

## **The Impact of Social Networks on Sales Training Transfer and Performance**

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Due to constant technological changes, increased competition, and for the fact that selling knowledge is quickly outdated, firms are investing considerable amount of money on training their salesforces (Kauffeld and Lehmann-Willenbrock 2010). Training is no longer seen as an event, but rather a process and research focuses now on understanding how training processes can be optimized (Holton, Bates, and Ruona 2000). In addition, there has been a shift within the academic community from identifying if training is successful to understanding the question of why training works (Holton, Bates, and Ruona 2000). Prior research has shown peer support along with training climate are essential to promote training transfer (Baldwin, Ford, and Blume 2009; Blume et al. 2010). In addition, it is widely acknowledged that as compared to passive learning, active learning enhances individual learning.

This research adds to the sales training field by focusing on the link between sales training and sales performance and considering the role that knowledge networks play in enhancing sales training programs. For this research, we collaborated with a B2B sales division of a multinational consumer electronics firm. We collected complete network data from individuals directly and indirectly involved in the selling process along with salesperson training, demographic and performance data over a 3 year. Our research yielded three interesting results that sales managers and executives should consider when designing, implementing, and managing a sales training program.

First, prior research has suggested that as people grow older, they are less willing to engage in self-development (McEnrue 1989). Our research demonstrates that in a sales training context this may not be the case and that you can “teach old dogs new tricks”. Salespeople are interested in strengthening their knowledge, skills, and abilities to increase their performance. Salespeople are more likely to accept and utilize training if training is perceived as credible, practical, and fills a selling need (Yelon et al. 2004). As such sales managers should consider surveying their salespeople to identify training topics that are most relevant to the largest audience.

Second, managers should focus on promoting knowledge exchange among all members of a sales division, including those members not in formal selling roles. Sales training is a process and does not cease once instruction is complete. Informal learning promotes individual development through shared experiences. Sales managers should work toward creating and supporting learning networks (Van den Bossche and Segers 2013). This may be achieved by effectively organizing work environments, reducing silos between team that are all too common within selling organizations, and promoting the exchange of information not only through verbal communication, but also through technology (e.g. email, text, instant messaging, CRM systems).

Third, by understanding the various social networks within a sales organization, managers may be able to identify individuals that are central actors within knowledge networks. Sales managers may approach these focal individuals and ask for their endorsement and support to ensure that training is met with enthusiasm and its content utilized overtime. These “ambassadors of training” could be highly effective in their ability to communicate beyond formal reporting lines, promoting ongoing training utilization through the processes of adoption and diffusion.

## References

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