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GLOBAL

Charting a Career as a Global Sales Executive



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Selling GE in Europe may be one of the most challenging jobs in the world after the European Union Commissioner turned GE's merger with Honeywell International down last year. So why was the top job in Europe for America's most respected corporation given to Ferdinando Beccalli, a native of Turin, Italy? For one thing, Jeffrey Immelt, GE's Chairman, wanted a successful sales executive who had a fundamental understanding of different cultures.

The biggest gap in the development of many sales executives in today's global businesses is a comprehensive understanding of multiple cultures. By the time outstanding sales leaders have mastered their company's products and services, developed strategic account management skills and are ready for a top world-wide sales assignment, too few have developed the prerequisite cultural competencies for successfully leading a global business. This is even more important today because leadership in many industries is being challenged around the world. Why is Airbus suddenly winning more major contracts than Boeing? Why are global companies increasingly replacing leading national companies in energy, telecommunications and pharmaceuticals? It is often because their managers have developed the skills and experience necessary to lead a more successful global sales organization. What separates these successful global sales executives

from homegrown leaders is a combination of competencies and experience that is cultivated through education and early career opportunities.

Essential Competencies

Nani Beccalli, as he is known, is GE's Chief Executive for Europe. He studied in Italy, lived in the U.S., the Netherlands, Japan and now resides in Brussels—when he is not traveling. How many sales executives gain this kind of international experience or have had the opportunity to develop the unique competencies of an international sales executive? In addition, as more Europeans and Asians learn English as their second, third or fourth language, they are gaining an advantage that will provide them with opportunities to gain top global executive sales positions.

The competencies essential to becoming a global sales executive include: possessing a global mindset, developing global teams, implementing global systems, leveraging international alliances, demonstrating cross-cultural effectiveness and providing global sales leadership (see Figure 1, page 37). Participating in global sales leadership development programs with strategic account professionals from around the world is one of the best methods to develop these competencies.

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More than global sales competencies are required, however. Many new international sales executives struggle with non-stop travel. Mr. Beccalli has indicated he did not sleep in the same bed three nights in a row during his first six months as CEO of Europe. Constant time away from the family requires significant sacrifice. A spouse committed to international life is, perhaps, the most important asset. Conversely, a spouse who does not quickly adapt to foreign challenges is the cause of a significant number of unsuccessful international forays.

Cultural Challenges

The challenges of dealing with the subtleties of different cultures, customs and national approaches to business are also unfamiliar to many strategic account professionals when they begin to go global and can create a significant stumbling block, ruining credibility as well as international relationships. Julie Jessup, a former IBM Sales Representative and later a Digital Equipment Corporation Human Resources Executive, describes the naiveté of one manager who asked if he would be able to phone home from France. Another strategic account manager had the ignorance to ask his South Korean host if there were any institutions of higher learning in Korea. Just a few moments of research – something most executives overlook in haste – would have revealed to any business tourist Korea's high rate

of literacy, and the fact that there are over 50 universities in Seoul alone.

Respect for Local Regulations

Although regulations may be studied from afar, the interpretation and implementation of them must be understood locally. It is therefore essential to become familiar with the ambiguities and interpretation of laws, business customs and ethics in different regions. Many executives fail to respect the subtleties of international negotiations and make

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costly mistakes trying to navigate international sales. Parachuting into a country in an attempt to close a sale is the most common mistake cited by many local managers—especially in Asia where patience, long-term relationships and networking are essential. From marketing and prospecting at the beginning of an international sale to the final negotiation, the executive who fails to understand and react to cultural subtleties and sensitivities is at an enormous disadvantage. For

example, the common mode of American advertising that compares a product to a competitor's is illegal in parts of Europe. The complexity of a strategic account that transcends international borders often creates many surprises in pricing, shipping and quality expectations for inexperienced strategic account professionals. A medical products sales manager was astounded when Japanese inspectors rejected a perfectly good delivery of medical gloves because they were not laid neatly in pairs in boxes—despite the fact that they are identical gloves and are randomly tossed into boxes in correct numbers for delivery almost every place else in the world.

