

SALES STAFF TRAINING – COMPLEX AND PERMANENT ACTIVITY OF SALES OPERATIONAL MANAGEMENT

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The present article deals with the complexity of the aspects related to sales staff training. Each stage of the sale process requires preparation, training and practice, overcoming the idea according to which sales agents must be sent almost immediately on the field. The article also treats a series of elements influencing the employees' improvement programs in general, including as well the ones of the sale force. These are: the degree of integrating the organization within the business environment, the company's image, the conditions in which it develops its activity, the company's personnel strategy, the human resources planning, the union involvement in the organization and the manager's, employee's and HR specialist's involvement in the training.

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Each stage of the sale process requires preparation, training and practice. P.R. Smith speaks of the **7 P** in the skills required for sale, namely³⁴:

- *Prospecting – (searching the potential clients).*
- *Preparation – (establishing the objectives, studying the client etc.).*
- *Presentation – (demonstration, discussions).*
- *Possible problems – (obstacles size).*
- *„Please give me the order” – (concluding the sale or taking the order).*
- *Pen to paper – (correct recording of all details).*
- *Post – sales service – (constructing a protection wall for the client).*

Therefore, personnel training is an essential stage, directly depending on the future productivity of the sales staff and which will directly reflect in the organization profile.

The idea according to which sales agents were sent nearly immediately on the field is outdated. It is correct that training programs require supplementary costs as well as the loss of certain opportunities due to the fact that the personnel is not on the field, but their lack would have serious negative effects.

According to Kotler, the training programs must have several **objectives**³⁵:

- **Sales agents must know the organization and they must identify them with it.** This is why most of the training programs start with the presentation of company's history and objectives, of the organizational structure, of the financial structure and facilities, of its main products and of the markets it serves.
- **Sales agents must know the company's products,** and therefore they are shown their manufacture and functioning method.
- **Sales agents must know what characterizes their clients and competitors.** In this sense, the trainers present the customers features, needs and purchase habits as well as the strategies used by the competitors.
- **Sales agents must learn to perform a successful presentation.** Therefore, the training courses must cover the basic sale rules and emphasize the reason for each product sale.
- **Sales agents must know the work techniques on the field and their corresponding responsibilities.** They learn, therefore, to distribute their time between the real and potential

34 Smith P.R., Marketing Communications, Kogan Page Limited, London, 1993, p. 196.

35 Kotler Ph., Marketing Principles, European Edition, Teora Publishing House, Bucharest 1998, p. 914.

clients, how to use an expense account, how to draw up reports and how to communicate effectively.

The organizational characteristic, such as the organization's degree of integration in the business environment, the company's image, the conditions in which it develops its activity, the company's personnel strategy, the human resources planning, the union involvement in the organization, as well as the manager's, employee's and HR specialist's involvement in training, influence the employees' improvement programs in general, but also of those in the "first line"³⁶.

- **The degree of integration in the business environment affects the manner in which the professional training activity is developed.** If we speak of a company with an activity strongly integrated, the employees must also know other sectors of activity, services and products within the company. The training taking into consideration other activities can lead to the possibility of moving the human resources to other positions than the ones on which they are hired at the beginning (jobs rotation), in order to manage to comprehend the entire activity.

- **The conditions in which the company develops its activity.** The business conditions create specific requirements for the employees. For the companies developing their activity in an instable environment (characterized by fusion, acquisition, absorption) the employees' improvement programs can be abandoned, left at managers' discretion, or they can be developed on a shorter period of time than the one programmed.

The employees remaining within a company which underwent a fusion, acquisition or absorption, discover the fact that their positions have now different responsibilities requiring new qualifications, skills.

For the employees in the expanding companies (characterized by an increased demand for products and services) we can find many opportunities for other positions and promotions. These employees are usually thrilled to participate to improvement programs because new positions usually offer increased salaries and more challenging.

During the periods in which the companies try a business revitalization or redirection, profits are often fixed. As a result, less stimulants are available for the professional development: promotions or salary increases. In many cases, the companies reduce their work force in the idea to reduce costs. Employees' improvement in these conditions is performed in order for the employees to be available (trained) to occupy the positions become vacant by pensioning or due to the work force fluctuation. Improvement involves helping the employees to avoid limitation.

