

# The Missing Link

Inquiry into the role of sales in increasing the productivity of small and medium-sized enterprises



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Report by the All-Party Parliamentary Group  
for Professional Sales

**October 2019**

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This report was prepared by the Association of Professional Sales acting as secretariat for the inquiry.

**aps**  
ASSOCIATION OF  
PROFESSIONAL SALES

# All-Party Parliamentary Group for Professional Sales

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## Purpose

To improve recognition by Parliament and industry of the importance of sales and its impact on the UK economy; to promote and advance sales as a profession; to boost the success of British industry, especially in international trade.

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# Foreword

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There could not be a better time to focus on Britain's ability to sell. British businesses are readying themselves to win deals in new global marketplaces as Britain exits the European Union, but here we have a challenge: a critical shortage of salespeople with the right negotiation and leadership skills and digital expertise.

With every challenge comes opportunity. This is Britain's chance to encourage a generation of skilled and ethical salespeople to sell our brilliant innovations and high-quality products overseas.

In our inaugural inquiry we heard from expert witnesses who suggested a new approach to the problem of low productivity that has hampered the UK's Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (SMEs) for many years, and which has been holding us back compared to our international competitors.

The recommendations in this report aim to increase the productivity of our SMEs by improving the way they sell. If every SME in Britain could increase their productivity by just a few percent, it would transform the UK economy and lift the living standards of British workers. If we could close the productivity gap between the best and the rest it would boost the economy by around £270 billion, according to the Bank of England.

I have spent the last 30 years of my life in sales and believe it is one of the most important activities in our society. I am also immensely proud to be a Fellow of the Association of Professional Sales, an organisation whose purpose is to ensure customers get the best service from ethical and professional sellers.

Our national sales capability is key to our global success.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Kerr'.

**Stephen Kerr MP**

Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Professional Sales

# Executive Summary

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The All-Party Parliamentary Group for Professional Sales has been formed to promote good, ethical selling, and to ensure that British business has access to the professional sales skills it needs to flourish.

Our report identifies a critical shortage of professional salespeople that affects every business, but SMEs in particular. It also highlights a negative attitude in Britain towards selling that is holding the economy back. The government needs to intervene to close the skills gap, and to promote a more businesslike attitude towards selling.

This report outlines a number of specific interventions that will mitigate the skills shortage, but in the process it goes further. Helping SMEs to acquire professional sales skills will have a significant, positive impact on their productivity.

Professional selling is the missing link in Britain's approach to business and offers a fresh angle to tackling one of the UK economy's most intractable problems: stagnant productivity. Improving the quality of our selling has the capacity to boost the economy, raise living standards and enhance Britain's business reputation on the international stage.

The level of investment needed is relatively small. What is required is leadership, to change attitudes and redirect efforts.

This crucial time, when Britain is recalibrating its relationship with its trading partners, gives us the opportunity to think globally – and a strong international sales capability will be the key to our global success.

Britain can lead the way not just by what we sell but how we sell it. Britain's salespeople could be the diplomatic service of the 21st century, setting international standards in how to do business.

## Our key recommendations

Put sales on the national curriculum in schools and create sales research centres at universities.

Help SMEs develop sales and sales management skills, and embrace digital sales technologies.

Recognise sales as a profession with a standards body established by Royal Charter to ensure high ethical standards.

Appoint a sales tsar to take responsibility for driving change and ensuring that this vital part of the economy is understood at the heart of government.

# Introduction

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**Nothing happens in business until something is sold.**

*Attributed to Thomas J Watson, President, IBM (1915–56)*

Selling is a vital economic activity and employs nearly 4 million people, 12% of the UK workforce.<sup>1</sup> But there is a structural problem deepening within the sales profession that requires government intervention to put right.<sup>2</sup>

The ongoing digital revolution has fundamentally changed the business of selling, so much so that the term Sales 2.0 is often used.<sup>3</sup>

Consumer behaviour has been transformed, both in business and retail sales. With a wealth of information now available online, customers extensively research a purchase before deciding to buy. The traditional sales approach is outdated and ineffective, resulting in a lower productivity ratio.

Training for salespeople has not kept pace with the changes, and the result is a shortage of sales professionals with the extra skills needed to sell British goods and services at maximum effectiveness.<sup>4</sup> A knowledge of psychology, strategy, technology, business process, negotiation, law, ethics – these and more are needed by the modern seller.

Where are these skilled salespeople to come from? There is no clear answer to this question as Britain has no recognised structure for training salespeople. In the US and other global competitor countries, sales is widely taught at college and is being adopted as a university degree course; but in Britain, only marketing is extensively studied.

Every UK business has been affected by the shortage of sales skills, but the changes have had a disproportionate impact on SMEs.<sup>5</sup>

The APPG for Professional Sales chose to focus on SMEs for its inaugural inquiry because of the high level of government concern at underperformance by the UK's SMEs. Small businesses are vital to Britain, representing 51% of the UK economy. Concern has mounted that productivity<sup>6</sup> in the UK economy has barely risen since 2008, leading the UK's productivity to fall 30% behind France, Germany and the US.<sup>7</sup> The stagnant "long tail" of SMEs is blamed.<sup>8</sup>



**The UK is in many respects a tale (tail) of two companies: a small set in the upper tail gazelling along the productivity high road, and a much larger set in the lower tail snailing along the low road.**

*Andy Haldane, Chief Economist, Bank of England<sup>9</sup>*

Much has been written about what might be holding SMEs back. Attention at the UK government department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) has focused rightly on obstacles to SME growth such as a shortage of management skills, low take-up of digital technology, a culture of late payments and difficulties bidding for government contracts.

