

WHAT IS THE PERCEPTION OF ECONOMICS STUDENTS ABOUT A CAREER IN SALES?

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Abstract

Students' perception regarding a career in sales has long been studied, especially in the US, but with fewer studies in Europe. There is less research in Romania. The present paper questions students from five faculties within the Bucharest University of Economic Studies, the number of valid answers being 167. The main research results show that although they do not have a negative perception on the field, as it was generally indicated by the previous studies carried out in the Anglo-Saxon countries, students are not very attracted to a career in sales as a first professional option. The situation changes to some extent if there is a firm job offer that many more would accept. Another important aspect is the influence of socio-demographic variables on the decision to pursue a career in sales, with particular regard to differences between boys and girls and income levels. Although in general, they believe that the subjects studied in college would be of use for them in order to work in sales, most of the students do not intend to make this professional choice. The overall conclusion of the study is that students from Bucharest University of Economic Studies do not have a deepened knowledge of the field, and the lack of interest in a sales job is the result of the unawareness of this field rather than a negative perception.

Keywords: Sales, career, students' perception, curricula, willingness to work in sales

JEL Classification: M10, L81, L84

Introduction

As a marketing activity, sales have always represented an important part of revenue for any company (Barat and Spillan, 2009; Concha et al., 2014). However, the review of the literature suggests that the sales activity is not yet recognised by society as a profession, numerous studies spanning more than half a century highlighting negative opinions about a career in sales (Mason, 1965; Paul and Worthing, 1970; Dubinsky, 1980; Honeycutt et al., 1999; Wiles and Spiro, 2004; Caballero and Joonas, 2009; Bahhouth et al., 2011; Ballestra et al., 2017). Some authors show that these negative images have been strengthened by anecdotes, stories and media. For example, Hartman (2006) found that television and films consistently characterized vendors in stereotypical and negative terms: people who deceive, who always have something to hide, or villains. These stereotypical representations imply that a salesperson personifies some of the most despised characteristics of society, namely greed, deception, distrust and selfishness (Hartman, 2006).

Most studies of students' perception or attitude towards a career in sales targeted US students and, more recently, UK students (Fournier et al., 2014). In general, students outside the Anglo-Saxon countries have been given little attention in relation to this research topic. According to Cummins et al. (2013), there are few papers that refer to a sample of non-US students and explore the perception of sales, and Lee et al. (2007) shows that there is little concrete information regarding the way in which the sales job and sellers are seen in Europe.

The need to better understand the career motivation of students in the 21st century has increased due to the fact that there is a shortage of sales professionals (Agnihotri et al., 2014). As companies become global as part of their business strategy (Paul, 2015), the need for skilled sales professionals continues to grow by an average rate of 7-19% (Bristow et al., 2011). It is therefore appropriate to explore the motivational priorities of students towards a career in sales, to determine what aspects of sales jobs are preferred (or not) by students.

In this context, the main purpose of this study is to explore the perception of students from Bucharest University of Economic Studies (BUES) towards a career in sales and to find out whether such a perception influences the likelihood of a career in sales.

A merit of this study is that it seeks to investigate these issues in Romania, where not many such studies have been conducted.

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1. Literature Review

Although the nature of sales has changed significantly over the years, there is a certain concern that students do not yet notice this fact. Several professors have suggested that information is needed to correct the negative image on sales activity (Karakaya, 2014). Young new employees who attended sales courses during college years are inclined to be more optimistic about a career in sales. They are also more confident in their skills related to sales (Honeycutt and Thelen, 2003).

Cummins et al. (2006) have tested six educational tools to identify the most effective educational practices in reducing students' reluctance to embrace a career in sales. Even though the studies cited above did not mention the faculty profile, they show the importance of various educational methods to determine students to choose a career in sales. Taking into account the sample of this research (students from five faculties from BUES) and previous studies, the first hypothesis of the present research can be formulated: *H₁ - There is a link between the faculty profile and the students' intention to choose a career in sales.*

Hassan and Ogunkoya (2014) investigate the influence of demographic factors on insurance sales agents, including education, gender, marital status and length of job service.

In the present study, some socio-demographic variables do not make sense to research, therefore the second hypothesis of research will be: *H₂ – The socio-demographic variables (place of provenance, gender, family income) significantly influence the intention to choose a career in sales,* with three sub-hypotheses.

