

Sales Force Competence Management: Its Relevance and Framework

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Abstract

This paper recognizes the importance of sales force competence management in creating value for customers and achieving business goals. It argues that sales force can only be useful in this regard, if it possesses the dimensions and levels of sales job competence, that can enable it adapt to the turbulent global business environment. The paper maintains that a firm can enable its sales force acquire and improve its knowledge, skills and behavior, through the way its sales force competences are managed. It presents a sales force competence management framework that can enable a firm have, at all times, an effective and competent sales force required for successful domestic and global marketing.

Keywords: Competitive Advantage, Sales Force Competence Management, Competent Sale Force, Sales Force Competence, Resource-Based Theory.

1. Introduction

The concept of core competence advanced by Prahalad and Hamel (1990) has prompted many organizations throughout the world to identify, and develop their own core competences (Scarborough, 1998). Core competences are defined as the collective knowledge and capabilities that are embedded in the organization; they are central determinants of the organization's competitiveness due to their centrality to customers' value, their resistance to imitation, and their ability to extend to new business applications (Hamel and Prahalad, 1994). The core competence perspective of strategic management reflects the resource-based view of the organization (Von Krogh and Roos, 1995), which argues that an organization's competitive advantage derives from the valuable, rare, and inimitable resources that it can marshal (Barney, 1991). With its focus on organizational knowledge as a key strategic resource, the resource-based view in general, and the core competence perspective in particular, is well-suited to strategy formulation and management in knowledge-intensive organization (Conner and Prahalad, 1996). It is a widely held premise that people provide organizations with an important source of sustainable competitive advantage (Prahalad, 1983; Pfeffer, 1994; Wright, McMahan, McWilliams, 1994) and that the effective management of human capital, not physical capital, may be the ultimate determinant of organizational performance (Adler, 1998; Reich, 1991). The value of human capital may be especially apparent in modern manufacturing industries that have invested heavily on production innovations such as advanced manufacturing technology, statistical process control and computer numerically controlled machine, tools and equipment. Such initiatives tend to depend heavily on employee skills, abilities and commitment as key components in the customer value creation process (Snell & Dean, 1992). Accordingly, it is imperative for firms to harness the productive potential of their sales force in order to achieve sales superior performance (Youndt, Snell, Dean & Lepak, 1996).

The world has become a global village as a result of dizzying pace of technological innovations, shortened product life cycles, increase in competition, and globalization. Consequently, a firm's competitive ability and survival are dependent on its distinctive capabilities and core competences, and on how these resources are managed. Firms can generate competitive advantage from the way they manage their internal resources. The

society depends on the marketing performance of business organizations for its living standard, and these organizations, in turn depend on the sales performance of their sales force to achieve competitive advantage (Asiegbu, 2009). Thus, incompetence of sales force affects the organizations marketing performance in particular and human society economic well-being in general. It becomes apparent that the effect of poor sales force performance in sales job, is not limited to the firms alone but also to the economy by extension. Organizations view sales force ineffectiveness and incompetence with grave seriousness and concern. For example, in associating corporate performance with sales force management, Mallin and Mayo (2006) have observed that “Accounting for sales loss is important to managing the sales force as well as helping to ensure corporate profitability”. This no doubt, stresses the relevance of sales force competence in organizations’ pursuit of their corporate goals. Management of sales force competence is critical in improving the sales performance of the firm. Many scholars have been suggesting continued research on dynamic and innovative competence systems management (Lindgren & Henfridsson, 2002; Sandberg, 1994; Stenmark, 2002; Walter, 2003). This informs our interest in having some reflections on and showing the practical relevance of sales force competence management and framework. It is our view that effective management of sales force knowledge, skills, and behavior can make organizations occupy better competitive positions, and also enable human society enjoy higher living standards; thus our interest in this dimension of the discourse.

