

THE IMPORTANCE OF TEACHING SALES SKILLS TO OTHER AUDIENCES: THE CASE IN INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Sales has transformed, and selling should be seen as a multi-person and multipoint engagement phenomenon (Dixon & Tanner 2012). Selling has become the business of the whole organization, and therefore, attention should be paid in teaching sales skills to other audiences than sales people. As the role of consultative sales has increased (Rackham 2012), experts such as Information technology specialists have had to take new sales roles.

This paper describes the demand for new kind of sales skills set by industry for Information technology (IT) specialists. First, the results of a qualitative study of 57 Finnish organizations of various sizes and fields is presented, describing what kind of sales roles IT specialists are having. Second, results of the sales skills expected of IT specialists are highlighted. Finally, an integrated approach is introduced to implement sales training into university level IT education to meet the needs of industry.

INTRODUCTION

IT specialists have traditionally been experts in their own field, and selling has been considered quite a remote function for them, with sales professionals handling sales. However, the operational environment for selling and buying functions in business-to-business markets has changed fundamentally. (Haas, Snehota and Corsaro 2012, Blocker, Cannon, Panagopoulos and Sager 2012) The traditional prevailing view of selling is questioned, and recently, scholars have proposed that selling should be seen as a multi-person and multipoint engagement phenomenon instead of a linear stepwise process to achieve economic benefits for the seller and the buyer. In this view, value is created in the relationships itself, through a series of interaction and encounters. (Dixon & Tanner 2012) While face-to-face encounters are decreasing, the importance of fewer face-to-face interactions becomes greater. Sellers need to be increasingly sensitive and adaptive to emergent value creation opportunities, and flexible to react to emergent situations (Gant 2013, Borg and Johnston 2013). Hence, seller companies have to produce value for the buyer from the first meeting, and in a knowledge-intensive environment, buyers expect expertise when meeting with the seller.

Although the need for IT specialists' new kind of sales competencies has become apparent for practitioners, less attention has been paid to academic research within that area. Additionally, educational institutes teaching Information technology have been moderate in implementing selling-related topics in their curricula. At the same time, business companies are lacking IT specialists with adequate sales and interaction skills. Often the prevailing view of selling among IT experts may be quite narrow, as selling may be considered to be merely the business of sales people. However, as business buyers' purchasing becomes more organized and multifaceted, it makes suppliers' traditional single point relationships and existing sales models ineffective (Dixon & Tanner 2012), and results in other than sales personnel having to deal with issues such as customer relationships, sales meetings, and cross- and up-selling to customer companies

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

A number of studies focus on the new demands and requirements of the sales function. The increasing demands of selling have forced companies to involve more knowledge and insight into the sales process. Another identified change is that selling is not a task only for dedicated salespeople; instead it belongs to the overwhelming majority of all functions, encompassing all who have interactions with customers. (Dixon & Tanner 2012, Miller, Robert and Heiman 2005) Consequently, IT specialists and other technical experts face the challenge of getting involved in selling either directly or indirectly.

The primary objective of this paper was to investigate how the transformation of sales has affected the organizations' need for IT experts to be competent in selling. A qualitative study with 57 Finnish organizations of various sizes and fields was conducted. In the study, the organizations were asked what kind of trends are affecting their business, what kind of IT specialists are they recruiting in the future, and what kind of competencies are expected of them.

The research questions are

What kind of roles do IT specialists have in sales?

What kind of sales competencies are expected of them in these roles?

Based on the findings, an attempt to introduce an integrative approach for implementing sales teaching in university level IT education is made.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Extant literature on what the IT specialists' sales-related role includes, and more important, what kind of skills are expected of them remains scarce. Marketing literature, for example, rarely considers the simultaneous pursuit of service and sales goals. Sales literature centers on the performance effects of sales behaviors in relationship-oriented contexts (Plouffe, Hulland and Wachner 2009), while services literature focuses on the service provider's management of the customer experience. (Price, Arnould and Tierney 1995). IT project managers, for instance, work closely with customers and are in key position to note new customer needs, yet the five most popular topics in journals covering project management in 2003–2008 were strategic alignment, resource management, interpersonal leadership issues, relationship management, project planning and control. (Ingason & Jónasson 2009). The term selling was not covered to the least.