This APPG inquiry heard evidence that the shortage of sales skills at SMEs is another substantial barrier to productivity growth, but one that has so far been overlooked.

In some ways this omission is unsurprising. Salespeople and selling have historically had a poor reputation in the UK. Sales barely exists as an academic subject and is still in the process of defining itself as a profession; so there have been few voices to raise the issue.

That the issue is now finally being raised, is due to pressure from within the profession.

Sales is the lifeblood of business. For an SME to survive, it must sell its products and services. The connection between sales and productivity is clear-cut – sales per job is a basic measure of a company's efficiency. If an SME is failing to grow and to become more efficient, a key factor will be that it is failing to sell enough.

Witnesses who gave evidence to this inquiry lamented there was so little academic research into sales in the UK, and indeed, most of the research on the subject is US-based – a fact that is likely to be hampering the UK government in forming policy on SMEs. This needs to change.

The research that does exist suggests that adopting new sales skills can dramatically improve the productivity of a business. For example, a two-year study demonstrated that a Hewlett-Packard sales team closed 150% more major deals by adopting new sales methods.<sup>10</sup> Spread across all the UK's 1.8m smaller employers a far more modest improvement, of only a few percentage points, would be enough to shift the dial on the entire UK economy.



**As Olympic athletes have shown, marginal improvements accumulated over time can deliver world-beating performance. Applying those marginal gains to the population of UK companies could significantly improve UK living standards, even if those are harder to measure than gold medals.**

*Andy Haldane, Chief Economist, Bank of England*<sup>11</sup>

Fortunately, there are positive pressures within the UK sales profession to accelerate change.

In the last five years the Association of Professional Sales (APS) has been established, giving professional salespeople a voice, and leadership. The APS, a not-for-profit organisation, has set clear requirements for professional and ethical behaviour, and developed standards for high quality sales training. The government can play a significant role in making sure these are more widely adopted and accessed, to raise the quality of selling across the UK economy, especially in SMEs.<sup>12</sup>

This report makes a broad range of recommendations across government departments, so we recommend appointing a single, high-profile person from outside politics – effectively a sales tsar – to drive forward change on a number of fronts, in consultation with ministers at the Departments for Education and BEIS, and the Cabinet Office.



**How you sell is becoming more important than what you sell. So a good salesperson makes more difference to a company than a good product.**

*Neil Rackham, Visiting Professor of Sales, Sheffield University;  
Patron of the Association of Profession Sales <sup>13</sup>*



# 1. Britain suffers from snobbery about sales

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In Britain, selling is regarded negatively. Salespeople are typified as “used-car salesmen”, glib tricksters out to shortchange the customer. This is a cultural attitude with a long history, dating back at least to the 18th Century, with the class-conscious contempt of the aristocracy for new money made in grubby “trade”, and their horror at being described as “a nation of shopkeepers”.

Popular culture has continued to reinforce those stereotypes, for example in the TV sitcom *Only Fools and Horses*, and the Hollywood film *The Wolf of Wall Street*.

There is no doubt that in some instances the poor reputation of sales has been earned. In the 20th Century, cold calling and high-pressure selling techniques did nothing to raise the image of the profession; while the 21st Century has seen, not surprisingly, hostile responses to successive mis-selling scandals.

In general, British people feel uncomfortable at being sold to, and dislike having to sell. Selling is instinctively perceived as pushy, the opposite of British values. Anecdotal evidence from business consultants suggests that sales is the business responsibility that most SME owners want to “dump”, to hand over to someone else to deal with.<sup>14</sup>



**I've been to parties and said, I am in sales, and they say, oh yeah, what do you really want to do?**

*Jack Lopresti, Conservative MP for Filton and Bradley Stoke*<sup>15</sup>

But this cultural attitude is bad for business. Snobbery about selling has led to it being underrated as a professional skill in the UK. Unlike accountancy or marketing, which have been regulated by their own professional bodies for more than a century, sales has not been viewed as a body of skills and knowledge, but as a faintly dishonest activity suited to people with large personalities. It does not feature on the syllabus at school and very rarely at universities.

Now that the business landscape has been changed so dramatically by digitalisation, the UK's distaste for sales has hindered us from doing what is necessary to keep up and has put us at a competitive disadvantage. It is in marked contrast to the positive attitudes in the United States, where selling is regarded, not just with pragmatism, but enthusiasm. Selling is the subject of numerous popular books.

US universities are rapidly responding to the shortage of sales skills. In 2018, the Sales Education Foundation reported that there were 120 US universities that offered three or more sales-specific courses, in order to meet the need for professional salespeople<sup>16</sup> – a number that continues to increase year on year.

In 2018, only two UK universities met the same stringent criteria. Further, Edinburgh Napier University – one of the two – announced in August 2019 that it was to downgrade its sales teaching. “Edinburgh Napier Business School has decided to no longer focus upon Sales as a strategic academic subject group,” the university said in a statement, thanking its commercial partners for their support but offering no explanation. “Our capability to deliver sales skills as part of a co-curricular programme to enhance the student learner journey within The Business School remains.” Sales has been relegated to one of 39 optional modules on the university's MBA programme.

In the US, many universities conduct academic research into sales to understand trends and markets, and inform government and industry. By comparison, there are fewer than 10 academics based in UK universities who conduct research into sales.