- **Company's image.** For the companies with international activity, the improvement programs include employees' training for ample responsibilities, by using temporary and international assignments. Also according to the company's prestige, we shall determine if professional training will be centrally directed and coordinated, from the mother company or it shall be the responsibility of each subsidiary or branch.

- **The personnel strategy** influences the improvement by: the criteria used for the promotion and designation into decisional positions (designation flow) and the places where the company prefers to obtain human resources in order to complete the vacant positions (supply flow)³⁷. The companies differ, on a scale, according to the manner in which they perform the promotions and nominations in decisional positions, according to the individual or group performance, or based on the business unit performance. Also, they vary according to the degree in which their personnel needs are accomplished by resorting to the employees existing in the company (the internal workforce market) or to the employees in the competitor companies and on the recent entries on the workforce market such as schools graduates (external workforce market).

36 Campbell R.J., HR Development Strategies, in Developing Human Resources, Editura K. N. Wexley (Washington, DC: BNA Books, 1991), cap. 5.1, 5.34; Berry J. K., Linking Management Development to Business Strategy, Training and Development Journal (August 1990), p. 20 – 22.

37 Sonnenfeld J. A. and Peiperl M. A., Staffing Policy as a Strategic Response: A Typology of Career Systems, Academy of Management Review 13 (1998), p. 588 – 600.

Figure (1) presents the two dimensions of the personnel strategy. The interaction between the designation flow and the supply flow consists of four distinct types of companies:

- *fortress,*
- *baseball team,*
- *clubs,*
- *academies.*

Each type of company lays a different stress on the improvement activities. For example, certain companies such as the medical research ones lay a stress on innovation and creativity. These company types are labeled as "Baseball team", because it can be quite difficult to develop skills related to innovation and creativity. They tend to manipulate personnel needs by keeping the employees away from the competitors, or, by hiring graduates, with specialized skills (professions).

