Chapter 33
Involving Employers in Training Low–Skilled Workers for Technology Jobs:
A Chicken–and–Egg Problem

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ABSTRACT

Scholars, practitioners, and policy makers have for decades asserted a need for employer participation in workforce training but have at the same time lamented that such participation has been and still is lacking. This chapter identifies reasons why employers should have an interest in becoming active participants in training and developing the technology workforce of the future. To overcome the unique challenges of the next few decades brought on by globalization and international competition, employers must be more actively involved in the development of low-skilled workers for high-skill technology jobs. This chapter discusses why a highly educated, highly skilled technology workforce is needed and why low-skilled workers must be trained and developed, considers the particular challenges for low-skilled workers, presents commonly suggested solutions to the problem of preparing low-skilled workers for high-skill technology work, and finally reviews what employers should do, how they stand to benefit, and how they can be involved more effectively.

INTRODUCTION

In October 2012, a report detailing the struggles of a tool manufacturing company to find qualified employees appeared in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. It went on to say that according to a recent survey, 82% of manufacturing companies were ready to hire if only there were enough qualified appli-

cants (Giegerich, 2012). Then in March 2013, an Associated Press story reported on the fact that many low-wage workers do not take advantage of training opportunities for better jobs, either in their current workplaces or elsewhere, and stated that only 41% of low-wage workers (as opposed to 77% in the entire workforce) rated education as very important (Hananel & Agiesta, 2013). It appears

that well-paying technology jobs are available in some industries, yet low-wage workers are so pessimistic about their advancement chances that they will not undergo the needed training. In turn, both industry and worker needs go unfulfilled.

Since 1984, numerous studies and reports have exhorted workforce education practitioners, policy makers, and industry in the United States to be more proactive and more cooperative in high-skilled workforce training. Two examples shall suffice here [salient phrases were italicized by the author]:

[T]he educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people. … If only to keep and improve on the slim competitive edge we still retain in world markets, we must dedicate ourselves to the reform of our educational system for the benefit of all. (The National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1984, pp. 5-7)

Employers throughout our country face a diminishing pool of workers who are qualified for the critical jobs needed to keep America's private sector competitive in today's global economy. … If that trend continues unchecked, the future of our nation is in jeopardy. (Hull & Hinckley, 2007, p. vi)

As these alarming quotations indicate, the problem of a lack of qualified workers is not new, and past interventions have apparently not happened or failed to correct the problem. As the United States continues to emerge from the recent "Great Recession," evidence that this economic downturn was not simply "more of the same" but rather a sign of deep shifts in the global economy continues to accumulate. In addition, the United States now faces technological changes that Gordon (2009) contended require more industry-critical high-skill jobs to be created and more workers to be trained for those jobs if economic recovery and growth are to be sustained. In other words, industry

can no longer focus on low-skill work and must encourage and support low-skilled workers wishing to receive additional education and training, and low-skilled workers can no longer afford to cultivate a pessimistic outlook and reject training and education as pointless.

What is the challenge that makes today's situation so different from training needs of the past? For one, the development of modern technology has resulted in a demand for workers with higher skills than required of them in the past (Holzer, Raphael, & Stoll, 2002; Judy & D'Amico, 1997). In the past, technology often led to deskilling and an increase in low-wage labor, but the complexity of modern technology no longer allows this route. To avoid a situation in which a social and economic gulf opens between those able to meet the rising knowledge and skill standards and those who do not, workers must be trained and prepared more effectively for the workplace (Judy & D'Amico, 1997).

Consequently, there have for many years been frequent calls to change the workforce education system, particularly with regard to employers. Hodnett (1957) had already stated it clearly: "The need for better understanding through closer industry-college relations is a matter of national importance" (p. 12). He complained that a lack of interaction led to both sides' missing out on all the benefits such relations could provide. Lipsky (1973) also argued that employer involvement was the key ingredient in successful workforce training, and Hull and Hinckley (2007) lamented that such involvement had been sorely lacking. The ultimate consensus was that employers not only must but also should want to participate more actively in workforce training because of the many benefits that can be realized. Workforce education professionals similarly can no longer afford a short-term view of the world of work but need to develop a global view that helps them see beyond their current workplace (Aguinis & Kraiger, 2009) to enhance the workforce in ways never done before, as stated by Gordon (2009):

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