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Toward a Stakeholder-Focused Curriculum: Examining Specific University Program Offerings against Competencies Provided by the U.S. Department of Labor

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Abstract: Providing students with an education that employers view as relevant and valuable is an ever-increasing challenge for universities. The purpose of this paper is to provide a framework that university professors can use to examine their own program offerings against competencies deemed important by the U.S. Department of Labor. This paper focuses on specific competencies for success in technical sales. Faculty and employers are surveyed, and results indicate a high level of congruence between their opinions. However, some important differences did emerge between the two groups. These results are presented and discussed, along with the implementation of results to redevelop program curriculum.

Keywords: curriculum development, employment competencies, university programs.

I. Introduction.

Ever changing demands and shifting opportunities characterize the 21st century workplace. Organizations are fast changing, as is the nature of work within them due to rapid globalization, innovation, and technology. As such, the value of attracting and retaining extremely talented employees is immeasurable. Organizations desire employees who are willing to learn and learn fast, those who can readily transfer their knowledge and skills into the workplace, and those who are willing to earn and re-earn their job every day through performance-based measures.

A specific program was chosen that prepares students for careers as technical sales representatives and to become future business leaders. The hybrid business/technology program is recognized for "pioneering new frontiers" within the University of Nebraska system, which has a tradition of technology-rich education.

The faculty in the program is attempting to meet increasingly common 21st century challenges of providing students with an education that is viewed by employers as relevant and valuable. This study begins an effort to establish a stakeholder-focused curriculum by utilizing data from the United States Department of Labor (http://www.dol.gov/, 2005). The participants include major employers of its graduates as well as faculty who teach in the program.

II. Literature Review.

In response to the demands of the 21st century workplace, universities are not only being held accountable for validating the content of their courses through advisory boards and

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accrediting bodies, but they must also graduate students who can meet the ever changing needs of business and industry. The University of Luton has responded to this challenge on a university-wide basis and with a curriculum that embraces a varied range of disciplines in an attempt to develop students' skills alongside their subject knowledge to improve graduate employability (Atlay and Harris, 2000).

Dougherty, Knock, Sandas, and Aiken (2002) recognized that information technology holds the promise of increased productivity. However, rapidly evolving tools require that professionals are able to incorporate them into their careers effectively, which signals the need for IT curriculum development initiatives that help students develop the skills needed for this challenge.

In an attempt to meet the challenges of globalization, many western universities are responding by internationalizing their curricula and introducing an element of multiculturalism. Jackson (2003) contends that it is required for the sustainability of the students' future careers, and the process must be a joint effort between students and faculty.

One way to meet 21st century challenges is to involve stakeholders, such as employers in the process of developing or redeveloping university program curricula. Hesketh (2000) contends that the future recruitment intentions of employers fall against the backdrop of their perceptions of graduate quality and that the skill requirements of employers are clearly changing.

Several different types of university programs have elicited the opinions of several stakeholder groups in order to help create program curricula. For example, the Division of Occupational Therapy at the University of Manitoba redeveloped its curriculum from a three-year undergraduate degree to a two-year professional Master of Occupational Therapy program through a stakeholder consultation process (Restall, 2003).

In an effort to redevelop a human resources management curriculum, Thacker (2000) describes a process by which any curriculum can be updated or revised. This approach includes convening a task force of important constituent groups, such as faculty and practitioners.

In similar efforts, Lang, Cruse, McVey, and McMasters (1999) provided an opportunity for stakeholders to help universities define educational goals and objectives for entry-level engineering employees. Likewise, Tiwari, Chan, and Law (2002) adopted an approach that solicited suggestions from nurses, doctors, and policy makers to help shape the nursing curriculum, instead of just allowing nursing faculty to decide.

Even in smaller units such as one class versus an entire program, universities are seeking the advice of stakeholders other than just faculty members. For example, Anderson, Envick, and Roth (2003) surveyed entrepreneurs and financial advisors to determine, among 30 finance topics, which are most important to include in entrepreneurial finance courses. The results proved helpful in prioritizing finance topics for entrepreneurship majors.

As far as the field of industrial distribution is concerned, involving the help of external stakeholders is not new either. Purdue University implemented a networking partnership between students, faculty, and employers. This partnership includes special project opportunities, workshops, networking placement, faculty presentations, and conference book programs (Newton and Schmidt, 2003).

