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Workforce Literacy Training to Empower Employees Whose Literacy Levels Do Not Meet Job Requirements

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Illiteracy in America is high, yet adult literacy programs are ignored. Basic adult literacy programs may not meet the needs of workers. Workplace literacy programs can be a means of recruiting and retaining workers who might not otherwise participate in an adult literacy program. Such programs often are more attractive due to their location, time, and familiar setting. Further, workers are more likely to be successful when the literacy program uses real job materials, problems, and technology. Workplace literacy programs help employees who have been identified as having low literacy skills. With additional workplace training, these employees become team members contributing to the success of the workplace.

Certain jobs in American business and industry may be threatened because the influx of sophisticated technology, language specifically written for the workplace, changing procedures, and processes in the workplace may cause some employees to lose their jobs due to obsolete job skills. A number of these employees lack basic educational competencies, and illiteracy is suspected as the cause for poor job performance. In order to keep up with the global market, employers must evaluate their employee job training methods.

The twenty-first century holds incredible promise for America's workers. Judy and D'Amico (1997) state:

Workforce 2020 can be the most prosperous, flexible, intellectually stimulated, and safest workforce the world has ever known. But we can achieve this goal only if we take personal responsibility as individuals, parents, employers, and citizens. We need to understand our situation and confront our challenges. Outmoded government programs, corporate practices, and individual traits must be altered if we are to cope successfully with the new economic realities that are fast approaching. Our actions today will determine whether we realize our hope for a competent and prosperous workforce tomorrow.

Current practices in the workplace

Illiteracy hurts companies, but it also hurts employees. Many companies that modernize choose simply to lay off employees with inadequate skills. These adults become part of a complex and costly national unemployment problem. Retraining enables companies to retain their present workforce, improve work-

ing conditions, and empower employees to become valuable members of the work team.

Companies increasingly acknowledge the problems of illiteracy and a deficiency in job skills, but do not act on the situation. Usually, employers will lay off or fire employees that do not meet job expectations. Employees need skills in learning on the job, so that they can build on their conceptual understanding and use it to operate new technologies to meet job requirements. An important aspect of workplace-literacy skills is the ability to transfer what is learned in one situation to others, or when appropriate, to recognize differences in systems and to modify the mental picture of the work process accordingly.

Some employees are thoughtful and quick to build on their experiences, while others seem to repeatedly make the same mistakes. Field (1994) states:

Although the factors that contribute to mindfulness are not well understood, it is clear that the abilities to reflect, learn, and support the learning of others are central to workplace competence. Research suggests that employees who have effective learning skills have the following abilities:

- They can think about and discuss their own learning needs
- They can overcome the disadvantages of their limited formal education
- They are confident about keeping up, despite rapid change
- They are good at investigating situations, presenting complex information logically, and drawing general conclusions from particular observations.

Employees with low literacy skills also have poor learning skills. These employees, in general, never developed study skills in school. Without these important tools of learning, it is significantly difficult to meet job requirements.

Workplace trends

Recent trends in the labor market and in the population of workers looking for a job has also begun to influence workplace education. These trends include:

- A shift in employment opportunities from relatively low-skilled jobs in manufacturing to higher skilled jobs in the service sector;
- A restructuring toward more efficient, "high-performance" workplaces that require higher skill levels for job performance;
- A general increase in the use of literacy in workplaces;
- An increase in temporary and part-time work;
- A shortfall in the level of skills workers bring to employment;
- An increase in the number of workers with limited abilities to use English.

Workplace literacy programs operating within these constraints are characterized by:

- Instruction that addresses learner needs;
- Active involvement by major stakeholders (management, employee organizations, instructors, and the learners themselves);
- A custom-designed curriculum that integrates basic skills instruction with workplace applications and materials (Field, 1994).

Resources available

Although effective programs incorporate these elements, few have the necessary resources to incorporate them all at the outset. Most likely, you will have to begin with one class, such as a GED (General Educational Development) program or perhaps a short, job-related course that teaches basic skills. Thus, an effective literacy program that meets the needs of all workers can be achieved gradually, over a longer period of time (National Center On Adult Literacy, 1996).

Effective material for a workplace literacy program

Too often, people mistakenly think that any sort of literacy instruction will translate to improved learner skills on the job. College-educated adults often make this mistake because they are able to apply their own high-level literacy skills to learning and meeting the demands of new jobs. College-educated adults can do this because the literally thousands of hours that they have invested in literacy use has provided them with high levels of oral and written skills.