**People don't come to this university to go into sales.**

*One UK university's response to the offer of a free lecture on sales to undergraduates*<sup>17</sup>

It is often remarked that Britain makes outstanding discoveries and innovations, then fails to make money from them.<sup>18</sup> Our brilliance at research and development is not backed up by the same level of expertise in selling. This is commercially damaging. No business would tolerate a state of affairs where the sales department was reluctant or unable to do its job. Why should UK plc?

It would be a more practical attitude to view selling as not a necessary evil but a desirable skill, and even an occasion for pride. Why not be proud of enabling the UK to reap the profits of British success in science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM)? Britain's international calling card as it resets its relationship with its trading partners should be as a confident, commercially astute country which prides itself on the highest standards of ethical, customer-centric selling.

The UK's problem with sales is a nationwide issue that threatens economic prospects at home and abroad. It is not just SMEs who struggle to sell – it is all of us.

## Recommendation

1. Whitehall departments should run "Get Britain Selling" and "Selling is Great"<sup>19</sup> media campaigns to influence social attitudes.

## 2. SMEs need to become sales aware

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British SMEs lack workforce skills and management skills compared to international competitors, studies indicate.<sup>20</sup> The UK is also comparatively lacking in the infrastructure to allow skills to trickle down to SMEs.<sup>21</sup> This matters because higher levels of workforce skills are strongly associated with higher productivity.<sup>22</sup> Be The Business cites evidence that as much as 25% of the UK's productivity gap with the US is down to poor management.<sup>23</sup>

In the specific area of sales there is not only a shortage of skills, there is a lack of awareness among SMEs that such skills even exist.<sup>24</sup> To quote the former US defence secretary Donald Rumsfeld, the new sales techniques and skills are an "unknown, unknown"; and SME owners "don't know what they don't know".

Most start-ups get away with a lack of formal sales skills because the company founder instinctively acts as a "super-salesperson", whose promises to meet the customer's needs carry extra weight because she or he is the boss, studies suggest.<sup>25</sup> Lack of sales knowhow is counterbalanced by the fact that SMEs tend to be closer to their customers, which gives them an advantage over larger companies. Inquiry witnesses agreed that all start-ups would benefit from "Sales 1.0" training, to raise awareness of how to pace a sale, how to close a deal, when to walk away, and how to develop sales when the phone isn't ringing.<sup>26</sup>

The gov.uk website, the main source of advice to SMEs since the Business Link site was scrapped, recommends merely cutting prices, or improving the product. There is no information about selling techniques.<sup>27</sup>



**Most [SME owners] do not even have the basic foundation of how to ask an open question. They all sell too soon. They're getting involved with clients: 'Buy my product! Buy my product!' That's not sales, that's bad selling.**

*Alison Edgar, Managing Director, Sales Coaching Solutions* <sup>28</sup>

Sales awareness for SMEs becomes vital when the company is ready to grow and take on a sales team.

This is a critical moment in the life of an SME, when the proprietor needs to step back and take a managerial approach, rather than continue to try to do everything. Getting it wrong at a vulnerable time when trying to scale up is the reason for many UK SME failures. Around 6% of the UK's 1.6 million employer SMEs were in a phase of growth the last time businesses were surveyed, in late 2018; that makes approximately 100,000 companies which could potentially benefit from acquiring sales management skills.<sup>29</sup>

Plenty of advice is available for SMEs, via Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) and Growth Hubs, on upgrading the finance or marketing function of an SME, but practically no advice on sales processes, recruitment or management. Anecdotally, this is not for want of demand. SMEs are very keen to hire sellers who will increase their sales, but do not know how to choose a candidate capable of doing this.<sup>30</sup>

Recruiting the right salesperson can have a profound effect on the fortunes of an SME, leading to rapid, sustainable growth. The reverse is also true; recruiting an ineffective salesperson has a chilling effect on a new business's chances.



**My wife and my sister worked in a factory in Ayr that produced high-end cashmere products. Their production went up because they got a wonderful salesperson. This man – he was called Mr Pride – he sold this stuff in Japan, he sold it in Italy. It meant that they had to get machines in and get more people in. And that’s where the link to productivity was: the ability of one wee fella that was good at what he did. He was passionate.**

*Bill Grant, Scottish Conservative and Unionist MP for Ayr*

The BEIS select committee has already called for bite-sized learning modules on management which SMEs can access online; we would agree, and to this we would add a range of sales-specific learning modules, which the APS can help to design. Small businesses are more likely to adopt high performance work practices when they are part of an external business advisory network.<sup>31</sup>

More intense, in-firm support is also needed for SMEs seeking to grow. BEIS has acknowledged<sup>32</sup> that in-firm interventions are effective in helping SMEs to scale up. BEIS should fund a pilot programme employing sales consultants at Growth Hubs, to offer hands-on advice to individual SMEs seeking to build their sales capability, modelled on other successful SME interventions.

## Recommendations

- 2.** The gov.uk website and business organisations **must** offer information about effective selling for SMEs, and signpost SMEs towards the APS as an additional source of knowledge.
- 3.** LEPs and Growth Hubs should regularly include events on sales best practice in their offering for SMEs.
- 4.** BEIS should pilot a programme employing sales specialists to offer in-firm support for SMEs, extending it nationwide if successful. Business Support Helpline advisers should be trained to offer sales guidance to SMEs.
- 5.** BEIS should allocate funds for an online peer-to-peer support network on sales for SMEs, run by sales specialists.