Competencies can be viewed as more than having knowledge, skills and attitudes; the ability to use them is required to achieve the desired results. Competencies are not just personal attributes. They are the result of the relationship between experience and practice. (Olle, Snell and Carraccio 2010). Another view is that competencies are considered to be employees' abilities to use their knowledge in specific professional situations. Therefore, competencies can be defined as knowledge, experience, attitude and willingness to work in various conditions and the ability to adapt to changing conditions. (Thierry, Sauret, and Monod 1994)

In the qualitative study, we used Verbeke's categorization of sales performance determinants (Verbeke, Dietz, and Verwaal 2010) as basis for the classification of sales competencies and skills for IT specialists. Verbeke et. al. (2010) further refined a coarse-grained six-factor categorization scheme (Walker, Churchill, and Ford 1977, Churchill, Ford, Steven and Walker 1985) to correspond with the widely fragmented full spectrum of sales performance determinants. By retaining the six-factor outline as a guide to their own meta-analysis and by using other theoretical frameworks of other scholars, they developed a sub-classification in each of the six categories. Second, they evaluated the level at which the six refined categories accurately covered all critical streams of sales force research, and then inserted additional subcategories to incorporate research streams that conceptually fit into the broader Walker (1977) categories, but do not fit clearly into any theoretical sub-category. For the purpose of this study, we use four of the main categories to describe the sales competencies needed by IT specialists: aptitude, skill level, motivation and personal factors.

METHODOLOGY

The conducted research started by reviewing recent sales research and studies on recent IT market development, technological trends and national action plan for responding to the new digital economy. Based on these studies an initial understanding on the most important trends affecting the competence needs was built. The research was continued by planning and conducting the semi-structured interviews. In the interview the respondents were first asked to describe the business opportunities and challenges they expect to face in the future. Then the respondents were asked to name the main technological or other trends they think will affect their business or operations. The tentative set of trends was presented to the interviewees for commenting and refining at the end of the discussion. Finally, the customers were asked explicitly what kind of skills and competences they want to recruit in the future. These answers were analysed to compose a relevant set of competence profiles. (Soitinaho et. al 2015)

The conducted research consisted of a qualitative study of 57 organizations in various fields. In order to get a comprehensive view of the needed competencies of future IT professionals, the interviewed organizations were chosen among eight different categories, which represented the main actors in the Finnish IT field. The number of interviewed companies and organizations is in parenthesis.

1. **IT service business**, small and growth companies. Annual revenue about 2-20 M€ and number of employees 20-200. (9)
2. **IT suppliers**, large companies. Well established actors in the IT field having large offering of products and services. Annual revenue typically more than 100M€. (9)
3. **Specialized product and cloud service companies**, of varying size. More specialized than the previous category. (9)
4. **Utilizers of IT**. Private companies or public organizations (other than IT) that utilize IT products and services in their own business in a field (10)

5. **Recruiting companies and training companies.** Private companies offering IT recruiting and training services. (2)
6. **Game developer companies.** (2)
7. **Non-profit forums and interest organisations.** Contribute widely in the development and competitiveness of the Finnish IT industry. (6)
8. **Public universities.** Responsible for the public degree education in Finland. (11)

The respondents were chosen by selecting people in management positions who recruit IT experts. The interviewees represented several work areas, for example, business managers, HR managers, IT managers, service consultants, IT experts and developers. Interviewees from the non-profit forums and interest organizations were typically managers possessing a long and wide experience from the IT field.

