
HOW ATTRACTIVE CAN A JOB IN SALES BE? A BUSINESS STUDENTS' EVALUATION

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Abstract

This study examines how Romanian business students evaluate the attractiveness of a potential job in sales. To this end, a total of 167 students from five different faculties of the Bucharest Academy of Economic Sciences have been surveyed online, with the main purpose of identifying what they perceive as an attractive/unattractive potential job in the field of sales, as well as identifying what attributes the students associate to a potential job in the field of sales. The most attractive aspect of a job in sales has been found to be *the interaction with many people*, while the highest score for the unattractive attributes was associated to *the fact that you need to persuade people / negotiate with them*. However, negotiation is considered by almost half of the interviewees as an attractive attribute. When thinking about a job in the field of sales, students firstly evaluate the possibility of growing from a professional standpoint as well as the balance between personal and professional life, while the lowest item on their list was the “impressive” name of the job and the possibility to work separately from other colleagues. As to the most attractive fields of activity in sales, the students' options were first and foremost directed towards tourism and leisure (27.1%), IT industry (25.3%) and real estate (22.9%). Boys prefer outdoor activities in a larger proportion than girls (50% and 40% respectively) and are less inclined to seek a job that requires them to sell via telephone or in a store. The results of this study could help establish a profile of the business student who is interested in a career in sales.

Keywords

sales job, job attractiveness, sales fields, attitudes toward sales, student perception of sales career

JEL Classification

M10, L81, L84

Introduction

This research aims at understanding the business students' perception towards a job in sales. This issue is topical, as it appears from the literature review.

Talented employees are often viewed as one of the most important production factors that retailers have need of in order to remain competitive in sales environments that nowadays change so rapidly, so many retail companies have focused their efforts on recruiting graduates (Reda, 2008). A research subject that is carefully studied now has to do with the most important attributes of a job which students analyze in order to determine how appealing a certain potential job is when evaluating several job opportunities (Oh et al., 2016). Some authors (Broadbridge et al., 2009) have claimed that retail employers have not succeeded in selling their empty job positions to the public. The negative perception towards a career in retail can be determined by a poor communication between the retail industry and the potential candidates for vacant jobs (Broadbridge, 2003).

Sojka et al. (2000) have focused mainly on the perceptions of students from the business field, who have had the most contact with sales: marketing students, students who have done two or more sales courses and students who have had a connection to the field of sales through relatives or through a temporary job / internship in sales. The conclusion of the study is that these students have a significantly better perception towards a career in sales than other students. Bristow et al. (2006) opts for a similar strategy, finding that students who had done courses in sales were more likely to have a positive attitude towards choosing a career in sales. Suciu et al. (2009) consider investment in language training and adopting a knowledge management approach can improve students' skills and competences, making them better prepared for the labor market.

While some authors have shown there is a relative lack of research with regards to education in sales (Cummins et al., 2013), others have shown that sales jobs nowadays require more technical and analytic abilities than ever (Davidson, 2013). The literature has also indicated that the level of professionalism required in sales is growing, as an increasing number of sales employees are more solution-oriented rather than sales-oriented (DeVecchio and Honeycutt, 2002; Ellis, 2000). Furthermore, the cost of training the employees and the cost of fluctuation are high; therefore, choosing the right candidate for the sales position is crucial (Adidam, 2006).

Donoho et al. (2012) show that there are gender differences in the way scenarios regarding sales ethics are evaluated, but Spillan et al. (2007) have found that there are no significant differences between the perceptions of men and those of women towards a career in sales, although men have indeed indicated they are more likely to pursue such a career. Sherwood et al. (2012) have shown that students in their early years and women have had more positive attitudes towards sales.

Other research has revealed that the perception towards sales as a profession may depend on six criteria. These include knowledge provided by specialized programs in universities, the autonomy of certification programs and their public credibility, the service brought to society, organizational culture, an ethic code and the importance of sales abilities (Hawes et al., 2004). A significant challenge in the recruiting process comes from competence-related industries that require the same skills that are practically becoming competing industries. Specifically, companies from other industries are simultaneously increasing their recruitment efforts, targeting the same talented students or graduates. Retailers should be aware of this competition on the market because students are worried first and foremost about their own career, without tracing clear delimitations between certain industries or categories of jobs (Rousseau and Arthur, 1999). It is therefore important for retailers to understand how these potential candidates evaluate the attractiveness of jobs and make the decision by analyzing industries. In this context, identifying the attractive and unattractive attributes of a sales job might become a key attribute in the human resources strategy that retailers formulate.