### 3. Sales training is key to making SMEs more productive

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Sales jobs consistently rank as one of the hardest positions to fill for any business.<sup>33</sup> A 2016 poll of UK sales leaders for the APS showed that recruiting sales staff was their most pressing worry, alongside the pace of digital change,<sup>34</sup> while a 2017 survey of 869 US tech start-ups found that sales leader was the hardest job to fill.<sup>35</sup>

Recruiting talented sales staff is particularly difficult for SMEs.<sup>36</sup> There is a lack of sales-ready talent to step into SMEs, and a lack of recruitment firms focusing upon this need. Also, it is a huge financial commitment to take on that first sales hire. The most productive and ambitious salespeople tend to be attracted not to an SME but to a large company with an established reputation, able to offer a substantial reward package and promotion.

Problems getting and hanging on to good sales staff have a significant impact on productivity for SMEs – indeed, for all businesses.<sup>37</sup> In a survey of more than 800 human resources (HR) executives conducted by Accenture in February 2014, 69% said that their inability to attract and retain middle-skills talent (including sales professionals) frequently affected their performance. Over one-third of respondents believed that inadequate availability of middle-skilled workers had undermined their productivity.<sup>38</sup>

The average tenure of a sales representative in some industries is as low as 2.5 years, of which on average the first 5.3 months is spent ramping up to full productivity.<sup>39</sup> This compares to an average tenure of approximately eight years across all UK jobs.<sup>40</sup> Unfilled jobs, bad hires and high churn all damage productivity. They may also be associated with Britain's higher levels of SME failure.<sup>41,42</sup>



**I believe if SMEs were able to offer a formal career development plan then this would greatly assist them in attracting talent.**

*David Griffiths, Managing Director, Sharples Group*

The most effective way for SMEs to compete on level terms with larger employers in attracting the most potentially productive staff, is to offer high-quality training that will make it worth their while to stay. Professionally-accredited training is a valuable lure; it offers internationally-recognised skills and standards, transferable between industry sectors, for an ambitious seller to add to their CV.

Research suggests that best-practice sales training boosts a business's economic performance by an average of 30%.<sup>43</sup> It enables sales staff to work more productively, and encourages them to stay longer in role at full productivity.

The obstacles for SMEs accessing sales education are: cost; the ability to distinguish between good and average, in the huge, private sector sales training market where cost and quality are variable; and the availability of accredited training that is appropriate in scale and scope to SMEs. Much sales training is aimed at larger organisations, where a frontline salesperson may be supported by specialised teams, e.g. to compile a business case for a prospective client. Salespeople in SMEs need to be competent in the full range of modern sales skills.

Very little sales-specific training is available via LEPs and Growth Hubs. For example, on one day in August the London Growth Hub listed an impressive 67 forthcoming sales and marketing events, but in each case the focus was marketing or general business, rather than sales.

Andy Haldane, Chair, the Industrial Strategy Council, has called for the UK's universities to become much more actively involved in upskilling SMEs in order to boost productivity.<sup>44</sup> One practical way of doing this is to establish schools of sales at UK universities to work closely with SMEs and conduct research. These research centres can become the focus for sales education and training, and can keep costs to a minimum by attracting private sector sponsorship.

## Recommendations

6. Information on adopting the best sales procedures, and bite-sized, practical courses, **must** be commissioned and actively marketed to SMEs.
7. Sales training from private providers should be regulated. The gov.uk website, LEPs, Growth Hubs, and business organisations should signpost SMEs towards accredited sources of sales training.
8. The Treasury should explore and put in place appropriate measures to make sales training affordable and accessible, for example: match-funding, a growth voucher, or tax breaks.
9. Centres of sales research **must** be set up at university business schools in the UK with the help of private sector sponsorship, incentivised by tax breaks. These should act as hubs to disseminate sales excellence to SMEs and gather data.

## 4. SMEs need to recruit young people into sales

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SMEs who cannot compete for the high-performing salespeople of today should try to recruit the high-potential salespeople of tomorrow. Like football clubs who can't afford the inflated salaries of star players, they should invest in training youth talent.

Hiring young and digitally aware people as apprentices offers business advantages for SMEs. They can positively influence the uptake of digital sales techniques and technology that are vital for an SME's future success. The need to coach trainees can drive cultural change, encouraging SME leaders to adopt an open, coaching style of management for all staff, with proven benefits for productivity.



**They energise the environment; they bring about change; overall, apprentices are a fantastic asset to any organisation.**

*Mike Gibson, Director, National Sales, Royal Mail* <sup>46</sup>

It is now possible to enter sales as an apprentice.

Apprenticeships in B2B sales at Level 4 (foundation degree) and Level 6 (BSc Hons) have been developed in the last two years, thanks to leadership from the APS. The first cohort of degree apprentices began training with large employers in September 2018. In time these qualifications will help to reduce the shortage of sales skills and talent.

Nearly 80% of SMEs expressed interest in taking on apprentices, in one study.<sup>47</sup> It is unfortunately already clear, however, that there are obstacles to the uptake of apprenticeships by SMEs. The courses are funded by business through the apprenticeship levy; but the levy procedure puts SMEs at a disadvantage because they have to submit more paperwork than large companies. In addition, SMEs – particularly outside urban areas – are anecdotally struggling to find good, affordable apprenticeship training.<sup>48</sup> It is not commercially viable for training companies to work with small-sized cohorts on existing funding bands, therefore the SME community misses out on the opportunity.

SMEs are also concerned about whether they have the resources to support an apprentice, about the difficulty of finding the right young people to recruit, and the quality of training from apprenticeship providers. These real and perceived difficulties are deterring SMEs from attempting to recruit apprentices, studies show.<sup>49</sup>

Government can play a role in reducing the practical, financial and bureaucratic obstacles for SMEs, so that they can attract high-calibre apprentices with the lure of gaining degree-level professional qualifications while being paid a salary.