2. The Relevance of Sales Force Competence Management

In this study, we define sales force competence as those observable knowledge, skills, and behavior, which differentiate between superior and other performers in the context of sales job (Asiegbu, 2009). Sales job competence is a demonstration to building and sustaining superior marketing exchange relationships with customers and the total commitment and willingness to exhibit appropriate behavior in a specific selling context. Sales job requires competent sales force. Sales force competence is important in several ways. First, there is an increasing quest among firms to garner rent-yielding intangible or tacit assets on the basis of distinctive competence to achieve above-normal marketing performance (Prahalad & Hamel, 1990). Sales force competence contributes to a firm’s distinctive competency and thus, knowing its management is critical in this regard.

Second, for an organization to achieve consistently above-normal marketing performance, it must create a Sustainable Competitive Advantage (SCA) (Aaker, 1989:91; Porter, 1985:15). That is, it must create sustainable superior value for its customers (Narver & Slater, 1990:21). Competitive advantage stems from proprietary assets that are not easily purchased, stolen, imitated or substituted for (Dierickx and Cool, 1989; Barney, 1991; Peteraf, 1993). Human capital is the most potent of these assets, and competency-based human resources management involves operational structures and processes, which are based on the concept and results of the management of core competences and tacit individual competences of employees (Ahiauzu, 2006; Armstrong, 2001) such as sales force. Third, many people have misconceptions about the selling process, sales force activities and the personal characteristics necessary for a successful sales career. Various selling jobs can involve very different tasks and require different knowledge, skills and abilities (Johnston and Marshall, 2003:8). It makes sense therefore, to examine the management of sales force competence and its consequences.

Fourth, market orientation consists of three behavioral components – customer orientation, competitor orientation, and inter-functional coordination, and two decision criteria – long-term focus and profitability (Aaker, 1988, Anderson, 1982; Day, 1984; Kotler, 1977; Levitt, 1980, Porter, 1985; Narver & Slater, 1990). These, in no small measure, require competent and well-managed sales force to carryout these functions and achieve these objectives, thus, the growing need for a good framework for managing sales force competence for better performance in sales job. Fifth, today, the most prevalent formalization of a customer-centric culture is Customer-Relationship Management (CRM). Central to achieving CRM objectives is the pivotal role of the sales force, as the boundary spanner between the firm and its customers. The sales force can only be efficient and effective in this regard if it acquires some knowledge, skills and behavior. It then becomes imperative to have a sales force competence management system, which sales managers can use in developing the sales force to make it effective in performing this onerous task.

Furthermore, Bagozzi (1978) outlines several key ways in which selling job differ from other occupations. He observed that the salesperson is faced with more demanding interactions, conflicting pressures, to serve and satisfy both company and customer (role conflict), and performance evaluation based on almost entirely on his/her efforts and abilities. Bagozzi concluded that as a result of these features, the occupation is characterized by vulnerability. Given the nature of the sales job, it is not surprising that many sales organizations have recorded high levels of sales force turnover and sub-optimal marketing performance. It therefore stands to reason

that to obtain top brass sales force and curb the ugly incidences of frustrated sales force that choose abandoning the selling job, their competences need to be enhanced using an appropriate framework that is designed with the peculiar nature of their job in mind.

Finally, sales force competence is one of the criteria used to evaluate enterprise for some International Awards on competitive strengths. For example, in 2006, Hitachi Data Systems repeated as winner of the 2nd edition of Diogenes Lab-Storage Magazine Quality Awards. For that award, a firm is evaluated on five categories of criteria, namely: Sales force competence, Product features, Initial product quality, Product reliability, and Technical support. This stresses the importance firms should attach to the management of their sales force competences.