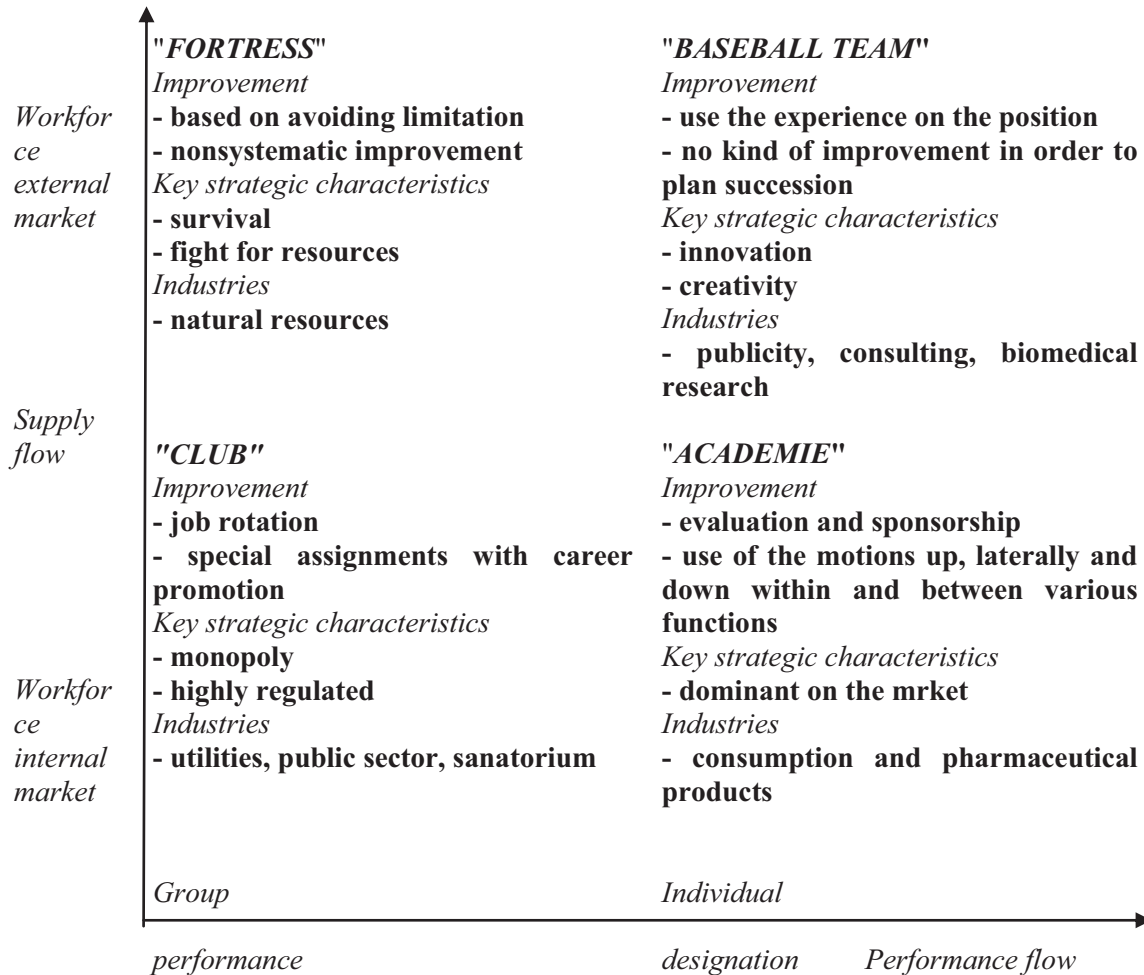


Fig. (1): The implications of the personnel strategy regarding the employees' improvement. (Source: Noe R.A., Hollenbeck J.R., Gerhart B., Wright P.M., **Human resource management. Gaining a competitive advantage**, a Time Mirror Higher Education Group, Inc. Company, 1997, p. 386.)

- **The human resources planning** allows the company to anticipate the motions of the human resources within the company due to jobs rotation, transfers, retirements and promotions. Planning helps to identify the places from the companies where employees with certain abilities are required. The improvement programs can be initiated in order to prepare employees for

certain increased responsibilities, for promotions, movements on the same hierarchic line (lateral), transfers, and opportunities for inferior hierarchic positions which are predicted by the human resources plan.

- **Unionization.** The unions can consider the programs as another attempt to make the employees work harder without sharing none of the productivity gains. The management programs of the Unions assure that all parts (unions, patronages, employees) understand the improvement purposes and are developed to perform the necessary changes so that the company bring profits and that the employees maintain their positions and share any increased profits.

- **Involving the manager, the employee and the HR specialist in the improvement programs development.** The employees' efficiency and effectiveness depend on the degree in which the managers, employees and personnel specialized in professional training are involved in the process. The development of the professional training activity for the employees of a company by a personnel specialized in human resources can lead to a wide range of improvement opportunities based on trainings (seminars). If the line managers were aware of what they can obtain by the training activity (such as the reduction of the time for recruiting competent personnel for a vacant position) they would be more eager to get involved in this activity. They will also become interested in the development process if they are remunerated for participation. At Xerox, the performances evaluations are directly correlated to the salary increases³⁸. A part of obtaining managers performances consist in the activities that they undertook in order to promote and develop women and minorities (transferring the women and minorities to polyvalent jobs which can provide them with the experience they need in order to become senior managers).

A present tendency in the professional improvement field is the one in which the employees are the ones who initiate the planning process of the improvement programs. The bigger a company's expectation for a continuous learning philosophy, the more its planning is expected. Companies will support the development activities such as reimbursements of the expenses with courses, seminars, work meetings, granting the employee the freedom to opt for various programs.

In sales, this principle can be successful, because the person who deals with sales knows better the vulnerable aspects that he desires to improve. A company's sales force must be aware therefore that without a thorough and constant training it cannot be competitive on a market with increased competition.

A delicate problem of the human resources management in general and of the preparation and training activity in particular is represented by the **selection of the adequate training method.**

In practice two great training possibilities appear: training programs at the workplace (on-the-job training) and training programs outside the workplace normal hours (off – the – job training).

The on-the-job training programs **have an informal character and include: training, orientation sessions, coaching, mentorship, job rotations etc.**

- **Training.** Is a method for transferring knowledge and skills from an experienced employee to a less experienced one³⁹. Training takes for 4 steps:

Step no. 1: The person training the employee must spend with the latter a "protected" time interval, namely without interruptions. The first assignment is to define the problem or the action to be performed.

Step no. 2: After explaining to the employee which is the situation and why he needs training, the training person must ask him clarifying questions, in order to understand that the respective individual thinks and speaks of the same problem. Is thinking must be encouraged and enlarged by delicate suggestions.