This paper aims to mirror the efforts made by other universities and programs to prepare students for the challenges of the 21st century workplace, but more specifically to prepare students for careers in technical sales. This is accomplished by analyzing the Industrial Distribution Program curriculum at the University of Nebraska at Kearney through the eyes of both faculty and employers.

III. Methodology.

Ten faculty members who teach courses in a technical sales program participated in the survey, along with employers, who actively recruit, provide internships and send representatives to speak to classes at the university. The employers that participated include Applied Industrial Technologies, Molex Incorporated, Crescent Electric Supply, Eaton Electrical, Ferguson Enterprises, Hub City Industrial Supply, Shelter Distribution, SCP Pool Corporation, Shelter Distribution Incorporated, and Pape`. All surveys distributed to both faculty and employers were returned, and all 20 were usable.

The instrument used for the study listed 33 competencies cited by the U.S. Department of Labor as important for success in technical sales (citation). Faculty members chose this instrument because the National Association of Industrial Technology, which is the accrediting body of the program, also recognizes the competencies listed.

The 33 competencies fit into seven categories of knowledge for persons in technical sales careers. These categories include: (1) Sales and Marketing; (2) Mathematics; (3) Economics and Accounting; (4) English Language; (5) Engineering and Technology; (6) Education and Training; and (7) Customer and Personal Service.

Participants used a 7-point Likert scale to determine which of the 33 competencies a graduate of the Industrial Distribution Program needs to both gain employment and advance in their career. The scale used is as follows: 1 = needed to be among the top performers in the field; 2 = needed to be extremely successful; 3 = needed to be very successful; 4 = undecided/unsure; 5 = needed to be moderately successful; 6 = needed to be somewhat successful; 7 = not needed at all. The survey itself is available upon request from the authors.

IV. Results.

Table 1 reports the mean scores by rank of all 33 competencies to *gain employment* according to employers. The highest ranked competency is “determine customer wants and needs” with a mean of 3.0. The lowest ranked topic is “apply calculus concepts related to business” with a mean of 5.9.

Table 2 reports the mean scores by rank of all competencies to *gain employment* according to faculty. The highest ranked competency is “write professional business letters and memos” with a mean of 1.8. This ranked #6 with employers, with a mean score of 3.7. The lowest ranked competency is “apply calculus concepts related to business” with a mean score of 4.2. This coincides with the employers’ lowest ranked competency.

TABLE 1. Gain Employment – Employer Responses.

Competency	Mean	Knowledge Category
Determine customer wants and needs	3.0	Customer & Personal Service
Promote products	3.1	Sales & Marketing
Sell solutions	3.3	Sales & Marketing
Promote value-added services	3.4	Sales & Marketing
Derive arithmetic solutions	3.4	Mathematics
Find solutions to customer wants and needs	3.4	Customer & Personal Service
Assess and provide services that satisfy customer needs	3.6	Customer & Personal Service
Make and close sales	3.7	Sales & Marketing
Describe financial advantages	3.7	Economics & Accounting
Write effective sales proposals	3.7	English Language
Demonstrate products	3.9	Sales & Marketing
Comprehend technical products and services	3.9	Engineering & Technology
Assess the effectiveness of customer service efforts	4.0	Customer & Personal Service
Write professional business letters and memos	4.1	English Language
Comprehend statistical data	4.3	Mathematics
Explain statistical data to customers and peers	4.3	Mathematics
Understand concepts of supply and demand	4.3	Economics & Accounting
Comprehend basic accounting cycle	4.3	Economics & Accounting
Demonstrate technical products and services	4.3	Engineering & Technology
Comprehend industrial systems and devices	4.3	Engineering & Technology
Demonstrate industrial systems and devices	4.3	Engineering & Technology
Write general and technical information packages	4.4	English Language
Conduct training for individuals and groups	4.6	Education & Training
Assess training outcomes	4.6	Education & Training
Prepare instructional materials	4.7	Education & Training
Develop and write training materials	5.0	English Language
Read and comprehend blueprints	5.0	Engineering & Technology
Read and understand business financial reports	5.1	Economics & Accounting
Design demonstration materials	5.1	Education & Training
Comprehend scientific equipment and devices	5.3	Engineering & Technology
Demonstrate scientific equipment and devices	5.3	Engineering & Technology
Apply algebraic solutions to problems	5.7	Mathematics
Apply calculus concepts related to business	5.9	Mathematics

TABLE 2. Gain Employment – Faculty Responses.