## Recommendations

- 10.** The process **must** be simplified for SMEs applying to take on apprentices. SMEs should be offered support to apply for apprenticeship funding, and given advice on managing sales apprentices.
- 11.** The funding ceiling for SME sales apprentices should be raised from £6,000 to £12,000 for an 18-month course of externally-ratified sales training.
- 12.** Gov.uk, LEPs, Growth Hubs and business professional bodies should signpost SMEs towards Level 4 apprenticeships in sales.



## 5. Sales needs to be studied



**Sales is not seen as a subject; it's not seen as a profession; it's not seen as a career; it's not seen as a business function. It's seen as a small part of marketing.**

*Nick Lee, Professor of Marketing, Warwick Business School* <sup>45</sup>

Britain's historic lack of respect for selling is reflected in the way that sales is taught and studied in UK schools. It is barely mentioned at all. At any one time, around one in nine of Britain's workforce is employed in a sales role,<sup>50</sup> yet most young people are either unaware of sales as a career, or believe that it means working in a call centre.

The picture is no brighter at university. There are more than a thousand undergraduate academic degree courses with "marketing" in the title, but fewer than 10 that mention "sales", or "sales management". Only two institutions, Leeds Trinity and Middlesex universities, offer the degree apprenticeship in B2B sales developed with the help of the APS.

This is a huge missed opportunity for the economy. The value of studying sales is easy to quantify. Research suggests that newly hired salespeople who have had a sales education become productive 30% faster, and stay in role 40% longer. One major US industrial manufacturer estimated in 2007 that this saved them nearly \$175,000 per hire.<sup>51</sup>

Yet British universities continue to produce cohorts of business graduates who are passionate about marketing and strategy but have little idea of the importance of sales as a discipline – never mind the value-add of professional selling skills, such as how to negotiate or close a deal. Sales rarely features on the curriculum of general MBAs, and there are only two postgraduate courses in sales management.

There is no logical reason for this. Sales has complexified so much in the last 40 years that it offers no shortage of material for rigorous academic study. There are, for example, the competing modern theories of selling, the legal and regulatory framework, ethics, the interface with procurement and marketing, customer psychology, customer experience, compiling a financial case, and handling complex multi-party negotiations. In addition, there is the technology side: the use of AI, data analytics to identify opportunities, forecasting software and customer relationship management tools.

A disparaging view seems to persist that sales is just a behaviour. It is certainly true that when studying sales, work experience is vital to practise the soft skills of customer relations, negotiation and teamwork. These should not be despised however – they are the very skills which employers complain are so lacking in today's school-leavers and graduates.

The main reasons that sales is not studied appear to be a combination of inertia, ignorance and historic prejudice on the part of academia, plus lack of awareness in wider society to stimulate demand. But Britain's SMEs do need salespeople; and this is a situation where government can intervene positively to stimulate the desire to learn and teach selling.

To ensure a steady stream of high-quality recruits into sales, positive change needs to start at school to enthuse young people to study and practise the skills required. As a high percentage of school-leavers will work in sales at some point in their careers, this will be a valuable addition to their understanding of working life. There is already space allocated in the school day for young people to learn about money and develop business sense, under the often-overlooked 'economic' element of the Personal, Social, Health and Economic curriculum.

Selling is a basic business activity which young children enjoy naturally when 'playing shops'. Simple sales activities should be introduced at primary schools where they would be an enjoyable addition to the PSHE curriculum, fostering important skills of reasoning, negotiating and communicating. Secondary schools should run business competitions, requiring skills of planning, presentation and negotiation.

At present, sales does not feature within business courses at GCSE or A Level, and the Department for Education must take urgent action to change this. A module on sales should examine the significance of selling to the economy, and include a look at ethics, selling methods, and modern sales theory.

Every university must include sales in its general business courses, and more UK universities should start to offer sales-specific courses. The government can play a key role in incentivising more universities to teach sales academically.



**In the US in 2010 there were 40 colleges that offered sales programmes. By 2014, there were 162.**

*Neil Rackham, as above*<sup>52</sup>

One obstacle will be the shortage of academics to teach sales, as there are fewer than ten sales specialists at UK universities. A relatively small investment would provide research funding for PhD students to study sales, based at the university schools of sales recommended in Section 3 of this report. Again, sponsorship should be sought from businesses, who are well aware of the skills gap. Within five years, the shortage of sales academics would have started to ease, and a wealth of useful research evidence would become available to inform future government economic policy.

The UK could learn from the success of the sales competitions for final year undergraduates in the US, where employers pay to act as judges because of the opportunity it provides to recruit new sales talent.<sup>53</sup>

## Recommendations

**13.** Sales **must** be included in the business curriculum at GCSE and A Level.

**14.** Sales activities should be added to the Personal, Social, Health and Economic curriculum from primary school upwards. Sales skills should be promoted in secondary schools via competitions such as Young Enterprise, and activities such as the APS Sales In A Box programme.<sup>54</sup>

**15.** Universities **must** include sales modules in their business degree courses. They should also develop their own undergraduate and postgraduate courses majoring in sales. More universities should offer the BSc Hons apprenticeship in B2B Sales.

**16.** University business schools **must** partner with the private sector so that business students can gain practical sales experience as part of their study. Universities and their private sector partners should run sales competitions to help to prepare graduates for sales careers.

**17.** Britain's first academic chair in sales should be established, with private sector sponsorship. A fund should be set up to subsidise academic research into sales at university, to enable the number of sales academics to grow swiftly.