38 Noe R.A., Hollenbeck J.R., Gerthart B., Wright P.M., op. cit., p. 387.

39 CODECS, Open University Business School, BZT654 Competitive Management, vol. 5, Personnel Development and Evaluation, 1997, p. 59.

Step no. 3: The individual must be offered new ideas, at the same time with the encouragements to find his own solution. The person training him must abstain from telling him "I would do like this!", if this is not expressly required. If it is necessary, the problem must be redefined.

Step no. 4: We get to a point in which we must adopt a decision. The employee's trainer must provide him with all information he needs. The discussion is ended, the conclusions are drawn and a summary of what took place is made including the adopted measures. If necessary, we appreciate the advantages obtained or the improvement of the work results, compared to those that the employee would have obtained if he followed his own methods.

- **Jobs rotation** – is a training process in which the participant learns based on the observations and on practice and not based on certain instructions. Rotation means transferring the employees to other departments on different jobs for a given period of time. During the training, the participant is "in the responsibility" of a superior who will occupy with the participant's orientation, training and evaluation.

Jobs rotation is frequently used for training the first management level especially for the new employees. During the training cycle by jobs rotation, the participant expects to learn how each department functions, including the key roles, policies and procedures.

- **Guiding (coaching)**. The managers understand that they must have an active and positive role in the employees' performance in order to assure that the objectives are reached. They are not especially paid for what they do, but for what their subordinates perform.

The coaching activity is similar to personnel training, although one of the fundamental differences is that the coach must not be the employee's direct manager. Usually, the mentors chosen to guide the personnel are elder persons or more experienced persons than the one coached. Mentors must offer support, encouragement and development opportunities, acting such as resonance boxes for the employee's ideas.

The stages of such a program is presented as follows:

Table (1)
Stages of a training program

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|---|--|
| Preparation stage | Considers: - establishing the objectives for reaching the desired efficiency; - providing the necessary work equipment and the propitious workplace arrangement. |
| Stage I – Preparation | Aims at: - identifying the participant's command degree of the skills necessary for the respective activity; - rousing the employee's interest and desire to learn. |
| Stage II – Assimilating knowledge and practical operations | - the employee is theoretically informed related to the operations that must be performed, in this sense the trainer uses the exemplification technique; - the employee is motivated in addressing questions in order to clarify the misunderstandings and the general comprehension of the information and operations to be assimilated; - the employee is completely patiently trained, with clarity on what he has to do; He exercises insistently until he gets the habit; - the trainer makes sure that the employee understood each operation before presenting the following information; - at the end of the training, the retention is provided by representing the process in its entirety as operations sum. |

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| Stage III – Verifying performances | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - we test theoretically the assignments appropriation manner; - we address questions on what to do; - at a practical level we observe the performance, we correct the errors; - we continue this stage until the effective appropriation of knowledge and habits. |
| Stage IV – Evaluation session (follow-up) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - we verify if the instructions have been complied with; - we establish the possible improvements of the training program. |

(*Source*: Pânișoară G., Pânișoară I., **Human Resources Management, Practical Guide**, Polirom Publishing House, Bucharest, 2004, p. 98.)

In sales, training is essential, because it is a field in which the changes take place rapidly, and those that do not keep up will be eliminated by the competitors. These activity needs to be granted an increased and continuous attention from both sides (of the management personnel and of the sale force members). Everyone must be aware that there is no point where you can stop, considering that you learned; this point gets farther and farther as you get close to it because nobody will ever detain all knowledge, techniques and skills necessary for the sale!...

This is also the belief of Zig Ziglar, who notices: “*If I look behind to my sales agent , sales manager and sales trainer career I have no doubt that the most successful professional continues to have the attitude of a beginner. The sales professional which reaches and remains on top of his job is an „experienced rookie”.* And this means that if we consider sales as a continuous learning process, we will ceaselessly learn the “*small things*” that produce the “big differences” in our career of sales professionals. (We have no profit from a sale ALMOST accomplished)”⁴⁰.

The author lays, consequently, a great stress on the continuous training in sales activity. “*We have no profit from a sale ALMOST accomplished.*” – is perhaps the most realistic phrase ever written about sales. It could be translated with something like ... *the national anthem is sung only for the first place*... Nevertheless, in order to have the guaranteed success, the sales force must assume the phrase “*long life learning*” as a fact.

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⁴⁰ Ziglar Z., Sales Art, Amaletia Publishing House, Bucharest 2002, p. 14.