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WHITEPAPER

From Expertise to Commercial Impact

The psychology shaping commercial
effectiveness in professional services

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Foreword

Professional services firms depend on expertise, but technical excellence does not always translate into commercial impact. As professionals become more senior, they are increasingly expected to identify opportunities, deepen client relationships, influence decisions and contribute to growth.

When commercial performance is inconsistent, the response is often to focus on skills: more sales training, greater encouragement to be proactive or increased pressure to deliver results. Yet people with similar experience and capability can respond very differently to the same commercial opportunity.

The difference can lie in the belief patterns shaping how they interpret and respond to commercial situations.

For organisations, this creates a diagnostic challenge. If the underlying cause of a behaviour is unclear, development risks being broad rather than targeted. The Commercial Impact Profiler (CIP) provides a way to look beneath observable behaviour and make these commercial belief patterns visible, creating a more precise basis for identifying strengths, understanding barriers and directing development.

The Peoplewise approach combines this to instil the mindset, skills and tools people need to perform differently in practice. The result is a more deliberate approach to commercial capability, supporting individual development while informing team effectiveness, talent decisions and wider organisational strategy.

Dr Belinda Board
Founder and CEO

Introduction

Some of the most capable professionals struggle to translate their expertise into commercial growth. The problem is not always a lack of sales skill. Often, we need to look beneath the behaviour to understand the belief system that influences commercial capability.

Professional services firms are built on expertise. Their value lies in the knowledge, judgement and experience of people who can solve complex problems, provide trusted advice and deliver work to a high professional standard. These are the capabilities on which careers are built, and client relationships are earned.

But those strengths do not automatically translate into the behaviours needed to drive commercial growth. As professionals progress, technical excellence remains essential, but it is increasingly accompanied by a different set of expectations: identifying opportunities, understanding evolving client needs, deepening relationships, communicating value, influencing decisions and contributing to growth.

It is a challenge we hear regularly: “Our people are brilliant at what they do, but how do we get them to be more commercial?”

As markets become more competitive and clients more discerning, that question matters more than ever.

So why can this transition be so difficult?

This paper explores the psychology behind commercial effectiveness in professional services: the belief system that shapes commercial behaviour, how these patterns can be understood and measured, and what this means for organisations seeking to build sustainable commercial capability.





When Expertise Is No Longer Enough

For lawyers, consultants, accountants, engineers and other specialists, commercial expectations can introduce a tension that was not necessarily present earlier in their careers.

As they become more senior, they are increasingly expected not only to deliver excellent work, but to originate it, develop clients and contribute commercially. For many, this can feel uncomfortable.

Why?

For many, they may not see themselves as salespeople. The word sales itself can carry negative connotations, conjuring a stereotype that can feel quite at odds with the trusted adviser they have spent their career becoming: pushy, smooth-talking, overly persistent or insincere.

A 2022 qualitative study of lawyers and accountants in professional services firms provides an interesting illustration of this tension. The professionals actively negotiated the relationship between their professional identity and sales work, making the two more compatible by positioning themselves as relationship builders, trustworthy partners, problem solvers and helpers (Singh & Frandsen, 2022).

Perhaps, then, part of the challenge lies in how we think about selling in the first place.

In professional services, effective selling is rarely about delivering the perfect pitch. It is about being curious enough to understand what a client really needs, recognising where you can add value and having the confidence to initiate a conversation rather than waiting for the client to raise the issue. It is about building trusted relationships, challenging thinking appropriately and helping clients make good decisions.

Seen this way, commercial effectiveness becomes much more closely connected to the capabilities professionals already value. It does not require them to abandon the trusted-adviser identity they have worked hard to establish. Rather, it asks them to apply the same expertise, judgement and relationship skills more deliberately to recognising opportunities and creating value.

This reframing matters because how people think about selling can shape how they behave commercially. The assumptions and beliefs they hold about what selling involves, what success requires and how they should respond in a commercial situation can influence whether they recognise opportunities, act on them and sustain their efforts.

If we want to understand commercial behaviour more fully, we therefore need to look beneath what people do and examine the belief system shaping how they interpret and respond to commercial situations.



The Psychology Behind Commercial Behaviour

If beliefs shape how people interpret commercial situations, they also shape how they respond to them.

Consider two equally capable professionals presented with the same opportunity. Both may recognise the potential value for the client and understand what an effective commercial conversation requires, yet one acts while the other hesitates. One remains engaged when progress slows, while another interprets the same uncertainty as a reason to step back.

From the outside, these differences can easily be described as one person simply being more “commercial” or a more “natural salesperson”. But those labels tell us very little about what is actually driving the behaviour.