The same situation is not true of low- and middle-level illiterates. They have practiced little and have poor oral and written skills. Their use of technology is also limited. Consequently, two months of general literacy instruction at four hours a week will provide only a slight improvement in general literacy skills, and usually shows no noticeable impact on the ability to apply general literacy to technical applications.

For results to occur, employees need to have the ability to transfer skills learned to the job. This will not happen in just a few hours of training. Low-literate employees need continuous training until competencies that are acquired can be applied on the job. Unfortunately, the limitations of literacy transfer to enable effective competencies to be demonstrated on the job have serious implications for workplace literacy programs. This is especially true if programs attempt to use traditional school-type materials.

Unless specific workplace materials are used, instruction becomes less important and the interest level to continue learning drops significantly. This is especially true when a training program has multi-level learners with different learning styles. These employees lack the study skills and previous education experience to keep up with the classes. As a result, these employees are not transferring current learning skills to prior knowledge learned, finding it difficult to stay current with the changing job environment.

To retrain these employees will enable companies to retain their present workforce, improve working conditions, and empower employees to become valuable members of the work team.

Identifying outcomes

Employee literacy training should create relationships that lead to the identification of long-term problems, such as chronic low literacy on the job. That way, immediate responses can be parlayed into comprehensive, long-term assistance.

More and more companies are adopting training programs to help their employees raise the levels of their basic skills. Appropriate literacy training materials and their effectiveness are essential for the success of the program in retraining low-literate employees.

These employees are in need of basic job training that can be provided by ...utilizing on-the-job materials, technology, and problems.

Unfortunately, companies look to outside assistance for training. Often, the employee training consists of general Adult Basic Education. The materials used and the subject matter taught are not the best choices for assisting low-literate employees. These employees are in need of basic job training that can be provided by an employee-training program utilizing on-the-job materials, technology, and problems. When job related materials are provided, low-literate employees benefit from being able to transfer learning to real world situations. Another benefit to these employees is the opportunity to practice new skills during everyday activities on the job.

Effective workplace literacy programs

A workplace literacy program should consider four constraints that will affect the program's success. Because workers' skills

vary widely, the use of a multi-strand program can address a variety of learner's needs. Workplace literacy requires a long-term commitment. To gain improvement in job performance, literacy skills should be taught using job-related materials, not general educational materials that do not provide a clear link to the job. Lastly, instruction must provide opportunities for practice in a timely manner, or else newly-acquired skills will be lost before they can be used on the job.

Benefits from workplace literacy training

Do employees who participate in a workplace literacy-training program have a longer term of service and benefit from the training?

Workplace literacy programs have been established in a small share of business firms.

Employees feel tremendously insecure and vulnerable in the changing workplace. They are looking for education to provide them with job security and potential advancement.

The employers who offer these programs are responding to both internal and external factors. The main internal motivation is to upgrade the firm's

workforce. A substantial share of hourly workers, perhaps 25 to 40 percent have some basic skills deficiencies, and businesses link basic skills improvement to productivity enhancement.

Another important internal force is workplace restructuring. Businesses are responding to increased domestic and foreign competition by reorganizing their production processes with techniques such as total quality management, self-managed teams, just-in-time inventory procedures, or investments in new technology. Each of these activities may require substantial retraining of employees and upgrading of skills. Externally, businesses report that customer requirements have played a significant role in initiating programs.

Employees feel tremendously insecure and vulnerable in the changing workplace. They are looking for education to provide them with job security and potential advancement.

Employees who participate in workplace literacy programs generally acknowledge their skill deficiencies and are looking for education to improve their job security and lead to higher wages (Hollenbeck, 1993). Ironically, while this economical outcome is not happening in general, another unexpected outcome occurs almost universally. These individuals cite improved self-confidence and self-esteem as a result of participation in the programs. Such payoffs are important to participants and lead them to continued participation. Minority workers actively participating in programs have become "true believers" in the programs and made considerable learning gains. Overall, employees support and participation in workplace education may be characterized as narrow, but deep (Hollenbeck, 1993).

