Building Sales Capabilities

in the Brave New

Digital World
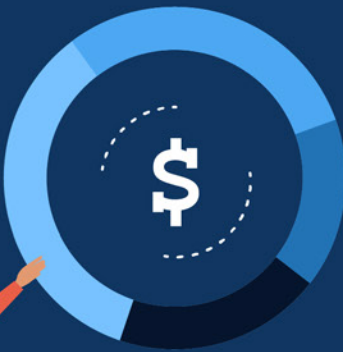
2021

Table of Contents

Sales Effectiveness Rated as Top 3 Business Priority

Before the pandemic, while organizations were already dabbling in technology-enabled learning delivery, face-to-face instructor-led training was the preferred choice as the delivery method for performance improvement — especially for sales teams. Sales professionals benefited greatly from gathering and learning together, sharing their experiences, giving feedback and receiving coaching from trained facilitators.

When the world shifted to remote work, organizations stopped all employee gatherings, in-person training included. Most companies adopted a "wait and see" approach hoping to pause temporarily until business returned to normal. As remote work became the new normal, however, many organizations realized they could not continue to delay their sales capability training efforts due to the vital nature of the sales function.

Top Business Priorities

Rated Important or Critical

Improving customer experience
79%

Increasing productivity
72%

Improving sales effectiveness
71%

Digital transformation
70%

Diversity, equity and inclusion
70%

Source: Brandon Hall Group,
2021 HCM Outlook Survey

Most Important Post-COVID Business Transitions

Rated Important Or Critical

Generating sales and revenue
88%

Creating policies related to employees who are afraid to come back to on-site work
79%

Sustaining strong communications across the enterprise
76%

Determining upskilling/reskilling priorities related to changing business conditions
67%

Managing change
57%

Source: Brandon Hall Group, Transitioning to the New Realities of the COVID-19 Experience, 2020

During this period of rapid change, focusing on generating sales and revenue has been the highest-rated priority for organizations. It is even more crucial for companies to develop their sales forces as a major source of competency and advantage. But while the challenge in many ways remains the same, the approach has changed radically: World-class sales training has to be delivered digitally while still preserving the capability-building power of rich, in-person training.

Sales Performance Challenges

Even before the recent major shift to remote work, sales performance faced challenges. According to a 2019 study in *Harvard Business Review*, sales teams overall were seeing:

- Win rates below **50%** and falling

- Sales cycles lengthening by **one-third**

- Time-to-sales proficiency that was almost as long as the average tenure of sales professionals. While average tenure for sales professionals is 18 months, **74%** reach proficiency in 12 months — resulting in just six months of fully productive time

These challenges only intensified the need for robust sales training.

Traditionally, substantial sales training has been conducted in person, which has proven to be effective. Sales professionals, in particular, value the face-to-face interaction and spontaneous discussion. Many selling skills are "soft skills," broadly classified as a combination of communication skills, behaviors and social acumen that allow people to sell and collaborate effectively. As a result, highly interactive exercises such as role-plays and group debriefs have become an important staple of these trainings.

Most sales leaders have been wary of other options: standard eLearning is too simplistic, and web conference-based training can be fatiguing. The former has limited effectiveness and the latter has limited efficiency.

In response to the pandemic and the inability to leverage in-person training, sales and learning leaders have moved through three "stages" in a Cycle of Reaction. First, they started with the Hesitation stage, so that they could see how things would turn out. Next, when they recognized it would be a long wait, they went into the Replication stage, where they tried to replicate training though web conferences. Forward-thinking organizations have now moved on to the Reinvention stage, where they are looking at ways to utilize new approaches to put their sales training on a more sustainable and effective digital footing. Next, we'll cover some of the key elements of these approaches.

Cycle of Reaction

Hesitation
On hold, until it is over

Replication
Doing the "next best thing"

Reinvention
Finding the better way

Source: Wilson Learning Worldwide Inc.

Keys to Successful Sales Training

Immediate applicability. Salespeople should leave a learning event knowing they can immediately apply their skills and knowledge.

Recognition of past experiences. People generally come to sales training with various levels of knowledge and experience. The learning needs to take that into account.

Engaging experiences. Sales professionals are busy people who are easily distracted by other priorities. The learning must grab their attention and keep it.

Sharing and learning from others. Sales professionals love to share what they know.

Expert coaching and feedback. They also love to learn from experts who have more experience.

There are five keys to creating a highly effective sales training program, listed above. It is then a matter of how you can incorporate these into a digital platform. You can do so with modern platforms, such as NovoEd's. But doing so in an effective way is not simply a matter of migrating over existing content and exercises online. It requires redesigning the learning experience from the ground up, to take advantage of the platform's capabilities. Next, we will share four key learning design principles to creating effective digital sales training that can meet or even exceed the results you obtain in a standard in-person training experience.