Competency	Mean	Knowledge Category
Write professional business letters and memos	1.8	English Language
Find solutions to customer wants and needs	2.2	Customer & Personal Service
Comprehend industrial systems and devices	2.2	Engineering & Technology
Make and close sales	2.3	Sales & Marketing
Comprehend technical products and services	2.3	Engineering & Technology
Sell solutions	2.4	Sales & Marketing
Assess and provide services that satisfy customer needs	2.5	Customer & Personal Service
Understand concepts of supply and demand	2.5	Economics & Accounting
Promote products	2.7	Sales & Marketing
Determine customer wants and needs	2.8	Customer & Personal Service
Comprehend basic accounting cycle	2.9	Economics & Accounting
Describe financial advantages	2.9	Economics & Accounting
Assess the effectiveness of customer service efforts	2.9	Customer & Personal Service
Demonstrate industrial systems and devices	2.9	Engineering & Technology
Demonstrate technical products and services	3.0	Engineering & Technology
Promote value-added services	3.0	Sales & Marketing
Comprehend statistical data	3.0	Mathematics
Write effective sales proposals	3.1	English Language
Read and comprehend blueprints	3.1	Engineering & Technology
Comprehend scientific equipment and devices	3.3	Engineering & Technology
Demonstrate products	3.4	Sales & Marketing
Read and understand business financial reports	3.4	Economics & Accounting
Assess training outcomes	3.5	Education & Training
Conduct training for individuals and groups	3.6	Education & Training
Prepare instructional materials	3.7	Education & Training
Explain statistical data to customers and peers	3.7	Mathematics
Write general and technical information packages	3.7	English Language
Design demonstration materials	3.8	Education & Training
Demonstrate scientific equipment and devices	3.8	Engineering & Technology
Derive arithmetic solutions	3.9	Mathematics
Develop and write training materials	4.0	English Language
Apply algebraic solutions to problems	4.0	Mathematics
Apply calculus concepts related to business	4.2	Mathematics

Table 3 reports the mean scores by rank of all 33 competencies for *career advancement* according to employers. The highest ranked competency is "determine customer wants and needs", which is the same one that ranked first to gain employment according to employers. The mean score, however, moved from a 3.0 (to gain employment) to a 1.4 (to advance in one's career). The lowest ranked topic also remained the same, "apply calculus concepts related to business" with a mean score of 5.4.

Table 4 reports the mean scores by rank of all competencies for *career advancement* according to faculty. The highest ranked competency is "assess and provide services that satisfy customer needs" with a mean score of 1.1. This ranked #3 with employers, with a mean score of 1.9. The lowest ranked competency is "apply calculus concepts related to business" with a mean score of 3.5. This coincides with the employers' lowest ranked competency.

TABLE 3. Career Advancement – Employer Responses.

Competency	Mean	Knowledge Category
Determine customer wants and needs	1.4	Customer & Personal Service
Sell solutions	1.6	Sales & Marketing
Derive arithmetic solutions	1.9	Mathematics
Assess and provide services that satisfy customer needs	1.9	Customer & Personal Service
Make and close sales	1.9	Sales & Marketing
Find solutions to customer wants and needs	2.0	Customer & Personal Service
Promote value-added services	2.0	Sales & Marketing
Describe financial advantages	2.0	Economics & Accounting
Promote products	2.1	Sales & Marketing
Write effective sales proposals	2.1	English Language
Demonstrate products	2.1	Sales & Marketing
Assess the effectiveness of customer service efforts	2.3	Customer & Personal Service
Understand concepts of supply and demand	2.3	Economics & Accounting
Conduct training for individuals and groups	2.3	Education & Training
Comprehend technical products and services	2.6	Engineering & Technology
Write professional business letters and memos	2.6	English Language
Comprehend statistical data	2.6	Mathematics
Demonstrate technical products and services	2.7	Engineering & Technology
Explain statistical data to customers and peers	2.9	Mathematics
Comprehend industrial systems and devices	2.9	Engineering & Technology
Read and comprehend blueprints	2.9	Engineering & Technology
Read and understand business financial reports	2.9	Economics & Accounting
Comprehend basic accounting cycle	3.0	Economics & Accounting
Demonstrate industrial systems and devices	3.0	Engineering & Technology
Assess training outcomes	3.1	Education & Training
Develop and write training materials	3.1	English Language
Write general and technical information packages	3.3	English Language
Prepare instructional materials	3.3	Education & Training
Comprehend scientific equipment and devices	3.6	Engineering & Technology
Demonstrate scientific equipment and devices	3.7	Engineering & Technology
Design demonstration materials	4.3	Education & Training
Apply algebraic solutions to problems	4.9	Mathematics
Apply calculus concepts related to business	5.4	Mathematics