Future workplace benefits

In the early twenty-first century, the best-paying jobs will demand high skill levels, particularly in the areas of reading, writing, math, reasoning, and computing. A larger share of fast-growing occupations also will require education beyond high school, but not necessarily a four-year college degree. Yet, a recent annual survey showed that more students than ever are applying to four-year colleges, though many of these students are poorly prepared. In most medium-sized to large colleges, at least one fourth of the freshman require remedial education in mathematics and reading before they can do college-level work. Even remediation is often insufficient. According to the U.S. Department of Education's most recent comprehensive study of adult literacy, 14 to 16 percent of American-born college graduates are functionally illiterate in math and reading.

With the right materials, these problems can be addressed in the workplace. Employees who believe, once they have been

identified as having deficiencies, can make changes in their job and remain employed. However, choosing to use workplace materials is not always the choice employers make. Because their everyday contact is with workers, any feedback employers get typically comes from their employees. Instructors tend to tailor instruction to the needs and interests of these employer concerns. Often this leads to course content with minimal reference to the workplace. There are advantages and disadvantages to this approach. First, instructors agree that learners will be most enthusiastic and interested in subjects most relevant to them personally, so that learning gains will be greatest with such an approach. The other side of the argument, is that employers support workplace education to improve worker productivity, and research has shown that productivity gains tend to be greatest from programs that include job-specific materials in the curriculum (Mikulecky et al, 1992).

Using program resources to meet the workers' interests allows them to take an early and active part in planning and developing the program. This sends a message to employees that employers are investing in people and their success on the job. As a result, learners will buy into the program, increasing enrollment and retention.

The education program developed will use some off-the-shelf materials for strands such as general education for low-level learners, but it will also incorporate custom-designed instruction. Customizing the curriculum will allow the program to meet the needs of both management and workers.

Some of the custom-designed strands of the program will be based on task analysis. This involves interviewing and observing employees who are expert at their jobs to document job tasks and supporting skills. While more time-consuming than using pre-packaged educational materials, instruction that uses material from workers' jobs will provide a direct link between the skill and the job. Employees will receive immediate reinforcement of skills learned, which will provide job skill improvement.

In determining the specifics of a program, the following activities will help companies to plan. First, analyze the needs and wants of both your company and the employees. Find out where the problems are. After determining the need, consider whether a literacy program will help meet those needs. If such education will help, then decide what types of courses will be offered and who will benefit from these courses.

Also analyze what types of non-training solutions will be important to the success of the program.

Addressing the need

Over the past two decades, research has revealed important information that characterized literacy education in the workplace. Organizations face multiple challenges with regard to workers' skills and the ever-increasing demands of jobs. Programs that have multiple strands are able to address these issues most effectively. Improvement requires significant practice time, often more than is available in classes. Programs have compensated for this lack of time by providing additional practice time at home and by using materials that are job-related to gain practice as learners perform their jobs.

To ensure that skills will have an impact on job performance, instruction should be targeted to specific job tasks. Besides increasing practice time, using job-related materials increases learners' ability to transfer skills directly to the job, thereby increasing productivity. Since new skills are lost without regular practice, instruction should also be timed to correspond closely to when the new skills will be used on the job.

The changing labor market also plays a significant role in the nature of workplace literacy programs. Labor market trends such as the shift to more service-sector jobs, high

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performance workplaces, increased use of literacy, and increasing temporary and part-time work all influence the need for workplace education. Instructors and program developers should strive to make programs relevant to workers' needs, such as the need for flexible skills that will apply to a variety of jobs and the need for increased quality control. Programs should also address such concerns as low levels of worker skills and immigrants with limited English. Long-term programs that begin with learning basic reading and writing skills should advance to job-skills education and beyond. Consequently, learners improve productivity and address personal needs such as improving chances for advancement.

Reflection

All of the issues discussed in this paper along with possible solutions are relevant only if employers are willing to invest time and money in on-the-job training—not just training when it is convenient for the trainees, but an actual plan that is carefully tailored to meet the needs of the employees. On-the-job training is only effective if the organization supports learning.

Predictions

Companies interested in staying profitable will need to invest in education, personal development, formal vocational training, on-the-job learning, and experiential learning of their employees. Every company should have as its number one goal the development of more cooperation and participation in relations between employees and managers. Without the achievement of such a goal companies not only will fail to keep up with changing trends within their business area, but will lose their competitive edge in the global marketplace. To reach this goal requires changes in job design, management structures and systems, and management-employee relations. Both technology and industrial relations matters have contributed to the need for these types of

changes. There is considerable evidence to suggest that technological change usually leads to a need for employees with a higher level of skills. Companies need to recognize that investing in training of their employees today will contribute to a profitable future for everyone.

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