The interviews were conducted in March – May 2014 in semi-structured form after literature preview and creation of the interview themes. Companies were chosen on the basis of the Finnish industry structure. They were contacted to find the respondents who possessed a view of how business has developed and what the future challenges are, and what kind of human resources the company needs. The interviewer documented the responses during the interview. Most interviews were conducted in pairs, which enabled one person to focus entirely on making notes.

RESULTS

During the analysis, important themes rising from the interviews were identified. Findings were clear, and they were agreed by the research group. An increasing need to sell, buy and serve was clearly indicated among all company respondents. It was seen especially important in IT growth companies. Selling and service skills were seen as “necessary skills” for everyone, and it was mentioned in various ways. Increased need for selling, buying, and service skills was the only top trend mentioned that relates to generic skills outside the IT area. The respondents working in universities did not explicitly mention selling, which may indicate that their point of view is still quite technical on contrary to the companies recruiting IT experts.

When asked about skills and competences IT professionals must possess to get recruited by the company or organization in the future, the replies were first split into two groups- generic skills and characteristics (non-IT) and IT-related competencies. Based on the responses, generic skills were categorized into five classes. The following generic, non-IT skills and competences were mentioned,

1) Sales and service skills and customer orientation were most appreciated in all categories of the interviewees. Regarding sales skills some emphasized that IT professionals tend to have a too narrow view of sales and it is not seen as a natural part of customer service or relations, which implies that the respondents have witnessed the transformation of sales, but IT specialists still hold the traditional view of sales. It was also mentioned that often IT specialists serve internal customers within the company, as well. Customer orientation was seen as part of sales skills, as it effects the IT specialists’ ability to add value by offering the right solutions. These skills were considered especially important within the growth companies (category 1) and large IT suppliers (category 2). The other determinants mentioned were *2) Business understanding and development skills, 3) Interactive cooperation and information sharing skills, 4) Passion, love and can-do attitude and 5) Desire for continuous personal development.*

The selling-related skills demanded of IT experts are summarized in table 1 using Verbeke’s modified categorization of sales performance determinants.

Sales skills needed varied based on company size and type, as the roles of IT specialists varied accordingly. Small growth companies expected IT specialists to be able to sell their solutions, whereas large IT suppliers appreciated a team role in sales, and other than IT companies emphasized internal sales skills. Based on the results, an integrated approach to implement teaching of necessary sales skills into IT education curriculum is recommended, where all IT specialists need to possess an understanding of sales and how their role is related to selling, Depending on the study path / future professional profile, role specific sales skills should be implemented into curricula.

DISCUSSION

Theoretical contributions

The qualitative work reported in this paper provides new insight into how to expand sales skills and competencies into other audiences than sales people, thus supporting the perception of sales as the multi-person and multipoint engagement phenomenon. In addition, this study provides new insight into selling in the IT environment context.

Managerial contributions

Managers should find this work helpful in recruiting and training IT specialists in sales, as this study provides a categorization of sales skills and competencies needed by IT specialists. Second, IT education institutes may utilize the results to better respond to the need of industry. Furthermore, sales education programs may want to extend and tailor sales teaching into IT programs.

Limitations and future research

As this study is based on qualitative data, future work should consider empirically testing the findings reported here. Finally, testing these findings in other knowledge-intensive settings would also be valuable in order to understand the evolved needs of the sales function to extend to other audiences.

Table 1. Selling-related skills demanded of IT experts (Verbeke et. al 2010 modified)

Main categories	Definition
<i>Skill level</i>	
<i>Macro selling</i>	
Selling-related knowledge	Able to understand business and ICT*s role developing it. Able to understand customer needs and proactively suggest solutions Able to communicate (business) value of products, services and solutions. Able to understand the sales process and see one’s own role regarding sales.
<i>Micro selling</i>	
Interpersonal	Able to communicate with different people, within a team and with customers in their language. Able to share ideas.
Degree of adaptiveness	Able to adapt one’s behavior depending on whether communicating with technical or business people.
<i>Motivation</i>	
Work engagement	“Can do” attitude, passion and willingness to learn, Desire to develop oneself professionally.

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