Handley and Shanka (2012) introduce the residential environment between the variables investigated. Even though the study of these authors investigates a multi-cultural environment, this variable could also influence the choice of a sales career in Romania. As a result, a first sub-hypothesis related to the influence of socio-demographic factors on the intention to pursue a sales career can be suggested: *H_{2a} - The place of provenance influences the intention to choose a career in sales.*

Synthesizing the studies conducted up to that point, Moncrief et al. (2000) highlights that the number of women engaged in sales was consistently lower than that of men, even though there were no obvious differences between men and women in terms of job satisfaction or other work-related issues. Thus, a hypothesis about the influence of socio-demographic factors on the intention to pursue a career in sales can be formulated: *H_{2b} - There are differences between boys and girls regarding the intention to choose a career in sales.*

Previous studies on choosing a sales career have shown that the attractiveness of such a job is determined by both job attributes and individual factors. For example, some studies have focused on job attributes (Kim, Knight and Crutsinger, 2009); others have highlighted individual factors such as job expectations and personal values (Oh, Weitz and Lim, 2016). In this context, Oh et al. (2016) highlight the role of hiring salary in choosing a job in sales. With regard to this research, the variable salary will be replaced by the average net income per family member to find out if it influences the choice of a career in sales. Thus, the third sub-hypothesis on socio-demographic variables is: *H_{2c} -The average net income per family member influences the intention to choose a career in sales.*

Spillan et al. (2007) show that the tradition of careers is strong in many families. Many children follow the path of their parents or relatives, with many examples of sons and daughters who have followed a sales career just like their mother, father, uncle or other relative. However, the authors assume that there are no significant differences in their willingness to work in sales, between students who have family members or relatives who work or have worked in sales and those who do not have. At the end of their research, the authors do not reject the hypothesis. Taking into account that there is no strong tradition in Romania to pursue a sales career due to the existence of models in the close circle, as there is in the family of doctors or teachers, the third hypothesis of this research is: *H₃ - There are no important differences in their willingness to work in sales, between students who have relatives or friends who work or have worked in sales and those who do not have such relatives or friends.*

2. Research methodology

The purpose of this research is to identify the perception of economics students on a sales career. For this purpose, students from Bucharest University of Economic Studies were interviewed, from several faculties: The Faculty of Business and Tourism, The Faculty of Marketing, The Faculty of Business Administration (in Foreign Languages)-FABIZ, The Faculty of International Business and Economics-REI and The Faculty of Economic Cybernetics, Statistics and Informatics-CSIE. The purpose of investigating students from several faculties was, firstly, to find out whether there are differences regarding the intention to pursue a career in sales between them, depending on their faculty profile.

Consequently, the main objectives of this study aim to: (1) identify students' intention to develop a career in sales; (2) determine the impact of socio-demographic differences on students' intention to develop a career in sales; (3) find the degree to which economic studies and practice in the field influences the choice of a sales career.

These objectives will be pursued in parallel with the hypotheses putted forward in the literature review section.

The research method used was the survey. The data collection was done online via a questionnaire using Google Docs. The link hosting the questionnaire was distributed by email, Facebook, and WhatsApp to students from the faculties mentioned above. Data was collected between 18 March and 31 March 2019, when 173 responses were received. Of these, six questionnaires that were incomplete were removed. Responses have been downloaded from the Google Form and processed in Excel. A quantitative analysis was performed, using pivot tables, middle and median, and the scale used was the 5 point Likert scale.

Respondents' profile is presented in Table 1, using three socio-demographic variables: respondents' faculty, place of provenance and sex.

Table no. 1 The sample structure, by faculty, place of provenance and gender (%)

Faculty/ Place of provenance	Gender		Total
	Boy	Girl	
Business and Tourism	9.70	28.48	38.18
Urban (exclude Bucharest)	3.64	9.70	13.33
Bucharest	3.64	11.51	15.15
Rural	2.42	7.27	9.70
CSIE	4.24	20.61	24.85
Urban (exclude Bucharest)	1.82	13.33	15.15
Bucharest	2.42	3.64	6.06
Rural	0.00	3.64	3.64
REI	1.21	12.12	13.33
Urban (exclude Bucharest)	1.21	6.06	7.27
Bucharest	0.00	4.85	4.85
Rural	0.00	1.21	1.21
Marketing	1.82	10.91	12.73
Urban (exclude Bucharest)	0.61	4.85	5.45
Bucharest	0.61	3.64	4.24
Rural	0.60	2.42	3.04
FABIZ	3.64	7.27	10.91
Urban (exclude Bucharest)	1.82	4.85	6.67
Bucharest	1.82	1.21	3.03
Rural	0.00	1.21	1.21
Total	20.61	79.39	100