As one can see by comparing Tables 1 and 2 along with comparing Tables 3 and 4, the opinions of employers and faculty are similar, however, faculty opinions were much stronger according to the 7-point scale. For example, for gaining employment the lowest mean score provided by faculty on all 33 competencies was a 4.2, while employers provided a mean score of 4.3 or higher (meaning less need) for 19 of these competencies. Likewise, the lowest mean score provided by faculty for career advancement was a 3.5. Employers scored five competencies higher than 3.5, with one being a 5.4.

TABLE 4. Career Advancement – Faculty Responses.

Competency	Mean	Knowledge Category
Assess and provide services that satisfy customer needs	1.1	Customer & Personal Service
Determine customer wants and needs	1.2	Customer & Personal Service
Find solutions to customer wants and needs	1.2	Customer & Personal Service
Describe financial advantages	1.2	Economics & Accounting
Make and close sales	1.2	Sales & Marketing
Assess the effectiveness of customer service efforts	1.2	Customer & Personal Service
Write effective sales proposals	1.3	English Language
Read and understand business financial reports	1.4	Economics & Accounting
Comprehend industrial systems and devices	1.5	Engineering & Technology
Comprehend technical products and services	1.5	Engineering & Technology
Comprehend basic accounting cycle	1.5	Economics & Accounting
Promote value-added services	1.5	Sales & Marketing
Write professional business letters and memos	1.6	English Language
Sell solutions	1.6	Sales & Marketing
Promote products	1.6	Sales & Marketing
Demonstrate industrial systems and devices	1.7	Engineering & Technology
Demonstrate products	1.7	Sales & Marketing
Comprehend statistical data	1.8	Mathematics
Explain statistical data to customers and peers	1.8	Mathematics
Understand concepts of supply and demand	1.9	Economics & Accounting
Demonstrate technical products and services	1.9	Engineering & Technology
Assess training outcomes	1.9	Education & Training
Conduct training for individuals and groups	2.1	Education & Training
Comprehend scientific equipment and devices	2.4	Engineering & Technology
Prepare instructional materials	2.4	Education & Training
Design demonstration materials	2.4	Education & Training
Demonstrate scientific equipment and devices	2.5	Engineering & Technology
Write general and technical information packages	2.6	English Language
Develop and write training materials	2.8	English Language
Read and comprehend blueprints	2.9	Engineering & Technology
Apply algebraic solutions to problems	3.1	Mathematics
Derive arithmetic solutions	3.3	Mathematics
Apply calculus concepts related to business	3.5	Mathematics

