



Mastering Technical Sales
 2037 Trowbridge Drive
 Newtown, PA 18940
 Phone +1-215-431-1552
John@masteringtechnicalsales.com
www.masteringtechnicalsales.com
 John Care, Managing Director

The Sales Engineer Career Path

Now What?

You have been an SE for a number of years. In fact, you have been a really good SE for those years. Looking ahead – what comes next? What are the typical career paths for a Sales Engineer and how do you prepare yourself for those different paths?

Over the past three years, we’ve worked with both SE leadership and Human Resources at four different technology companies to determine the answers to those questions. Our simple investigative strategy was to ask the SE’s and measure the outcomes. We asked the question to over 2,600 SE’s across those four companies¹.

“30 months from now, what role / job position would you (realistically) like to have as the next step in your career?”

Anticipated Role	Overall Total %	Male SE’s (%)	Female SE’s (%)
SE Management	39	38	45
Become A Better/Senior SE	31	32	29
Go Into Sales (or Partners)	16	17	13
Other (Prod Mktg , Services etc.)	6	6	5
Leave The Vendor Environment	8	7	8

A more detailed analysis of the underlying data and response shows that there is little variation by region or by type of technology sold. The numbers are also uniform for ages 24 through 42. After 42, a lower proportion seeks management positions and the each of the other options rises, although proportionally more wish to become a senior SE. So let’s look at those higher level numbers.

- 1. The Lure Of Management:** More SE’s want to get into management than become a stronger and more senior individual contributor SE. That is driven by talent, desire, quest for a prestigious title, because “it’s the right thing to do”, monetary gain and numerous other smaller factors. I personally believe that being a first line SE Manager is

about the hardest job in sales (See [“So You Really Want To Be A PreSales Manager?”](#)). Moving into management “just because” is the reason many rookie managers fail because they are not prepared. Taking a top SE who has tenure and experience and moving them into management in the hope they can transfer those skills onto others is a shaky proposition. Without some basic form of leadership skills, it’s a tough position to learn the trade. Management and leadership are full time jobs, not a hobby.

- 2. The Super Senior SE:** The 3 in 10 who want to advance through the individual ranks are driven by either an aversion to line management (no desire or a bad experience) or the true “techie” drive to become the best of the best and the subject matter expert. Many midsize and larger tech companies now have a steady Individual Contributor (IC) progression that ends with a title equivalent to a Director level. You will see titles such as Master Principal, Distinguished Engineer and Strategist. For more read [“The Super Senior Sales Engineer”](#).

I think it is wonderful that companies recognize that not everyone want to be a manager. SE Organizations who put this structure into place – beyond the standard staff/senior SE roles – typically notice a significant increase in retention.

- 3. Going Over To The Dark Side:** The road to sales is paved with gold until you actually try it. One SE in six watches a salesrep and thinks, *“I do most of the work anyway, why shouldn’t I get the monetary rewards?”* They don’t see all the hard work, underlying effort and even the rejection most sales people encounter. Having a technical background and understanding how the product actually works isn’t always as big an advantage as you think it should be, especially if you cannot leave you technical roots behind you. For more read [“So You Want To Be A Sales Rep?”](#)

The two year failure rate of SE’s moving into sales is 72.5% (defined as still in the position after two years and having achieved quota in Year 2). That number shrinks to 50% if the initial position is within Channel Sales or a Sales Overlay.

That said, some of the best salespeople in the world were once Sales Engineers. Now they are Sales VPs, General Managers and even CEO of their own company. Don’t do it for the money, do it because you will enjoy it and will be successful.

- 4. Transferring Out.** More people internally transfer into the SE organization than transfer out of it. The primary destinations of outflow are Product Marketing/Management or Professional Services. The customer and sales experience the SE’s have usually assist them in being highly successful in these positions – particularly within the product team.

When making this move you have to be prepared to give up a leveraged compensation plan, a level of customer interaction and the “thrill of victory”.

- 5. Moving On.** There are still 7-8% of the SE population who see themselves out of the vendor sales environment within the 30 months. That’s typically driven by issues such as work-life balance, family, health, job satisfaction, disillusionment with selling and desire for a 9-5 corporate job. Strong SE leadership can get in front of these issues and proactively deal with them to reduce the rate to about 3-4%. You can’t make all the people happy all the time – and that’s OK.

There is no standard career path for the Sales Engineer. However, there is a standard for who is in charge of that career – and it’s you. Although the old “*where do you see yourself in five years, young man?*” interview question is a punch line for a few jokes; if you don’t know where you are going, anyway will get you there. Give your career some thought and start preparing for the next step. It’s not an irreversible step – I’m on career #5.

“Dreams are not what you do in your sleep. They are the things that don’t let you sleep” – APJ Abdul Kalam.

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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ⁱ We covered each of the major global geographies and eliminated anyone who had been an SE for less than 30 months for reasons of experience. The data presented here focuses more on desires. What is interesting are the outcomes – which almost exactly match the desire to within a couple of percentage points if you track the movement of the SE’s from one employer to another.