Source: Author's own calculations

Most of the respondents were from the Faculty of Business and Tourism (38.18%), followed by the other faculties in the decreasing order of the number of answers: CSIE (24.85%), REI (13.33%), Marketing (12.73%) and FABIZ (10.91%). Of the total number of students who answered the questionnaire, 79.39% were girls and 20.61% boys. Also, of the total sample, 47.9% come from "another city" than Bucharest, 33.3% are from Bucharest and 18.8% from rural areas.

In relation to average net monthly income per family member, the distribution of respondents was as shown in Table 2.

Table no. 2 The sample structure, by faculty where they are students and net income per family member (%)

Faculty	The average net monthly income per family member, in lei					Total
	Less than 700	Between 701-1500	Between 1501-3000	Between 3001-4500	More than 4500	
Business and Tourism	10.94	34.37	32.81	12.50	9.38	100
CSIE	0.00	26.83	39.02	24.39	9.76	100
FABIZ	5.56	11.10	38.89	5.56	38.89	100
Marketing	14.29	19.05	28.57	33.33	4.76	100
REI	0.00	4.55	68.18	18.18	9.09	100
Total	6.62	24.10	39.16	18.07	12.05	100

Source: Author's own calculations

It is noted that among the respondents, most students from the Faculty of Business and Tourism come from families with a net monthly income per family member in the range of 700 -1500 lei (34.37%); most students from the CSIE Faculty are in the range 1500-3000 lei (39.02%); at FABIZ there are two intervals with the same percentage (38.89% for the range 1500-3000 lei and over 4500 lei). At the Faculty of Marketing, most students are in the range of 3000-4500 lei. It is worth noting that at REI Faculty there is a significantly higher value than the rest of the faculty, 68.18%, for the range 1500-3000 lei. On the whole sample, most students are in the range 1500-3000 lei (39.16%).

In the next section, the influence of these socio-demographic variables on the perception of the students of the five faculties investigating a sales career will be analyzed.

3. Results and discussion

The first objective of the research was to find students' intention to develop a long-term career in sales. Of the total sample, almost 29% of students intend to pursue a career in sales, while another 4.22% are already working. However, the highest percentage is represented by students who do not intend to develop a career in sales (around 67%).

Table no. 3 Students' intention to develop a career in sales, by faculty (%)

Faculty	Intentions to pursue a sales career (on long term)			
	Yes	I already work in sales	No	Total
Business and Tourism	35.94	9.38	54.68	100
CSIE	9.76	0.00	90.24	100
FABIZ	50.00	5.56	44.44	100
Marketing	23.81	0.00	76.19	100
REI	31.82	0.00	68.18	100
Total	28.92	4.22	66.86	100

Source: Author's own calculations

The greatest interest in such a career is observed among students from FABIZ (50%), followed by students from Business and Tourism (35.94%). The lowest interest is shown by the CSIE students (9.76%). It is worth noting that from the first two faculties come students already working in sales (9.38% from Business and Tourism and 5.56% from FABIZ).

If we only refer to this analysis, it might be argued that the faculty profile influences the intention to work in sales, as specified in hypothesis H₁. Of course, accepting or rejecting a hypothesis requires more tests, but the present result is a first step toward that goal.

Asked if they would be offered a career in sales, student responses were slightly different. The situation is presented in Table 4.

Table no. 4: Intention to accept a job in sales if offered (%)

Faculty	Intention to accept a job in sales			
	Yes	No	I do not know	Total
Business and Tourism	51.56	12.50	35.94	100
CSIE	19.51	19.51	60.98	100
FABIZ	44.44	11.12	44.44	100
Marketing	42.86	28.57	28.57	100
REI	59.09	13.64	27.27	100
Total	42.77	16.27	40.96	100

Source: Author's own calculations

It is noted that students from REI would be most willing to accept a sales job offer (about 59%), students from Business and Tourism taking the second place (51.56%). It is also worth mentioning that among CSIE students there is an increase in the intention to accept an offer compared to the intention to pursue a sales career previously analyzed. They also have the highest percentage of the answer *I do not know* (almost 61%).