## 6. SMEs should embrace digital sales tools and techniques

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Britain's SMEs have a poor record on take up of advanced digital technologies compared to SMEs in other European countries.<sup>55</sup> This will need to change if UK SMEs are to become more productive. Failure to take up digital technology is one of the starkest differences between highly productive firms and firms with stagnant productivity.<sup>56</sup>

SMEs that have embraced digital technologies have average productivity levels 13.6% higher than those which have not. Digital sales tools are a crucial factor: using a Customer Relationship Management tool provides an average 18.4% increase in sales per employee.<sup>57</sup> This compares with a 13.5% increase in sales per employee when an SME adopts cloud-based computing, and 11.8% when an SME moves to web-based accounting.

Medium-sized enterprises are 15% less likely to have a formal sales process than larger companies, and are less likely to use formal hiring tools.<sup>58</sup> Take-up of digital technologies is lowest among micro-businesses, fewer than half of whom have any system for tracking sales and business performance.



**The UK lacks an integrated business support system to help diffuse the new methods, processes, and technologies uncovered by our frontier firms. SMEs need financial incentives, hand-held assistance at a local level, and bespoke skills support to drive their take up of best practice.**

*Tej Parikh, Chief Economist, Institute of Directors* <sup>59</sup>

The smallest SMEs need encouragement, advice and training to adopt productivity-boosting technology. Active marketing is needed to drive behaviour change, particularly among those hard-to-reach SMEs which do not engage with business support and where productivity remains stubbornly low.

The government can help by ensuring that agencies offer a wide range of support, and that loans, grants and tax breaks are available. It can also help to ensure that technology is available at the appropriate scale for small businesses.

Recruiting younger staff, who have grown up more digitally aware, will be a powerful driver for the adoption of new digital technologies. [See Chapter 4]



**Too many SMEs do not possess basic digital skills and there is a danger that many will miss out on the benefits of new technologies, such as robotics, AI and 5G. This will reduce the ability of SMEs to be more productive and innovative, reach out to customers and access support, much of which is digital.”**

*BEIS Select Committee report, Small Businesses and Productivity* <sup>60</sup>

## Recommendations

- 18.** Information and short, practically focused courses for SMEs on adopting sales technology **must** be compiled and made available online.
- 19.** Simplified sales tools, appropriate for SMEs, should be made available online.
- 20.** The Treasury should explore innovative ways to incentivise SMEs to adopt digital technology.

## 7. Looking ahead

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Every OECD country is experiencing and responding to the same acute skills shortage in sales, but in Britain we are hindered by our social and cultural attitudes and this is hampering efforts to raise productivity. Commentators in the US and Canada are calling for sales training and education to alleviate the shortage. In the US, this call to action has resulted in a rapid expansion of sales teaching at university.<sup>61</sup> British businesses risk being at a disadvantage if the UK fails to follow suit.



**Sales is changing, Academia is out of touch, and this is bad for business and the academy.**

*Frank V Cespedes & Daniel Weinfurter, Harvard Business Review* <sup>62</sup>

The sales profession itself needs to earn greater respect by aspiring to strong, ethical standards. The message to individual salespeople, about adopting ethical behaviour and the need to up-skill, would be given a powerful boost if sales was formally recognised as a profession, with a standards body established by royal charter.

The government can set a lead here by preferring bids for procurement contracts from companies whose sales teams qualify as Investors in Sales – where 50% or more of the salesforce are professionally registered. This would encourage the wider adoption of ethical sales practices, and act as a flagship initiative to back up the “Selling is Great” message [see recommendation 1]. It would also help SMEs to compete on level terms with larger companies, increasing the chances of the Government meeting its procurement target of spending £1 in every £3 with SMEs by 2022.<sup>63</sup>

There are no quick fixes when turning around centuries of negative attitudes towards sales. The Government has a key role to play in setting a lead from the top. Patience and consistency are required; both have been in short supply in Britain’s strategy towards SMEs over recent years, as the BEIS Select Committee has already noted.<sup>64</sup> This is why we recommend that all successful sales initiatives should be guaranteed funding for five years.

For a flatlining SME, a proficient salesperson or sales team is the engine to drive up the whole company’s productivity. The UK government should raise awareness of the value of good selling, promote sales education and boost the adoption of sales technology, because in so doing it could finally start to get to grips with the productivity crisis.

The UK has the unique advantage of being the first country in the world to move towards professionalising sales. The Association of Professional Sales is taking the lead on this as it campaigns for chartered status to give the sales profession the same standing as accountancy, marketing and procurement. No other country has yet made that move.



**There needs to be another level of professionalism [in sales], not brought in by outside consultants but from within the profession. That is truly novel. We are so interested in this idea [the APS] has started here, we are talking about this back in the United States.**

*Tim Riesterer, Chief Strategy Officer, Corporate Visions Inc* <sup>65</sup>

Britain has the opportunity, if it chooses, to establish itself as the global standard bearer of sales professionalism. The high standards of British selling could be held up as a mark of quality, allowing UK exporters to differentiate themselves from their overseas competitors. This would enhance Britain's international reputation. It could create a new export industry in sales standards and skills.

As Britain recalibrates its trading relationships with Europe and the rest of the world, there is no better time than now.

## Recommendations

- 21.** The government **must** appoint a sales tsar to drive change.
- 22.** The APS **must** be recognised by royal charter as the professional standards body for sales.
- 23.** Government procurement departments should prefer bids from companies which qualify as Investors In Sales, to drive the adoption of skilled, ethical selling.
- 24.** All successful programmes to improve the productivity of SMEs, by boosting sales capability, should be funded for five years, and avenues explored to secure a continuing funding stream.



