



**2024 & Looking ahead to 2025**  
**Hiring trends & analysis**  
*UK Drinks sector: Spirits*

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## ***Introduction & Observations***

### ***Looking ahead to 2025, areas of focus for hiring***

- *Significant areas of interest:* salespeople covering the UK multiple retailers; experienced London sales; proven mid-level regional sales; senior roles (more detail below). 2025 hiring has been predominantly brand- and sales- focused.
- *Difficult areas to hire:* London salespeople - as usual hiring managers would like good contact books and a few years' experience but also there was such significant hiring in this sector across 2024 that candidate supply of this type of limited.
- *Senior roles:* Focus is on senior candidates (MD/CEO) who can show commercial successes re turnaround, successful team-building, who have commercial training as well as product knowledge. Our Succession Planning product has been very popular this year; this can provide company owners with a good understanding of the candidates on the market along with salary ranges and accompanying information.

### ***Demand for recruiting services***

- During this year hiring has changed given the headwinds against the spirits sector. There is more scrutiny on senior business leaders and overall company performance. Against this backdrop however companies still want & need the best people they can attract for their roles and we at Vinokelly have found that hiring managers are keen for market information, a careful and thorough hiring process with a good range of candidates, and clear management of candidate salary expectations.
- There is still high interest from candidates outside the UK however UK work visa availability is a barrier as many companies do not want to provide sponsorship.
- Personality/aptitude testing is becoming standard in searches at mid-to senior levels. In our experience this adds significant value to the recruiting process and comfort to the hiring manager. Here at Vinokelly we include this as a standard service for no extra fee for any client.



## *Introduction & Observations*

### ***Hiring from outside the spirits industry***

- For some roles: salespeople focusing on multiple retailers, brand marketers & operations/supply chain, the cautious trend to welcome candidates from outside the industry has continued. However generally companies tend to prefer candidates with spirits experience or if not spirits then similar experience in other alcohol sectors. Operations/supply chain candidates often need to have experience in a similarly high regulation industry (e.g. electronics, pharmaceuticals) if not in alcohol.
- The no-&-low sub-sector is attractive to candidates in the health & wellness industry - these candidates typically have experience in drinks and in building brands. However despite interest from these candidates we have not seen the corresponding enthusiasm from hiring managers in bringing these types of candidates on board unless at early start-up levels.



## *Key Remuneration Issues*

### **Salary Growth & Expectations 2024/2025**

- After the salary increases of the last 2 years linked to inflation & cost of living increases, currently salaries have remained stable often with little or no increase. We are not seeing any signs of significant salary increases within an existing role unless the person is critical to the organisation - shortage of skills/business critical role/high performer.
- In some cases there have been some incidences of hiring managers hoping that new joiners will take a slightly lower salary particularly if the benefits package of the new company are more lucrative. This is a risky strategy with hiring and more often than not the hiring process won't end in success. All hiring is PR therefore unless this strategy has been clearly communicated to the candidates throughout the hiring process it is very likely to leave a bad impression.

**2024/5**  
**Typical salary increase**  
**new role:**  
**+ 4-10%**

**Typical salary increase**  
**existing role:**  
**+0-3%**

**2025**  
**Expected salary increase**  
**new role**  
**(candidate's view):**  
**+8-12%**

### **Bonus payments**

- As in previous years companies offering clear structures towards bonuses/commission rather than an opaque structure & unclear criteria will always attract better candidates and retain staff. If a bonus payment can include an element of targets-led payments rather than 100% discretionary this will make a significant difference.

### **The importance of benefits & holiday days**

- Benefits such as alcohol allowance/offering portfolio spirits at cost, medical & health insurance are very popular and do make a difference in hiring and also in retaining employees. Candidates will consider moving roles for a smaller salary increase if benefits are significantly better, especially company pension contributions. Companies offering these benefits do attract better candidates and it can make the difference between 2 roles offered simultaneously.
- Holiday allowance is typically 25 days + UK bank holidays – anything above this is a huge plus! Annual holiday allowance of 20 days can make it difficult to attract & retain candidates.



## *Key Remuneration Issues*

### ***Flexibility/working from home – now a normal part of the working week***

- Most companies have settled with a hybrid structure of 3 days in the office and 2 at home - the days being Mon/Fri working from home and Tues/Wed/Thurs in the office. Salespeople tend to spend more time at home/with clients and typically meet 1 day a week in the office although this can vary; those selling to multiple retailers tend to go to the office least.
- Some companies who moved to fully remote working and maintained this for a couple of years after covid are looking to change this. They asking people to come to the office weekly citing better collaboration, innovation and productivity when their employees come together regularly.

### ***WSET (Spirits) Qualifications***

- A significant benefit to candidates in spirits roles is the company paying for WSET qualifications, partially or in full. The specific spirits WSET qualifications available are very popular echoing the eagerness of wine candidates looking to deepen their product knowledge. For companies offering this benefit they generally find that employees stay longer in their roles as it builds loyalty and goodwill.