Overall, it is noted that a categorical refusal of a firm hiring offer in sales is, however, quite unlikely (about 16% of the total sample), a quite unexpected exception being the percentage of students in Marketing (28, 57%).

A conclusion of this comparison may be that the lack of intention to develop a career in sales (about 67%) is not categorical, but may indicate a lack of knowledge of the field of sales.

In Figures 1 and 2 there is a comparative presentation of the two intentions analyzed above: Yes_Int (referring to the fact that he has already considered a sales career) and Yes_Ofr (for intent to accept a firm offer). Similarly proceed to answer *No*.

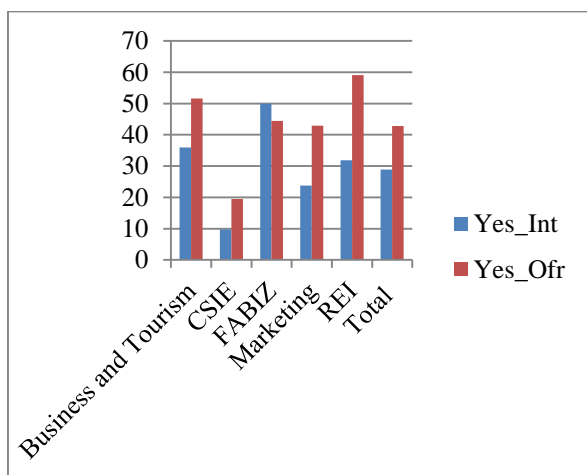


Figure no. 1: Comparison 'Yes' between intention and offer

Source: Author's own calculations

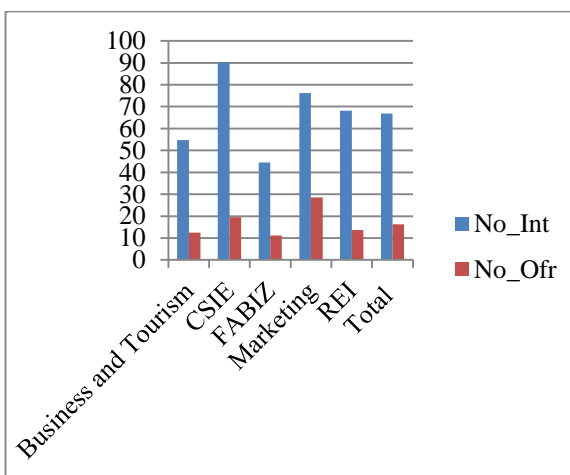


Figure no. 2: Comparison 'No' between intention and offer

Source: Author's own calculations

It can be said that a binding job offer could determine many more students to work in sales, even though they themselves have not thought about it.

The second objective of the research is to determine the impact of socio-demographic differences on the intention to develop a career in sales. Thus, the place of provenance influences the intention to develop a sales career as shown in Table 5.

Table no. 5: The influence of the place of provenance on the intention to develop a career in sales (%)

Place of provenance	Intentions to pursue a sales career (on long term)			
	Yes	No	I already work in sales	Total
Urban (exclude Bucharest)	32.91	67.09	0.00	100
Bucharest	24.56	68.42	7.02	100
Rural	25.81	64.51	9.68	100
Total	28.74	67.07	4.19	100

Source: Author's own calculations

It is noticed that the greatest intention is recorded for students of urban provenance (32.91%), followed by those of rural provenance and, finally, students from Bucharest. Students of rural provenance are also the most numerous already working. Adding together the percentage of those who intend to work with those who are already working, the ranking changes, students of rural provenance being most interested in a sales job (35.45%).

Table 6: The influence of place of provenance on the intention to accept a firm hiring offer in sales (%)

Place of provenance	Intention to accept a job in sales			
	Yes	No	I do not know	Total
Urban (exclude Bucharest)	45.57	15.19	39.24	100
Bucharest	36.84	17.54	45.61	100
Rural	45.16	16.13	38.71	100
Total general	42.51	16.17	41.32	100

Source: Author's own calculations

As in the analysis regarding the faculties, there is also a greater intention to accept a firm hiring offer in sales compared to the intention to develop a career in sales on own initiative. Also, as in the analysis corresponding to Table 5, the influence of place of provenance is approximately the same, with small variations.