Research into salesperson performance supports a more nuanced picture. A foundational meta-analysis examining 116 studies and 1,653 relationships between potential determinants and performance found that skill was important but formed part of a broader set of influences including role perceptions, motivation, personal factors, and organisational and environmental conditions (Churchill, et al., 1985).

More recent evidence reinforces the importance of what motivates commercial behaviour. A 2022 meta-analysis drawing on 127 studies and 77,560

salespeople found that motivation was significantly associated with sales performance, with intrinsic motivation showing a stronger relationship with performance than extrinsic motivation (Good, et al., 2022).

A sales methodology can teach someone the steps of what to do, but it does not explain whether, when or how those skills will be put into practice.

Someone who hesitates to pursue an opportunity may lack the practical skills to navigate the conversation. But they may instead doubt their ability to influence what happens next. Someone who withdraws when progress slows may need to develop persistence, or they may interpret the possibility of failure in a way that makes disengagement more likely.

The same outward behaviour can therefore reflect very different underlying causes.

The missing piece may not be another skill. It may be understanding the beliefs and motivations shaping how that person interprets the situation in the first place.

That distinction matters because different causes require different development. To understand commercial behaviour more fully, we therefore need to look beneath what people do and examine the belief system influencing how they respond.



What Our Research Found

This question sat at the heart of our own research into commercial effectiveness:

Why do some commercial professionals consistently create greater impact than others, even when they have similar experience, technical knowledge or market opportunity?

Our research examined approximately 50,000 sales and commercial professionals across multiple industries, sectors and geographies (Mills, et al., 2018).

What emerged was a distinctive commercial belief system, organised around five areas associated with commercial effectiveness:

- ★ Success - "I am most fulfilled when I am successful."
- ★ Control - "Someone or something must always be accountable for success."
- ★ Workstyle - "Facing challenges and adversity is simply a fact of life."
- ★ Influence - "Successful people are influential."
- ★ Communication - "Successful people know best how to communicate."

But the beliefs themselves did not tell the whole story.

To understand what distinguished the strongest commercial performers, we compared the highest-performing 5% with lower-performing groups. This revealed a further layer of nuance: people could hold broadly similar beliefs yet differ significantly in what was driving those beliefs.

These differences shaped how the beliefs were expressed in practice and, ultimately, the commercial behaviours and outcomes that followed.

For example, two people may both place a high value on commercial success, but for different reasons. One may be driven more strongly by the prospect of winning, while another may be motivated more by avoiding failure.

Similarly, two people may both recognise that commercial outcomes are influenced by factors beyond their control, while differing in the extent to which they believe their own actions can still shape what happens next.

What mattered, therefore, was not simply whether a particular belief was present, but what was driving it and how that influenced its expression in practice.

We refer to these underlying forces as Motivators: the drivers that shape how a belief translates into behaviour in a commercial situation.

This distinction became central to the development of the Commercial Impact Profiler (CIP), providing a way to identify and measure these patterns and use them to inform more targeted commercial development.



Making Commercial Capability Measurable

Commercial capability can be difficult to diagnose from performance alone. Two people may deliver similar results for very different reasons, while someone with strong commercial potential may not yet be translating it consistently into impact.

The Commercial Impact Profiler (CIP) provides a way to look beneath those outcomes and understand the belief system shaping how people approach commercial situations.

Drawing on patterns identified among the highest-performing 5% of commercial professionals in our research, the CIP benchmarks five areas of belief and the Motivators that sit beneath them. This allows organisations to understand not simply whether someone demonstrates a particular commercial behaviour, but what may be driving it, and where underlying patterns may be supporting or constraining effectiveness.

Across the five belief areas, the CIP explores the different Motivators that can shape how each belief is expressed in practice.

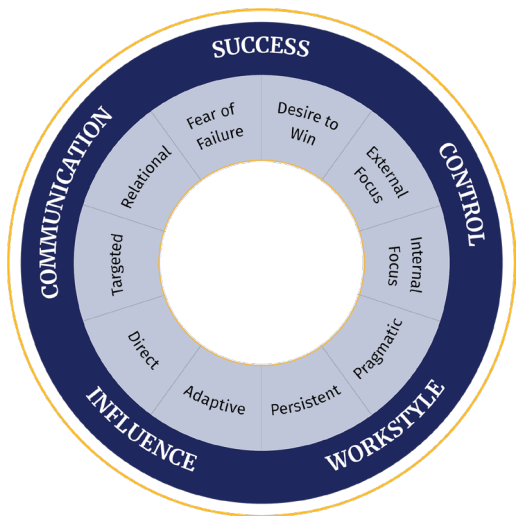
In simple terms, it helps us explore questions such as:

-  **Success**
Am I more driven by the prospect of winning, or by avoiding failure?
-  **Control**
Do I focus more on what I can personally influence, or on the external factors shaping the outcome?
-  **Workstyle**
When progress becomes difficult, am I more inclined to persist or to adapt my approach?
-  **Influence**
Do I tend to influence more directly, or adapt my approach to the person and situation?
-  **Communication**
Do I tend to communicate with a clear outcome in mind, or create space for dialogue and exploration?

