



Mastering Technical Sales

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The Sales Engineer Subject Matter Expert

An Alternate Path To The Top

Not every Sales Engineer wants to climb onto the management career track. Several recent surveys I conducted for large technology companies yielded a number of **60%** for individuals who wanted to become a better SE or to move into a different part of the company over the next 3 years *instead of* becoming a first line SE manager. One common route to "better" is to become a Subject Matter Expert (SME) or a Consulting Engineer (CE) specializing in a particular discipline

That accomplishment is easier said than done, especially as the only people who can legitimately call you a SME are your customers and your peers. It's not the kind of title you can just put on a business card (unlike Senior or Principal SE) and have people blindly accept it. So although some SE's just wake up one morning, realize they know more (and maybe have forgotten more) about a subject than everyone else at their company, and then realize they have turned into an SME - it's better to have a plan. So exactly how do you become a SME?

Question Yourself: Whenever I have guided or mentored other SE's I always advise them to make the classic list of pros and cons to the job. I usually wanted to understand whether the SE was running away from something ("anything but my current job") or running towards something ("opportunity/progression/achievement"). Becoming a SME takes time and effort - it's not a short term (i.e. less than 12 months) goal. Certainly there are times when you just need to make a move because of job survival, a bad manager or even career stagnation. Yet they are rarely a good motive.



Establish The Focus: Simply put, what is the "subject matter" about which you propose to be an expert? There are multiple routes to becoming an SME - you can choose to be technical, business (financial/economic), solution (putting things together) or vertical (understanding an industry). You will need to clearly define the area, and then put together a simple value statement for the position. What is the value of taking you out of the field and putting you in this position? Note that whether you actually transfer from one group to another or stay put where you are and specialize - you still need to do this. What is the value to your company, to the salespeople you work with, to your management chain, and to your peers?



Question The Company: Should your company have an established and respected specialist organization it becomes a lot easier to make the transition. But if SME is what experienced SE's become when there is nowhere else organizationally to put them (it happens) then watch out. If your company is small enough that it doesn't yet have this kind of position then you can in effect write your own job description. Who knows - if there are enough SE's just like you - then some enterprising rising star can propose starting up and managing the SME group.

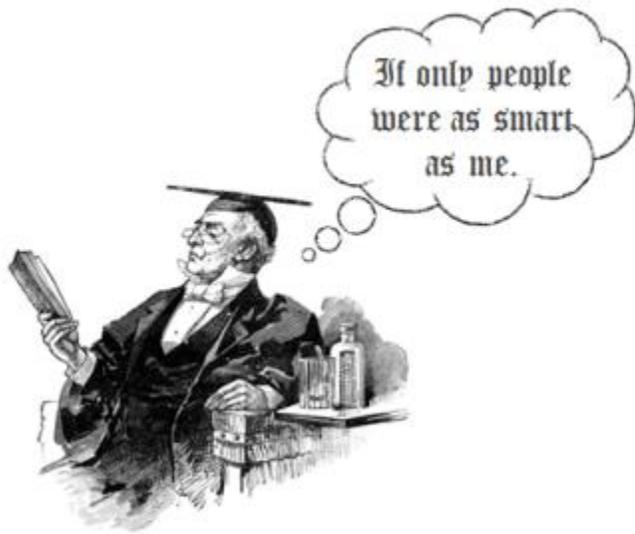
At this point you need your manager's buy-in to the process, as she is going to have to help you map out your path and probably give you an assist with HR, training and a few other departments. She, and any of your mentors, can also help you with the value statement.

Develop The Skills: No question about it - you definitely need to develop the knowledge and expertise to support your SME status. Plus you'll need the communication skills to effectively deliver that knowledge as required. Here are some possible sources for the knowledge:

1. **Read** as much as you can. Reference material and current events.
2. **Watch** and observe others. Shadow the existing gurus if they exist.
3. **Question** everyone. Pretend you are five years old once more and want to understand how the world works. Find out where the gaps are.
4. **Look** for professional organizations, associations, internal groups and anything connected to the "subject matter" in any way.
5. **Learn** from others. Seek out internal and external classes.

6. **Answer** questions. Volunteer to go find the answer when you don't know it. The research will teach you even more.

Share The Skills: The mark of a truly top-class SME is the ability to "share your toys" and teach others, An expert who keeps knowledge to himself as a form of power is organizationally useless. A great SME should aim to elevate themselves and effectively put themselves out of business. You know how this works as there will be a significant proportion of sales calls when you are invited to attend "just in case". Many of those calls cover basic material that you can easily teach the field SE (and sales) team. By up-skilling



the field you avoid all these Level-1 calls and can focus on truly providing value when it is absolutely needed. You want to be the go-to person when it really counts, and not for each and every potential occurrence of your area of expertise. Many new SME's have trouble saying "No" because they are so eager to please and make a name for themselves. After a few months they need to throttle back otherwise they get booked for 60 hours a week and spend more time travelling than selling.

Scope and Impact: Every good SME works with and has relationships with Product Management and Product Marketing. You need to extend your reach above and beyond that of a field SE. Try reaching out to your colleagues around the world and sharing ideas and best practices. Then share those with the field (remember - put yourself out of business!). You're also going to have to be far more proactive than you may have been in the past. You need to start accomplishing tasks like running programs, setting meetings and even finding leads without being given much direction.

Build The Brand: You need to be considered as the expert/guru in your particular area of expertise - whether that is technical or business or a mix of the two. So what does that bland statement actually mean? Here are just a few ideas:

-  Write some white papers
-  Get published externally
-  Be quoted (with corporate approval) in trade magazines

- 1.92 Run an (approved) blog or Twitter stream.
- 1.92 Present regularly at User Group meetings, Sales Kickoffs and other conferences
- 1.92 Roll-out/train the field on new releases (what they really need to know!)
- 1.92 Represent the company nationally or internationally
- 1.92 Create or change corporate processes
- 1.92 Design new sales, marketing or support campaigns
- 1.92 Drive some new alliance or partnership program

A Subject Matter Expert can make a major difference to both sales and presales teams. You can shorten sales cycles, quickly (dis)qualify deals, adjust competitive strategy and clearly provide value to customers. A SME role can serve as a stepping stone to greater responsibility for a younger SE as part of career progression, it can serve as a way to refresh a tired and stagnant career path for a mid-career SE, and as a senior position for the experienced master SE who just wants to do something different.

Just don't wake up in the morning and realize you have become an SME - have a plan!

“The true sign of intelligence is not knowledge but imagination”

Albert Einstein.

Talking Points is a monthly column authored by John Care, Managing Director of Mastering Technical Sales. For more information on this and other Sales Engineering topics visit the website at www.masteringtechnicalsales.com.

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