UK suffering from shortage of skilled B2B salespeople to strike deals and pull economy out of recession

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An MP-led inquiry is warning that Britain is suffering from a shortage of salespeople and of sales skills. Much more needs to be done to recruit and train people with strong business-to-business selling skills, to drive the economy out of the recession caused by the Covid-19 crisis, and to find new global trading opportunities outside the EU.

The findings of the inquiry are published today by MPs on the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Professional Sales. Their report,

Supercharging Sales: Investing in B2B selling for jobs and growth
http://the-aps.com/resource/resmgr/appg/superchargingsales.pdf

reveals that job adverts for business-to-business salespeople increased in intensity by 25% during the last 12 months,[1] with employers' needs for advanced expertise in digital selling going unmet. Lack of capability to sell through digital channels is a barrier to British businesses selling abroad, and needs to be tackled with government support to promote recruitment and training.

- Trade between businesses is hugely valuable to the UK economy, worth an estimated £1.7 trillion annually.
- B2B companies pay nearly £22 billion in corporation tax, and employ more than 10 million people.[2]

In January, B2B selling was recategorised by the Office for National Statistics as a professional occupation for the first time, putting it on a par with doctors and teachers, in recognition of the high level of skills and training required. Yet the B2B sector is routinely lumped in with retail sales in official statistics, although their needs are very different. As a result, opportunities are missed to put in place policies that could meet the growing demand of business for professional salespeople, and facilitate the UK's B2B trade at home and abroad.

The recruitment squeeze is hardest on SMEs. Many larger corporate companies have coped with the huge adjustments required by the Covid-19 pandemic, which has seen for the first time the value of deals struck via digital selling outstrip the deals done face to face.[3] By comparison, however, although SMEs have made enormous efforts to take on digital skills since the first UK lockdown began, with 62% adopting at least one new technology, [4] a majority continue to struggle because they lack the same resources and skills in B2B selling, sales management and digital technology.

SMEs are the backbone of the economy.[5] With 75-80% of large corporates now saying they actively prefer transacting business via virtual meetings, [6] SMEs will have to learn how to use technology in order to remain competitive. Action now will make British businesses more digitally and commercially adept, equipping the UK to do business across the world as an independent trading nation. It will ensure that the skill of Britain's B2B salespeople enhances the UK's reputation abroad as a trading partner.

In its inquiry report, the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Professional Sales is calling on the government to:

1 Recognise the importance to the economy of B2B selling by SMEs, and its value as a career

2 Encourage more entrants into the B2B sales profession at SMEs through work-based training

3 Inspire more advanced skills in existing B2B salespeople and their managers at SMEs, and promote the uptake of digital sales technology.

As the government's priorities shift away from job retention and towards retraining people for the skilled jobs of the future, professional B2B selling must be one of the UK's top priorities. In its recommendations, the APPG calls for Level 3 courses in B2B selling and sales management to be made available free under the Government's Lifetime Skills Guarantee; and for young people made redundant from low-paid, customer-facing roles in hospitality and leisure to be encouraged to retrain for a secure

and skilled career in B2B selling, where the median salary is more than £46,000 a year.

Speaking in June 2020, the Prime Minister set out his vision for the UK as an economic powerhouse which depends on our ability to sell the best of British.

Boris Johnson MP said: “We need now a new dynamic commercial spirit to make the most of UK breakthroughs, so that British ideas produce new British industries and British jobs.”

This “new dynamic commercial spirit” depends on the UK’s ability to sell.

Mark Pawsey MP, chair of the All-Party Group for Professional Sales said:

“Our findings are that SME owners need to learn to sell in a new way. Many have only started adopting digital technology and are being held back by a lack of business-to-business selling skills. B2B salespeople need to be upskilled, and more need to be trained. We say that the government must intervene to help, as the recession has left many SMEs too weak to do it alone.

“If we turn round attitudes, and if we upskill our workforce, then B2B selling will be a major force to power the UK out of recession, creating jobs and building new markets overseas.”

Mark Pawsey MP, the chairman of the APPG for Professional Sales, will launch the report from 1.30 - 2.00pm on Tuesday 9 March, with short contributions from report witnesses. The event will be streamed live on the APPG’s Facebook page:
https://www.facebook.com/APPGProfessionalSales

Notes to editors:

[1] Source: Emsi Data Q1 2021.1 [see charts throughout APPG report]

https://www.economicmodelling.co.uk

[2] Statistics from B2B Nation: the B2B industry’s contribution to the UK economy revealed, B2B Marketing, April 2019. B2B selling is four times as big as retail (known as business-to-consumer, or B2C), and the policy needs of the two sectors are different. Where a retail sale tends to be a quick transaction, selling to another business is typically a lengthy and complex activity. A strategic B2B deal can run into billions of pounds and last for years.

[3] Source: McKinsey

[4] Source: State of Small Business Britain report 2020

https://www.enterpriseresearch.ac.uk/publications/state-of-small-business-britain-2020/

[5] Small and medium-sized enterprises are vital to Britain. They account for 99.9% of the business population, represent 52.3% of the UK economy and employ 60.7% of working Britons.

Source: National Statistics 2020 - Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy.

[6] Source: McKinsey, as above.

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Association of Professional Sales – Secretariat to the APPG inquiry

NEWS RELEASE: UK suffering from shortage of salespeople to strike deals and pull economy out of recession

APPG Report launch: 1.30-2.00pm, Tuesday 9 March 2021.

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