## *Spirits Sales*

### ***Multiple Retailers & Convenience***

- In 2023 there was a significant investment in people at the NAE/NAM level. In particular it was the larger agencies/producers hiring people from inexperienced backgrounds with no obvious relevant skill set mainly bringing enthusiasm and some drinks industry knowledge/experience. This made sense given the lack of talent pool even at the very junior levels. This has not continued in 2024 or 2025 so far.
- Since Q3 2024 we are experiencing an increase in demand for experienced candidates focusing on specific accounts within the multiple retailers. The focus is experienced spirits people with brand & high volume experience. Supermarket buyers are being considered for these roles more often than in the past few years in particular if a specific supermarket account is needed.
- Salary ranges are large because candidates can experience significant jumps in salary currently by moving roles. Particularly currently if the candidate can bring deep experience and relationships with the buyers at a specific retailer.
- For salespeople covering Convenience/Cash & Carry/RTM customers experienced salespeople are required at this level. Salary levels are less than for experienced multiple retail salespeople and are capped.

### ***National On-trade***

- Salaries in this area have increased at a lower pace than the market in this area; hiring demand has remained relatively low compared to other sectors. This is a trend we have seen maintained over the last few years.



## *Spirits Sales*

### ***Regional Sales***

- Currently in regional roles there is an undersupply of candidates in every region. The spirits talent pool at the junior level has experienced new entrants from other areas (not necessarily alcohol). These employees are likely to stay in their roles for at least 2-3 years while they learn and gain some product qualifications. Looking forward to end 2025/2026 there could be an increase in the supply of candidates in this area. However bonuses for regional sales have improved in the last 2 years and candidates are now getting significant sums - in some cases up to 20% of their salary. Some companies are bringing back regular commission payments and another benefit is stretch bonuses on top of the existing bonus structure.

### ***London Sales***

- In London sales there has been significant demand from companies keen to hire since the beginning of 2024. However this area is still under-resourced. There needs to be investment & training at the junior entrant level and despite significant enthusiasm from candidates in hospitality, that typical route into this role isn't currently popular with employers. "Plug and play" candidates who can bring a contact book, business development and account management skills (min 3-5 years experience) are in a strong position. Given the difficulties of gaining new business in this area it can be difficult to tempt candidates to consider new roles.
- Candidates are discerning about opportunities in this sector. If the hiring company wants someone with a strong contact book the salary level for this type of candidate has increased. In 2024 a lot of companies were looking to add to their London teams and were unable to hire; we are seeing candidates who had moved out of London sales tempted back into these roles at enhanced salaries.
- A handful of senior, high billing London salespeople have very high overall remuneration packages and can tend to sit outside of normal salary ranges.



## *Spirits Sales*

### ***E-Commerce/E-Tailer Sales***

- These types of customers (online retailers, Amazon, D2C platforms) are well-established roles (unlike in the wine sector) and sit within the national off-trade sales teams. With strong brands individuals covering these areas can be paid similarly to those covering the big 4 multiples.

### ***Country Managers***

- Demand for this role has levelled out after an increase since 2022.
- These roles are typically aimed at senior salespeople and have at least 5 years' experience due to the nature of the role: typically working alone from a home office often invoicing salary rather than payment via PAYE, drawing heavily on buyer contacts and network from previous sales roles.
- Often in this type of role for the spirits sector coverage involves running a large number of distributors across the UK & EU. Regular travel is key and its unusual for this person to sell directly to the multiple grocers or the national on-trade.

### ***International Sales/Export Sales***

- Within spirits this type of role is well-developed in the UK in particular in whisky. Even a small whisky producer will have a significant experience focus. Often people will need to run a good number of distributors across several countries/global region and a lot of travel is required. Salaries are on a par with salespeople selling to the big 4 multiple retailers and bonuses are targeted and can be >25% of salary.
- In terms of movement of people this is a market that is top-heavy with experienced people - similarly to off-trade (multiple retailers). Junior candidates are needed and although there was hiring at this level in 2024 these candidates are still inexperienced and won't likely consider new roles until at least 2026. After 3 years experience in this role candidates are very sought after and can expect a good salary bump (10 - 15%) with enhanced bonus possibilities for moving roles.



## *No & Low Spirits Sales*

### *No-& Low alcohol*

- Outside of the large producers, if these companies are out of the “start-up” stage they are now starting to hire based on specific skill sets rather than passion and enthusiasm.
- There is still pressure on salaries and packages in general - less holiday days, undefined bonus schemes, no private medical.
- There is plenty of excitement about this new and growing sub-sector of the market however often these companies look to hire candidates with spirits experience rather than those in the health/wellbeing sectors. Candidates from the latter are attracted to this area as they see it as a natural extension.



## *Spirits Category Managers*

### ***Category Managers***

- Category managers mainly exist in larger agencies & producers; if this expertise is needed in smaller companies it can be outsourced to specific agencies or a data-focused salesperson may take on some parts of this in addition to their role.
- Generally aligned to the salesforce rather than marketing.
- It is a very small people market and these people are rarely asked to come to the office as they mainly deal with national sales, significantly grocery customers. It would be unusual for them to be in the office 2 - 3 days per week and in a hiring process to insist upon this would alienate a lot of good candidates.
- Category managers can move between alcohol sub-sectors easily and there are more at junior and mid-level in the large beer and spirits producers.
- It is quite normal for experienced category managers to move between completely unrelated markets: telecoms to spirits to pharmaceuticals, for example. These sorts of category managers command significant salaries and often work on a contract basis.



