knowledge
2	Ability and willingness to solve problems
3	Thoroughness and follow through
4	Trustworthiness
5	Market knowledge and industry experience
6	Empathy
7	Being easily contactable
8	Knowledge of customers business
9	Personal attention
10	Ability to provide technical education
11	Regularity of sales calls
12	Preparation of sales calls
13	Readily available information

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Introduction

The research aimed to identify, according to organisational buyers perspectives, which attributes of salespeople are preferred in the engineering industry of South Africa.

Twelve respondents were interviewed and asked to provide, according to their own perspectives, their five most preferred attributes of sales people that they had dealt with. Respondents were then asked to select their five most preferred attributes from a random listing of the 13 most preferred attributes of sales people as identified by research detailed in the literature review, and rank these in order of preference. Content from the interviews, as well as the attribute rankings provided by the respondents, provided the basis from which a final view of the preferred attributes of sales people in the engineering industry of South Africa could be deduced. According to organisational buyers' perceptions, the preferred attributes are presented in rank order in Table 21.

5.2 Conclusions of the research

Twelve semi-structured interviews, with respondents as organisational buyers within the engineering industry of South Africa, were conducted in order to understand their perceptions as to the preferred attributes of sales people within the industry. The interviews were recorded on a smart phone and a themed content analysis conducted on respondent comments, responses and perceptions from the interviews. This formed the empirical data, and themes from the empirical data were used to develop a ranking of the preferred attributes of sales people in the engineering industry of South Africa.

Findings from the research ranked the five attributes in Table 20 as preferred attributes, according to organisational buyer perceptions, of sales people in the engineering industry of South Africa

5.3 Recommendations

The research study identified the preferred attributes of sales people in the engineering industry of South Africa, according to organisational buyer perceptions.

The findings from this research are considered important as they provide insight to suppliers of the engineering industry in South Africa, from the customers' perspective, of preferred sales person attributes. These insights could be used in the training of sales teams and as guidelines to assist the recruitment process. Findings from the literature review show that sales person attributes can have a significant impact on performance. By understanding preferences, from the customers' perspective, it is possible to align sales people with these preferred attributes in an effort to improve performance.

Therefore, an opportunity clearly exists, to develop and measure sales person attributes within a specific industry to improve overall organisation performance.

It is recommended that sales management, particularly in the engineering industry of South Africa, use this research to evaluate each individual salesperson's attributes and develops coaching programs for the salespeople to improve on these attributes. Furthermore, these findings would add value to the interview process when recruiting individuals to fill sales roles.

5.4 Suggestions for further research

Knowledge surrounding the influence of sales people, in particular their attributes, on performance is still relatively unknown. This study was conducted in order to understand the attributes preferred by organisational buyers in the

engineering industry of South Africa. The following areas are suggested for possible future research:

5.4.1 Extending the research to other industries in South Africa

The current research study only included the preferences of organisational buyers in the engineering industry, whereas there is an opportunity to extend the research study to other industries in South Africa where B2B marketing and sales are an important differentiator between success and failure. The objective would be to identify and correlate the findings from these preferred attributes to the findings of those in other industries to arrive at a relevant list of preferred attributes for that specific organisational and industry environment.

5.4.2 Comparison between organisational perceptions and sales person perceptions

This research focussed specifically on preferences and perceptions from and organisational buyers' perspective. In order to effectively coach and measure salesperson performance, it may be necessary to understand the perception of salespeople.

5.4.3 Extending the research to the engineering industries of other countries

Engineering and mining projects throughout Africa are increasingly being influenced on a global level. South African organisations supply products and solutions to companies in global locations. Further research into organisational buyers of other regions would be beneficial.

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APPENDIX A

Request letter to respondents

Dear Mr./Ms._____,

I am an MBA student at Wits Business School and am currently completing my research report in order to fulfil all requirements for the Masters' degree.

My research topic is entitled: "Preferred attributes of salespeople in the engineering industry of South Africa", and I kindly ask for your assistance in affording me an opportunity to meet with you. It is my intention to relate research conducted in other industry segments to the engineering industry of South Africa.

I anticipate requiring less than forty-five minutes of your time for this interview. The meeting will take the form of a semi-structured interview in which I will ask you to share some of your thoughts on preferred attributes of salespeople. I will then ask you to select five of your most important attributes, from a list of thirteen attributes developed from research conducted and then ask you to provide some form of justification as to these top-five attributes.

I will gladly provide you with a copy of my findings upon completion of my research and, upon request, will also ensure that your name and organisation details will be kept confidential in the research report.

I thank you in advance and look forward to meeting with you.

Yours faithfully,

David Claassen
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E-mail: davidc@zest.co.za

Interview outline for respondents

Preferred attributes of salespeople in the engineering industry of South Africa

Details of the respondent:

Date:

Time:

Respondent name:

Title:

Organisation:

Opening remarks:

Thank the respondent for taking the time to meet and contribute to the research report.

Refer to both the e-mail and follow up telephone conversation requesting the interview and provide general information and background to the research - that it is an important area of research for the understanding and improvement of the sales force specific to their industry as well as discuss what the research aims to achieve.

Provide a brief explanation as to the format of the interview and that it will follow a semi-structured format.

Ask the respondent for permission to record the interview, State that the recordings will be stored in a safe location and that they will be deleted six months after the research report has been submitted. Also, clarify with respondent as to their preference for person and/or company anonymity.

Background information:

Ask the respondent some factual data about themselves and their company:

- What is the company's main interest?
- What part of the decision making cycle do they belong to?
- In your opinion, what is the main function of the salesperson?

Question one:

What do you believe or understand by the term 'preferred attribute' with regards to salespeople?

Question two:

What attributes would stop you from buying from a particular sales person?

Question three:

What attributes would influence you to buy from a particular sales person?

Question four:

What makes this salesperson stand out from the normal/average sales person?

Question five:

Please describe the ideal salesperson in terms of attributes.

Question six

What personal qualities would influence the buying process?

Question seven:

According to your perspective, which, do you believe, are the most preferred attributes of a salesperson, in order of importance, and provide a brief justification as to why?

Question eight:

Are there any other attributes that you think are missing from the list below? If yes, please add?

Question nine

Research in the aluminium industry (Van der Westhuizen, 2010), petro chemical industry (Young, 2005) and various authors in a variety of industries have found the following attributes to be preferred. Please list your top-five, one being most preferred and five being least preferred.

Attribute	In top-five (Y/N)
Ability and willingness to solve problems	
Thoroughness and follow through	
Technical and product knowledge	
Ability to provide technical education	
Market knowledge and industry experience	
Regularity of sales calls	
Preparation of sales calls	
Being easily contactable	
Readily available information	
Trustworthiness	
Knowledge of customers' business	
Empathy	
Personal attention	

Question ten:

From your selected top-five attributes, please rank the attributes in order of importance to you.

Question eleven:

Please provide a brief justification as to your preferred ranking.

Question twelve:

What are your reasons for not listing x attributes?