Today, the sales force's most vital role is creating, building and sustaining profitable marketing exchange relationships between its firm and the firm's customers. Relationship marketing predicated intimacy between the firm and its customers (Morgan and Hunter, 1994; Sheth & Parvatigar, 1995). Owing to their boundary-spanning role, the field sales force of a company has traditionally been a vital link between the firm and its customers (Cravens *et al*, 1992) and a prime platform for communicating the firm's marketing message to its customers and the voice of the customers to the firm. The most significant difference between selling and other elements in the marketing effort is the personal contact. The need for this personal contact will vary depending on such factors as the scale of risk, size of investment, type of customer, frequency of purchase, newness of product and many other factors (Encyclopedia of Marketing, 2001:519). The greater the need for personal contact in selling, the more important it becomes to engage competent sales force, and hence, sales force competence management.

3. Our Proposed Sales Force Competence Management Model

What is meant by salesforce competences and which are appropriate for customer care and thus, relationship marketing? According to Hymes (1972:16), competence is understood to be dependent on two things: "tacit knowledge" and ability "to use". Weimann (1977:198) defines competence as the "ability of an interactant to choose among available specific behaviors in order that her/she may successfully accomplish his/her own personal goals during an encounter while maintaining the face and line of his/her fellow interactants within the constraints of the situation". Larson, *et al* (1978:16) hold, that "competence is the ability of an individual to demonstrate knowledge of the appropriate behavior in a given situation".

Scheffler (1965:92) divides ability into subclasses of "facility" and "critical skill". He sees *facilities as automatic behavior that is not processed cognitively* and argues *that critical skills are acquired through training and are improved by practice requiring strategic judgments*. This means that critical skills require conscious knowledge while facilities do not. Scheffler (1965), therefore, concludes that *skills are the connections between knowledge and behavior*. We propose that proficiency in skills, as described by Scheffler, is what is required for the manifestation of a specific competence. It makes sense to argue that both knowledge and skill allow one to "function". Wiemann and Backlund (1980:190) assert that if the level of knowledge and skill is sufficiently high, then one may be able to infer that the person is competent, that is, the person can perform *effectively*. Therefore, for an individual to possess a particular competence, he/she needs both to *know (knowledge)* and *know-how*. These two aspects of knowing may exist both at the overt and covert levels.

The individual salesperson possesses competence at a number of different levels. Four competence levels have been identified in the literature: basic knowledge, standardized application, complex application, and expertise (Ley, *et al*, 2007:6). These levels reflect the fact that a competence usually is composed of knowledge in a certain domain as well as skills needed for application. It presupposes that the development of a competence in a certain domain follows an inherent order. It implies that basic declarative knowledge is developed first (i), skills in the form of contextualized rules are developed later and lead to increasing flexible forms of application (ii), and (iii) (Anderson, 2000). Expertise then refers to the highest stage of application using highly contextualized and implicit skills in the particular situation. This study is of the opinion that sales force, which attains and maintains its competence at the expertise level is most likely to contribute maximally to marketing performance, *ceteris paribus*.

Knowledge is the capacity for effective action. This is information accumulated in a particular area of expertise (e.g., closing sales). It comprises facts and procedures – to do. Nielson (1997, 1998) conceives a competence as consisting of three different types of knowledge – specific, integrative (or integration), and deployment knowledge. According to him, specific knowledge is knowledge about specific areas or knowledge domains, such as technology or a scientific discipline. However, a competence will (in most cases) be dependent on the

integration or combination of several (many) areas of specific knowledge. Integrative knowledge can be seen as a representation of the knowledge underlying the ability to integrate the different domains of specific knowledge.

Deployment knowledge is an expression of the abilities in the company to derive value from its stock of knowledge through effective commercialization. Accordingly, salespeople need to have specific knowledge in areas such as, knowledge about the 4Ps of marketing, competitors, customers, marketing intermediaries, the company itself, government regulations and others. They must integrate these specific knowledge and utilize them in establishing and sustaining marketing exchange relationships with the organization's valued customers. It should be emphasized that a competence is dependent on the existence of all three types of knowledge and the development of competence is dependent on the existence of all three types of knowledge and the development of competence will require that all three types of knowledge are developed in conjunction.

