



INTEGRATING BLENDED LEARNING INTO A SALES ACADEMY

BY STEPHANI MAGER

As millennials now represent more than 50 percent of the workforce and Generation Z begins to enter it, personal, engaging and relevant new hire onboarding programs are becoming increasingly more important. These tech-savvy generations are seeking blended learning, a combination of face-to-face and digital training, and access to advanced technologies in order to perform at the highest level in their job roles.

MetLife, Inc., the number one provider of employee benefits in the U.S., is no stranger to training the technologically advanced generations. Each year, MetLife employees visit colleges and universities with business schools and sales programs to recruit college seniors nationwide. These students then apply to participate in MetLife’s 12-month sales training program, called Sales Academy. Anna Lavery, the assistant VP of learning solutions at MetLife, says the program is specifically focused on building product knowledge and refining an individual’s selling skills. Upon completion of the program, the individuals are then placed into their roles as either a sales account executive or a sales associate within one of MetLife’s U.S. locations.

The Improvements

In previous years, this sales training program consisted of product and

market knowledge and leveraging role plays to practice speaking and positioning with benefits brokers and employers. Fresh out of college, MetLife’s sales trainees were still in an education mindset. As such, Lavery says they would take the textbook knowledge they received on a product, such as dental

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insurance, and instead of presenting it in a way the recipient could relate to, the trainees would tell whomever they were talking to everything they knew about dental insurance. With the breadth and complexity of the products it became apparent that a new approach was needed to enhance positioning and solution selling skills, says Lavery. The knowledge was there, but confidence needed to be improved on.

A year ago, this training program went through a curriculum change to include an on-demand social learning and coaching platform from Advantex Learning Solutions. The platform is cloud-based, making it easily accessible on a computer, mobile phone or tablet. This integration allowed for MetLife trainees nationwide to communicate, practice together, give feedback and grow with one another. The platform appealed to MetLife because “the ability to practice remotely and get feedback socially fit for this cohort of learners,” says Lavery. “They’re comfortable with technology and with recording themselves.”

Knowing where the gap in the curriculum was from previous years, MetLife wanted to make sure that whatever platform they picked would provide the right solution to help their trainees. The program provides blended learning for their nationally dispersed sales force. This includes webcasts with subject matter experts, e-learning programs, on-the-job exercises and in-person learning labs – a face-to-face classroom experience held every six to eight weeks.

Out of the more than 1,700 college seniors who apply to attend the training program, 18 are selected each year. After graduating from college, Lavery says that these 18 individuals begin the 12-month onboarding program, starting

with orientation where they spend the first six to eight weeks on the job gaining knowledge on group benefits and learning how the marketplace works. Lavery says the remainder of the program is focused primarily on products, breaking it into six to eight week increments for dental, disability, voluntary benefits, etc. The program also works to strengthen relationship building and presentation skills.

The Benefits

Lavery says an important benefit that has come out of this program is the feedback. "Understanding how to give and receive feedback early on in one's career is so valuable." For example, she says the trainees can utilize the platform to record themselves pitching a product, practicing and recording as many times as they want to. They can then share that video to receive feedback from their nationally dispersed peers, product experts and sales leadership within the company. "There's more opportunity for them to refine, synthesize, incorporate feedback than existed in any other scenario," says Lavery.

Recording videos of sales positioning drills assigned to trainees throughout the program. "The first time [the trainees] did a drill, they recorded themselves an average of 18 times before sending it out," Lavery says. "The last time they did

the drill, they recorded themselves five times." The more an individual would record a pitch, the more confident and comfortable they became when speaking about the product(s). This was a visible improvement that was seen throughout the program's duration.

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Drills like this one can not only help build confidence and refine skills during training, they can also help trainees even after the training program ends. Adopting the habit of recording sales positioning and sending the videos to peers and leadership for feedback can help sales professionals prep before client or internal meetings. For example, "if you're going into a large sales meeting, you can record some of your key points and get feedback from experts and leadership," says Lavery. This is a valuable tool for sales professionals of all levels, and one that these trainees can utilize in their new positions.

The Results

In the 12 months it ran, the new on-demand social learning curriculum showed improvements in the chosen 18 individuals, providing them with knowledge and skills they can take into their respective job roles at MetLife after training. As for results, Lavery says, "We saw a significant increase in the relevance of what they said, the confidence that they had in speaking, their product knowledge and their presence." These are all important qualities for a sales professional to have.

"It's important to MetLife that our salespeople provide strategic solutions and connected expertise to employers and employees," says Lavery. "The new platform helped in ensuring this objective. "We found a tool that allows us to refine the skills of our sales force, no matter where they are in the country, and to help them better serve employers and employees," says Lavery. The company was able to find a way to use technology and blended learning to provide the personal, engaging and relatable training that millennials crave, while also benefiting their employees and the company in the long run.

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