



Article

Sales training: A state of the art and contemporary review

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ABSTRACT

Organizations of today face numerous challenges, and training their sales force is definitely high on its agenda. This paper endeavors to contribute to the sales training field by providing a comprehensive state-of-the-art and contemporary review through the study of publications in sales training research in the last 30 years (1985–2014). The specific objectives of the review are to study the chronological trends and structural distribution of sales training research in terms of the research type, research focus, methods, research themes and other issues such as methodology, analytical techniques, geographical region etc. Findings of 56 articles on sales training research published in the last three decades are analyzed and directions for future research are identified.

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Formación en ventas: una revisión puntera y contemporánea

RESUMEN

Las organizaciones actuales se enfrentan a numerosos retos, siendo prioritaria en su agenda la formación de su fuerza de ventas. El presente documento pretende contribuir en este campo, mediante la aportación de una revisión amplia, vanguardista y contemporánea del estudio de las publicaciones sobre la investigación de la formación en ventas durante los últimos 30 años (1985–2014). Los objetivos específicos de la revisión son el estudio de las tendencias cronológicas y la distribución estructural de la investigación de la formación en ventas, en términos de tipo, objetivo y temas de la investigación, así como otras cuestiones tales como la metodología, las técnicas analíticas, la región geográfica, etc. Se analizan los hallazgos de 56 artículos sobre investigación de la formación en ventas, publicados durante los últimos treinta años, y se identifican las orientaciones de la investigación futura.

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1. Introduction

Organizations of today face numerous challenges, and training their sales force is definitely high on the agenda of most organizations (Rao, 2010). The increasing interest that firms have been

showing over recent years in employees and in practices related to their management, especially training, can be explained by the general acceptance of the fact that human resources and organizational knowledge are, at present, two of the main sources of sustainable competitive advantages for the company.

Sales training is a challenge to organizations, big or small, national or multinational, manufacturers or service providers especially amidst today's rapidly changing global economy. Organizations are spending millions of dollars on training employees, and sales training takes a significant portion of that budget (Tan & Newman, 2013). However, sales training programs seem to enjoy a lot of advantages despite their costs. Sales training involves a systematic attempt to understand, describe, and transfer "good selling practices" to sales personnel. Through sales training programs,

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sales personnel may actually learn to perform more effectively and more quickly. Research suggests that training may increase the salesperson's knowledge base and skill level, resulting in higher performance (Aragón-Sánchez, Barba-Aragón, & Sanz-Valle, 2003).

Anything that the organization can do to facilitate the sales training process through mentoring, role playing, observation, etc., should be better than no training at all and hence the need and justification for training (Attia Ashraf, Jantan M., Atteya, & Fakhr, 2014). Moreover, the motivation to receive training is also extremely high among salespeople, sales managers, and sales executives, leading the American Society for Training & Development to conclude that «the timing for sales training has never been better» (Lassk, 2012). Arguing on the same line, sales training research is hence also of interest to academicians and practitioners toward enriching and advancing the sales training knowledge base amidst continuous business challenges and opportunities.

This review paper consists of seven sections. In the next section we provide an overview of the sales training research and identify that a comprehensive review of sales training research does not exist until date to the best of our knowledge. We specifically identify various objectives of the study in terms of analysis of chronological trends and an understanding of relative emphasis on various aspects of sales training. The third section of our paper discusses the objectives and methodology of our research. In the fourth section we report the results of our analysis of 57 sales training research articles published in the last three decades (1985–2014). The fifth section provides highlights of some interesting sales training studies. In the sixth section our findings are discussed and also overall conclusions are drawn. The seventh and final section of the paper identifies directions for future research.

2. Sales training research: An overview

Evidence of the fact that organizations are devoted to sales training may be found in the investments companies make in sales training. Of these training expenditures, research has concluded that sales training represents the largest portion of total training expenditures. Selling is a problem-solving mission and training helps salesmen to understand, anticipate and exceed customer needs (Pollitt, 2012). According to Harris (2001), as cited in Pettijohn, Pettijohn and Taylor (2009), sales representatives need “grooming” to succeed and this grooming is an investment that is made by the firm and the manager in the form of training and coaching. It seems that the general sentiment is that if one has “some level of talent”, then sales training can be instrumental in helping convert that talent into positive results. Training can be defined as a planned program within the organization that endeavors to bring about relatively permanent changes in employee knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behavior. In the present context, training may improve sales performance (and company profits) by increasing productivity, improving morale, reducing turnover, improving customer relations, and improving management of time and territory (Farrell et al., 2001).