On the basis of these results, it can be appreciated that hypothesis H_{2a} - *The place of provenance influences the intention to choose a career in sales* can be accepted, under the same reservations mentioned at hypothesis H_1 . Actually, this information applies to all hypotheses of this study.

The influence of the variable sex on the intention to work in sales is shown in Figures 3 and 4.

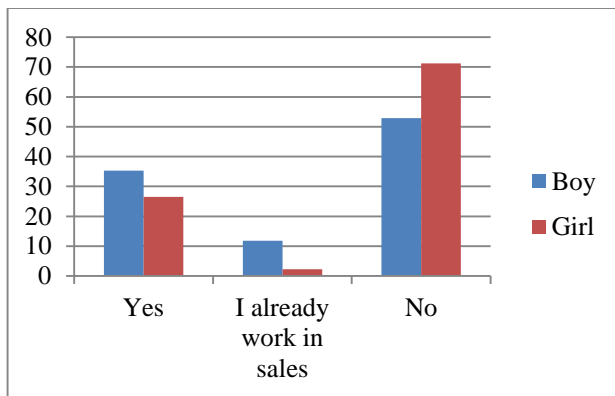


Figure no. 3: Influence of the variable sex on the intention to develop a career in sales (%)

Source: Author's own calculations

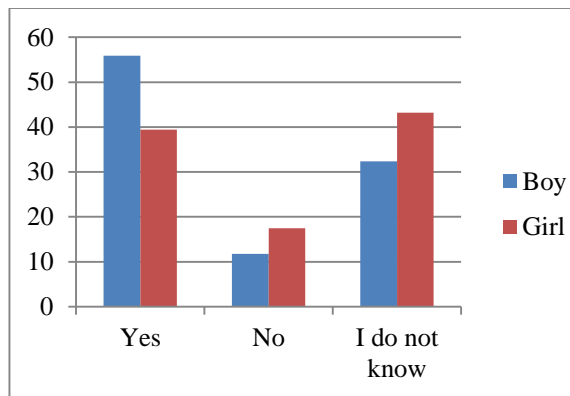


Figure no. 4: The influence of the variable sex on the intention to accept a firm hiring offer in sales (%)

Source: Author's own calculations

Even if the intention to accept a firm offer is greater than the intention to develop a career in sales on own initiative, in both cases it is noted that boys are more attracted to this field than girls. Nearly half of the boys intend to work or work already, and in the case of a definite offer, more than half would accept it (55.88%). At the same time, less than one-third of the girls intend to work or work already, and those who would accept a job offer totalize 39%.

Consequently, the H_{2b} - *There are differences between boys and girls regarding the intention to choose a career in sales* can be accepted.

The net monthly income per family member affects in the same manner both intentions, as shown in Fig.5 and 6. In this case, too, a firm offer of employment increases the intention to accept it.

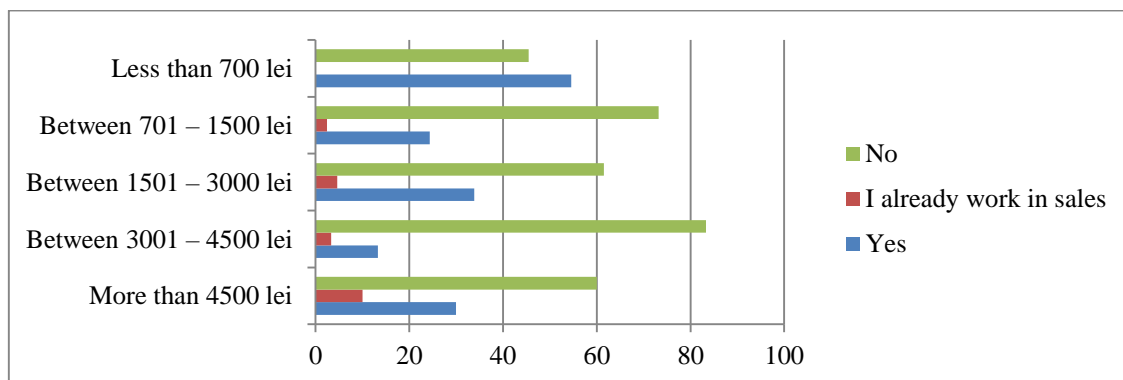


Figure no. 5: The influence of monthly net income per family member on the intention to develop a career in sales (%)

Source: Author's own calculations

The income range *Less than 700 lei* recorded the highest value for both Yes_Int and Yes_Ofr (54.55% in both cases), followed by the range *Between 1501 to 3000 lei* (38.87% cumulated percentage of those who want to work and who already works, Yes_Int) and respectively, 50.77% at Yes_Ofr.