The subsequent parts of this paper are as follow: the research methodology section, results and discussions and conclusions and suggestions.

Research methodology

The purpose of this research is to understand the business students' perception towards a job in sales and to identify the attractive / unattractive attributes they associate to such a job. To this end, students from five faculties from the Bucharest Academy of Economic Sciences were interviewed: Business and Tourism; Marketing; The Faculty of Business Administration (in Foreign Languages) – FABIZ; The Faculty of International Business and Economics – REI; and The Faculty of Economic Cybernetics, Statistics and Informatics – CSIE.

The main objectives of this study are: (1) finding the attractive / unattractive attributes of a sales job and (2) identifying the aspects that students associate with a job in sales.

The research method used was the survey. Data collection was done online through a questionnaire using Google Forms (Google docs). The link hosting the questionnaire was distributed by e-mail, Facebook and WhatsApp to the students from the faculties mentioned above. The link was distributed on March 18, 2019, and responses were collected until March 31, 2019, when 167 valid responses were recorded. The profile of the respondents is shown in Table no. 1, using two socio-demographic values: the students' faculty and gender.

Table no. 1 The sample structure

Faculty	Gender		Total
	Boy	Girl	
Business and Tourism	9.70	28.48	38.18
CSIE	4.24	20.61	24.85
REI	1.21	12.12	13.33
Marketing	1.82	10.91	12.73
FABIZ	3.64	7.27	10.91
Total general	20.61	79.39	100

Source: Authors' own calculations

Of the total students who answered the questionnaire, 79.39% were girls and 20.61% boys.

Results and discussion

Regarding the attractiveness / non-attractiveness elements of a job in sales, the summary of the answers obtained is presented in Table no. 2.

Table no. 2 Aspects considered attractive for a job in sales

Attributes of a sales job	No. of choices	Percentage*
Interaction with many people	102	61,1
Chance of big financial gains	88	52,7
High chances of being promoted	71	42,5
The need to persuade/negotiate	70	41,9
Self-reliance for having better results	68	40,7
Material benefits (car, phone etc.)	62	37,1
Field work	29	17,4
Others. Which?	1	0,6

* out of the total number of respondents (167)

Source: Authors' own calculations

The most attractive aspect of a sales job is *the interaction with many people* (chosen by 61.1% of respondents), followed by *the chance of big financial gains* (chosen by 52.7% of students) and by *high chances of being promoted* (42.5%).

The most unattractive aspects in a sales job can be seen in Table no. 3.

Table no. 3 Unattractive aspects of a sales job

Attributes of a sales job	No. of choices	Percentage*
The need to persuade/negotiate	75	44,9
Field work	74	44,3
Small chances of big financial gains	45	26,9
Interaction with many people	33	19,8
Self-reliance for having better results	31	18,6
Material benefits (car, phone etc.)	4	2,4
Lower chances of being promoted	3	1,8
Others. Which?	2	1,2

* out of the total number of respondents (167)

Source: Authors' own calculations

As a general observation, the percentages of the negative attributes are lower than those of the attractive attributes. The first three unattractive aspects of a sales job are: *The fact that you have to convince / negotiate (44.9%), Fieldwork (44.3%) and Small possibilities for financial gain (26.9%)*. What's interesting is that the same attribute, *the need to persuade / negotiate*, is considered by almost half of the respondents as being an attractive attribute, while the others see it as an unattractive attribute of a sales job. Also, 52.7% of students think they would have high chances of big financial gains, while 27% think the exact opposite.

To gain a deeper understanding of how attractive a sales job is for students, it is useful to know the expectations they have from a hypothetical ideal job and to compare them with the possibility that they see these expectations to be fulfilled in reality. For this purpose, the semantic differential scale with 5 values was used (1 = Not Important; 5 = Very Important). The result of this comparison can be seen in Table 4, based on the average.

