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Job Shadowing Experiences as a Teaching Tool: A New Twist on a Tried and True Technique

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Abstract - This article reports an innovative twist on the use of the job shadowing experience as a means not only to provide real-world exposure for the student, but also as a way to generate real-time data from the professionals to be utilized as a basis for class discussion. Reaction from both students and professionals has been overwhelmingly positive.

Keywords - job shadowing, school-to-work, career exploration

Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers and/or Practitioners - Job shadowing, a longstanding high school career exploration tool, can be adapted for use in college courses. Incorporation of an orally administered survey of the professional into the shadowing experience enriches the experience for the student and creates a database of real time responses to bring local reality to the classroom.

Introduction

Job shadowing has a long history of utilization. It is primarily considered a way for youth to become aware of the world-of-work through programs sponsored by schools or social organizations. For example, Junior Achievement International, in cooperation with several government agencies, has sponsored Groundhog Job Shadow Day for nearly 20 years. A quick internet search for job shadowing yielded over 24 million hits with the vast majority of those focused on programs aimed at high school students. Internet offerings detail anecdotal accounts of experiences, methods for setting up and executing programs, and extolment of the virtues of shadowing as a tool for high school students to prepare for college career direction. Other internet offerings focus on employer-developed programs aimed at internal advancement or as a recruitment tool for potential employees. There has been very little published addressing the use of job shadowing at the college level. Yet, job

shadowing can be a great tool for college students to explore potential careers prior to committing to a specific major. This project details a pilot program in which professional selling students engage in a job shadowing experience that yields not only personal experience for themselves, but that also generates information which can be used as a teaching tool for all students.

Many, if not most, of us have participated in a job shadowing experience. In our youth the experience may have been part of membership in an organization such as 4H, Scouting, Junior Achievement, or Future Business Leaders of America. As adults, we may have engaged in job shadowing as preparation for potential advancement within our organization or as part of a recruitment effort by a potential employer. Clearly, job shadowing has a long history of utilization and, in turn, the internet has millions of entries dealing with job shadowing. “Googling” job shadowing for high school students yielded over 24 million hits. Googling job shadowing for college students yielded nearly one-half million hits, but the vast majority of those concern high school programs that help prepare participants for college.

Literature Review

The review of published literature did yield a variety of anecdotal entries in practitioner publications. Much fewer in number are entries in academic journals. A range of foci are included in each outlet category. The attempt here is not to provide an exhaustive review, but rather, to highlight examples indicative of entries identified. Not surprisingly, education included many offerings. Most focused on shadowing as part of a school-to-work effort and talked about the general benefits of shadowing for high school students such as Reese (2005) who profiled Groundhog Job Shadow Day and explained the process and value of job shadowing experiences. A more specific focus was provided by Broussard, Mosley-Howard, and Roychoudhury (2006) who proposed the use of shadowing as part of a program to develop a school-work orientation in at-risk upper level high school students. Recently, Hutchins and Akos (2013) examined the use of shadowing in rural high schools finding that for a number of reasons, job shadowing is less likely to be utilized as part of a school-to-work program in rural schools.

Second to education in the number of entries is medicine in which three themes emerged; the ethicality of job shadowing in various subfields of medicine, the use of shadowing as a recruiting tool, and the use of shadowing to facilitate smooth transition for advancement in hospital settings. Kitsis (2011) and House (2012) addressed concerns about the ethicality of medical job shadowing due to patient privacy issues. Shermont and Murphy (2006) examined a recruiting program for a surgical nursing unit. Applicants to the unit were being encouraged to participate in job shadowing prior to being offered a position. Program advocates claimed shadowing exposed applicants to the culture of the unit which was believed to be important to retention. Freeman (2010) lauded job shadowing as an excellent way for

junior nurses to make a smooth transition to nursing management. Other articles deal with a broad range of occupations.

Clark (2003) explained a national program (Cool Careers in Parks and Recreation) developed by the National Recreation Association intended to increase awareness of opportunities by getting students to shadow professionals in the field. Similarly, Frawley (2009) detailed a time-extended shadowing program in which 25 high school students shadowed auto manufacturing employees for five weeks. An unusual incorporation of shadowing was reported by Yamatani, Engel, and Selveig (2009) who explained how shadowing was used to identify the correct caseload for social workers. And just to show that technology has influenced job shadowing, Smithee (2011) reported the use of virtual shadowing as 27 library employees used Twitter to provide access to a full day of activities. Clearly, a range of industries and goals have been involved, but only one empirical study was found that examined the value of shadowing for college students.

McCarthy and McCarthy (2006) examined job shadowing as part of experiential learning. Business and business education majors enrolled in one course each completed an eight-hour on-site job shadowing experience in a career field of their choosing. Then they rated the usefulness of all educational activities in the course. Shadowing was the highest rated educational activity. It surpassed speeches, tests, cases, outside speakers, and videos for “usefulness”. The authors specifically tested the significance of the mean difference for shadowing and cases. The mean difference achieved significance. While the McCarthy and McCarthy (2006) study validates the usefulness of job shadowing in the minds of students, it lacks focus due to the broad fields involved.

Purpose

The current project extends this notion by focusing all of the job shadowing in one profession; sales. It extends the shadowing experience further by using each shadowing experience to gain additional information from the shadowed professionals that can be used as a learning experience for all students.

Method

For each of the past two semesters, students enrolled in an entry-level (sophomore) personal selling course at a comprehensive mid-eastern university could select between a job shadowing project called The Professional and a book review as part of the course requirements. Forty students completed The Professional. Their task was to find a B2B field salesperson who would allow them to shadow for at least two field sales calls and who would also agree to complete an orally administered

questionnaire concerning views of their career development, views of their current position, and views of perceived changes in the sales profession (Exhibit 1).