**Our national sales capability is key to our global success.**

*Stephen Kerr MP, Chair, APPG for Professional Sales*

# Appendices

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## 1. Inquiry witnesses

<b>Tony Douglas</b>	Sales Education Specialist; formerly Associate Professor, Strategy and Sales, and Director of the Centre for Strategic Selling, Edinburgh Napier University
<b>Alison Edgar</b>	Managing Director, Sales Coaching Solutions; Founder, The Entrepreneur's Godmother
<b>David Griffiths</b>	Managing Director and Head of Sales, Sharples Group
<b>Mark Hart</b>	Professor of Small Business and Entrepreneurship, Aston Business School; Director of the Goldman Sachs 10,000 Small Businesses programme
<b>Andy Hough</b>	Founder and co-CEO, Association of Professional Sales (APS)
<b>Mike Hurley</b>	Head of Advisory and Academic Liaison, APS
<b>Richard Lane</b>	Co-founder, durhamlane
<b>Nick Lee</b>	Professor of Marketing, Warwick Business School; Associate Editor, Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management
<b>Rob Maguire</b>	Co-founder, Maguire Izatt
<b>Ian Moyse</b>	Sales Director, Natterbox
<b>Tej Parikh</b>	Senior Economist, Institute of Directors
<b>Philip Squire</b>	CEO, Consalia
<b>Ben Turner</b>	Co-CEO, APS

## 2. Case study

Sales education had a profound impact on one SME in Warrington, where profits and turnover enjoyed double-digit increases after the Head of Sales completed an MSc in Transformational Sales Leadership. Revenue had been stagnating for several years at Sharples Group, but in 2016 the new ideas that David Griffiths brought back from Middlesex University enabled the print services company to shift up a gear, taking on extra sales staff.

Profits rose 18%, while turnover increased from £3.07m to £3.45m, despite adverse trading conditions. "I believe [the course] was transformational," says Griffiths, who is also joint Managing Director. Thanks to the course he switched to consultative selling practices and introduced coaching and mentoring at all levels of the organisation – techniques he wouldn't otherwise have encountered. Griffiths continued to work full-time during the course, studying in his spare time so that the business did not suffer.

### **Would you agree that in general SMEs "don't know what they don't know" with respect to how to do sales? Where do they go for advice?**

This is a real problem. If I hadn't by chance stumbled across the master's programme with Toshiba, I too would have been none the wiser. SMEs spend a lot of money on finding answers for themselves through networking and related training, hiring consultants, or enrolling with some support network. I would say that this investment is often wasted, and if sales training and apprenticeship programmes were more readily available, the UK economy would benefit greatly.

**In your experience of working for SMEs, do you believe that owners/CEOs understand sales, put in place the right structures and have the right expectations?**

Many don't. I have been asked several times since I completed my master's to help through providing some consultancy. This is an opportunity that wouldn't have presented itself before and is proof that having a sales education brings greater opportunity to a profession in which development and realisation of potential is largely untapped.

**Do you see a contrast with large enterprises in how sales are managed?**

Large enterprises have the infrastructure to develop talent within their companies such as HR. This resource simply isn't affordable for SMEs, who can waste valuable time and resource trying and quite often failing to manage sales in an appropriate way. Whilst SMEs can still have highly effective teams, sales education would greatly assist in making these teams more successful. Speaking from experience with my master's degree, the awareness that I developed for myself, and the benefits it has brought to my sales team and the business as a whole, are numerous.

**Is there a lack of a good pool of sales talent accessible by SMEs? Where do you recruit your salespeople?**

I would say that there is a lack of talent and/or positive behaviours. Salespeople are often paid for performance which can lead to too much focus on what is in it for them, rather than for their customer. This trait is a fundamental reason why salespeople seem to lack talent, although I believe this can be remedied by education which often develops one's self-awareness and positive behaviours. We typically recruit from within the industry, although I would prefer to grow from grass roots, so we can develop talent that is aligned with the vision of our company and its values, financial resources permitting.

**Is onboarding, developing and retaining salespeople a challenge for SMEs in general? How much training do you do? Are you prevented from doing more?**

As in the previous point I would recruit differently now. I would say that we have wasted lots of time and money over the years through a lack of education when it comes to recruiting salespeople. Since my sales education, I have made many changes when it comes to development, one of which is a full-people strategy which includes a personal development plan for all members of the team. This would not have been achieved had I not completed the master's. Training and mentoring are tailored to individual's needs. This can be challenging, as often in a small-business managers are stretched, so creating the time-resource requires a lot of energy.

**Is the reason SMEs struggle to attract the best sales talent because they don't know how to sell their company to prospective employees?**

No, I don't think that's the case, I think SME leaders sell their businesses very well. I believe if SMEs were able to offer a formal career development plan then this would greatly assist them in attracting talent. In my experience, many leaders and sales leaders in SMEs don't know where to look for such a plan, or how to remove themselves from the sales function to free up time to introduce such a framework. I have discussed this issue many times with friends and colleagues who are in a similar position to me.

**Do you use the apprenticeship levy to bring in sales apprentices? Is the apprenticeship levy working for SMEs (specifically for sales)?**

No, not yet, but I would be very keen to. I would suggest the problem for many SMEs is that they don't know sales apprenticeships exist.

