

Introduction

Industrial distribution in the US accounts for more than \$7 trillion dollars in sales, encompasses more than 500,000 companies employing more than 6 million people. Despite this there are very few universities preparing workers specifically for this burgeoning sector. Milwaukee School of Engineering began exploring the opportunity to launch a degree program in Industrial Distribution/ Technical Sales in 2019. The National Fluid Power Association was a founding partner in developing this program and has continued to offer support and guidance.

MSOE is a unique institution, focusing on experiential learning, applied research and robust partnerships with industry. The program, offered through the Business School, is designed to bring together best practices in Business, Supply Chain and Engineering to meet the needs of this dynamic sector.

Leveraging our relationship with the Wisconsin Technical College Systems (WTCS), students gain their 2-year technical degree and are then able to matriculate into the two year bachelor of science degree at MSOE. Additionally in 2023 the program will be offered as a minor to MSOE Engineering students.

The Business School has had an overwhelming response to the program from the business sector, locally and nationally. There is a huge potential for internships, high-quality employment for graduating students and partnerships for the school to enhance the program.

The Problem

The degree was initially labeled as a “Bachelors in Technical Sales”, despite immense interest from the business sector very, very few students showed interest in the program internally or from the WTCS system. Students do not see the value proposition for a career in technical selling, it is unknown to them. They associate it with call centers and car dealerships, neither of which are appealing to the young technical professional.

What we have learned

In 2023 the program will be advertised as a “Bachelor of Science in Technical and Business Management”. We believe the curriculum is strong and industry led, we have made no changes in terms of content.

Our work with a committed industry partner last school year, showed us promising results. When we provide high engagement classroom content to students, including factory visits and mentorship from their sales professionals 1/3 of the class reached out to the company post engagement to ask about internships and employment opportunities. Over half the class at the end of the month-long engagement indicated they would consider a career in technical selling now.

To make this program successful, we need to get students to appreciate the great value in this career sooner, preferably in their first year of Technical College or, for students seeking minors in their freshman year at MSOE. We have noted that there are many, many businesses hoping to partner in this work, but the Business School has very limited resources both financially and in terms of manpower to do the strong outreach required to educate and excite our potential student pipeline.

Things to consider:

1. We have a unique and powerful transfer agreement with the technical college system that could be replicated outside of Wisconsin, how can industry support us in growing the network and in educating students about this career opportunity?
2. Should we create a consortium of interested parties to coordinate effort, reduce the burden on individual companies and raise interest across the sector for all actors?
3. Engineering students may need some extra financial support to incorporate a minor in technical selling, as it will likely take them over the number of academic credits allowed in their degree track.