These are not simple either/or distinctions, nor does stronger commercial performance depend on holding each Motivator in equal measure. The benchmark helps us understand the pattern and relative influence of Motivators associated with stronger commercial performance.

This creates a more nuanced picture of commercial effectiveness than a single score or broad profile. It also gives the CIP greater diagnostic precision, helping organisations move beyond simply asking people to “be more commercial” and instead identify what may be supporting or constraining their effectiveness.

That insight can then be used to target development more precisely. And its value extends beyond the individual. When viewed across teams and populations, these patterns can inform broader decisions about development, talent and commercial capability.



From Individual Impact to Organisational Success

Building sustainable commercial capability requires more than understanding what drives one person's behaviour. The greater opportunity lies in using that insight to make better decisions about development, talent and the environment in which commercial performance happens.

The CIP provides a diagnostic starting point, helping organisations identify where commercial strengths already exist, where underlying barriers may be limiting impact and where support is most likely to make a difference.

At an **individual level**, this creates a more precise basis for development. Rather than simply telling someone to be “more proactive” or “more commercial”, organisations can identify the factors that may be supporting or constraining how they approach opportunities, relationships and commercial decisions, and target development accordingly.

At a **team level**, aggregated insight can reveal shared strengths, gaps and complementary approaches. A team may, for example, build trusted relationships effectively but be less inclined to challenge client thinking, progress opportunities or maintain momentum when circumstances become difficult. Understanding these patterns allows teams to make better use of their collective capability.

At an **organisational level**, recurring patterns across roles, levels or talent populations can point to systemic challenges that extend beyond the individual. They may reveal where leadership signals, cultural norms, incentives or the wider environment are reinforcing, or inhibiting, the commercial behaviours the organisation needs.

This gives leaders a stronger evidence base for deciding where to invest and what kind of intervention is required, individual coaching, practical skill development, leadership enablement, talent intervention or broader cultural change.

A further lens on commercial potential



Insight from the CIP can also enrich conversations about commercial potential.

Current performance tells us what someone is delivering in their present role and context. It does not necessarily tell us everything about their capacity to create greater commercial impact in the future.

By looking beneath current outcomes at the belief patterns associated with commercial effectiveness, organisations can develop a richer picture of where capability may already exist but is not yet being fully expressed or utilised, where targeted development could unlock more of it, and where present performance may not tell the whole story.





Building Commercial Capability Beyond Sales Skills

Understanding what drives commercial behaviour is only valuable if it helps people perform differently.

That requires more than insight alone. Sustainable commercial development means equipping people with the mindset, skills and tools they need to act differently in real commercial situations.

The mindset shapes how people interpret opportunities, setbacks and influence. The skills enable them to navigate conversations, relationships and decisions effectively. The tools give them practical ways to apply those capabilities in the flow of work.

That is why our approach combines psychological insight with behaviour-led commercial development.

Ascent, our behaviour-led sales methodology, equips professionals with the practical approaches needed to understand client needs, create value, navigate conversations, progress opportunities and maintain momentum over time.

The CIP and Ascent address different but complementary dimensions of commercial capability.

The CIP helps us understand what may be influencing behaviour and why. Ascent develops what people need to do differently in practice.

Bringing the two together allows development to be more precise. A commercial challenge may require a new skill or tool, a shift in the beliefs influencing how that skill is applied, or a combination of both.

Rather than applying the same development solution to every challenge, organisations can better understand what needs to change, for whom, and what support will make that change more likely to translate into performance.

But sustainable commercial capability also depends on what happens around the individual. Leaders, managers, systems and the wider culture can either reinforce new behaviour or make it difficult to sustain.



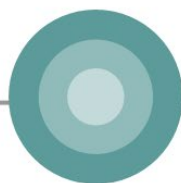
Awaken

Share and build client insight and awareness



Adapt

Adapt your approach to the client's unique needs



Assert

Communicate with confidence and assertive control



Accelerate

Drive and enable action



Our five-stage approach

Diagnose – We begin by building an evidence-based picture of current commercial capability and the factors influencing performance. This helps us understand not only where capability gaps exist, but also the behavioural, psychological and contextual factors that may be contributing to them.

