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Students left to sell for themselves

Andrew Cave finds that most business courses are not teaching vital skills

TREASURY minister John Healey has spoken out against the lack of formal sales training in business studies courses at colleges and universities after a survey found that 99pc of business graduates are coming to the world of work not knowing how to sell.

Research by sales improvement consultancy Huthwaite International found that only three of Britain's 300 business degrees and HND courses have specific sales modules.

In contrast, more than two thirds of such courses provide marketing modules. In addition, universities admission organisation Ucas has identified just four pre-employment specialist sales courses in Britain, compared to more than 100 specialist marketing courses.

According to the Chartered Institute of Marketing, 766,000 people in the UK work in sales, compared to 545,000 in marketing.

Huthwaite says sales skills touch more aspects of business than any other skill-set and are required during any interaction with customers, such as client meetings, accounts departments dealing with customers' payments, technical support and customer service.

Mr Healey, who was previously minister for adult skills at the Department for Education and Skills, and is also Huthwaite's local MP, representing the Yorkshire constituency of Wentworth, said he was greatly surprised by the findings.

"Clearly, given that three quarters of a million people work in sales companies, this is a major issue," he said.

"We have all these television programmes such as Dragons' Den and The Apprentice where sales seem to be as much about personality than anything else but are clearly skills that businesses value.

"If there is a message to business, it's that people planning a career in

business should not assume that business courses cover the hard sales skills they may be looking for.

"I don't see why from an academic point of view there should be this focus on marketing, rather than sales."

Sandy Hood, lecturer at Chichester College, part of the University of Portsmouth which offers a sales module as part of its Business HND, said: "I was most surprised to find how few institutions offer a sales module as part of their business qualifications.

"If it's the role of academia to equip students with the skills they need to be successful in their careers and life in general, to exclude teaching selling skills is to fall short in meeting that commitment.

"It's a great shame that students will not encounter such a vital commercial skill, with relevance across the business, until they are well beyond an undergraduate degree."

Mr Hood added: "The weakness in some academic circles is that to judge students on anything other than analytical skills goes beyond their comfort zones.

"It's easier in marketing for example to analyse a market and receive a grade based on the depth of that analysis.

"In sales, it can seem more problematic to grade someone based on a much more black and white analysis of whether or not a sale was made."

Nicholas Kirk, director of the sales recruitment business of employment agency Michael Page International, which each year recruits about 1,000 sales staff for companies, said skills such as pitching for business and closing deals are vital and need to be taught properly.

"There are plenty of courses once you have a sales job," he said, "but there's a shortage of training at pre-job level. It just doesn't seem to be available and it is difficult to see

how sales skills are considered less important than marketing ones.

"If you want to go into sales, it's not necessarily a good idea to incur the costs of doing a business studies course.

"These courses do not necessarily prepare people for all aspects of the world of work."

Tony Hughes, the chief executive of Huthwaite International, said: "Sales is the most important business skill-set but I've long suspected that there was little emphasis on sales as a skill-set worthy of academic study. "For many people, the concept of selling has essentially negative connotations: being sold to is what happens to them in shops, on the phone and on the street.

"As such, it can be a negative experience that gives selling a poor image.

'Sales is neither understood nor accepted by many - this, I anticipate, will change.'



Tony Hughes, MD at Huthwaite International

"For a buyer involved in a truly consultative purchase, however, sales is seen as both a credible and professional service that adds real value to the decision-making process and generally results in happy customers.

"Yet this is clearly not the perception in academia."

Mr Hughes concluded that the message to business is to be selective about business graduate candidates.

"If they've not had any instruction in sales, be sure you can provide the impetus to fill the skills gap," he said.

"Sales is neither understood nor accepted by many institutions and students as a legitimate course of study in the way that marketing is recognised. This, I anticipate, will change."

"Sales is taking a new direction. There is now a greater awareness that anyone with an element of customer contact in their job must have sales skills.

This does not mean that everyone should be out to close the deal. On the contrary, it simply means that everyone from service engineers to accounts personnel must recognise the impact they can have on their company's bottom line – both positively and negatively."

Mr Hughes said 30pc of Huthwaite's customers are not directly involved in selling and do not have 'sales' in their job title.

Sheffield Hallam University's BA in Business Studies does have a sales module on which Barry Hazelwood, Huthwaite's Delivery Services Manager, is one of the guest lecturers. Huthwaite also sponsors an annual project group of Hallam's MBA students.
