

## Workforce Development: Business/University Partnerships

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**E**conomic development is continuously evolving. What started out as industrial attraction has become much more broad-based. Today's economic developer may need to be versed in an almost limitless number of programs and activities. Among these are: entrepreneurial development, tourism, historic preservation, Main Street programs, Europe 1992, procurement assistance, housing development, community strategic planning, and workforce development. These are in addition to the more traditional areas of infrastructure development, finance, site development, marketing, and retention and expansion programs.

The watchword in economic development in the 1980s was "globalization." One of the most important issues on the local level in the 1990s is going to be workforce development. Without a quality workforce, America will not be able to compete in the global market of the 21st century.

### REQUIRED SKILLS FOR THE WORKPLACE OF THE FUTURE

In the late 1980s, the U.S. Department of Labor and the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD) launched a joint research project to identify the "basic" skills employers wanted their workers to possess. Researchers assumed that most employers would list primarily technical skills, such as computer literacy. They were wrong. What employers wanted and said they needed most desperately were workers with a solid basic education plus relationship skills and skills in self-management. Reviewing the results, ASTD lumped the most desired skills for workers of the future into seven categories: learning to learn; competence (reading, writing, and computation); communication; personal management; adaptability; group effectiveness; and influence. Each of these had a specific meaning for prospective employers.

"Learning to learn" was considered the most basic of all skills. Essentially, it meant that each person should acquire the self-

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knowledge concerning when and how he or she learned best. The key is for each person to find the best method for him or her to master new skills.

"Competence" refers to the basic skills of reading, writing, and math. The worker of tomorrow knows how to read and interpret graphs, charts, and diagrams. He or she must be able to scan information quickly and pick out relevant information. Employers want workers who can quickly digest complex material and then be able to use the information they acquire to solve problems. In writing, workers will need a level of writing skill that will enable them to communicate quickly and effectively. Finally, the required math skills will be more conceptual than computational. Workers will be expected to be able to scan computer-generated results and understand the computational routines used to arrive at these results.

"Communication" refers to verbal and listening skills. Workers of the future must have the skill to express their ideas and convey information to others quickly and effectively. They must also be good, active listeners, since much of the information they require to perform their jobs, solve problems and work effectively with others will come from verbal interaction.

"Personal management" refers to an individual's self-esteem and self-motivation. More than any other time in the past, workers in the future will be relied upon to "get the job done" with minimum supervision. No longer will workers have someone to tell them what to do, solve their prob-

lems, or remind them to seek technical or other assistance when they need it.

"Adaptability" refers primarily to creative-thinking and problem-solving skills. Workers of tomorrow need the skills to "break mental sets," "think creatively," analyze problems, and find innovative approaches to problem resolution.

"Group effectiveness" refers to interpersonal and team skills. Employees of the future need to understand how their individual behavior impacts others. They need skills to negotiate, resolve conflict, handle stress, deal with undesirable behavior in others, share in task accomplishment, and build positive working relationships with others in a group setting.

"Influence" refers to skills in organizational effectiveness and leadership. The future worker needs an understanding of what organizations are, how they work, why they exist, what makes organizations effective or ineffective, and how external and internal forces affect organizational accomplishment. On the leadership side, employees need an understanding of what makes leaders effective and ineffective, how the leader influences members of the group, the role of formal and informal leaders, the importance of a "vision," ethical standards for judging leaders, and so on.

### THE WORKPLACE OF THE FUTURE

Now that we know what kind of workforce issues we will be facing in the future, let's look at what is happening in the

workplace. Businesses are down-sizing, flattening-out, getting "leaner and meaner," asking employees to do more with less, particularly in the "soft" areas of business. Usually the first to feel the pinch, human resource departments are a likely target in the effort to "trim the fat." With training departments being cut, fewer training professionals remain to address the critical training needs of the organization. It is expensive to keep training professionals on staff — harder still for the small to mid-sized firms.

The fact is, the critical training needs of organizations will remain. This will exert enormous pressures on businesses to invest in education and retraining. Continuous learning will become commonplace to create a more flexible work force, provide employees with the skills necessary to take advantage of rapidly changing technology, and prepare employees for new jobs inside or outside the company when their old jobs are replaced by technology, or eliminated due to changes in customer demands.

In the future, the internal training departments are likely to be eliminated. Companies will still need training services, but they will contract for those services outside the organization rather than maintain internal staff specialists. As training departments are cut or eliminated, there will be a growing need for outside vendors to provide services on a contract basis that can no longer be provided internally.

## UNIVERSITY TRAINING CENTERS

There are alternatives to an internal training staff. Private trainers and training consultants are available in seemingly endless numbers. While many are highly qualified, some are not. It is not always easy for businesses to sort out the good from the bad. The price paid for training is too high to make mistakes with unknown/untried trainers. A somewhat safer alternative is to utilize a university or community college training center. Generally housed in a Continuing Education Unit or in a Business School, they are a useful resource for regional economic development efforts.

In essence, these centers broker training and consulting services. They link businesses with appropriate university resources

and "screen" to ensure quality contacts. Generally, these centers have the option of using highly skilled university faculty or professional trainers and consultants. They make a concerted effort to establish and maintain a statewide network of the best trainers available. Remember, these centers are judged on the quality of services they provide.

Businesses may appreciate the advantages inherent in utilizing the services of a university training center. These centers minimize the potential risk of hiring an unknown entity — the untried trainer/consultant. Because businesses contract with the university, the training center assumes responsibility for quality service — a kind of quasi-guarantee exists for the work performed. Utilizing their statewide networks of trainers and consultants, university training centers can showcase an array of talented individuals capable of addressing a company's specific training needs. These centers also serve as a screening device. They weed-out unsuitable trainers, saving businesses time and minimizing the possibility of selecting an unqualified or unsuitable trainer. University training centers have statewide knowledge and access to a wealth of human resources and special programs to assist businesses.

Some examples of successful training programs developed and delivered by a university training center include:

□ Following a thorough needs analysis including one-on-one discussions, focus groups, and an employee survey, the center designed a training program to improve international business understanding. The program was developed for a foundry employing over 400 people. The purpose of this program was to give the entire management team a basic understanding of, not only the global economy, but how competition in the global marketplace impacted the foundry's operation.

□ Using the same needs analysis process discussed above, the center designed a 32-module management and professional development program for a large manufacturer. Designed to address the specific training needs of this particular firm, the purpose was to increase their organizational effectiveness in order to strengthen their competitive position. Additional services

provided by the center on this project included: designing promotional materials; contracting with trainers; developing training materials; and providing logistical support.

□ For a mid-sized manufacturer, the center provided an integrated approach to continuing organizational improvement. This comprehensive process involved four phases: 1) a visioning process; 2) conducting a performance audit; 3) developing and implementing a change plan; and 4) evaluating, monitoring and refining. The primary focus was to identify the actions and strategies necessary to bring about the required changes in organizational culture, employee and management skills, and management practices to institutionalize a culture of continuous improvement.

## SUMMARY

In addressing workforce development needs, university training centers are a good bet (in terms of time, cost, effectiveness, and risk minimization). Economic developers should use these organizations as a marketing tool in business attraction and as a resource for business expansion and development. Improving a company's long-term effectiveness, stretching the training resources, and developing a highly qualified workforce are just some of the reasons for a business/university partnership.

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