

Transitioning from sales training to sales education

 Dr Philip Squire and Louise Sutton

As part of a wider professionalisation of the sales function, forward-looking companies are discovering the benefits of sales education as a way to equip their people to thrive in today's complex and challenging business environment.

Today's business landscape is challenging in multiple ways: it's super competitive; technology is forcing us to deal with change and adapt our go-to-market models at an unprecedented pace (a pace that can only accelerate); and there is so much data available that it's all too easy to experience information overload. What this means is that sales organisations need new strategies to ensure that their people have the right skills and experience to perform in this demanding environment.

A long time ago when one of the authors started his career in sales, the only preparation for the role involved little more than learning a script and being able to deliver it convincingly. There was little or no sales training and certainly no sales education.

Since those dark ages, we have seen massive growth in the sales training sector to meet demand from industry. Output has evolved down the years as trainers have sought to match the content of their programmes to the reality on the ground (although the frequency with which some providers update their material is questionable). Trainers have had to adapt to the changing dynamic between customer and supplier, to the emergence of new methodologies (the best of which have been founded in some kind research), and to the need for a more consistent approach to what comprises sales excellence. Over the past decade, we have started to compile a body of knowledge that is driving increasing professionalism within the sales community, as we respond to further research that informs us about what customers are looking for.

Strategic approach

Meanwhile, businesses have been looking for a more strategic approach to sales development with the establishment of in-house sales academies to provide a comprehensive framework across the organisation – though admittedly these remain largely the preserve of the large corporates. Now, however, we stand at an inflection point where old-school approaches to training are no longer fit for purpose: one-size-fits-all approaches and sheep-dip programmes do not fulfil today's requirements for flexibility and agility underpinned by a solid platform of learning and development. Something more strategic is required: a comprehensive framework for sales enablement that is both robust and at the same time dynamic – and, just as importantly, available to all types of organisation whatever their size.

Over the past couple of years, we have watched the emergence and ascendancy of the sales enablement vision, in part driven by technology advances. At the same time,

something more fundamental has been happening: we have witnessed the beginnings of a revolution that is seeing a switch away from sales training to sales education – albeit that it is still early days. This couldn't have happened without a bridging of the gap between sales academics and industry, and the coming together of a number of significant events:

- a reinvigorated drive to professionalise the sales community;
- the advent of more professional representative bodies for the sales community (such as the Association of Professional Sales);
- a (modest) proliferation in UK and European academic courses aimed at current and prospective sales professionals (there are many more in the United States);
- the emergence and acceptance of workplace-based education at multiple levels (including post-graduate);
- a drive by government to establish sales education as part of the apprenticeship framework in the UK; and
- a more comprehensive sales literature to champion these trends, pioneered by this *Journal*.

Work-based learning along the entire career path

One of the keys to this revolution has been the emergence of recent years of work-based learning. This enables salespeople to participate in learning as they work, and ensures that content is directly relevant to their own organisation by incorporating projects and content that is based around their day-today activity.

Today, we are far in advance of where we were even a couple of years ago. A work-based sales education is available to suit almost any career stage, from entry-level right up to post-graduate qualifications. November 2018 saw an announcement that government had approved the new, level-4 apprenticeship for frontline sales executives; this followed the committed work of the APS, industry, training providers and the government.

Meanwhile, at our own organisation, two cohorts of apprentices started their level-6 Business-to-Business Sales Degree Apprenticeship programmes last autumn. The three-year BSc programme in the south of the country kicked off in September 2018 in conjunction with Middlesex University, followed a month later by the northern programme, in partnership with Leeds Trinity University. Even more level-6 sales apprentices will be following programmes with other providers.

A level-7 sales apprenticeship programme is currently in inception, while Consalia's well-established MSc programmes in Sales Transformation and Leading Sales Transformation, in conjunction with Middlesex University, continue to provide significant benefits at leadership level to employees and employers alike.

Benefits for employees and employers

So what are these benefits? Anecdotal evidence from participants suggests that these programmes are associated with career progression; participants tend to be promoted

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as a consequence of gaining their qualifications, and their involvement tends to leave them energised and more engaged with their companies. Apprentices and other employees have a route to a recognised qualification without having to fund university fees – an important consideration – while also being able to make a contribution at work. Moreover, this approach offers structure and discipline, which increases participants' chances of success.

Employers benefit from having participants learn while they work, usually with a focus on topics and projects that are specific to their workplace. However, this tailoring takes place within the context of a nationally accredited program that has been approved by employers, government and the relevant academic institutions to ensure a necessary breadth of knowledge and consistency of outcome. Participating employers (such as technology giant SAP) have extensively measured the business impact of this type of sales education and found that it has positively changed behaviours amongst sales managers and their teams and led to a significant improvement in business performance.

In summary, the switch towards sales education offers five key benefits for employees and employers:

1. **Sales enablement is becoming much more strategic** within a framework that has been built on the expertise of industry, academics, professional bodies and government. The emphasis is on providing participants not only with the relevant skills and a certain level of knowledge, but also on equipping them with the right mindset to be successful in today's complex, global business environment – the ability to think, explore and reflect.
2. **This strategic framework is able to combine with the more tactical, just-in-time learning approaches** that are facilitated by technology and are necessary if we are to succeed in an environment where data and knowledge are proliferating so rapidly. Nobody can possibly retain everything they need to know over the course of a business career, but this is not necessary; the important thing is the development of critical thinking skills such that individuals have the wherewithal to find relevant knowledge when they need it, along with the ability to analyse the information, and to communicate and update their analysis.
3. **Sales education with recognised qualifications is subject to accreditation**, which benefits both individuals and employers. Employees now have an easy shorthand to highlight their capabilities with qualifications that are transferable across roles and companies, while recruitment becomes more reliable for employers who can fall back on a series of benchmark qualifications for comparing applicants.
4. **There is now a framework for development during a sales career with relevant qualifications at every level.** Individuals can progress along this path as far as they choose. Lifelong learning is becoming a reality for sales professionals.
5. **This approach is instilling a mindset change towards professionalism that will ultimately feed into the**

marketplace to benefit the customer. Using advanced analytics, companies will be able to measure the performance of their sales function not only in terms of revenue and other financial metrics, but also through the lens of improving customer satisfaction and quality of engagement; in turn they will be able to cross-reference this with the learning activity and other sales enablement initiatives happening across their sales organisation.

The sales profession is finally coming of age, and sales education is leading this transformation. Sales education is helping to embed a mindset change within companies that will benefit employees, employers and customers.



About the authors

Dr Philip Squire is the CEO of Consalia. He has been in sales roles since 1980 and, through his consultancy activities, has worked with sales organisations in over 40 countries.

Phil completed his doctoral research project *How can a "client-centric values" approach to selling lead to the co-creation of a new global selling mindset?* in 2006. A paper based on his research and results with one of his clients Hewlett Packard was published by the SAMA (Strategic Account Management Association) in 2008. Since then numerous articles based on his work have been published in the academic and professional press. Phil is a Trustee of the Association of Professional Sales.



Louise Sutton is the Academy Director for Consalia and has responsibility for driving the strategy of the accredited programmes to ensure quality delivery and excellent customer experience. She has a proven track record of leading strategic initiatives and has been instrumental in helping the sales profession develop the degree-level apprenticeship, which launched last year.

Louise started her career in IT and management consulting working at BP International, PWC and AT&T, before transitioning into learning and development roles. Prior to joining Consalia, Louise worked at Sony Mobile as their Commercial Academy Manager. She is an accredited Leadership & Performance Coach.