

THE POSSIBILITIES OF USING BENCHMARKING IN PERFECTING DISTRIBUTION SYSTEMS (THE POLISH AND ITALIAN EXPERIENCE)

ELŻBIETA KOPROWSKA

Abstract: Comparing to the best involves the systematic and continuous process based on confronting one's own effectiveness measured by productivity, quality and experience by means of results of those businesses and organizations that are the best and serve as examples of perfection. In the 21st century, limitations only to classic methods of management without considering the surroundings and learning from them is insufficient. . It is the uncovering of the elements that cause the analysis of the process to be executed effectively and the consequent pointing out of other possibilities in one's own business. It is the learning and the creative adaptation of the best practices. The article attempts to compare sales management in Poland and in Italy in the field of building production? Represented are typical solutions used in sales management in the named countries. Assessed are tested solutions, describing their strong and weak points. Described in the conclusions are the conditions that must be met in order to use the Italian system in Poland.

Keywords: benchmarking, The sales process, comparing the mode of distribution channels

JEL Classification: M10, M21

1. INTRODUCTION

The progressing globalization process and integration with European Union leads to sales systems unification in various European countries. Entering the EU, Poland has become a formal member of the third phase of the Economy and Currency Union and is obligated to introduce the euro currency at the most objectively convenient conditions (Koronowski A, 2009, s.45-46). Introducing euro in Poland would make the Polish companies to decide if they maintain their area of business to the local market or extend it to other markets of the Eurozone. Introducing euro in Poland could also increase company's costs by increasing the payroll. Both prices and payroll are targeting to achieve average level of the Eurozone members, which means they can be increasing faster (Bartosik 2009, s.62). Indirect interaction would take place in a wide scope of business environment, whereas direct impact would relate to the competitive position of the company including the competitive potential and competitive strategy, which is based on functional strategies including sales policy. (Gorynia, Jankowski 2011, s.15). Historical and cultural factors in particular regions of EU are still causing significant differences in the organization and functioning of sales systems, which impacts the efficiency of sales processes. An example of such a region, where mentioned factors are strongly impacting the merchandising management is Italy. Domination of big, family based trading companies inherited for generations, where certain solutions are mostly developed within a company and significant importance placed on trust and trading reliability make this region an interesting example to analyze. This analysis focuses in particular on comparison of functioning between a Polish and Italian trade representatives.

2. THE ESSENCE AND FUNCTION OF BENCHMARKING

The benchmarking philosophy bases on a statement that there is no man or company, who found a way of performing all activities in optimally. This means that it is necessary to learn from others. The beginning of benchmarking was simply to obtain and dismantle competition products to learn it's structure and find a better way of making.

In the 50's the Japanese have been visiting thousands of companies across the world, especially in America and Western Europe in order to find ideas and concepts that could be adapted and developed in the country with own production processes. The results of the visiting was a dynamic activity in the area of possessing technology and economical knowledge, when the economy reached the level of leading western countries and signing of many contracts to import western knowledge in the area of the best technology and know-now (Bendell T., Butle L., Gotfort K., 1977, s.11.) Thanks to that the Japanese moved a lot of solutions to their own land and increased the efficiency of achieving their goals. The first attempt to describe the essence of benchmarking in management was the definition created by R.C. Camp, chief of benchmarking at Xerox at the time, believed to be the benchmarking pioneer. In his book "The Search for Industry Best Practice that Lead to Superior Performance" he provides the following definition:

"Benchmarking is the search for industry best practices that lead to superior performance"

Etymologically the terminology comes from the word "benchmark", which according to the Oxford dictionary means a "mark", "program", "norm" used as a reference point (Anderson B., 1995, s.212.), whereas the according to the Webster dictionary it means "geodesist reference point (...) marking certain location (...) and used as a reference (...) norm, by which something is measured or evaluated. (Martyniak Z., 1997, s.185.)

