AN EMPLOYEE-CENTERED WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

AUTHOR

DR. JACK BYRD, JR.

A RESEARCH REPORT
OF THE

CENTER FOR ENTREPRENEURIAL STUDIES AND DEVELOPMENT, INC.

West Virginia University
College of Engineering
P.O. Box 6070
Morgantown, WV 26506-6070

(304) 293-5551
(304) 293-3612-Fax
**Background**

Workforce development is a process of acquiring the ability to learn job skills and to make wise career decisions. Workforce development is only effective if employees are involved in a continuing series of career-enhancing experiences. Some of these experiences may be connected to formal training events; but more often than not, career development is self-directed.

The conventional model for workforce development is episodic in structure, driven by formal training events, and limited to specific job-skill development. Consider the two employees described in exhibits A and B. Based on conventional assessment practices, Greg would be better prepared as a skilled machinist because he has undergone more skill development training. Doug’s development has been continuing but is largely self-directed.

The issue in workforce development is not whether Doug’s or Greg’s career development is better but how to blend the formal episodic approach to workforce development with the continuing self-directed approach.

This paper presents a workforce-development strategy that focuses first on the development of the individual and then on the development of job skills. This strategy begins with the development of the individual traits necessary for job success and then moves to the development of an ability to master ever-changing specific job skill requirements. The workforce development strategy is considered an employee-centered approach since it focuses on the employee first and foremost.

**Premises for the Employee-Centered Workforce Development Strategy**

The basic premises for the employee-centered workforce development strategy are drawn from experiences of the Center for Entrepreneurial Studies and Development, Inc., (CESD) through its work with employers and employees. These experiences include two comprehensive workforce assessments in West Virginia.

Successful employees must possess both general and specific job skills.

- ‘General job skills’ refers to a broad set of skills (e.g., communications, working with others, problem-solving, self-discipline, and technology) that are required for virtually every job. See exhibit C for a listing of typical general job skills.
- ‘Specific job skills’ refers to the requirements necessary to perform a job. Specific job skills are constantly evolving. Employees must develop the ability to master specific job skills as they evolve. In many cases, the mastery of specific job skills will need to be self-directed.
EXHIBIT A
ONE APPROACH TO EMPLOYEE DEVELOPMENT

Doug began preparation for his current position as a young boy who had an interest in motorcycles. As he realized that some parts he needed were unavailable, he became interested in machining his own parts. He learned many of the machining basics from his father who was also a machinist.

When Doug went to high school, he entered the vo-tech program where he learned the basic principles of machining. His first job after high school was with a small machine shop. He learned to do simpler jobs with the help of experienced employees. During the 5.5 years that Doug worked for this organization, he perfected many of the basic machining skills in a volume-based machine environment.

Doug’s next position was with an established manufacturer of motorcycle parts. His work required precision machining of one-of-a-kind parts. In this position, he needed to acquire some design skills to compensate for the design deficiencies of the organization’s engineers. He also learned from experience the requirements of the job as well as how to select materials and tools. While Doug was provided with occasional guidance from other employees, he learned most of his skills through his own experience. Doug remained with this organization for 7.5 years.

Doug’s next position change was to a smaller organization that performed high quality machining of industrial equipment. Doug already possessed the machining skills for this job, but he began to acquire some experience with computer numerical control (CNC) equipment. He also gained a much greater appreciation for design through his work with blueprints. He remained with this organization for three years.

Doug is currently working at a manufacturing facility where he is a CNC operator. He has learned to program the CNC equipment. He learned the basics from another employee, but most of the technical programming has been acquired through his own work with the equipment. He has been with this employer for 5.5 years.

Doug has taken two courses at Fairmont State College (automated data processing and manufacturing processes). In both cases, the decision to take these courses was for his own betterment. In neither case was he encouraged by his employer to take the course.

Doug has acquired additional job knowledge through his personal reading. His hobbies have often contributed to new knowledge he can use on the job.

In his four employment experiences of over 18 years, Doug has received no formal classroom training other than in safety practices.
Greg decided to become a machinist when he was in high school. He elected to take the vo-tech option and acquired skills on most traditional manufacturing equipment. After graduating from high school, Greg decided to continue his education and obtained a certificate in manufacturing processes from a technical school.

After graduation, Greg accepted a job with a leading manufacturer performing machinist duties in their machine shop. The job requirements were quite varied, and Greg obtained considerable experience with different pieces of equipment.

Greg has remained in this position for most of his career. He was trained in CNC equipment operations but has generally avoided any assignment that requires programming. He prefers to do the conventional jobs that he has always done.