Skill (techne in Greek) is used to denote expertise development in the course of training and experience (Clark, 2004). Skills mean to carryout in performance – to do. Sales force skill is therefore the demonstration of expertise (e.g., ability to make effective sales presentations or negotiate successfully). A sales force skill is the ability to exhibit a sequence of selling behavior that is fundamentally related to attaining a performance objective. Being able to identify the cause of the failure of a new product is a skill because it requires the ability to identify a sequence of actions, which will accomplish a specific objective. It also involves being able to identify potential obstacles and sources of help in overcoming them.

Salesperson behavior is his or her actions with regard to his or her sales job (cf., Solomon, 2002). These actions depend on the sales person's self-concept, motive and traits. *Sales force Self-concepts* consist of attitudes, values and self-image. Sales force self-image is the understanding a salesperson has of his or her self and an assessment of where he/she stands in the context of values held by others in his/her environment. A trait is a general disposition to behave in certain ways (e.g., flexibility). A salesperson trait is a characteristic or quality that the salesperson has, like efficiency, which is the trait of believing 'you are in control of your future and fate'. When a salesperson encounters a problem at work, he or she then takes an initiative to resolve the problem, rather than wait for someone else to do it. *Sales force Motive* is another component of behavior motives are recurrent thoughts driving behaviors (e.g., drive for achievement, affiliation). A sales force motive is a drive or thought related to a particular goal, like achievement, which is a need to improve and compete against a standard of excellence, high energy level, ability to take initiative, result orientation, tenacity, integrity, adaptability, resilience, ability to deal with detailed information and lateral thinking (Encyclopedia of Marketing, 1999:558). The list can be inexhaustible in terms of human traits.

In this paper, we define sales force competence management **as the process of analyzing, planning, developing, and evaluating the knowledge, skills, and behavior of an organization's sales force members for superior performance in sales job** (Figure 3.1). The model proposes that sales force competence management starts with the analysis of the current status of sales force knowledge, skills, and behavior dimensions and levels. The next step is the planning of how to reduce the identified short falls in the sales force competences. The third step is to make the sales force pass through some skills development programs. The fourth step is to evaluate the effectiveness of their skills development program.

3.1 Sales Force Competence Analysis

Sales force competence analysis involves three distinct tasks (i) the first activity is ascertaining the dimensions and levels of competences a firm needs to be effective in responding to competitive, and indeed, environmental challenges at any particular point in time. Some challenges in sales job require varying dimensions and levels of competences on the part of sales force. At this stage, the grades of knowledge, skills, attitudes, motives, temperaments, responsiveness, expected of a salesperson and deemed appropriate for effective performance in sales job in a particular situation are established. (ii) The second activity is determining the current state of sales force competences. This involves identifying the knowledge, skills, and behavior dimensions and levels of which sales people already possess. (iii) The third activity is assessing the gap between the firm's required sales force competences (given the current environmental challenges) and the competences already acquired by the firm's sales force.

Competence gap analysis determines how skilled or proficient individual sales people are on these components, how much individuals differ from desired performance and whether or not they need training (Wentling, 1992). The required performance minus the present performance equals the competence gap. A competence gap thus, compares the sales person's already acquired competences with the competences required for the job in order to identify future competence improvement opportunities (Intuition, 2008). The competence needs analysis provide

many things to a trainer. The analyses determine the training contents, and how deficient the sales people are in these contents.

It is thus, apparent that without clearly identifying the competence gap, the entire competence management has no focus. It would rather be a waste of resources or frustrating to the trainers and trainees to design and deliver training topics and skills where the sales persons are already able and proficient. Competence gap identification can thus, enable management to avoid waste and make cost effective decisions in the development of sales force competence. Hence, competence analysis is essential in the transformation of sales people into competent sales force.