Table no. 4 Students' expectations of the ideal workplace and one in sales

Workplace expectations	Expectations of the ideal workplace		Projections on a real job in sales		t test
	Mean	Median	Mean	Median	
Job stability	4,10	4	3,04	3	6.73*
The possibility to grow professionally	4,41	5	3,24	3	5.58*
Be appreciated for what I'm doing	4,09	4	3,41	3	5.04*
Be able to influence my salary	4,01	4	3,69	3	2.91*
Help others	3,88	4	3,50	3	3.74*
Have control over my working schedule	3,90	4	3,08	3	5.22*
Have a big salary	4,30	4	3,41	3	5.74*
Do a job that helps people	3,94	4	3,38	3	4.02*
Work independently from others	3,26	3	3,20	3	1.16
Have a good relationship with my colleagues	4,16	4	3,48	3	4.84*
Work in a team	3,59	4	3,34	3	5.27*
Work with new technologies	3,86	4	3,47	3	4.74*
Have a higher status (prestige)	3,71	4	3,04	3	4.27*
The job has an impressive name	2,48	2	2,63	3	-7.45*

To give me clear opportunities for promotion	4,01	4	3,28	3	5.63*
To ensure a work-life balance	4,40	5	3,24	3	11.41*

*p<0.05

Source: Authors' own calculations

Students appreciate first and foremost the opportunity to develop professionally and the balance between personal and professional life, but there are many other attributes that most students have appreciated as important. Regarding the projections that students make about a job in sales, to all the attributes analyzed the most frequent answer was *neither important nor unimportant*, and the averages are significantly lower than when referring to the ideal job. This fact may show -from the point of view of the mean- that students perceive that a job in sales cannot properly meet their expectations from a job, but also that students do not know the content of a job in sales (fact suggested by the median, since most of the opinions expressed are neutral). There exist significant differences between the two types of expectations as t-test values show (Table no. 4), except for work independently from others. Thus, students consider working independently from others is a condition stated for an ideal job which is very likely to be accomplished also on a real job in sales.

In order to identify the connections students make when thinking about a sales job we again used the 5-value Likert scale (1 = Strongly disagree; 5 = Strongly agree). Table no. 5 summarizes the students' responses based on the mean.

Table no. 5 Aspects with which students associate a job in sales

Elements of association	Mean	Median
It's for frustrated people	1,27	1
It's an uninteresting, boring job	1,63	1
It's a job that's easy to get	2,51	2
It's for people who only think about money	2,01	2
Those who work in sales press people to buy products they don't need	2,74	3
People working in sales are dishonest and want to cheat customers	2,14	2
It's just a job, you can't make a career	2,03	2
It involves a lot of traveling	2,79	3
It's a low security job	2,64	3
You work too hard compared to how much money you make	2,40	2
It interferes with your personal life	2,42	2
It's difficult to be promoted into a management position	2,72	3

Source: Authors' own calculations

It can be concluded that respondents are generally convinced that a sales job is not for frustrated people and is not uninteresting or boring. In relation to other association suggestions, both the mean and median suggest either a rather negative association or a faint opinion about a job in sales.

If they were working in sales, for 38% of the students it would not matter if they held a job in direct sales to individuals and sales to companies. About the same percentage is registered for preferences directed to a position in sales to companies. Direct sales to individuals, as a first option, registered a percentage of 7%, and 17% of students did not have an opinion (Table no. 6).

Table no. 6 The type of sales position considered attractive (%)

Type of position	Total
Sales to companies	37.72
Direct sales to individuals	7.19
Both, to the same extent	38.32
I can't appreciate it	16.77
Total	100

Source: Authors' own calculations

With regard to the areas of activity considered most attractive for a job in sales, the students' options were directed primarily to: tourism and leisure (27.1%), IT industry (25.3%) and real estate (22.9%). The first two choices are most likely justified by the fact that most of the respondents come from those two faculties. An important conclusion could be that these two faculties, Business and Tourism and CSIE have well-defined profiles and students get to know the field for which they study and to evaluate it as attractive. A distribution by faculties and fields of the obtained answers can be found in Table no. 7.

