

FITTING A SQUARE PEG INTO A SQUARE HOLE: INTRODUCING ASSESSMENT PROGRAMS TO DETERMINE PROPER FIT BETWEEN SALES GRADUATES AND EMPLOYERS

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POSITION PAPER

If recent trends continue, over 50% of business school graduates will begin their career in sales, regardless of their major (SEF, 2014). To prepare graduates, universities are developing sales programs (certificates, minors, and majors) in their marketing departments. Graduates of collegiate sales programs are in high demand, with many sales students receiving multiple job offers far in advance of graduation (Damast, 2012). In fact, the Sales Education Foundation (SEF) (2015) identifies 93 “Top Sales Schools” in North America and reports job placement statistics for 71 of them. For these programs, average job placement upon graduation is 93.6%.

Sales educators are uniquely placed to provide students with skills that are in demand. However, educators face an interesting dilemma as the job market for sales graduates continues to improve. Some employers are challenged to find the right graduates to place in many of these professional selling roles (Weber, 2015). We propose that, while the current framework of collegiate sales education helps prepare students for what to expect in a sales-focused position, assisting students in determining what to look for in their ideal post-graduate opportunity receives little focus. Rather than helping students get “a job,” educators now need to provide students with tools to assess career fit among the multiple offers that are often received following completion of sales-focused marketing degrees.

Employee fit, or person-organization fit, is defined as “the congruence of an individual’s beliefs and values with the culture, norms, and values of an organization” (Handler, 2004). Research on employee fit finds that it is positively related to decreased turnover intentions (Sims et al., 1994) and fulfills an employee’s desire for meaningful work (Scroggins, 2008). Faced with high turnover rates, sales managers seek ways to find talent that want to work for the organization, that see the company as a long-term fit and not merely a first step to another role with a different firm (Jones et al., 2005).

We propose assessments to guide students in determining what they do want and do not want in a full-time sales role. Sales educators are keenly aware of the traditional stereotypes associated with the sales profession (questionable ethics, pressure to sell to anyone and everyone, high turnover rates) and utilize many in- and out-of class activities to dispel these antiquated notions and to focus on the positive aspects of working in a client-facing sales role. These aspects, which include responsibility, flexibility, and communication, match what many Millennials seek in a career (Asghar, 2014). Providing tools to help students determine their best corporate “match” can aid the decision-making process, as they will have a clear understanding of aspects that truly matter to them, beyond standard measures of brand name, salary or location. Two particular tools that can help students to get to know themselves are a written code of ethics and completion of the Chally assessment.

First, we propose introducing a Personal Code of Ethics exercise, as developed by Dingus and Milovic (2015), where students reflect on their values and develop rules for their professional lives based on the ethics that guide their personal lives. This assignment has been found to help students prioritize different aspects of jobs and to view companies from multiple perspectives (some students have even reported discussing how the company’s code of ethics matches with their own during a job interview).

Next, we suggest having students complete the Chally Assessment. Sales educators can become certified to administer the Chally Assessment in their sales classes, free-of-charge by the SEF. The Chally Assessment acknowledges that sales is a broad term, so it predicts success on the job for students to help focus on which aspect

of sales they may be better suited for (for example, inbound telesales versus strategic account manager). In addition to quantified measures of skills and identification of motivations and drivers for each student, the assessment provides customized tips for improvement in weaker areas (Chally, 2015).

Finally, we propose working closely with university career centers to determine the unique aspects of companies that hire on campus to determine how best to match each student's ideal fit with specific employer culture. While some universities have sales educators with specific corporate relations assignments, most do not. We encourage faculty to build relationships with career services and to utilize the SEF's Candidate Match Program can help students find their optimal fit. While this may be a timely endeavor, sales programs will benefit from alumni joining the company that "fits" and then returning to campus to recruit and, over time, efficiencies in the process will be created.

Future work on this topic includes determining when to include the exercises in a semester, whether or not to make these assignments mandatory, and how to assess and track student-employer matches beyond the classroom. Additionally, instructors should review assessment tools that may come available through their own university and through organizations designed to assist university sales programs. The additional time and effort required by faculty to help students assess fit is substantial, but we believe the benefits outweigh the costs. Working with students and employers to establish fit and successfully make professional matches can both assist organizations through decreased turnover and increased employee morale and promote the benefits of sales programs to future students, who will be able to see the success of former students in the workplace.

REFERENCES

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