Four Guiding Design Principles

The design principles of traditional eLearning design may be counterproductive for today's learners, even if implemented with the best of intentions. They often feature flashy designs and animations that try to capture attention, provide the "right" answers for every scenario, don't allow for peer interaction or sharing, and are completely solo and unconnected to sales managers. However, a truly effective digital sales training experience should follow the following principles:

1. Allow your audience to focus

2. Don't monopolize the answers

3. Expose nuance and judgment

4. Include managers in the learning

1 **Allow your Audience to Focus**

We all recognize that if we can't get salespeoples' attention, the content is irrelevant. Many online content creators took inspiration from video games, which can transfix people for hours and compel them to lose track of time. Early eLearning theory proposed that the flashier the presentation, the more it would hold your audience's attention. This manner of thinking, peaking with the "gamification" trend, turned out *not* to be the holy grail and was overblown as a fad. Some people still cling to this type of thinking as it can be tempting to pin your hopes on flashes and beeps.

But no one mistakes training for a game. Learning theory states that increasing cognitive load hampers the ability to learn. Having too many animations, flashing objects and sections on a screen detract from learners' ability to absorb specific concepts. This is critically important for software user interfaces: They must be minimalist and clear, and guide users intuitively. Everyone is accustomed to consumer-grade apps on their phones and learning programs need to be just as simple.

Having too many distracting things on a screen can hamper the ability to learn.

2 **Don't Monopolize the Answers**

In sales training, it is common to introduce a new selling methodology and then describe exactly how to implement it. This might be appropriate for those beginning their careers with little work experience. However, this ignores a crucial adult learning principle: Adults bring their prior experience to the table. The fact that is you can't transplant knowledge; you have to graft it onto people's existing experiences.

Training programs should engage the thinking, ideas and experiences of the participants. Facilitators should move away from the "Sage on the Stage" to become more of a "Guide on the Side," similar to the way good facilitators spur conversation in an in-person workshop setting.

Here is why designing for this type of dynamic in online learning is so difficult: It requires learning designers to let go. Instead of stuffing an online course with content and quizzes, there should be designed space and open conversations. This new mindset eschews the tangible markers of minimal value for the transformative possibilities of perspective-sharing and genuine dialogue.

Facilitators should move away from the "Sage on the Stage" to become more of a "Guide on the Side."

3 **Expose Nuance and Judgment**

A good rule of thumb is to keep things simple, but it is possible to take this idea too far. We can make a distinction between concept and application. Concepts should be simple. For example, concepts around listening, being curious and cultivating stakeholders are all simple and powerful. But the application of those concepts in the real world is not simple at all; it is messy and is full of shades of gray. Knowing how and when to apply a particular concept makes all the difference.

Let's keep in mind that the goal of training is to change behavior to achieve a desired outcome in the real world. To do that requires not just understanding a concept but understanding it deeply enough to grasp how it might, or might not be applied in different situations. It is this nuance and subtlety that leads to the development of expertise. The best way to foster this in a training environment is through shared practice, dialogue and feedback.

Knowing how and when to apply a particular concept makes all the difference.

4 Include Managers in the Learning

Trying to get things done after training is a good goal but difficult to do. When people finish a training experience, their "bubble" is immediately popped by the realities of the day-to-day life. There are ways organizations try to reinforce changes and affect behavior, including checklists, reinforcement reminders and revamped performance evaluations.

These tend to be effective in only eliciting the minimal compliant behavior.

There is a much more powerful way to change the behaviors of reps and their managers: get the managers involved in the training itself and have them be a key part of the experience. In the face-to-face training world, this is difficult because sales managers can't attend the training of all of their direct reports, but it is much more feasible to incorporate in online programs. The key to incorporating managers effectively is to make the online interface as simple and as streamlined as possible, for them to see the progress of their reports, and review and approve their deliverables.

Get the managers involved in the training itself and have them be a key part of the experience.

Manager Involvement

Leading sales performance and leadership development provider Wilson Learning has seen the kind of impact can be made by including managers into the learning process. Wilson Learning uses a learning method they call "application challenge assignments." In these assignments, salespeople are given a real-life application challenge where they must use a specific skill with a specific client. They need

to create a document or a video, and send that to their manager. Their manager provides feedback on how well they did. This occurs over a series of assignments with different skills. Originally, this was all happening via email.

Wilson Learning then implemented NovoEd as a learning platform to make the process easier for learners and managers.

The documents and videos were created and shared within the platform and managers could go in to review and leave feedback. Before deploying NovoEd, only 46% of the challenge assignments were completed and about 2% of managers had provided any feedback. With the platform in place, challenge completion rose to 91% and manager participation to 82%.