3. SALES MANAGERS EFFICIENCY MEASURES

Sales rate is the most important and the most spectacular criteria for measuring the efficiency of a sales specialist. It is however insufficient for the companies that wishes to build their image and foundations for a long time functioning. Customer care quality, customer satisfaction, trust and attachment to the brand are the uncountable criteria that bring value over time. According to Peter Drucker "The only center of profit is the client".

Table 1 Sales specialist evaluation metrics

Metric	Description
Bill penetration rate	A percentage of accounts with performed orders. It shows if the sales specialist intensively provides service with all accounts and is systematic.
Conversion rate	Allows to evaluate the capability of the sales representative to exploit opportunities to convert potential clients into real ones and open new accounts.
Closed accounts rate	Allows to evaluate the capability of the sales specialist to maintain the clients and proper quality of service.
Sales level per account	Low level can indicate that the sales specialist is taking too much time towards the strong clients generating high income and not enough to others. Accounts should be divided into classes in order to evaluate strong and weak points of the sales specialist.
Cancelled orders rate	Can indicate that the sales specialist is putting pressure in the client to place the order, but is not focused on finalizing the transaction.

Source: Tallitsch J., Moynahan J., Fine-Tuning So/es Compensation Programs, „Compensation & Benefits Review”, marzec-kwiecień 1994, s. 37.

The above table shows that it is necessary to incorporate "solid" criteria to the evaluation conditions for sales specialists determining sales rate, profits and costs, as well as the "soft" criteria determining the quality of work, client satisfaction, regularity or gathering of information about clients, products to obtain new clients. A lost client means not only a loss of another order, but also loss of the income equal to the value of all products that the client could have ordered throughout his life. Additionally there comes the cost of getting a new client. According to TARP research (Technical Assistant Research Program), the cost of getting a new client is five times the cost of current satisfied client (Kotler 2006, s.200). To achieve selected goal the personnel responsible for client relations should be highly qualified in the area of adjustment to the client's organizational culture, purchasing motives recognition, environmental conditions adaptation, adaptation to appearing conflict of interests or changing priorities. (Artur Olczak, Maciej Urbaniak 2006, s.54). There are three models of trading cooperation: assimilation, marginalization and integration (D.J.Goud, K.R. Evans, R.J.Szultz 1999, s.599). The idea of strategic assumptions has to be reflected in a specific form of offer including a marketing communication. The form, content and tone of the communication has to be strictly related to its purpose, the characteristics of target customers, the characteristics and positioning of the product and to financial possibilities. Because of that, members of the trading services have to be informed with the strategic arrangements. This is a necessary condition to create so called brilliant ideas, which should be not only creative, but also effective (Mariusz Trojanowski 2010, s.169).

4. CHOOSING A TRADE REPRESENTATIVE

For the overall selection procedure two tasks lead to achieve the key purpose. First is to determine the skills and motivation, so therefore the potential of candidates and the second is to determine the evaluate the candidates from the point of view of the needs related to the particular position. In this context the most reliable criteria are education, professional experience and the physical and personal characteristics. The first step of excluding certain candidates from further recruitment is the presented information. Usually it's a resume (CV) or other document included in the recruitment announcement. Effective application segregation helps to save time and cost of recruitment. Another criteria of selection relates to physical condition and is reflected in a dedicated medical examination.

Personal characteristics are also one of the main selection criteria, especially for a trade representative, who should be a very communicative person. Such person should also be a good listener and observer with certain empathy, emotional approach and flexibility (Oczachowska 2009, s.174-175). They should be able to maintain eye contact while speaking in a confident but kind way (Strzyżewska 1997, s.95). A good salesman should also know how to deal with questions and objections from the client side and be open for any notices (A.Rudzewicz 2012, s.55). If a seller is unable to provide explanations to every question from the customer or deal with customer's objections, the transaction will most likely not take place (CH.Futrell 2004, s.393). Next important attribute is to be ready for a big workload enabling to achieve personal goals, that gives satisfaction and to have a need for achievements with determination and persistence (Ch.Futrell 2004, Steward 1995, s.14).