3.2 Sales Force Competence Planning

Competence planning is putting in details how the firm intends to fill the identified competence gaps, and involves as its activities personal development plan and competence sourcing. Asiegbu (2009) observes that personal development plan involves ascertaining individual sales person's expressed and selected action plan as well as various development sources/alternatives including tools and resource person available for the individual development plan to be actualized. Generally, development plans do the following. (i) They describe individual sales person action plan which is an expression and a selection of knowledge, skill and level and behavior ambitions and/or new interest domain. Assist salespeople make informed choices in this regard is critical. (ii) They link competences to training resources. (iii) They create project teams based on skill requirements. (iv) They determine training progress tracking technique. (v) They make automatic recommendations based on the result of competence gap analysis. Since personal development plan allows the individual salesperson to set his or her own targets and select means of achieving them, he or she would be committed to the development program and thus close the earlier identified competence gaps by becoming competent at the end of the development program.

Competence sourcing involves identify learning resources that can be utilized during development to minimize the individual competence gaps (cf. Avilar, 2005). It focuses on determining the techniques and materials that are appropriate for the development program. Firms can lease personnel or in-source a consultant to be engaged in the competence development (Johansson and Hurria, 2003). Sourcing training contents, procedures and other resources are usually planned at this stage in order to choose or guide the development of instructional aids and strategies (Halim and Ali, 2000). Thus, it is apparent that sales force competence planning provides a ground work for sales force competence development.

3.2 Sales Force Competence Development

Sales force competence development is the activity of broadening the competence dimensions and levels of individual salespeople, which will help achieve the sales and marketing objectives and meet its needs (Johansson and Hurria, 2003). It involves building the knowledge and skills of sales person with the aim of preparing them take on new responsibilities and challenges. This entails making sale people acquire new horizons, technologies, or view points with the goal of being able to do more with less and increase creative problem-solving abilities. Sales force competence development can be achieved through training, coaching and mentoring (Development Zone Document –HR, 2008).

Training is a process of acquiring specific skills and knowledge to perform a job better (Jucious, 1963). It helps people to become qualified and proficient in doing some jobs (Dahama, 1979). Training focuses on using appropriate techniques to transfer knowledge and skills, which are intended to change a sales person's current behavior to desired sales job behavior. This paper views training as the effort put forward to provide job-related culture, skills, knowledge, and behavior that result in optimal performance in selling environment.

Coaching is the transfer of wisdom from a wise and trusted teacher. It is about increasing an individual's knowledge and thought processes with a particular tasks or process. Coaching creates a supportive environment that develops critical thinking skills, ideas, and behaviors about a subject. Coaching is performed on the job, that is it is done real time. The coach uses real tasks and problems to help the learner increase his or her performance. In this case, amore experienced sales person can coach a fresh graduate on sales job by taking him or her through a number of selling processes.

Mentoring is the transfer of wisdom from a wise and trusted teacher. Thus, it relies on the mentor's specific knowledge and wisdom. According to Fine and Pullin, (1998) mentoring is the support and guidance that an experienced person (mentor) provides to a less experienced person project. Mentoring sales people has the

tendency to make them minimize or close their competence gaps and become more effective and competent in their sales job.

3.4 Sales Force Competence Evaluation

Competence evaluation is a process to determine the relevance, effectiveness, and impacts of development methods and programs in light of their objectives. Training evaluation is a systematic process of collecting information for and about a training activity, which can then be used for guiding decision-making and for assessing the relevance and effectiveness of various training components. Sales force competence evaluation is an assessment of the efficacy of the competence development techniques and materials. Once an organization implements a sales force competence development program, it must evaluate the program's success. Sales force competence evaluation thus, involves a re-assessment of the sales person's competences after he or she received training, coaching, and mentoring to ascertain his, or her current competence status. It assesses the extent the learning resources have enabled the salesperson eliminate or reduce his or her performance gap, earlier identified at the competence analysis stage.