Study Based on:

- More than 1,000 Application Challenge assignments
- Multiple organizations

Learning Platform Impact on Manager Coaching

With Learning Platform
- 91%
- 82%

- Challenges completed
- Manager feedback completed

Before Learning Platform
- 46%
- 2%
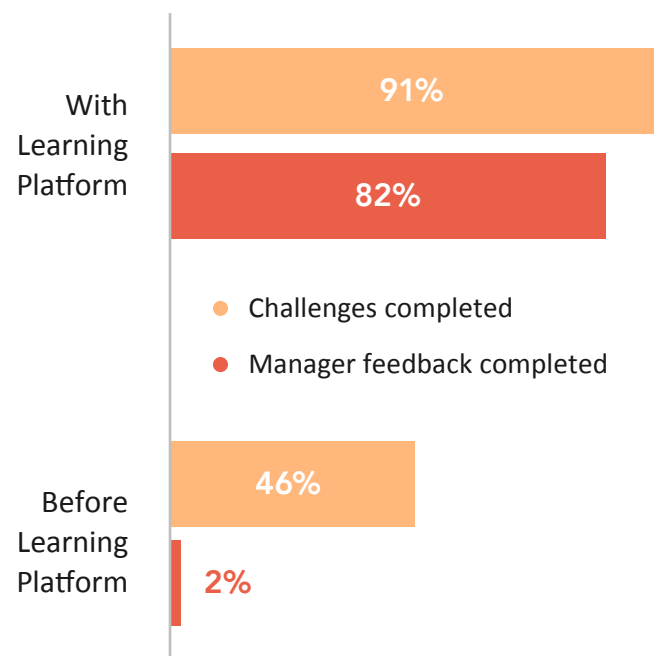
Source: Wilson Learning Worldwide Inc.

Conclusion

To summarize, the importance of building an organization's sales capabilities is higher than ever, and we have been faced during the pandemic with the loss of our most effective training tool to build deep capability: in-person training. However, this has presented an opportunity to leap forward into the digital age and take advantage of new models and tools to provide even more efficient and effective training to our sales professionals.

The key is recognizing the effectiveness limits of traditional eLearning and the scalability limits of web conference-based learning, and take the step of reinventing sales training with a whole new digital paradigm. To do so, you must tap into the dynamics that are so effective in face-to-face training: applicability, drawing upon experience, engaging people with each other and with mentors and coaches. These are all experiences that can now be enabled online, through cutting-edge digital platforms such as NovoEd's and with your own content or award-winning training content from Wilson Learning.

Please contact us to learn more.

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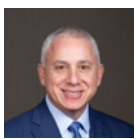
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About NovoEd

NovoEd's collaborative learning platform empowers organizations to design and deliver experiential learning that accelerates business performance on a global scale.

Since the company's founding at Stanford's social algorithm laboratory in 2012, global corporations, executive education providers and training firms have relied on NovoEd to develop high-margin capabilities through purposeful practice and application, coaching and mentorship and group collaboration. NovoEd's proven approach to learning connects diverse groups of learners, mentors and leaders in a high-impact online environment.

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NovoEd

To learn more, please visit: **www.novoed.com**

About Wilson Learning

For more than 50 years, organizations have sought Wilson Learning's expertise in helping them address key business issues, including:

- Salesforce Effectiveness
- Leadership Development
- Workforce Readiness

At Wilson Learning, we help organizations improve the effectiveness of their salespeople and sales leaders. Our solutions result in significant returns for our clients, including more deals won, higher-margin sales, more referrals, more upsells and cross-sells to existing customers, and faster growth in sales revenue. Our customized and results-oriented approach equips sales organizations with a common language, sales methodology, sales process, strategies, skills and techniques to help our customers achieve transformational improvements.

We also work extensively with HRD, OD and L&D senior-level executives in transforming their leaders to meet the organization's demands and execute the business's strategy. We consult with organizations to develop all levels of leaders from first-level leaders to executives. Our solutions equip leaders with the capability, tools, knowledge and vision to create employee engagement, drive strategy, achieve results and deliver value to customers and shareholders.

Organizations in more than 50 countries achieve success through working with Wilson Learning on inspiring, developing and transforming their greatest investment — their people.

WILSON LEARNING®

To learn more, please visit: **www.global.wilsonlearning.com**

About Brandon Hall Group

With more than 10,000 clients globally and 27 years of delivering world-class research and advisory services, Brandon Hall Group is focused on developing research that drives performance in emerging and large organizations, and provides strategic insights for executives and practitioners responsible for growth and business results.

Some ways we can help …

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ORGANIZATIONAL EXCELLENCE CERTIFICATION PROGRAM
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HCMA PROFESSIONAL CERTIFICATIONS
are comprehensive educational programs that center around a multiphase knowledge test.