Define – We translate that insight into clear priorities for change: identifying the behaviours and capabilities most critical to commercial success, establishing what good looks like and agreeing how progress and impact will be measured.

Design – Development is then built around the needs identified through diagnosis. Rather than applying the same intervention across every population, the solution can target the particular combination of psychological, behavioural and practical capability required. Managers and leaders can also be equipped to reinforce those capabilities through coaching, role-modelling and everyday performance conversations.

Deliver – Development is brought into the realities of day-to-day commercial work. Alongside workshops and facilitated learning, participants apply new approaches to live pipeline opportunities and commercial challenges, helping turn learning into behaviour.

Embed – Finally, the focus shifts to sustaining and scaling change. Behavioural and commercial outcomes can be tracked over time to understand what is changing, where further support or investment is needed and how the approach should evolve. Aggregated insight can reveal wider cultural patterns and inform decisions about talent, succession, leadership and the environment required to sustain commercial performance.

Our five-stage approach brings these elements together, moving from diagnosis through to development, application and sustained change. Understanding those differences allows development to be far more targeted.

The result is a more integrated approach to commercial capability: connecting insight with skills, application and the organisational conditions needed for new behaviour to stick.



A Better Question For Commercial Growth

For many organisations, the challenge is not that their people lack ability. It is that commercial success is often treated as an expectation before it is deliberately developed as a capability.

Professionals reach a certain level and are increasingly expected to originate work, deepen client relationships and contribute to growth. When that does not happen consistently, the response can be to provide more sales training or simply ask people to “be more commercial”. But neither response, on its own, tells us what is actually getting in the way.

If technically strong professionals hesitate to initiate commercial conversations, the underlying cause may be confidence, their belief in their ability to influence the outcome, how they respond to risk or failure, or how they sustain effort when progress becomes difficult. In other cases, the barrier may sit beyond the individual, within the signals, expectations or culture of the organisation itself. Different causes require different responses. That is why the more useful question is not:

Once organisations can answer that question with greater precision, the conversation changes.

Commercial development becomes less about trying to turn professionals into stereotypical salespeople and more about helping them apply their expertise, relationships and judgement in ways that create greater value for clients and the organisation.

It also becomes possible to move beyond broad expectations and generic interventions towards a more deliberate approach: understanding the mindset shaping behaviour, building the skills and tools people need, and creating the conditions that help those capabilities translate into sustained commercial impact.

Commercial effectiveness can then be diagnosed, developed, enabled and embedded, rather than simply expected.



“Why can’t our people sell?”



“What is getting in the way of our people being commercially effective?”



Conclusion

Commercial effectiveness should not be treated as something professionals simply acquire with seniority, nor as a capability that can always be developed through skills alone.

Knowing what to do matters. But so does understanding what influences whether, when and how someone does it.

Looking beneath commercial behaviour at the beliefs and Motivators shaping it creates a more precise basis for development. It allows organisations to move beyond broad labels and generic expectations to understand what may actually be enabling or constraining commercial impact.

The opportunity also extends beyond the individual. When viewed across teams and populations, these patterns can inform decisions about where capability already exists, where development could unlock more of it, and where wider organisational conditions may need to change.

Ultimately, the more useful question is not: “How do we teach our people to sell?” It is: “What is getting in the way of our people being commercially effective?”

Answering that question changes the nature of commercial development. It becomes less about trying to turn professionals into stereotypical salespeople and more about equipping them with the mindset, skills and tools to apply their expertise, relationships and judgement in ways that create greater value for clients and the organisation.

Commercial effectiveness can then be deliberately diagnosed, developed, enabled and embedded — rather than simply expected.

Let's talk

Embrace change and let Peoplewise be your partner in achieving success. Start your journey with us today and unlock your organisation's full potential.

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We can take you further

Assess

Our research-led psychometric, assessment and analytics tools reliably measure people's capabilities and predict their potential, so that you can make better hiring and investment decisions.

Develop

Our leadership development, personal effectiveness and executive coaching programmes equip every person to achieve their potential and perform at their best, so that you can build a stronger business with home-grown talent.

Perform

Our research insights, team workshops and change strategies identify and build change-ready cultures, strong talent pipelines and high-performing teams so that you can achieve effective transformation and sustainable growth.

Peoplewise is an award-winning business psychology consultancy specialising in assessing potential, developing leaders and transforming business.

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