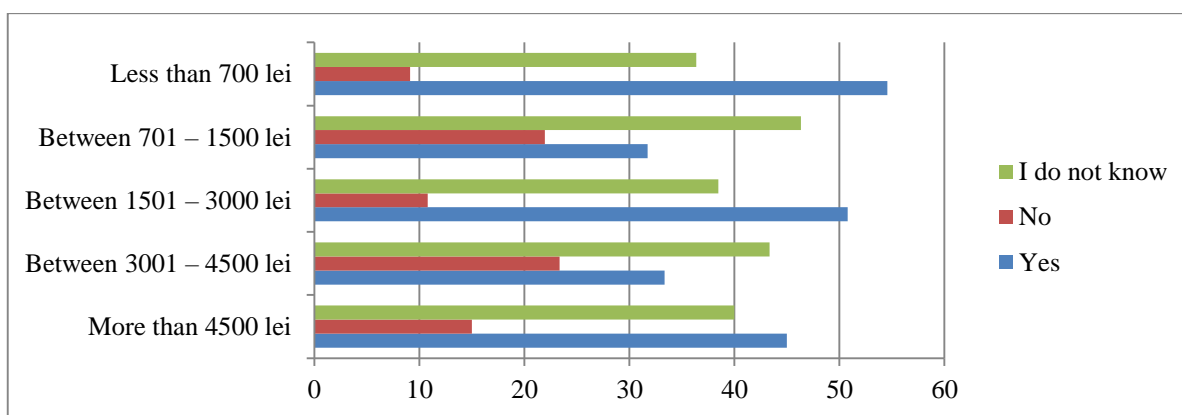


Figure no. 6: The influence of monthly net income per family member on the intention to accept a firm hiring offer in sales (%)

Source: Author's own calculations

Based on the analysis of the relationship between the net monthly income per family member and the intention to work in sales, it can be assumed that the H_{2c} -The average net income per family member influences the intention to choose a career in sales can be accepted.

Analyzing the above results, it can be concluded that among the three variables analyzed, gender and income levels exert the greatest influence on the decision to develop a career in sales.

The *third objective*, find the degree to which economic studies and practice in the field influences the choice of a sales career, was based, on the one hand, on investigating the extent to which the content of the subjects studied at the faculty helps students to develop a career in sales, and on the other hand, on the students' view of what would be necessary to happen during their studies so that they feel ready for a career in sales.

Table no. 7: The influence of the curriculum on the intention to work in sales (%)

Does the content of the subjects studied at the faculty help you to develop a career in sales?	Yes	I already work in sales	No	Total
Very much	28.57	14.29	57.14	100
Enough	40.43	4.26	55.32	100
Somewhat	28.95	1.32	69.74	100
To a small extent	16.67	8.33	75.00	100
Not at all	7.69	7.69	84.62	100

Source: Author's own calculations

It is noted that the intention to work in sales is higher among students who consider that the subjects studied at college are useful for this purpose than among those who do not appreciate the studies in this way. However, there is a much higher percentage of students who, while believing that what they learn at college is useful, do not intend to work in sales.

In order to increase the level of training in the field of sales, students appreciate, according to the data in Table 8, that the most useful would be to practice in a sales department (75.44% of the respondents made such a choice).

Table no. 8: The most important measures to increase the students' preparedness for a job in sales

Measures	Number of choices	Percent*
practice in a sales department	126	75,44
a mentor with sales experience	85	50,90
sales simulations at the seminar	70	41,92
a sales course	57	34,13

Source: Author's own calculations

Note: * relative to the number of respondents (167)

It is noticed that students feel they need first of all practical training, the course on sales being the last in their preferences list. It is also worth mentioning that half of them appreciate the role of a mentor in sales training.