Over time Greg has become the company’s designated machinist for sustaining product support. In this job, Greg performs most of the routine assignments required to sustain product lines once they have been in operation for some time. Greg is concerned that he may have to change jobs since the work normally assigned to him is declining.
EXHIBIT C

GENERAL WORKPLACE SKILLS

**Communications**
- Communicating ideas
- Taking rational positions
- Making presentations
- Active listening
- Following oral directions
- Giving oral directions
- Nonverbal communications
- Writing for impact

**Self-Management**
- Accepting responsibility
- Avoiding distractions
- Being consistent
- Organizing yourself
- Managing your time
- Showing perseverance
- Taking initiative
- Checking your work
- Correcting mistakes
- Setting goals
- Asserting yourself
- Being decisive
- Maintaining priorities
- Living up to your potential
- Developing a successful attitude
- Living without excuses

**Working with others**
- High performance teams
- Making decisions by consensus
- Working through conflict
- Team behavior
- Providing corrective feedback
- Providing positive feedback
- Handling criticism
- Respecting others

**Understanding organizations**
- Understanding functional areas in organizations
- Employer expectations
- Meeting work realities
- Understanding the paycheck
- Achieving good performance evaluations
- Building credentials
- Working with a boss
- Understanding how changes are made

**Problem-solving**
- Thinking through unstructured problems
- Gathering information
- Assessing information accuracy
- Generating and developing ideas
- Testing ideas
- Separating symptoms from root causes
- Analyzing cause and effect
- Being a critical thinker

**Continuous Learning**
- Strategies for learning a new job
- Understanding your learning style
- Improving your job knowledge
- Assessing your own performance
- Learning from experience
- Advancing the state of the art
• Work habits and attitudes are very fragile, and one negative experience can often outweigh numerous positive experiences. Employees must be able to put their work experiences into proper perspective and to develop work habits and attitudes that reflect their own sense of accomplishment and not the opinions or actions of others.

• With experience, the successful employee should become the expert for specific job skills. Developing this expertise requires a willingness to test job practices in order to develop a ‘science’ of how a job should be done. Employees need to acquire the ability to develop a ‘science’ of their jobs.

• Not all employees begin their careers at the same point with respect to motivation, self-discipline, general job skills, or specific job skills. A job development strategy must recognize these different starting points for individual employees.

The Employee-Centered Workforce Development

The employee-centered workforce development strategy involves a series of interactions between job experiences and skill development (both specific and general job skills). The essence of the employee-centered model is shown in exhibit D.

For the person who lacks basic literacy skills, the employee-centered approach begins with support for the development of the basic skills to be successful in a job. These skills include reading, basic math, and oral communications. In addition, the person must learn how to find a job. It may also be necessary during this step to work on the person’s self esteem and goal setting to assure the individual that a job will be available once the basic literacy is obtained.

During the first stage of employee development, the employee is required to perform limited tasks. Employees in stage 1 must be able to acquire the basic skills of the position by understanding the fundamentals of the job.

Stage 1 jobs often require minimal skills, and employers have limited expectations for employees at this point in their careers. If the employee is left without any support during this first job experience, the employee’s work attitude and work habits may be adversely impacted. Many of the attitude problems that employers face with employees were shaped by these first job experiences.

The employee-centered workforce development strategy would provide first-job employees with a development experience consisting of training in general job skills such as communications, problem solving, and working with others. The training experience will also provide an opportunity to counsel employees on self-management, work habits, and work attitudes. It is envisioned that this educational experience will be provided at a local community and technical college and will carry college credit.
**EXHIBIT D**

**THE JOB EXPERIENCE/SKILLS DEVELOPMENT LADDER**

---

**Job Expectations**

- Mentor others in job skills
- Extending the 'science' of the job
- Mastery of specific job skills
- Some specific job skills
- Acceptable general job skills
- Self-discipline
- Good work habits, attitude

**Stage 4 jobs**
- Job-change skills

**Stage 3 jobs**
- Job-learning skills

**Stage 2 jobs**
- Specific job skills

**Entry level job (Stage 1)**
- General job skills
- Minimal expectations for general job skills

---

**Essential Learning Needs**

- Creativity and innovation
- Change processes
- Leadership
- Job learning strategies
- Job mentoring skills
- Basic science of the job
- Specific job skills
- Self-discipline
- Communications, problem solving, working with others
- Work habits, attitudes
- Reading
- Basic math
- Oral communications
- Finding a job skills

---

© 2000. CESD, Inc. All rights reserved.

An Employee-Centered Workforce Development Strategy (10/20/02)
The goals of the employee-development program for first-time employees are presented below:

- Provide hands-on training in the critical general job skills required for any job.
- Provide personal counseling for employees to help prepare them for advancing their career.
- Provide a career development perspective that helps offset the negative job experiences that many first-time employees face.
- Provide a positive entry experience for continuation of the employee’s education.

