

Marketing & Sales Practice

The difference between good and bad sales training: A closer look at certification

Building sales capabilities has to evolve to deliver growth and keep up with evolving needs.

by William Decherd, Matt Deimund, Kedar Naik, and Maria Valdivieso



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Imagine this: a doctor who is about to perform complex surgery on you graduated from medical school and completed a residency program. But since then, she hasn't done any additional training to understand new surgical methods and technologies. Or, just as bad, imagine that doctor had *completed* the training but *didn't actually learn anything valuable*. How would you feel about the surgery's chances of complete success?

Society recognizes that professionals in medicine, law, engineering, and many other careers require training throughout their careers. In many cases, that educational progress is reflected in additional certifications. Even in business, Six Sigma has become a common operations-focused certification recognized for unlocking value and building skills over time.

That dedication to ongoing growth and skill improvement should be true for sales professionals

as well. Why? Because the value from such a program is immense. But as many recognize, creating a valuable program isn't easy.

Almost all sales organizations today offer training. Unfortunately, it is typically ineffective and, far too often, simply boring. Many executives don't realize how important effective sales training is. It is easy to view it as a cost center rather than an opportunity to drive a high return on investment.

A McKinsey global survey of some 1,200 respondents across various sales roles, from leadership to the front line, found that fast-growing companies were 80 percent more likely than slow-growing companies to achieve commercial results from sales training programs.¹ The survey found a host of factors that correlated with high sales performance, but one of the most interesting was successful implementation of a certification-based approach to sales training (Exhibit 1).

¹ Outperformers defined as having revenue growth ≥ 4 percent and faster growth than their peers. Underperformers defined as having revenue growth ≤ 3 percent and growth at the same pace or slower than their peers.

Exhibit 1

Great companies have an effective sales training program in place.

Good companies	Great companies
Offer training in multiple types of skills	Create specific learning journeys to build the distinct skills needed in each role
Get the support of their organization's sales leaders	Ensure sales leaders own and drive the program
Use high-quality off-the-shelf content	Tailor content to their sales force's specific selling motion
View training as a once-a-year exercise	Invest in continual on-the-job skill building
Measure results based on training completion	Measure results based on sales impact (pipeline, revenue, and margin growth)

Some organizations already have some form of certification-based sales training, but often it doesn't really mean anything. People who complete the training get a piece of paper, but there is little incentive for building skills nor any real consequences for those who fail to meet the standard.

Creating a world-class sales capability-building program requires focused effort by sales leadership, particularly with regards to practically establishing the program (Exhibit 2). Defining the core sales skills that your organization needs to enhance, determining the most appropriate forums to train for those skills, and then creating realistic content tailored to your company's sales motion are just a few of the challenges.

Exhibit 2

Four core elements make up a best-in-class sales capability-building program.



The best sales organizations realize the value of a sales certification program and act on it. They ensure that the certification is recognized as a mark of excellence within the company, that it's hard to achieve (requiring meaningful skill development), and that there are visible and financial rewards that come with obtaining the certification as well as real consequences, such as bonus or promotion implications, for not getting on board.

An example of an effective sales certification program

Sales executives at a leading global services firm were tasked with executing a turnaround. The organization's revenues had dipped for multiple quarters, and the head of sales was on the spot for helping the sales force connect better with customers. Sales training consisted of an off-the-shelf sales workshop once a year. Both sales management and frontline sales professionals saw the training as a cost—time out of the field that kept them from selling—rather than an investment in their ability to deliver future results.

The executives designed a new, tailored capability-building program that focused on the specific skills the sales force needed to develop, all wrapped into a meaningful certification program. It consisted of a series of levels that successively built skills. Each level entailed several different activities in varying formats. To earn certification for a specific level, participants had to complete tailored work related to their specific customer accounts, such as identifying a customer's most pressing business issues and needs at a very granular level. They also had to undertake a case study, consisting of multiple role plays and simulated exercises over the course of three days, with senior sales managers playing the role of the customer. Finally, they were asked to carry out activities with actual clients while on the job. Only after completing all of these

activities successfully could a sales professional be certified.

To attain advanced certification, they had to go even further, demonstrating additional levels of professional aptitude through significant commercial success and showing how the training program thus far had helped them win specific deals. They also had to showcase their role as mentors for their organization's up-and-coming professionals. Most important, however, the program was laser-focused on both developing skills and on-the-job training, not just finishing the course. Sales executives believed so strongly in the value of the program that they decreed that sales professionals had to achieve certification in order to qualify for incentive-based compensation.

The program also had meaningful nonfinancial rewards. For example, the first participants to complete the highest level of the certification program were showered with visible praise at sales meetings and recognized through town halls and email blasts. Better yet, the journey didn't stop once a certification was earned. Sales professionals had to *recertify every year*, undertaking a constantly evolving training curriculum.

Since instigating the program, the organization has been able to directly link the field commitments required by the program to more than \$100 million of incremental sales opportunities in the pipeline.

The world's best sales organizations expect—and equip—their sales professionals to continually train and sharpen their skills. Just like the world's top doctors, lawyers, and engineers, sales professionals must also constantly work to enhance their craft through a certification-based approach.

William Decherd is a partner in McKinsey's Nairobi office, **Matt Deimund** is an alumnus of the Dallas office, **Kedar Naik** is a partner in the Brussels office, and **Maria Valdivieso** is a partner in the Miami office.

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