## *Spirits Marketing*

### ***Brand Managers***

- Since 2023 the demand for hiring Brand Managers at all levels has continued to stay strong. The levels Assistant Brand Manager (ABM) and Junior Brand Management (JBM) have seen increased hiring, in some cases ABM level roles newly added to teams.
- The ABM role is a second role rather than an entry level role. Candidates will need strong spirits knowledge for this role, either from hospitality or WSET qualifications.
- The Brand Manager/Senior Brand Manager salary range is large because there is considerable variation within the roles at this level. Some companies do not have the SBM level rather just different levels of BMs with experience. This generally depends on the size of the marketing team and overall company.
- Head/Director Brand Management is still only present in a few companies that have teams of 4/5+ brand managers. Otherwise this role is taken by others such as Marketing or Buying Director.
- Salaries at the ABM/JBM have softened slightly as there are more roles at these levels. At the BM/SBM level there is definite pressure to keep salaries stable with little increase with a strong need to manage candidate expectations particularly on moving roles.

### ***Brand Ambassadors***

- In 2024/5 there has been very little demand for Brand Ambassadors. Currently demand is at the mid-level although at significantly reduced levels from 2022/2023. Often found in the larger spirits producers as part of the marketing function.
- Occasionally Senior Brand Ambassadors exist although turnover at the senior end is very low as it is often difficult to find a comparable role elsewhere. Candidates for these roles often dominate a micro-niche within the sector and are super-connectors.



# *Spirits Marketing*

## ***Digital Marketing***

- Very little hiring since 2024 for specific digital marketers after a hiring spike in 2021 - 2023. Whereas during and after covid this was a stand-alone role this is now an expected skill set for all marketers and brand managers.

## ***PR/Comms Manager***

- Very low levels of hiring specific PR/Comms people - these roles generally only exist in larger agencies/producers, particularly if there is an incredibly strong brand. Otherwise this is part of the Marketing Manager role in conjunction with PR agencies.

## ***Trade/Customer Marketing***

- Trade & Customer Marketing is often found in the team at the mid-level of candidates. This hasn't changed since previous years and hiring demand has remained stable.

## ***No & Low***

- Unlike the rest of the spirits sector, young digital marketers are a key focus for marketing in this sector. In particular Instagram & TikTok experience.



# Operations

## *Operations/Supply Chain/Demand Planning/S&OP Manager*

*Roles across customer services, demand planning, operations, logistics and supply chain can intermingle depending on the size and structure of the company.*

- In small companies often there is 1 Operations Manager comprising many roles.
- If the role is demand planning then the salaries are normally at the higher end of the role and very advanced excel experience is key.
- Whereas these roles traditionally did not offer flexible working, it is now very much the norm with maximum 3 days in the office.
- Head of Operations/Supply Chain compensation can vary considerably hence the large range.
- Often the Customer Services team is overseen by Head of Supply Chain/Operations.

## *Customer Services*

- In general the salary levels in Customer Services roles are fairly low with little bonus or benefits offered until more experienced levels. Many people will move into supply chain or operations roles after gaining some experience at the junior level.
- There is high turnover in Customer Services roles and most people use these roles as a way to into the drinks sector. Candidates tend to join these teams with diverse experience from other sectors.
- Head of Customer Services only exists in a large team and this person will often combine responsibilities with another area such as Supply Chain.
- **Stock Controller** - Often a junior/mid-level level role and a small candidate market in spirits. People normally move on to other roles as their experience grows. Often people are brought in from outside of the drinks sector to these roles.
- **Sales Operations** - A role rarely seen at a senior level if found then in companies with large on-trade sales teams. Head of the team is known as Manager and will be paid less than any full sales Manager position. Car allowance depends on the company and how much direct contact this person has with certain types of customers. Salary levels at the junior/mid-level are similar to Customer Services.



## ***Vinokelly Drinks Recruitment***

***Established in 2016 by Elizabeth and Gareth O’Kelly, we have established a reputation with clients and candidates alike for detailed knowledge of the UK drinks sector.***

- We are based near London, UK.
- Specialists in spirits, wine, champagne, rose, sparkling, whisky, no & low.
- A thoughtful, informative approach to your hiring needs.
- We work exclusively and in partnership with you on your searches, we do not work multi-agency.
- We aim to turn around searches quickly: 6-8 weeks is our average time from initial briefing to the candidate resigning.
- Almost all of our business is from referrals.
- We offer EQ/personality testing & reference checking as part of our fee.
- We are a family business providing continuity and integrity of our people over the long term unlike other companies who experience regular turnover of “recruitment consultants”.

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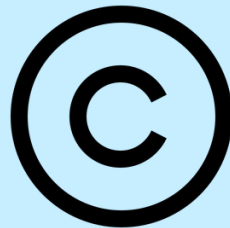


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