Regarding the degree to which relatives or friends who have embraced a sales career influence the students' desire to work in sales, the results are shown in Figure 7.

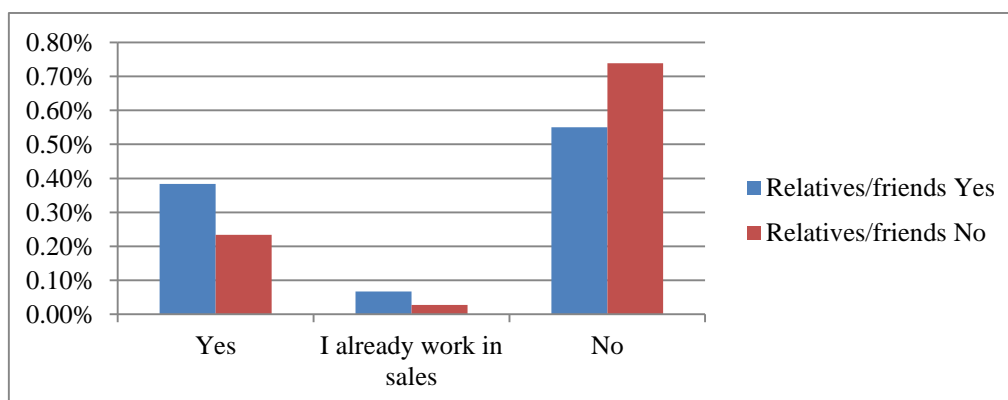


Figure no. 7: The relationship between the existence of relatives / friends who works in sales and the desire to work

Source: Author's own calculations

Students with relatives/friends who works in sales intend to work in sales in a proportion of 38%, and 6.7% of them already work; students with no relatives/friends who works in sales intend to work in a proportion of 23.4% and 2.8% already work. Noteworthy is that in case of those who do not intend to work in sales the percentage is much higher if they have no relatives/friends than in case they have (about 74% versus about 23%).

It can be concluded that the existence of relatives or friends working in sales exerts a certain influence on the desire to develop a career in the same field. As this influence does not seem too strong, the hypothesis H_3 - *There are no important differences in their willingness to work in sales, between students who have relatives or friends who work or have worked in sales and those who do not have such relatives or friends* can be accepted.

Conclusions and suggestions

This study investigated the perception that students at five faculties of Bucharest University of Economic Studies have about a career in sales.

Based on previous studies, the overall perception is negative. A first conclusion of this study is that BUES students do not have such a negative perception as the literature shows, but they do not have a well-defined opinion on this profession. This could be an advantage if employers were more involved in supporting student training and shaping a clearer representation of what it means to work in sales.

Regarding the students' intention to work in sales, FABIZ students, who are followed by Business and Tourism students, showed the greatest intention, while CSIE students ranked the last. However, the hierarchy changes if students would face a firm offer of employment. The highest percentage was recorded at REI, the students from the Faculty of Business and Tourism retaining the second place. In general, there is an increasing tendency to accept a safe offer over the intention to look for a job on their own initiative, which is even the case of CSIE students. This step forward could be useful for employers who are facing a lack of sales force. The techniques to meet students who may not even be looking for a job at this time can deliver better results than those based on waiting for applications following job advertisements. It seems that, at least in this area, students prefer to be "hunted" and not to be "hunters" of jobs.

Socio-demographic variables determine an influence on the intent of a sales career, with particular regard to differences between boys and girls and income levels. Thus, boys are more interested in a sales job and prefer outdoor activities, and among the girls interested, most prefer indoor activities.

The most effective methods to become good sellers are considered the practice in a sales department, the existence of a mentor and sales simulations at the seminar. Theoretical courses are the least appreciated.

In virtue of all the aspects identified and analyzed in this paper, it may be appreciated that a closer cooperation between the business environment and universities is needed. The objectives of this collaboration should be to: identify talents, give students the opportunity to get a more in-depth knowledge of different areas of activity, and to have attractive places to practice. As well, students want to be mentored by tutors to facilitate their integration into the field of activity. Companies need to understand that they are as important stakeholders of universities as students, and that an investment in education always has a high return.

In the current context, where the young labor force is included in the much studied category of the millennials, with different job search behaviors and with another understanding of the career idea, the conclusion of this study could be summarized as follows: Do sales jobs need to sell itself better?

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