

PERSPECTIVE ON SALES TRAINING, PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

Stefanie Boyer, University of South Florida, United States

ABSTRACT

In this paper, recent developments in adult learning theory are introduced and new directions forecasted for future sales research. The purpose of this manuscript is to move sales training research forward by identifying gaps in the extant sales training literature and presenting research directions and propositions.

INTRODUCTION

Addressing deficiencies in the sales training domain is of utmost importance due to the impact sales training has on both individual firms and the greater welfare of the economy. The purpose of this research is to outline a brief history of sales training and explain how the traditional sales training and development paradigm is in opposition of components in adult learning theory (Speck 1996). Thus, adopting and modifying propositions from adult learning theory may help remedy problems with inefficiencies in sales training and development research.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND PROPOSITIONS

The traditional sales training and development paradigm is in direct opposition of adult learning theory, which may explain inefficiencies within sales training. Since adult learning theory explains adult learning, it should also explain salesperson development, given that training and development are forms of learning. These differences will be used to create propositions for future sales researchers so that future salesperson development may be more effective. A recent literature review on sales training (Cron et al. 2005) describes the traditional sales training paradigm in which 1) material is standardized, 2) management determines the content and topics of training, 3) employees are required to participate, 4) delivery of training is centrally controlled and often 5) lecture based. However, according to adult learning theory's best practices in professional development, Speck (1996), suggests the following key points in planning professional development and adult learning, A) "Adults will commit to learning when the goals and objectives are considered realistic and important to them. Application in the "real world" is important and relevant to the adult learner's personal and professional needs." B) "Adults want to be the origin of their own learning and will resist learning activities they believe are an attack on their competence. Thus, professional development needs to give participants some control over the what, who, how, why, when and where of their learning." C) "Adult learners need to see that the professional development learning and their day-to-day activities and problems are related and relevant." D) "Adult learners need direct concrete experiences, in which they apply the learning in real work." E) "Adult learners come to learning with a wide range of previous experiences, knowledge, self-direction, interests, and competencies. This diversity must be accommodated in the professional development planning." F) "Transfer of learning for adults is not automatic and must be facilitated. Coaching and other kinds of follow-up support are needed to help adult learners transfer learning into daily practice so that it is sustained" (pg. 36-37 Speck 1996). Overall, adult learning theory suggests that adult learners need some control over learning, and it should be individualized and reinforced, in order for learning to be effective and long lasting. When the goals of learning are realistic and relevant, adults will be more committed to learning. Nevertheless, the traditional paradigm is standardized, often provided through a lecture approach and salespeople have no control over training. These differences between the traditional training paradigm and adult learning theory may create inefficiencies in traditional salesperson training. Thus, following adult learning theory may offer more favorable outcomes in sales training and development. The following propositions are created based on adult learning theory:

P₁: Salespeople will be more committed to learning when the goals of learning are realistic and related to both their personal and professional needs.

P₂: Salesperson training will be more effective when the salesperson has some autonomy over training.

P₃: Salespeople will learn more effectively in the field with a coach or mentor than in a classroom based setting.

P₄: Salesperson training will be more effective if the training materials and methods consider the a) previous knowledge, b) experience, c) self-direction, and d) competencies of individual salespeople.

P₅: Salesperson training and development will be sustained to a higher degree when applying a combination of coaching and follow-up.

References Available on Request.