The sales calls had to be face-to-face field calls and the professional had to agree that the calls would not simply be for customer-service/follow-up. Students were to witness a sales professional attempting to close a sale. Students were required to submit a verbatim transcription of the answer to each question; no paraphrasing allowed. In addition, each student was to write a blow-by-blow account of what they witnessed during each sales call. They were encouraged to be critical of what they witnessed and prescriptive as was appropriate.

The primary reason for inclusion of the questionnaire in The Professional is to provide local current near-real-time information with which students can identify. Of course, it gives each shadowing participant additional experience interacting with their professional, but data collection for teaching is of paramount importance. Then, the main concern becomes how to best share the information gained from the questionnaires with students.

Exhibit 1: The Professional - Interview Questions

Name:

Company:

Position/Title:

Description of Position:

Could you please detail a "typical" day in your current sales position?

What has been your career path to this point in your career?

What led to the position changes during your career?

What led you into sales?

What do you like most about sales?

What do you like least about sales?

How do you motivate yourself during sales slumps?

Some salespeople prefer "the chase" and some salespeople prefer "customer service". Do you have a preference? Why?

How would you describe the amount of supervision (contact with direct manager) in your position?

Based on your experience, what factors most often lead to the failure (leaving the field) of salespeople?

Is your compensation based on salary, incentive, or a combination of these?

Do you feel that your compensation structure supports the tasks your company requires of you?

Much of the current literature suggests that sales has moved from the "selling of product" to the "solution of customer problems". What is your opinion?

It was decided not to have each participant make a presentation to the class about their shadowing experience or to share their questionnaire answers in totality. Rather, during each semester, as course topics were covered having corresponding

questionnaire items, composite results of the surveys were interjected and participants could volunteer to add questionnaire responses or mention sales tactics they witnessed during the two field sales calls. During the second semester aggregate results were incorporated and moving forward, the intention is to interject aggregate results into material and discussions as appropriate for the entire course. As the aggregate number of questionnaires increases, both descriptive and inferential statistical analysis will be completed.

Results

The point of this paper is not to report the findings from the questionnaires or sales call summaries. In fact, results corroborate statistical findings presented in most Principles of Selling textbooks. The true value lies in the reaction students have knowing the findings being reported come from local professional salespeople holding positions they might realistically occupy themselves in the near future. It brings a reality to the numbers that broad studies from academic journals just cannot match. Since The Professional project option is explained during the first week of class, students understand the source of the information when it is mentioned in class, thus the reality exists throughout the course.

Initially, each student must locate and get agreement from a professional B2B salesperson to participate in the project. This forces the student into an interaction which may be outside his/her normal comfort zone. Since getting agreement is not a certainty, oftentimes students must contact multiple salespeople to get the project arranged. A positive emerges naturally as the process builds confidence, or at least fortitude. Another positive, witnessing the actual sales calls, is of unparalleled value. Actually seeing the professional salesperson in action, and seeing the application of what has been learned in class is invaluable. On two occasions, the salespeople became quite excited about the project, and, in essence, gave each student a crash-course for selling their product. Then, on at least one of the two sales calls, the student handled the interaction. For those two students, this became, perhaps, a paramount learning experience. Finally, administering the questionnaire has two-fold value. First, the process of administering the questionnaire one-on-one provides additional interaction experience. Second, it generates the information to be shared with future students. While there are many positives about The Professional, there are a couple of potential problems.

Limitations

In mid-small size markets, the pool of professional salespeople may limit the long term collection of data. Duplication, while fine for the shadowing experience, would tarnish the value of the aggregate questionnaire data. To avoid data duplication, records have to be maintained. Also, since students actually administer the

questionnaires, faculty must be aware of the IRB requirements of their institutions. However, in spite of these potential limitations, student reaction makes this approach quite worthwhile.

Discussion

Student feedback has been nothing short of phenomenal. After completing the project, participating students were asked to answer two questions.

1. What benefits did you receive (both personally and professionally) by completing “The Professional” salesperson shadowing experience?
2. How did “The Professional” salesperson shadowing experience compare as a learning experience to other projects you have completed during your college career?

Benefits consistently mentioned include gaining a better understanding of what is needed to become a salesperson, seeing the amount of planning salespeople need prior to making a sales call, witnessing how to be flexible during the sales call, and experiencing how a professional salesperson talks/interacts with the customer.

Compared to other course projects, students have noted that this is the only project that ever got them into the field, that ever put them in direct contact with a professional, and that let them experience what they might be doing for the rest of their careers. In addition, students referred to it as, “. . . an essential part of my college experience,” “absolutely worth my while and beneficial for the future,” and “It was a great experience and I am so glad it did it.”

Verbally and in the conclusion of their written summary of sales calls most students have applauded the experience. “Best class project ever,” “This should be required of every student,” and “I wasn’t really sure that sales would be for me; now I know it is what I want to do,” exemplify unsolicited commentary. As previously mentioned, body language and increased student involvement when questionnaire responses are discussed clearly indicate non-participating students appreciate the information.

Incorporation of a job shadowing experience, supplemented by completion of an orally-administered questionnaire of the sales professional, into an introductory sophomore-level personal selling college course is promising. In addition to the value of the shadowing experience for career awareness and in building believability of course materials for individual participants, the continued aggregation of data

provides near-real-time local information to enhance the learning experience for all students.

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