The employee who acquires the general job skills and demonstrates strong job performance should advance to a second-stage job. These skills are called ‘control skills’ since they represent the full range of skills necessary to perform the job in an effective way. Without these skills, an employee will not be capable of handling the variety of situations that they are likely to encounter on the job. It is at this point that the employee will begin to develop specific job skills. The employer may provide training in the basic skills needed, but in many cases, the employee may be encouraged to obtain additional education in the specific job skills from the local community and technical college. The roles of the employer and the educational institution in developing specific job skills are described in exhibit E.

**EXHIBIT E**

**EMPLOYER/EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTION ROLES IN SPECIFIC JOB-SKILL EDUCATION**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employer</th>
<th>Educational Institution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Provide specific knowledge for how a specific job is to be performed.</td>
<td>Understand the ‘why’ aspects of the job skills being learned.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learn how to respond to different job situations.</td>
<td>Learn why different job situations require a different response.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learn how to apply judgment.</td>
<td>Learn why to apply judgment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learn by doing.</td>
<td>Learn by understanding.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The employer must train the employee efficiently in order to meet the job requirements. Time spent training an employee is generally a cost to the employer. As a result, the employee learns how to perform a job but not why the job is done in that way. The employee can learn the ‘why’ of the job through a concurrent educational program. As before, the employee would gain college credit for this education.

As employees learn the job and advance their skills, they are likely to advance to a higher level job (stage 3 job) where a broader range of skills is required. As a part of this job, employees are also expected to develop other employees. They are expected to
have a mastery of job skills. These skills are called ‘influence skills’ because they represent an ability to perform the job and react to the environment in which the job is done. Employees possessing these skills have the ability to react to a number of factors influencing the job and manage to get the job done no matter what the job situation is. In many cases, this mastery will originate from the employee’s own learning. Employees will develop their own ‘science’ of the job. Essentially, this science consists of the rules of thumb based on cause-and-effect observations of the employee. The science of the job represents what employees learn about their job from experience. In many cases, the science of the job is not written down.

For stage 3 jobs, employees must learn how to learn. Learning strategies help employees observe what is happening on their job. Learning strategies include understanding cause-and-effect relationships that are used to structure the rules of thumb that comprise the science of the job. In effect, employees learn how to structure what they observe and experience into what they know.

Another key skill learned during the stage 3 jobs is how to mentor other employees. These mentoring skills help employees share their knowledge with others who lack such experience.

The fourth stage of an employee’s development involves a deeper understanding of the entire job. At this stage of development, the employee is constantly observing the process and devising new skills, control strategies, and ways to influence the job. The employee has also developed the insight that will allow him/her to guide other employees through the first three stages of development. Skills at this level are called ‘structural skills’ since the employee is capable of affecting the entire structure of the job and the ability of other employees to do the job.

During the fourth stage of an employee’s development, the employee must develop the skills to see the job in new ways and to lead the process for introducing change to the job. The acquisition of such skills result in an employee who adds value through new ideas that change the basic structure of the job.

Traditional vs. Employee-Centered Workforce Development

The traditional and employee-centered workforce development models are different in many ways, as shown in exhibit F. In general, the traditional workforce development model places a heavy reliance upon formal education programs. Workforce development is front-loaded in that much of the skill development is obtained prior to employment. Workforce development in the traditional model also depends heavily on an instructor who imparts knowledge.

In the employee-centered model, employees acquire knowledge as a career-long process with a heavy emphasis on self-learning. The employee-centered model also places a
heavy emphasis on developing the capacity for learning new skills with expanding job opportunities.

**EXHIBIT F**

**CONTRASTING TRADITIONAL AND EMPLOYEE-CENTERED WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT MODELS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Traditional Workforce Development Model</th>
<th>Employee-Centered Workforce Development Model</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Focuses on skills obtained prior to employment</td>
<td>Focuses on an employee’s ability and motivation to acquire skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focuses on specific job skill requirement changes</td>
<td>Focuses on specific and general job skills and the ability to self-learn new skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tends to be episodic and driven by specific job-skill requirement changes</td>
<td>Is ongoing and driven by an employee’s progression in job responsibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognizes knowledge through academic degrees or certificates</td>
<td>Recognizes knowledge through demonstration of the job</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Summary**

Workforce development is often thought of as the training in specific skills often prior to the start of a career. This strategy often ignores the needs of employees and employers that occur over an employees career. The employee centered approach outlined here offers a strategy that makes workforce development a lifelong journey.

**Author**

Jack Byrd, Jr. is the Executive Director of the Center for Entrepreneurial Studies and Development, Inc., (CESD), a non-profit corporation affiliated with West Virginia University.