

Workforce Development: Upgraded Skills Leads To Upgraded Productivity

By Eleanor Shelton

When economic times were better and the bottom line was more like a floor-length dress than a mini skirt, companies made workforce development a priority. Had an employee who needed to learn excel? Send them to a 3-day seminar in Chicago. Had an executive staff member not comfortable giving a speech? Enroll the whole executive team in a Dale Carnegie class. Even though investing in personnel is important to a company's future, when the economy is down workforce development tends to be the first place the budget is cut. Because of the changing economic times and the realization that investing in employee skills is still critical, companies are looking for ways to cut costs and get a bigger bang for the buck, while teaching their employees the skills they need.

Washtenaw Community College's new Workforce Development department is an example of how companies are now thinking outside the box.

"Instead of concentrating on general skills, companies are looking for opportunities to upgrade skills that are specific to that organization," says Brandon Tucker, workforce development manager at Washtenaw Community College. "We've worked with companies who needed to teach a group of managers how to write business-appropriate emails for example or an automotive supplier who needs to upgrade their employees welding skills. In both cases we've created curriculum specific to needs using experts in the field with proven track records here at the college."

Employee training researcher and author Laura Bassi states that organizations that make large investments in people typically have lower employee turnover, which is associated with higher customer satisfaction, which in turn is a driver of profitability. She also writes that the education and training variable is the most significant predictor of an organization's success as compared to price-to-earning ratios. The American Society for Training and Development (ASTD) reports that, "employee learning and development is taking center stage as business leaders increasingly understand that a highly skilled, knowledgeable workforce is critical to achieving growth and success."

Tom Sullivan coordinates training for the Facilities Maintenance department at the University of Michigan, a unit with approximately 450 Skilled Trades workers, Maintenance Mechanics, and support staff - all working around the clock to keep the U-M facilities functioning smoothly. A few years ago, he was facing the dilemma of how to continue to provide technical skills classes - courses required for Maintenance Mechanics' advancement - in the face of budgetary pressures. If he couldn't find a way to show cost reductions, the suspension or even elimination of these classes was a real possibility.

Sullivan saw this as an opportunity to find a training solution that was less expensive and more closely aligned to the needs of the mechanics than the previous training program.

"We needed to find an instructor who was experienced in teaching a multi-craft curriculum - covering the basics of plumbing, electrical, carpentry, and other maintenance work - and who could incorporate practical, hands-on exercises for the types of activities that we do on a daily basis, Sullivan said."

He turned to WCC because they already had a Commercial Property Maintenance Certification program that could serve as starting point. After several facility tours and planning discussions between WCC faculty and U-M Maintenance foremen and managers, the college established the Commercial Building Maintenance Certification program, designed to provide a practical, structured and accredited course of study for the U-M maintenance staff.

"A unique feature of the program is that it brings the college to the workplace - classes are conveniently held on-site at the U-M Plant facility," Sullivan said. "It is a key initiative in helping to fulfill our vision of being a learning organization that supports employee development and career advancement."

Graduates receive 12 college credit hours and a certificate upon completion.

There were 18 U-M employees who completed the first cycle of training, and 25 more employees have signed up for the second program.



U-M Facilities Maintenance employees participating in a class.

"Our staff members have found the class to be a great experience," says Sullivan. "In addition to upgrading technical skills, the classes provide an opportunity for peer learning and for establishing solid working relationships. The employees did this on their own time, which says a lot about how they value education. This learning partnership with our staff is great for morale, and shows the commitment U-M has for employee learning and development."

WCC's Workforce Development department, Ann Arbor SPARK, and the Michigan Economic Development Corporation have joined forces to identify and address the training needs of the area businesses in new and innovative ways.

"We are working overtime to close a critical skills gap that is preventing us from

filling thousands of Michigan job openings," says Amy Cell, senior vice president of talent enhancement at the Michigan Economic Development Corp in a recent press release. "We must create a deep talent pool in order to keep businesses growing here and to attract new ones."

Employee training and development are big business. According to *Training Magazine* the total 2010 U.S. training expenditure was \$52.8 billion. And Donna Doleman, vice president of Marketing, Communication and Talent with Ann Arbor SPARK, a non-profit organization that strives to advance the economy of the Ann Arbor region by establishing the area as a desired place for business expansion and location, says that organizations take the supply of qualified training professionals into consideration when starting or relocating their business.

"Lakeside Software, a company based in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, wanted to expand. They were debating between California and Ann Arbor but chose Ann Arbor because of the plethora of talented IT professionals who could upgrade their employees' skills. When convincing companies that this is where they need to be, we try to think strategically about what companies will need," says Doleman.

Whether it is machine shop training for an auto manufacturer, communication etiquette for a food service company or welding for the Department of Labor, all organizations depend on creative solutions to keep their employees productive even in a bad economy.

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