Evaluation thus, focused on monitoring and assessing sales force competence level improvement or otherwise on the sales job (Johnston and Marshal, 2003). A number of scholars have proposed methods of evaluating the result of training programs (Canevale and Schutz, 1990; Holcomb, 1993; Rossi *et al*, 1979; McEvoy and Buller, 1990). This paper adopts the techniques suggested by Kirkpatrick (1959, 1976) for evaluating training programs: (i) reaction measures (ii) learning measures (iii) behavior measures; and formative evaluation and (iii) summative evaluation. Reaction measures are how the trainees liked the program in terms of content, techniques, duration, trainers, facilities, and management. Learning measures assess the trainees' knowledge and skills, which they were able to absorb at the time of training. Behavior measures concerned with the extent to which the trainees were able to apply their knowledge to real field situations. It measures hoe appropriate the training was in changing the knowledge, skills and behavior of participants. Formative evaluation involves the collection of relevant and useful data while the training program, is being conducted. This information can identify the drawbacks and unintended outcomes and is helpful in revising the plan and structure of training programs to suit the needs of the situation. Summative evaluation is done at the end of its effectiveness in relation to achieving the objectives and goals.

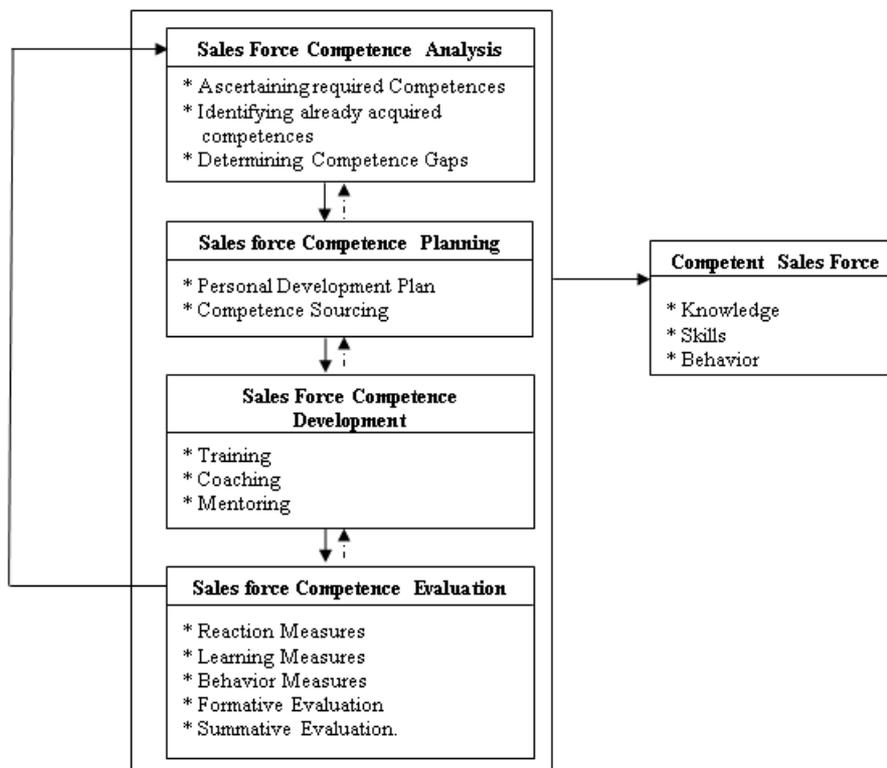


Figure 3.1: Sales force Competence Management Framework

Source: Authors' Desk Research (2011)

In summary, sales force competence analysis focuses on identifying the competences an organization requires for effective and efficient performance of sales job, identifying the competences, which a salesperson is already possessing, and an assessment of the gaps between these required and acquired competences. The difference is the sales force competence gap, which needs to be already closed. Competence planning is a focus on determining the competence development needs based on the identified competence gaps; sourcing experts and training materials for competence and enabling salespeople set their personal development plans based on development materials and methods, which are within the reach of the organization. Competence development is a focus on the improvement and upgrading of the knowledge, skills, behaviors of salespeople through project team staffing, training, coaching and mentoring to enable them exhibit superior performance in sales job.

