

Risks of implementing LinkedIn Sales in large sales departments and how to overcome them

PART 1



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This first article is about a topic that is not much discussed. It's about implementing LinkedIn (LI) sales in larger or large sales departments. The information in the article is based on my experiences from both sides. I'm familiar with the world of a:

1. Consultant who implements LI sales to sales departments
2. Manager of sales department where the LI sales was introduced

Point 2 is extremely important to me because, as a consultant, I better understand the risks and problems that for sure will occur.

The implementation of LI in larger sales departments is significantly more complex than it might seem. It can't be compared with LI business in smaller companies, individuals, or marketing or HR departments. It is very different, and I will explain, what you can expect. You probably register a lot of opinions and tips on how to do business with LI. There are many experts in the LI world in Slovakia or the Czech Republic, and this number will certainly increase. Nevertheless, I dare to say that the opinions and tips about the use of LI completely ignore the topic of introducing LI to larger sales departments.

If the principles tailored to your situation are applied correctly, I think generating additional revenue with LI is quite easy. But it's easy if you independently decided to use LI for business and you believe that this complementing sales stream does work. Simply said, those people who choose this path themselves, are generally successful. Business, if you apply the knowledge correctly, will certainly come. It's not just my feeling, I know it. I have a lot of supporting evidence.

However, this is radically different when sellers are told that this is a new corporate sales strategy, and they have to adapt. In the case of having change management experiences, you might know, that if an improper process is used, the chances of successful implementation and the main goal of gaining additional revenue is relatively low. This is a great pity because if a larger company starts this project incorrectly and subsequently is unsuccessful, another attempt might come probably a few years later. In other words, the competitive advantage is lost.

It's necessary to realize basic knowledge:

Sellers' resistance will come. It is not a possibility if resistance will be the main issue, but it's a fact. It's 100% sure.

The whole situation is further exacerbated by another dimension. The expected sales results through LI sales, will not come immediately. It takes considerable time, depending on the

industry. Surely, you know from psychology, that if satisfaction does not come quickly, but might even take months, we humans have a clear tendency to resign. That's a fact. On the other hand, the positive thing is, that the LI sales work on a snowball effect principle. If it is done right, the results will continue to grow. Therefore, when I talk to sales directors or CEOs, this is crucial to mention. The process of implementing LI sales to large sales departments comes hand in hand with considerable resistance from sellers itself. Simply the risks are high, and implementation is not so easy, but it's an ongoing process where change management knowledge is the key to success.

My sales manager experience in a department where social selling was implemented

Many years ago, I led a sales department in a large IT company. On a global level, a decision was made, that social selling is a certain sales trend, and it needs to be used as a complementing sales stream. I, who ran the acquisition department, was among those who were naturally in the front line of implementation. It was a time when the term "LI consultant" did not exist yet. The company was simply ahead of its time and focused on various activities supporting the effective use of the upcoming trend. Back then, it was a bit of sci-fi. Now, for those who have experience with LI sales, the added value is clear.

Company money was not an issue. E.g. all the salespeople in my department received LI Sales Navigator, which was at the time called differently. Each seller received a so-called "rep page". It was a seller's website, where company articles, news, and seller's own videos could easily be published. All focused on the seller's product portfolio and country specialization. Already at that time, everyone had a technical advantage of using chat and video with his clients via his own "rep page". Also, a professional cameraman was hired to shoot introduction videos of each seller, which they could publish on their websites, send to customers, etc. Besides, everyone received iPhones for work. I will not go into further detail. I just wanted to illustrate that the company had invested considerable sums in supporting this complementary sales stream. Even now, in 2020, when social selling is far more understood, I'm not aware of any company putting so much budget in social selling, as I experienced back then.

But there's the other side of the coin. The risks of sellers' mind change had been underestimated. The use of change management principles was far from ideal. The vast majority of sellers were naturally in resistance. Long story short, it took an exceptionally long time to get some results, and even those results were much smaller than the potential, they had.

But why will people be in resistance?

1. It's a big change.
2. They didn't decide on the change on their own.
3. They may feel threatened.
4. They might not feel confident.
5. They don't understand it and don't feel a sense of urgency.
6. They have technical uncertainties.
7. They have personal uncertainties (e.g. own public presentation).
8. They feel there will be more work.
9. They have bad experiences.
10. They may also be in opposition for reasons unrelated to LI, etc.

Not only does this change come with resistance, and there will always be opponents in the company, as well as supporters of the change, but it is also important to be aware of the wider context. Imagine that you are a senior, successful seller, and if you are in some companies in the IT or Telco business, you can easily have a significantly higher salary than most managers from other industries, and suddenly you are told that the business needs to be done differently. What reaction might follow? Our egos can be extraordinarily strong.

Sales or Marketing?

An important factor to consider is to understand whether the activity is sales or rather marketing. That's a big difference. Not only in various ways of presenting and communicating but in the mindset as well. Visibility and views are great, but for a seller on sales targets, the only activity that matters is bringing clear revenue. The sellers must see clear connections between their activities and the following meetings and subsequent deals. A seller will never be satisfied with only LI views, what is for various reasons highly important too, but it's not enough.

2 simple examples

1. Company in the B2C segment with a chain of physical stores reselling goods from various suppliers. Such a case is suitable for the so-called LI marketing use. It is mainly about brand awareness. But that's not sales through sellers, aiming for achieving their targets.
2. On the other hand, if you have a regular B2B salesforce, responsible for sales acquisition of new clients too, it's a sales use of LI.

It might seem that marketing and sales often overlap on LI, and they partially do, but it's a different mindset and the activities on LI need to be significantly different.

Main risks to prepare for

1. Sellers' resistance.
2. Lack of patience – it takes some time until the additional revenue will start to come.
3. Sellers' distrust of a consultant, who does not know their world. E.g. sellers in a large B2B business will mostly not accept a consultant, who doesn't know their sales world. In the process of change, they will pull out different business views and situations and the consultant must be able to respond appropriately. If he fails to do so, he/she is likely to lose respect.
4. Unsuccessful implementation – loss of competitive advantage, another attempt will be extremely difficult.

My experience with a company that has failed

I have experience with a company that tried to implement LI sales to several sellers, but the project was unsuccessful. It's good to mention that the business of that company is relatively simple for the successful use of LI. It wasn't about complex solutions, but services that everyone simply needs. Therefore, all LI users are potential customers. From my point of view, in the world of gaining additional revenue through LI, it was a relatively simple industry and segment. But let's go back to what happened. The company had several months of experience with a LI consultant, who worked with them regularly every week, and even so, according to them, it did not bring any additional sales. After about half a year, they canceled the consultations and it's obvious that the feelings of the management were quite skeptical about the second chance or another view. They simply fell into a trap of incorrect implementation. If it was a company that sells sophisticated solutions by senior sellers, then it's lost. Such sellers would simply no longer allow a second chance and they would sabotage it.

After mentioning the risks that you can probably expect, I will very simply focus on 33 points - solutions using the knowledge of change management, which I consider crucial for such a larger project.

Don't miss the next edition of Czech and Slovak Leaders magazine where I'm going to elaborate on these.

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...to be continued