Some personal characteristics can be initially evaluated based on the handwriting, which is why some companies require a handwritten cover letter, that can be reviewed by a graphologist. Only clinical tests however can provide verification of those characteristics. These tests are however quite expensive. The effectiveness and efficiency of recruitment is also relying on an interview with a candidate. It's often divided into introduction conversation and a detailed interview. A useful tool for the interview is a non-standard questionnaire, that should contain a few universal questions for all candidates. As an effect of the introduction conversation it should be to limit the amount of candidates to a few per selected position. The detailed interview however should be led by a personal manager, psychology specialist or a sociologist as a lot of questions are actually filtering a candidates personal life and decision making motives.

An often question for a sales representative candidate is "do you like a fieldwork?". The question aims to determine whether the candidate is able to take sacrifices related to often business traveling and limited contact with family. It appears that the answer to this question is usually positive, however in real conditions it is often not in line with the truth, which impact a significant rotations in this job.

Hiring a professional sales representative in Poland is difficult. One of leading pharmaceuticals companies GLAXO SMITH, that offers very good work conditions, chose

university grades and diploma score as one of selection criteria. The company was not focusing on any particular faculty but on ambitions and ability to work efficiently of potential employees.

Usually companies face two issues: lack of training (insufficient preparation for new merchandisers) and lack of personnel, that can and wishes to be a salesman (Oczakowska 2009, s.174-175). Often a new sales representative cannot count on as good introduction by his supervisor as he would expect or even worse – on a level expected by the efficiency increase process (Adam Rudzewicz 2012, s.57).

5. SALES FORCE SALARY POLICY IN POLAND

According to Polish law described in the Work Code the definition of salary is as follows: “salary is a provision deserved upon performed work, which an employer is obliged to pay timely to an employee in exchange for performed work based on work agreement. The salary should be agreed to match the type of work and qualifications necessary to perform it.” According to S. Borkowska “salary is a reward for performed work proportional to its amount and quality” (S.Borkowska 1992, s. 8). Salary (all its forms and components) is an important motive for people to act more efficiently, improve own professional skills, follow career path. It is caused by the fact that people follow their basic needs, wish to improve their material status or claim certain goods.

Salary is one of most effective ways of communication between a company and its environment, which is why a strategic plan of human resources management should predict:

- Relation between static salary system and changeable conditions relevant for the company, that is type of positions, market conditions, employee competences, company financial possibilities, methods of setting desired position of the company on the market, measurement of positions capacity, construction of payroll methods and bonus counting mechanism
- Incorporation of employee achievements evaluation to increase efficiency e.g. by relating the increase of base salary to amount of result bonus

Maintain market orientation, that is knowledge about salary rates for positions in scope, new ways of rewarding approach and motivation.

6. SALARY RATES FOR DIFFERENT SALES POSITIONS IN POLAND

There is a huge fluctuation in Poland among sales and merchandising job in Poland with biggest rotation comparing to other jobs. What is causing this phenomenon? There are many reasons. Insufficient earnings compared to effort and time consumed, limited possibility of learning at universities leading to lack of qualified employees. Disproportions in earnings between certain types of positions are most visible with specialists and managers positions. In case of experienced specialists (SD) highest salaries are offered to employees related to key accounts (median of key account specialists (SD) is 5 856 PLN) and to field sales force (sales representative (SD) – 5 359 PLN). On the other hand the least earnings are related to stationary

salesman (salesman (SD) – 3 143 PLN). (Sedlak & Sedlak, Raport 11.2104).

