

It's time to close the skills gap for Canada's sales professionals

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 CONTRIBUTED TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL
 PUBLISHED FEBRUARY 8, 2018

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Canada is often referred to as an innovation nation. Indeed, Ottawa is banking hard on innovation as a major economic driver, with the term used well more than triple the number of times in the 2017 budget than in 2016.

This aligns with the federal government's ambitious goal of doubling Canadian high-growth companies to 28,000 and bolstering goods and services exports by 30 per cent by the year 2025. Its Economic Strategy Tables identify six priority areas, which include clean tech, digital industries and advanced manufacturing.

Yet, for such innovation to translate into economic growth, an essential element is neglected: commercial sales. Canada needs a skilled, empowered sales force that opens domestic and global markets to its innovations. To fish, one needs a strong rod and reel, not just an attractive lure.

But as things stand, the rod and reel – in other words, Canada's commercial sales force – has been weakened by lack of support and recognition. For too long, there has been a disconnect between the demand for highly skilled sales specialists and the actual training available to accredit such specialists. This disconnect has resulted in a troublesome skills gap, one that we must close if the country's high-growth companies are to dramatically expand.

Consider that for at least a decade, sales and marketing professionals have ranked among the most sought-after specialists in Canada. In fact, according to the Conference Board of Canada, sales and marketing professionals have

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**Canada is falling behind.
The time to act is now.**

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been among the top five specializations in highest demand over the past 10 years.

Yet despite the 1.2 million sales professionals working in Canada today (almost 6.6 per cent of the country's work force), nearly half of the companies surveyed last fall by the Bank of Canada believe they will have trouble filling open sales positions with qualified candidates as they seek to grow.

So why does such a dearth of qualified job candidates exist, causing a labour shortage in this specialty right when Canada needs it the most?

Findings from the first report on The New Sales DNA in Canada, produced by the Canadian Professional Sales Association (CPSA) and Abacus Data, reveal several key insights – and areas for immediate action.

Perhaps most glaring is the fact that sales is largely absent from the postsecondary curriculum and thus played down as a career. In fact, 40 per cent of sales teams have received no formal training. This has perpetuated a troublesome image problem: the lingering perception that other professions are more respectable, because many people simply "fall into" sales.

Yet, the report also found that what they fall into turns out to be quite the career. Commercial sales carries a 90-per-cent rate of job satisfaction. It is also barrier-free: Employers hire professionals of all ages, genders and cultural backgrounds. In fact, over the past five years, a rising number of women, visible minorities and millennials are joining the sales profession, helping shed outdated perceptions. And, with the high demand, opportunities abound for new recruits – provided they have the skills required to succeed.

With Canada poised for economic growth, the commercial sales industry must grow along with it. The tide must shift from a "fallback" career to one that is pursued for its rewarding, promising nature. And there is little time to wait.

During our research, the CPSA has heard loud and clear from industries of all kinds that employers in Canada want better national standards for sales professionals. They want sales curriculum and discussions happening far earlier in the education process. They want experienced, creative professionals to fill, with not just hard skills, but highly sought-after soft skills, too, such as empathy, communication and agility.

This is what we're working to achieve. But we need the collective support of government, business and academia to make it happen.

As the famous management consultant Peter Drucker once said, "what gets measured gets improved." Let's spread the optimism already existing in the profession to broader conversations that need to take place immediately to improve, and finally close, the skills gap amongst Canada's commercial sales force – so that Canada's near-term economic goals can be reached.