Fundamental work skills: A prerequisite for performance

A large percentage of workers entering the workforce do not have the fundamental technical, business or interpersonal skills to become effective employees. And many currently employed workers lack the skills to earn promotions or even stay employed. To fill this critical and costly gap, many organizations are implementing fundamental skills training. First, however, they have to select the specific skills needed as well as delivery methods that will provide the greatest return for their investment.

In the early 1990s, a U.S. Department of Labor study found that more than half of the nation’s young people were leaving school without the knowledge they needed to find and hold a job. Even more alarming, many knew little about such basic workplace demands as showing up on time and calling in when they are sick. Today, this situation continues to pose serious problems for organizational leaders.

Prioritizing needed skills

In a more recent study, AchieveGlobal asked trainers and managers in a variety of industries to rate the importance of 23 job-related communication skills for their organizations. Our findings were similar to those reported in other research. Here are some highlights:

Interpersonal relationships. Respondents rated “resolving issues with coworkers” and “maintaining good relationships” most important. Many said employees need to better understand how their actions affect coworkers and how their work habits directly relate to the success of the company.

Communication skills. “Communicating ideas,” “listening for details” and “knowing when to ask for or offer help” were viewed as most critical.

Self-esteem and work ethic. Nearly all respondents indicated the following as important factors for success:
• accepting responsibilities
• showing respect for self and others
• remaining focused amid change and challenge
• taking pride in a job well done
• managing work priorities
• managing personal growth

A common concern was that many entry-level workers have had little exposure to the real world of work. Often, they have unrealistic salary expectations and tend to make assumptions about career planning and promotion. And even experienced line and staff-support workers may not be prepared to cope with today’s changing work environments, overcome obstacles and solve problems.

If your employees need fundamental skills training, here are some questions to consider

1. How many of your line and staff-support employees, and job applicants, lack basic interpersonal work skills?
2. How is that affecting your operations, image and bottom line?
3. How is that affecting customer perceptions?
4. In what areas is a lack of skills most crucial to your competitive status?
5. How will you gain commitment from middle management?
6. How will you reward use of the new skills? Incentives? Performance appraisals?
7. Who will participate in the training?
8. How will you tie the training to organizational strategy and vision?
9. What resources will you use to implement the training? In-house, vendor?
10. What coaching or other follow-up activities are required?
11. How will you ensure enthusiastic response from line and staff-support employees?
12. How will you communicate the importance of the program?
13. What are the learning styles of the people you need to train?
14. What barriers (such as language, literacy or culture) might exist?
training's value in helping them overcome these barriers. The respondents, from a variety of work, educational and vocational settings, cited their personal deficiencies in basic communication, interpersonal, coping or problem-solving skills.

One trainee explained that he didn’t know how to handle confrontations. Training in communication skills and how to handle disagreements helped him to better understand another person’s point of view so he wouldn’t be creating uncomfortable situations.

Another participant described an ongoing conflict with another employee that resulted in both losing their jobs. She commented that if she had had the training earlier, they might have been able to “talk it out.”

A team leader in a corporate shipping department explained that the training helped him improve communication and team skills and be more effective in his job. Some participants said their coworkers needed the training. A corporate mail-room employee described some of the people he works with as “just there to get in their eight hours.” He said training would help these workers take their jobs more seriously.

The trainer’s perspective

We also asked several trainers about their experiences in training these workers. One respondent indicated that 30 percent of Welfare-To-Work and School-To-Work populations lacked fundamental reading and writing skills.

Some participants learn more successfully through personal stories and role-play. Others have a difficult time with the teamwork required for such activities. Still others, due to literacy issues, do not do well with paper-based learning.

Another expert indicated that many line and support-staff employees have difficulty “working within a team, communicating orally, speaking up in meetings, knowing when to request help and understanding their job responsibilities.”

To overcome these barriers, fundamental skills training programs need to include methods that meet various learning styles and competency levels.

Fundamental skills training and bottom-line results

Many Fortune 500 companies believe that basic communications skills training pays back significant dividends. A Motorola representative estimates a gain of $30 for every $1 his company invests in employee training. Levi-Strauss & Co. experienced record sales and profits after it instituted a new training program in 1995.

Marriott International realized a savings of $4 for every dollar spent on work-skills training and a social assistance hot line for Welfare-To-Work employees. This gain reflected a reduction in management hours spent helping employees with time-management and interpersonal problems.

What does all this mean to leaders of today’s organizations? The message is clear. Employee training in fundamental skills is a prerequisite for success in today’s diverse and demanding workplace.

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