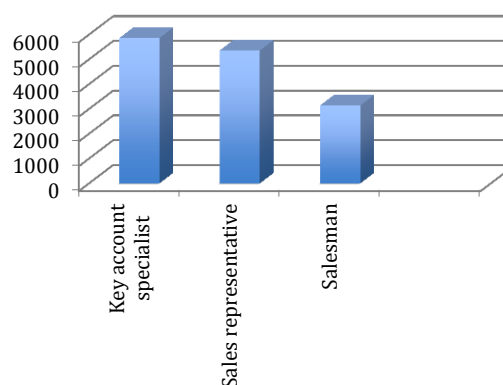


Figure 1

Source: Report “Sales employees earnings in 2014”, Sedlak & Sedlak

Among KI level managers, significantly higher salaries are paid in positions related to sales development (sales network development manager (KI) – 15 950 PLN). On the contrary two times less are the salaries of this level managers for field sales force (regional sales manager (KI) – 8 089 PLN) and import/export (import and export manager (KI) – 9 371 PLN). (Sedlak & Sedlak, Raport 11.2104)

7. SPECIALISTS SALARIES IN EUROPEAN UNION

Average salary for specialists in all countries of EU in 2010 was 3 168 euro. Most earnings noted in Luxemburg. In 2010 the value was 5 215 euro, so 65% more than average salary in EU. The lowest salaries were offered in Bulgaria – 494 euro, so over 10 times less than in Luxemburg and over 6 times less than EU average. In Poland the earning were at level of 1 001 euro, that is 3 times less than EU average. (Sedlak & Sedlak, Raport 11.2014)

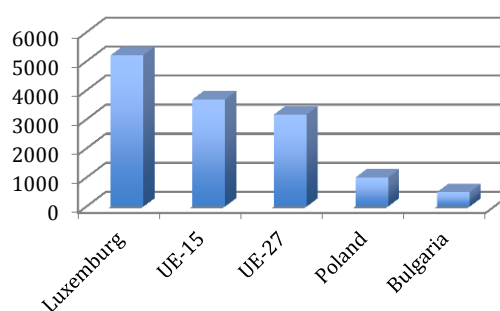


Figure 2

Source: Report – Salaries in different professions – Poland compared to EU, Sedlak & Sedlak

The salaries of Polish sales specialist are not close to European equivalents. The qualification of Polish merchandisers are however quite low. Let us consider recruitment process initiated via web portals. Typical requirements for this position are: high school graduation, driving license, availability, kind face, communication skills. This type of search gathers hundreds of candidates, who are often not familiar with the profession, but are willing to try because of the low requirements. As a result it appears that those people are not competent when it comes to achieve sales targets due to lack of experience or not willing to get involved in undertakings that would bring value only in future.

8. ITALIAN COMPANIES SALES SYSTEM IN PROCESS OF DISTRIBUTION CHANNELS IMPROVEMENT – CASE STUDY

Differences between sales system functioning in Poland and Italy in the area of building hardware are significant. Over the years in Italy a certain group of companies emerged, that is specialized in sales services in selected area, where a certain factory is recommending its products in a form of agreement. Most common form of deal is 5% net commission of every paid bill. In Poland in most of the cases there has been a different model developed. There are sales representatives related to particular company and being paid upon a job contract. Their main objective is to cooperate with current and potential buyers in selected area both wholesale and retail (A.Czubala 2001, s.61). Usually the sales representatives have a business car and mobile phone. Motivation system is based on bonus in a form of commission from the sales income. Sales representatives should also have certain personality characteristics, necessary for negotiations. Negotiations should not be a monolog, but a dialog between salesman and client. Empathy makes it easier to start negotiations. The effect of first impression is particularly important as in first contact 55% of attention is paid to person evaluation (look, mimic, gestures, way of greeting) and only 7% to the conversation content (A.Olczak, M.Urbaniak 2006, s.58). There are negotiations where psychic pressure from both sides can lead to reckless decisions. Sides can negotiate in "hard", "soft" or "subjective" way (Z.Nęcki 2001, s.21-125). Hiring sales representatives in Poland is followed with additional costs (car, mobile phone, trainings). The candidates while evaluating potential employer are considering its current financial situation and current and potential position on the market. The salary of a sales representative is related with their activity rate measured by sales amount, orders count, quantities per order, relation of orders amount to visits amount, average turnover per account (A.Czubala 2001, s.61). If a company is in a difficult economic situation and its position on the market is weak, lots of potentially worthy candidates would quit the recruitment seeing little opportunities for their own career development. In the Italian system all costs are transferred to the representative (agent). It is caused by the fact that each company stating similar undertaking is forced to take big costs of own activities in the early stage.