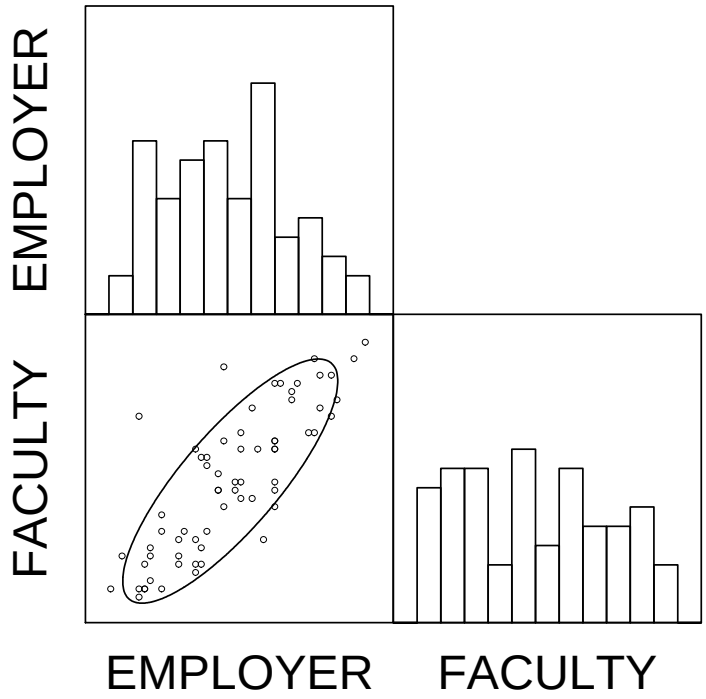
In order to address the differences between how faculty and employers scored the competencies in both gaining employment and career advancement, a paired t-test was used to determine if this difference is statistically significant. Results indicate there is a significant difference [$t = 12.607$, $p < 0.01$ (see Table 5)].

This difference, however, does not necessarily indicate there is disagreement between the groups of raters. In order to determine the level of agreement, a correlation matrix was computed to measure the linear relationship between opinions of employers compared to the opinions of faculty. The result was a correlation coefficient of .82, indicating strong agreement on which competencies are more important relative to other competencies. The significant difference found from the paired t-test is a result of faculty opinions being significantly stronger than employer opinions, although in the same direction. Figure 1 illustrates the correlation scatterplot matrix.

TABLE 5. Paired T-Test of Employer vs. Faculty Reponses.

Mean Employer	3.511
Mean Faculty	2.512
Mean Difference	0.998
95.00% CI	0.840-1.157
SD of Difference	0.643
t	12.607
df	65
p-value	0.00

FIGURE 1. Correlation Scatterplot Matrix of Employer and Faculty Responses.



With this level of agreement, it is essential to revisit the seven categories of knowledge and determine which ones appear to be more essential for curriculum development. The average mean scores of all competencies in each knowledge category were used from both employers and faculty to determine a combined mean score and rank. The rankings for both gaining employment and career advancement are the same (See Table 6).

TABLE 6. Overall Knowledge Category Rankings.

Rank	Knowledge Category	GE Mean	Needed to be. . .	CA Mean	Needed to be. . .
1	Customer & Personal Service	3.05	very successful	1.55	among top performers in the field
2	Sales and Marketing	3.12	very successful	1.71	among top performers in the field
3	Economics & Accounting	3.63	very successful	2.02	extremely successful
4	English Language	3.74	very successful	2.49	extremely successful
5	Engineering & Technology	3.77	very successful	2.55	extremely successful
6	Education & Training	4.20	undecided/unsure	2.73	extremely successful
7	Mathematics	4.22	undecided/unsure	3.10	very successful

V. Implementing results in Curriculum Redevelopment.

As mentioned in the literature review, universities are held accountable for graduating students who can meet the ever-changing needs of business and industry. Skill requirements are changing (Hesketh, 2000), and programs are being redeveloped through a stakeholder consultation process (Restall, 2003), such as practitioners (Thacker, 2000; Lang, et. al, 1999; Tiwari, et. al, 2002). We contend that is crucial to include the specific competencies deemed most important by employers in a program's curriculum. Employer rankings of these competencies for a career in technical sales (gaining employment and career advancement) were obtained. The authors elected to use the same method as Anderson, Envick, and Roth (2003) to re-prioritize specific topics covered program courses.

The 33 competencies were divided into the top-third, middle-third, and bottom-third rankings for both employers and faculty respondents. The 9 competencies included in two of the knowledge categories, Sales & Marketing and Customer & Personal Services, consistently ranked in the top-third according to employers. Only one of these competencies (assess the effectiveness of customer service efforts) barely slipped into the middle-third category.