**What governance do you have in place for selling? What is your view on how widespread this is in SMEs in general?**

Personally, I believe in what the APS is trying to achieve and have a lot to thank my profession for. I have developed a consultative sales methodology in my business, designed to focus on the clients' needs rather than the sales individual. We operate within the value statement of 'principle before profit', which in summary means that there's nothing wrong with making money, but we do this as a result of positive sales behaviours. This earned my company the High Sheriff of Cheshire's Award for Most Responsible Business Practice in 2017, against competition from much larger organisations than us.



### 3. Glossary

<b>APPG</b>	All-Party Parliamentary Group - a cross party group of MPs formed around a key subject area e.g. APPG for Professional Sales
<b>APS</b>	Association of Professional Sales, a not-for-profit organisation reinvesting in the sales profession to build standards, trust and education
<b>B2B sales</b>	Business-to-business sales, as opposed to retail sales
<b>BEIS</b>	Government department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy
<b>EMEA</b>	Global region covering Europe, Middle East and Asia
<b>Growth Hubs</b>	Local public/private sector partnerships led by Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) <a href="https://www.lepnetwork.net/growth-hubs/">https://www.lepnetwork.net/growth-hubs/</a>
<b>LEPs</b>	Local Enterprise Partnerships are joint ventures between local authorities and businesses which help to set economic priorities and lead economic growth and job creation <a href="https://www.lepnetwork.net">https://www.lepnetwork.net</a> <a href="https://www.gov.uk/business/local-enterprise-partnerships-leps-and-enterprise-zones">https://www.gov.uk/business/local-enterprise-partnerships-leps-and-enterprise-zones</a>
<b>MBA</b>	Master of business administration, a university qualification
<b>Productivity</b>	The efficiency of a business, often measured as sales per employee
<b>SMEs</b>	Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises - companies with up to 250 employees.

### 4. Report Authors

**Researcher and writer** | Jenny Booth, Association of Professional Sales

**Editor** | Adam Harding, Association of Professional Sales

**Commissioning Editor** | Guy Lloyd, Association of Professional Sales

## Summary of Recommendations

### Chapter 1 – Britain suffers from snobbery about sales.

1. Whitehall departments should run “Get Britain Selling” and “Selling is Great” media campaigns to influence social attitudes.

### Chapter 2 – SMEs need to become sales aware

2. The gov.uk website and business organisations **must** offer information about effective selling for SMEs, and signpost SMEs towards the APS as an additional source of knowledge.

3. LEPs and Growth Hubs should regularly include events on sales best practice in their offering for SMEs.

4. BEIS should pilot a programme employing sales specialists to offer in-firm support for SMEs, extending it nationwide if successful. Business Support Helpline advisers should be trained to offer sales guidance to SMEs.

5. BEIS should allocate funds for an online peer-to-peer support network on sales for SMEs, run by sales specialists.

### Chapter 3 – Sales training is key to making SMEs more productive

6. Information on adopting the best sales procedures, and bite-sized, practical courses, **must** be commissioned and actively marketed to SMEs.

7. Sales training from private providers should be regulated. The gov.uk website, LEPs, Growth Hubs, and business organisations should signpost SMEs towards accredited sources of sales training.

8. The Treasury should explore and put in place appropriate measures to make sales training affordable and accessible, for example: match-funding, a growth voucher, or tax breaks.

9. Centres of sales research **must** be set up at university business schools in the UK with the help of private sector sponsorship, incentivised by tax breaks. These should act as hubs to disseminate sales excellence to SMEs and gather data.

### Chapter 4 – SMEs need to recruit young people into sales

10. The process **must** be simplified for SMEs applying to take on apprentices. SMEs should be offered support to apply for apprenticeship funding, and given advice on managing sales apprentices.

11. The funding ceiling for SME sales apprentices should be raised from £6,000 to £12,000 for an 18-month course of externally-ratified sales training.

12. Gov.uk, LEPs, Growth Hubs and business professional bodies should signpost SMEs towards Level 4 apprenticeships in sales.

## Summary of Recommendations

### Chapter 5 – Sales needs to be studied

13. Sales **must** be included in the business curriculum at GCSE and A Level.
14. Sales activities should be added to the Personal, Social, Health and Economic curriculum from primary school upwards. Sales skills should be promoted in secondary schools via competitions such as Young Enterprise, and activities such as the APS Sales In A Box programme.<sup>54</sup>
15. Universities **must** include sales modules in their business degree courses. They should also develop their own undergraduate and postgraduate courses majoring in sales. More universities should offer the BSc Hons apprenticeship in B2B Sales.
16. University business schools **must** partner with the private sector so that business students can gain practical sales experience as part of their study. Universities and their private sector partners should run sales competitions to help to prepare graduates for sales careers.
17. Britain's first academic chair in sales should be established, with private sector sponsorship. A fund should be set up to subsidise academic research into sales at university, to enable the number of sales academics to grow swiftly.

### Chapter 6 – SMEs should embrace digital sales tools and techniques

18. Information and short, practically focused courses for SMEs on adopting sales technology **must** be compiled and made available online.
19. Simplified sales tools, appropriate for SMEs, should be made available online.
20. The Treasury should explore innovative ways to incentivise SMEs to adopt digital technology.

### Chapter 7 – Looking ahead

21. The government **must** appoint a sales tsar to drive change.
22. The APS **must** be recognised by royal charter as the professional standards body for sales.
23. Government procurement departments should prefer bids from companies which qualify as Investors In Sales, to drive the adoption of skilled, ethical selling.
24. All successful programmes to improve the productivity of SMEs by boosting sales capability should be funded for five years, and avenues explored to secure a continuing funding stream.

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  - ISM – Institute of Sales Management (formerly the ISMM).
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