9. AGENCY FORM OF SALES IN ITALY – FEATURES AND FUNCTIONING

Agents and sales representatives belong to the category of trade intermediators, taking actions to promote a brand, sell products, provide service, find new clients and sign contracts in their area of activities. Agents are constantly delegated by the companies and perform their activities under subordination to the employer. They can work for several companies and act as different formal options such as private person or a company. Important is to have the agents signed in to the list of local chamber of commerce. In Italy and agent working on the base of self-employment sets the work time on his own and takes responsibility of the results, however is obliged to work according to the planned annual budget agreed with the factory (D.Balducci 2009, s.39). The factory also requires a monthly report of

activities. Agent has to appear on site once a year. To perform the duties efficiently agent is released from many duties such as returns or complaint handling. Cannot take money for sent products. This allows the agent to be more mobile and maintain better relations with customers. Agent can choose the products and cooperate with different factories, however the products cannot be competitive to one another. Agents take an agreed commission at finalization of contract with clients and an indirect commission (D.Balducci 2009, s.8).

According to 409 article of Italian civil code agent has to take care of the clients, perform actions delegated from the employer according to the provided instructions with loyalty and trust. Send information to the company about current market conditions in the area of actions and other useful information leading to evaluation of business benefits. At agents disposal the cooperating company has to have available all necessary documents describing benefits and necessary to fulfill the contractual agreements. The company also has to communicate to the agent in correct time potential decrease in business operations volumes. Agent also has to receive communication about clients failure to keep the contractual agreements.

It appears that the Italian solution is more efficient. It is reflected mainly in the income generated per single representative (agent) and average income per representative. For example Entra company (one of leading producers of building hardware in Italy) generates average income per representative in amount of 1.3 million euro per year, whereas in similar Polish company it is only 600 000 euro. The higher income is mostly related to higher involvement and the impact on efficiency is placed by lower cost of representatives (agents) employment. In the Italian system agents are taking the costs of sales, training and self-development on their own (D.Balducci 2009,s.20). It is not easy to be the sales agent as it means to manage one's self individually. Agent has to manage their own fiscal and office deals such as own car, commission calculation, cost calculation, documentation, tax calculation, financial declarations is a way to keep the balance between costs and income above zero. Agent has to manage their own time and essentially has to earn to support their self and family, which is especially difficult in the time of crisis and recession.

Detailed comparison data for two selected companies (Polish and Italian) from the area of building hardware have been presented on below chart.

The agency form used in Italy can however cause issues with control from the company perspective over the actions of the agent and with delegating tasks other than sales. Polish sales representatives are obliged to report their work at least once a week. Their tasks are also to continuously search for new clients and extend databases. Regional representative has to meet his supervisor usually once a week. The supervisor follows the sales strategy by presenting to subordinates a plan for implementation.

In both systems the sales representatives are granted with selected region exclusively. Additionally in Italy this solution rules out commission gaining on region other than assigned. This limits the events of "stealing" clients and creating internal conflicts.

