

Chapter 8

Do Attitudes Toward Careers in Sales Differ Based on Country of Origin? A Comparative Analysis of MBA Student Attitudes: The US and the UK

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ABSTRACT

Personal selling is a profession that has been described as requiring skilled and professional employees. Although employers have looked toward colleges and universities as sources of potential new sales employees in the past, the complexity and professionalism required in sales has led employers to recruit graduate students to fill the sales role. This research evaluates the exposure of students pursuing their MBA degrees to sales and their attitudes toward sales to identify how these attitudes might affect the recruiting process. Further, given the prevalence of international business operations, the study identifies sales attitudes and sales exposure in a comparative fashion by assessing the responses of MBA students in the US and in UK. The results provide insights into differences in attitudes and sales knowledge between students enrolled in MBA courses in the two countries. Based on these findings, conclusions and suggestions for employers and educational institutions are developed.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-3631-6.ch008

INTRODUCTION

Of all the activities in which a sales manager engages, one of the most challenging is recruiting and hiring. It has been estimated that the costs of poor hiring decisions are 3 to 6 times the individual's annual income (Hrehocik, 2007). Furthermore, intrinsic costs of poor hiring decisions exist and these include costs associated with lost revenues, low morale, training, managerial time/focus, etc. Thus, selecting the best possible salesperson from a pool of candidates is a critical decision. The challenges of recruiting and selecting the best possible individuals are exacerbated in situations requiring continual sales force expansion and replacement hiring. In such situations it may seem that all the manager does is hire and train new salespeople. When such a circumstance is accompanied by other factors such as those which may exist when the firm/job is not well-known, or when the firm is required to select its group of new hires from a pool of college-educated individuals, the challenges expand. Further complicating the situation is that many college-educated students may have negative opinions of the position for which these sales managers are hiring.

In the US, students pursuing their Master's Degrees in Business Administration (MBA) are faced with many challenges. One author suggests, "the MBA is wholly out-of-touch with the 'real world' and the needs of practicing managers" (Rubin & Dierdorff, 2009, p. 209). As a general observation, it has been noted that employers feel that both oral and written communication skills should be included more frequently in MBA student classes (Ulinski & O'Callaghan, 2002). Others agree and argue that communication skills are highly important for MBA students and should be included more frequently as major components of their classes (Kane, 1993; Peterson, 1997).

The focus on increasing the MBA student's studies in the area of communication coincides with an increased desire by business organizations to hire salespeople based on their professionalism and business prowess. In fact, it's been stated that

"In today's competitive business environment, selling requires high levels of professionalism, business acumen, and consultative service" (Pulins & Buehrer, 2008, p. 15). Others contend that salespeople are increasingly required to possess greater knowledge about: buyer behavior, marketing analysis, sales forecasting, technology, company services, and more (Ellis, 2000). Based on these observations, more people are realizing that selling is being accepted as a profession and as such, the individuals entering sales need educational qualifications similar to those found in other professions (Cohen, 2009). These requirements suggest that "salespeople need to raise their level of salesmanship to a consultant level" (Aronauer, 2006). Thus, given the professionalism and knowledge levels required of salespeople, recruiters are increasingly focusing on MBA students (Simon 2006). However, this focus is problematic because sales education has been described as being absent from the graduate curricula in most graduate programs (Butler, 1996).

Many authors agree that sales force recruiting is an increasingly prevalent activity across college campuses in the US (Bristow, Gulati, & Amyx, 2006). Recruiting college graduates is described as being a major concern for US businesses (Amin, Hayajneh, & Nwakanma, 1995). The fact that college students are attractive recruits for many sales positions is well-established and probably reflects the belief that college students are trainable and talented (Dubinsky, 1980; Gurvis, 2000; Lysonski & Durvasula, 1998; Stevens & MacIntosh, 2002, 2003). As Ellis (2000) points out, it is logical recruiters would select college students as a source for new salespeople, particularly given the fact that the sales role is becoming more professional, requiring greater skills and knowledge. For example, salespeople are increasingly required to understand their customers' businesses; make more operational decisions; develop sales forecasts; understand buyer behavior; gather information and market analysis; and implement new technologies.

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