Table no. 7 Distribution of answers on attractive business sectors, by faculties (%)

Sectors perceived as attractive for a career in sales	Faculty					
	Business and Tourism	CSIE	FABIZ	Marketing	REI	Total
Insurance, financial and banking products	4.76	2.44	11.11	0.00	13.64	5.45
Constructions, construction machinery	1.59	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.61
FMCG (fast moving consumer goods, i.e. consumer goods, with high turnover and relatively low prices; e.g. detergents, cosmetics, basic foods, sweets, etc.)	9.52	0.00	5.56	4.76	4.55	5.45
Food industry, alcoholic beverages, tobacco	3.17	0.00	0.00	9.52	0.00	2.42
IT industry (hardware and software systems etc.)	14.29	58.54	5.56	23.81	18.18	26.06
Medical and pharmaceutical (medical equipment and devices, medical services, medicines etc.)	3.17	7.32	5.56	9.52	27.27	8.48
Real estate (lands, housing etc.)	17.46	24.39	44.44	33.33	9.09	23.03
Telecommunication	3.17	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	1.21
Tourism and leisure	42.86	7.32	27.78	19.05	27.27	27.27
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100

Source: Authors' own calculations

As shown in the table, students from the Faculty of Business and Tourism choose the tourism field in a proportion of about 43%, and those from CSIE choose their own IT domain, in a

proportion of 58.54%. Real estate is the first choice of students from FABIZ and Marketing, and those from REI pay equal attention to the medical field and tourism.

A final aspect analyzed is that of the preference regarding the place of activity, indoor or outdoor. There is some difference between boys and girls from this point of view, as shown in Figure no. 1.

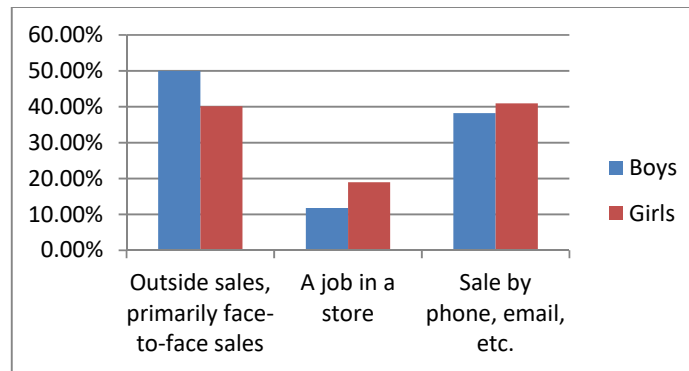


Fig. no. 1 Preferences for indoor/outdoor activities

Source: Authors' own calculations

Boys prefer outdoor activities to a greater extent than girls (50% and 40% respectively) and less selling by phone (38% versus 41%) or a job in the store (11.76% compared to 18.94%). However, chi-square test $\chi^2(2)=1.47$, $p>0.05$ shows that the differences between girls and boys regarding the preferences for indoor/outdoor activities are not statistical significant.

Conclusions and suggestions

This study has investigated the perception students from five different faculties of the Bucharest Academy of Economic Studies have towards a sales job.

With regards to the attractive/unattractive attributes of a job in the field of sales, the most appealing aspect for students is the interaction with a lot of people. The need to persuade / negotiate is also high on the students' preferences, but for a significant other part of students it represents an unattractive feature. In the same way, the chances for big financial gains are perceived by some as high and by others as low. These findings, along with the others shown in the study, could be used to design attractive offers of employment and to present the field of activity and the companies in a way that might remove prejudice from the minds of students and youth in general.

Boys are more interested than girls in a sales position and prefer outdoor activities, while most of the girls interested in such a job prefer indoor activities.

The results of this study could help create a profile of the business student who is interested in a career in sales. This profile could be important in identifying successful salespeople while they are still in our universities, allowing teachers to properly prepare them for such a career. In addition, recruiters should first of all seek out students who have already taken courses or internships in sales as they tend to have a significantly more favorable perception of the attractiveness of a sales position than the rest of the students. A step further would be the development of strong partnerships between universities and the business environment, from which all the involved factors would have to win, in the foreground being the students.

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