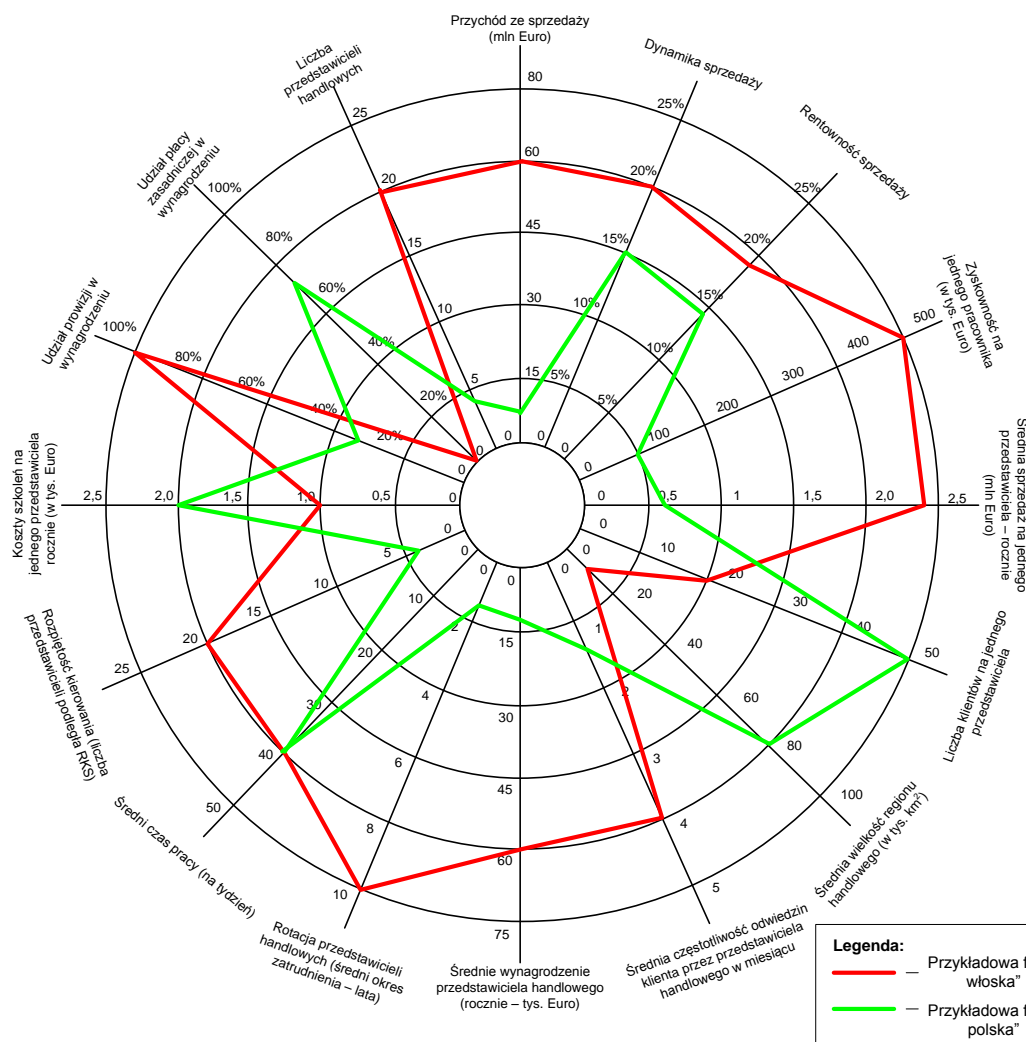


Figure 3 Comparison of sales systems in selected Polish and Italian company from the building hardware business.

Source: own study.

Other common features of both forms in employment and company representation are:

- Possibility to exclude from the supported region a key account serviced directly by the company
- Necessity to provide information about current market situation and opinion on the products

Common parts and differences between the systems in question have been presented in table 2.

10. PERFECTING THE SALES SYSTEM IN POLAND AND ITALY IN THE BUILDING HARDWARE BUSINESS

The compared systems both have advantages and disadvantages. The main disadvantages of the Polish system are: higher risk on the employer side, higher costs and lower

motivation of the employee towards achieving the sales tasks reflected in their involvement. The advantage is the ability to control the actions of a sales representative, delegate additional tasks e.g. promotional marketing. In this model it is more difficult to release an employee from duties based on unsatisfying results. In the Italian system the contract is cancelled upon low results – it describes the minimal sales level (budget). The representatives are working on their own and are more motivated for actions. They have limited access to company information, which lowers the risk of losing sensitive information to a competitive company. A comparison of advantages and disadvantages of both systems is presented in Table 3.