Sales & Marketing consists of knowledge of principles and methods for showing, promoting, and selling products or services. This includes marketing strategy and tactics, product demonstration, sales techniques, and sales control systems (http://www.dol.gov/). In technical sales these competences include: (1) promote products; (2) sell solutions; (3) promote value-added services; (4) make and close sales calls; and (5) demonstrate products. Customer & Personal Services consists of knowledge of principles and processes for providing customer and personal services. This includes customer needs assessment, meeting quality standards for services, and evaluation of customer satisfaction (http://www.dol.gov/). In technical sales these competencies include: (1) determine customer wants and needs; (2) find solutions to customer wants and needs; (3) assess and provide services that satisfy customer wants and needs; and (4) assess the effectiveness of customer service efforts.

The faculty member in charge of curriculum development of the program made changes in his courses to include more case studies, role playing exercises, readings, classroom discussions, and lecture material that more heavily favored specific competencies within the two categories of Sales & Marketing and Customer & Personal Services. This information was provided to other faculty members as well, for curricular considerations.

Like in any course or program, to make room for more material, other material must be reduced or eliminated. Careful consideration was given to those specific topics faculty had deemed very important (in the top-third category) but employers had not rated very high (middle and even bottom-third category rankings). Topic coverage that was reduced or eliminated includes: writing professional business letters and memos (slightly reduced); comprehending industrial systems and devices (reduced); understanding concepts of supply and demand (eliminated and left to other courses at the university); comprehending the basic accounting cycle (eliminated and left to other courses at the university); reading and understanding business financial reports (significantly reduced).

Overall, the topic coverage favored by employers tended to be more on the "sales" side (sales, marketing, customer service) and less on the "technical side" (math, engineering, technology) of technical sales. While faculty and employers in this study had similar views and statistical results did not point to any significant disagreements, it was a highly useful tool for redeveloping the program's offerings to reflect a more stakeholder-focused curriculum.

VI. Discussion and Conclusions.

Not surprisingly, both faculty and employers rated each and every competency as more important for career advancement than for gaining employment. The relative change in the ratings between gaining employment and career advancement among specific competencies is what proves instructive. For example, employers gave the competency of "conducting training for individuals and groups" a 4.6 for gaining employment, but a 2.3 for career advancement. Likewise, "reading and understanding financial reports" received a score of 5.1 for gaining employment, but jumped to a 2.9 for career advancement. This competency received the largest change among faculty responses as well, moving from a 3.4 for gaining employment to a 1.4 for career advancement.

Another noteworthy change, according to faculty, is the competency of "writing effective sales proposals". This competency scored a 3.1 for gaining employment and a 1.3 for career advancement. Other changes are important to consider as well by comparing Table 1 with Table 3 and comparing Table 2 with Table 4.

Despite the high level of agreement between faculty and employers, it is imperative to examine where differences did occur. The competency of "writing professional business letters and memos" ranked first for gaining employment according to faculty with a score of 1.8. Employers, however, rated this competency much further down the list with a score of 4.1.

"Determining customer wants and needs" ranked first for both gaining employment and career advancement, according to employers. Faculty, however, ranked this competency seventh for gaining employment, although it moved into the second ranked spot for career advancement. Similarly, "promoting value-added services" ranked fourth for both gaining employment and career advancement, according to employers. For gaining employment, faculty ranked this competency ninth. It did, however, rise to the fourth ranked position for career advancement.

These differences, among others, should be the focal point for future discussions between faculty and employers. Determining the reasoning and opinions behind the scores provided by the two groups would prove quite valuable in understanding the requirements of a technical sales career in both gaining employment and career advancement. This deepened understanding could then be translated into further curriculum development, with the end result being graduates who are well prepared to meet the 21st century challenges of a career in technical sales.

Even small changes to a program can provide students with the requisite knowledge and skills employers are seeking. While in this study there were not significant differences in the views of employers versus faculty members, the findings did provide for a richer understanding of what employers deem as important, and the curriculum changes reflect material more heavily favored toward the "sales" rather than the "technical" side of technical sales. This provides tremendous insight and allows faculty members to adjust and prioritize topic coverage in the classroom to better mirror employer demands.

The importance of this paper lies in the framework it provides to other professors who wish to examine their programs' offerings against competencies deemed important by the U.S. Department of Labor. As competition increases between universities, providing students with an education that employers view as relevant and valuable is of ever-increasing importance. Engaging in the process presented in this paper allows for the essential focal points to emerge from which curriculum can be developed or redeveloped. The ultimate goal is to provide students with the competitive advantage they need upon graduation.

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