Competence evaluation is a reassessment of the knowledge, skills and behavior of salespeople both in the course of and, after their competence development program, to ascertain the extent to which the identified competence gaps have been closed. Feedback from evaluation guides the organization to determine the effectiveness and efficiency of the development programs and materials. It is therefore, expected that with this sales force competence management approach; companies will possess more versatile salespeople who will be able to perform more effectively and efficiently (Avilar, 2005:7). The ultimate aim of producing competent sales force is to guarantee that customers receive a high standard of care (Dixon *et al.*, 2003), hence the importance of putting in place a good sales force competence management system. This competence when applied effectively will help the organization transform their sales people into competent sales force.

4. Discussion, Conclusion, and Implication

The primary thrust of competence management thinking centers around providing the organization with a time-and-resource accurate charted representation of its members' existing competences. This information can then be used, for example, to survey how well the members' competences correspond to the competence demands of existing needs or "roles" in the organization (Lindgren & Henfridsson, 2002). Document repositories and data warehousing are examples of how static competence information can be stored and made retrievable, and by so doing, functions as the organization's memory (Ackerman, 1994). This argumentation or supplementation of an organization's existing learning strategies or knowledge mechanisms has been the focus of numerous research studies (Lindgren *et al.*, 2007). However, organizational approaches to competence management still rely heavily on a rationalistic ad-hoc view of competence (Lindgren & Wallstrom, 2000; Lindgren & Stenmark, 2002). Sales force competence must be seen as dynamic, emergent, and situated in constantly changing practice and is therefore difficult to predict or define precisely (Stenmark, 2002). Communication and collaboration, then, become vital processes in an organization's quest to capture, manage, and utilize organizational sales force competences. Berio and Harzallah (2005) argue that the primary objective of competence management is to define, and continuously maintain competences, according to the objectives of the firm. Schooner, *et al.*, (2000) indicate that the three most prevalent purposes for competence interventions, in rank order, included: enhancement of performance expectation, provision of an integrated HR process, and alignment of behaviours with core values.

In today's rapidly changing world, companies of all sizes are undergoing challenges and facing the problem of how to manage change. Practically, in the knowledge economy, knowledge-workers such as salespeople have become the rising power (Drucker, 1995, 1999) and Human Resource (HR) is taking on an important strategic role (Thurow, 1996, 2000), so numerous companies are increasingly focusing on human capital as a source of competitive advantages. Also, in order to enhance their competitive advantages and achieve business success, many companies are expecting their employees to perform at higher levels. To accomplish these objectives, companies must help their employees to identify and cultivate their competences. It is now a leading company strategy to apply competences in all major human resource fields, including recruitment, selection, assessment, development, appraisal, and rewards (Schoonover, *et al.*, 2000; JPC-SED, 2002; Sinnott, *et al.*, 2002).

Competent sales force is essential in establishing, building, and sustaining exchange relationships between a company and its valued customers. Sales force competence can be assessed in terms of the dimensions and levels of sales knowledge, skills, and behavior exhibited in selling contexts. However, sales force competence can only be achieved if an organization puts in place an appropriate sales force competence management framework. This paper proposes a sales force management system, which involves activities such as sales force competence analysis, sales force competence planning, sales force competence development, and sales force competence evaluation. It is the opinion of the paper that with this sales force competence management framework, an organization is most likely to have, at all times, a stock of sales people that is highly knowledgeable, skilled in sales job, and can readily adapt and respond to the vagaries of the dynamic global business environment. The

implication, therefore, is that rent-yielding strategy is very possible with the way sales force competence is managed. A good sales force competence management system will enable firms leverage and transform their sales force competence into competitive advantage. It is therefore, our strong belief that our proposed sales force competence management model is handy in this regard.

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