Table 2 Comparison of polish and Italian solutions in terms of modeling the sales system

Italian system	Polish system
Differences	
1. Self-employment of the sales representatives in form of distribution companies, often based on generations, specialized in sales of specific assortment.	1. Job contract employment.
Common parts	
1. Dedicated exclusive region. 2. Possibility to exclude an account serviced directly by the company from selected region. 3. Necessity to provide information on the current market situation and opinion about the products. 4. Possibility to cancel the agreement, agency contract, job contract.	

Source: own study

The Possibilities of Using Benchmarking in Perfecting Distribution Systems (The Polish and Italian Experience)

Table 3 Advantages and disadvantages of polish and Italian solutions in the area of sales management in building hardware business

<i>Polish system</i>	<i>Italian system</i>
Advantages	
1. Lower administrative costs – employee does necessary calculations. 2. Lower possibility of hiring random people, who treat the job as temporary. 3. No need for work monitoring system – employee is evaluated based on global results. 4. More possibilities to reveal specific, individual competences 5. Higher sales efficiency. 6. Easier contract cancellation compared to job contract. 7. Increased sales potential by connected sales for specific products and complementary sales.	1. High rate of company integration. 2. Possibility to delegate additional tasks. 3. Lower representative competitiveness than in the Italian system.
Disadvantages	
1. Lower connection with the company. 2. Missing possibility to delegate tasks other than sales. 3. Lower control over the representative actions. 4. Higher competitiveness.	1. Higher administrative costs. 2. Higher possibility to hire random persons. 3. Lower efficiency than in the Italian system. 4. More difficult contract cancellation.

Source: own study

11. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The comparison shows several aspects that appear to be better in the Italian solution. Moving those practices to Poland would however face lots of obstacles such as:

- Change in the character of employment from the job contract to self-employment is not possible for a wide scale. Lots of trade representatives would not be able to invest in necessary tools.
- Difficulty in recruitment only with experienced persons with good results due to limited availability of such persons on the market
- Change of payroll form from time – commission to pure commission. The rate of 5% net income from sales actions would provide weak motivation in low turnover rate.
- Incorporation of strict regional limitation. In the situation of performing sales activities on another region the representative would not earn the commission. It requires a strong sales discipline and equal sales potential in all regions
- Not determined time of work. The contract would however describe a nominal level of sales that keeps the contract. This requires a lot of self-control and certain working culture, which in some cases cannot be achieved. It would also require to define the range of additional tasks such as reporting

There is no doubt that the source of competitive advantage in current decade is knowledge and a company that has it can increase the sales rate and income. Microsoft corporation and companies with similar profile having

nothing but knowledge have proved that with this resource one can create a huge value for stakeholders (I.H.Gordon 2001,s.150).

Increasing globalization and environmental complexity require to implement new tools and management methods. Especially the tools for gathering the knowledge and transferring it to organizational changes. Modern time of industrial growth is so called “knowledge era”. The knowledge becomes the main factor for the business success. It’s not the owned land, assets or work decide mainly about the company development, but a selection of correct strategy, innovation and flexibility, that depend directly on the knowledge potential of certain company. Learning the best practices in the area of business solutions is becoming a priceless source of inspiration and base for reflection.

Comparison of products and services, action guidelines, customer service or improvement of quality are leading to improve the processes efficiency. In general it is also extremely valuable tool for improvement of the sales activities. Especially useful is the comparison of sales actions globally (internationally), that has been performed in this article. Solutions in a single country are usually similar. Significant differences appear on international level which is related to historical, social and cultural factors. In the past communist countries were sending spies to obtain new technology. Now we have a direct access to the international innovations. Let us use what is in front of us (S.Gomułka Forbes 2015, nr 1, s.57).

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Elżbieta KOPROWSKA

PhD student in the Department of Trade and Commerce Authority

Cracow University of Economics, Poland

e-mail: ekop@outlook.com