Charting Your Career Path

How can you chart a career path that accelerates your chances of becoming an international sales executive? It is difficult to gain a foreign assignment in most large corporations until you have significant experience. So, it is imperative to find an alternate route. When Ms. Jessup discovered early on in her career that "international positions are reserved for people with 20 years of experience or those who have already worked internationally," she enrolled in France's acclaimed INSEAD – one of the largest and most influential top-tier business schools – for her MBA. She then landed her next position in Europe. INSEAD, the London School of Economics, Erasmus University in Rotterdam and many other well-respected international business schools in Europe and Asia

Figure 1. Global Sales Leadership Competencies

| Possesses a Global Mindset | Develops High-Performance Global Teams | Implements Global Sales Systems | Leverages International Alliances | Demonstrates Cross-Cultural Effectiveness | Provides Global Sales Leadership |
|--|--|--|---|---|--|
| Uses knowledge of global trends to anticipate opportunities. | Inspires commitment across geographic boundaries. | Anticipates changing needs of global systems. | Effectively communicates alliance benefits and results. | Demonstrates knowledge and respect for different cultures. | Communicates a vision that unites others worldwide. |
| Manages risks successfully in different business environments. | Facilitates effective global communications among all members. | Balances local and global needs when implementing systems. | Builds agreement among alliance stakeholders. | Adapts personal behaviors to compliment cultural environment. | Leverages worldwide company network to achieve objectives. |
| Ensures that efforts reflect local and international considerations. | Maximizes outcomes by leveraging team members' strengths. | Builds global systems improvement teams. | Ensures flexibility of alliances to adapt to changing conditions. | Facilitates understanding among people of different cultures. | Able to formulate global strategies to achieve objectives. |
| Views uncertainty as a growth opportunity | Aligns global resources to support team objectives. | Implements global systems change in a timely manner. | Maximizes benefits of the partnership to the company. | Responds to information within its cultural context. | Models core values of company globally. |

provide a valuable means to merge into a network of future international leaders while studying business from a more global perspective.

Even with an international degree, the path is often filled with obstacles in large corporations, so a fast growing, smaller business is an innovative route. The computer and telecommunications businesses, which have provided many international opportunities in the past decade, are now being replaced by faster growing services industries today. The problem is that they require local contacts and specific, local industry knowledge. So, leveraging contacts and experience from an internship abroad or a temporary assignment in a country often provides a good starting point. As a result, beginning early in your career significantly helps in mapping the route to a top global position. Mary Jane Williams, a Human Resources Manager at Serono North America concurs, saying, "Salespeople need to gain international experience early in their career if they want to become a sales executive in a global company like ours."

Developing a Global Perspective

The most immediate prerequisite for success as a global sales leader is to develop a global perspective. To this end, it is useful to subscribe to international publications, track global news and cultivate an international curiosity. Taking international vacations is another logical initiative. But, this must be done so as to gain deep exposure to other cultures as opposed to traveling with friends to typical tourist locations. Developing a network of international associates, regular contacts and multiple mentors in different parts of the world is also important.

Harder for most is to truly understand diverse cultures, their intrinsic values and beliefs and their impact on business interactions. Prospective global sales executives must enhance their cultural sensitivity. This only comes from intense reading about foreign cultures, in-depth discussions with those from varied

backgrounds and an insatiable appetite for learning what motivates people from other nations. Communication is also essential; build upon the language skills you have and concentrate on gaining fluency in other languages. To maintain these skills, stay in frequent contact with people who speak the language.



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Capitalizing on Global Opportunities

Within a company there are many opportunities as well. A prospective global sales executive should:

- Understand the company's goals and initiatives in the global marketplace;
- Get on the distribution list for strategic plans, global marketing strategies and international news;
- Volunteer to work on an international committee, task force or global account team;
- Find an international problem in your organization that needs solving and recommend a global task force;
- Learn to mobilize distant resources through influencing skills;
- Develop different management styles and techniques to facilitate managing people from different cultures and

mobilizing resources in multiple international locations;

- Forge partnerships with multilateral organizations; and
- Pursue partnerships with national companies, governments, funding organizations or associations to share ideas, resources and growth opportunities.

One of the best paths to gaining global experience early is to participate in or manage an international sales meeting. Neil Schmidt was a GE Medical Systems Marketing Manager when he organized an extremely successful and innovative international sales meeting. As a result, he was invited to manage his company's marketing operation in Europe. As more companies set up global account management processes, there are many new opportunities to find a launching pad for a global career.

From Curiosity to Commitment

Looking to the future, true global executives will play an essential role in the success of their businesses worldwide because they offer a greater perspective and understanding of different markets. And, as trade barriers continue to go down and international business becomes an increasing percentage of most companies' revenues, the need for successful global sales executives will increase. The combination of global competencies, experience, education and cultural awareness that marks the best leaders comes from an incessant curiosity and sincere humility that enables them to learn more from others as they travel. To chart a successful career path, prospective global sales executives must acquire knowledge as aggressively as they win international sales. Achieving a global sales executive position requires commitment, tenacity and sacrifices beyond most jobs, but the rewards are richness in life and an opportunity to see the world from a much broader perspective. 🌐

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