Interest in the topic of sales training has been increasing over the years in parallel with its rising practice as evident from the splurge in sales training publications by almost three times in the past decade as compared to the end of the last century. However, the bulk of these publications are non-academic and in terms of research the progress has been slow, with only 23 peers reviewed sales training journal articles during 1980, 40 during 1990 and 66 during the last decade as per the computerized database search.

The American Society for Training and Development divides the major sales training methodologies into two categories, namely, self-study (i.e., readings, pre-workshop assignments, and

programmed instruction) and workshops (i.e., lecture, discussion, on-the-job training, case study, and role plays). It has been suggested that organizations should attempt to use a combination of workshop methodologies in conjunction with some self-study methodologies (Vadi & Suuroja, 2006).

Further, the content of training for salespeople can be categorized into four as described by Hopkins (1978) involving: (a) product knowledge, (b) company knowledge, (c) market/industry awareness, and (d) selling techniques and related topics (Farrell et al., 2001). The nature of a typical sales training programs also varies depending upon if it is standardization (i.e., common to all salespeople), top-down (i.e., management decides), mandated (i.e., non-voluntary) structured (i.e., formal and centralized), in a classroom setting (by in-house or outside experts) (Sarin, Sego, Kohli, & Challagalla, 2010).

According to Aragón-Sánchez et al. (2003) the success of training depends on the correct execution of the steps of sales training process: previous analysis of training needs, development and implementation of an adequate training plan and evaluation. Training needs analysis is recognized as one of the first important “before” contributions to training effectiveness. A thorough needs analysis takes into account the individual differences of trainees, the organizational climate and objectives, and the characteristics of the task(s) to be learned. This information is then used to determine both the method and content of training.

It is worth mentioning that unlike what many articles have cited, training effectiveness is different from training evaluation. Training effectiveness is the study of the *individual* (personality traits, attitudes, abilities, demographics, experience, and expectations, self-efficacy, goal orientation, and motivation), *organizational* (climate for learning, history, policies, trainee selection technique, and trainee notification process) and *training* (instructional style, practice, and feedback), characteristics that influence the training process before, during, and after training (Álvarez et al., 2004). However, training experts typically study training effectiveness variables from the perspective of evaluation. Four of the five effectiveness models (Baldwin & Ford, 1988, Holton 1996; 2003, Tannenbaum et al., 1991, as cited in Alvarez, 2004) found in the literature focus primarily on one evaluation measure, transfer performance as the measures of learning.

Training evaluation, on the other hand, is the measurement of a training program's success or failure with regard to content and design, changes in learners, and organizational payoffs. The evaluation techniques used to assess these depend on the evaluation model chosen, as four different models have been proposed. The first model, Kirkpatrick's four dimensional measurement typology (i.e., reactions, learning, behavior, results) is, perhaps, the simplest and most common method for understanding training evaluation and the most frequently cited technique. This model was subsequently modified and advanced by other researchers, such as Alliger and Jantan (1989) who augmented the framework for training criteria based on Kirkpatrick's model dividing training reactions into affective and utilitarian reactions, and learning into post-training measures of learning, retention, skill demonstration. In the second model, Tannenbaum et al. (1993) expanded on Kirkpatrick's typology by adding post-training attitudes and dividing behavior into two outcomes for evaluation: training performance and transfer performance. A third evaluation model by Holton (1996) included three evaluation targets: learning, transfer, and results. Reactions were not a part of Holton's model because reactions are not considered a primary outcome of training; rather, reactions are defined as a mediating and/or moderating variable between trainees' motivation to learn and actual learning. The fourth and final evaluation model was provided by Aquinis and Kraiger (2009). This model emphasizes three multidimensional target areas for evaluation: training content and design (i.e., design, delivery, and

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