

Workforce development: It's a team effort

by Graham Nasby, ISA Hamilton Past-President

It was more than 25 years ago that American author Robert Fulghum penned his book *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*. In this short, but witty, book he talks about how the many skills that we use day to day in our jobs are based on foundational skills that we learn in our first year of school. Play nice, listen, share, put things back where you found them, clean up your own mess...you get the idea.

As we age, however, many of us seem to forget these important lessons. We forget that to learn new things requires effort, and you have to work with others to accomplish new things; thus, we end up with the boondoggle now known as workforce development.

Put simply, workforce development is about making sure that our workers, whether they be young or old, have the skills to support our many industries. Decades ago, industry usually addressed this need: plants would hire young people, often right out of high school, and then spend years training them how to do their jobs. For many years this system worked well, but modern economic realities make this approach less feasible. Many industries simply cannot afford to retain the steady numbers of staff that they used to, so the question is what can we do instead?

Many in our sector like the appeal of simple solutions: Make the employers do this, as they are the ones profiting from the workers; colleges/universities should be providing employment-ready grads; the government should be picking up the slack and providing training programs; or all should fall to the employees, as they are really the ones who should be looking after their own destinies. The problem with each of these approaches is that, just like our industry is saying, the task is simply too large for any one group to do it alone.

So, instead, we need to work together, with each of us taking on a role. That is not to say that this proposed cooperation will not take effort. If we all take on part of the responsibility for workforce development and share the load, the task is not as insurmountable as it seems.

Let's take a look at some of the things we can do together:

In our high schools, we need to ensure that courses in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) are readily available for all students, and that students are encouraged to take them. We also need to make sure students learn to read and write properly, so they can effectively communicate when they enter the workforce.

In our colleges/universities, we need to ensure both theoretical and hands-on programs are readily available, at an affordable cost, to give students the background they need to start their careers. We also need to make sure that programs are available not just for young people, but also for those upgrading their skills or pursuing second careers due to job loss or because of a new interest. It is also critical that employers take an active role

by providing feedback on the skills that they most need from program graduates, to keep education relevant to modern business needs.

Employers need to spend the time and effort to continue to develop their employees. This does not mean just training courses, but also a combination of on-the-job training, mentoring employees, and ensuring employees are given the opportunities to grow their skills over time with new challenges. Employers should also not be afraid of hiring someone who they can train into a job, rather than always looking for ready-made skill sets. Studies have shown that empowered long-term employees are generally more productive.

Governments, through good policy, can put in place favorable programs to encourage employers to cultivate employees. Well-applied tax incentives and grants can foster healthy companies, which can then afford to develop their workforces. Cities and towns can also create favorable business conditions to encourage businesses to stay in their locale and maintain stable workforces.

Technical associations, like ISA, also have an important role to play by providing technical resources, such as publications, conferences, and training courses, as well as networking communities, to support the development of workers over the course of their careers.

The above are just a few examples of how we can work together to solve the workforce development challenge. As Fulghum put it, "when you go out into the world, watch out for traffic, hold hands, and stick together." Together we can take the issue of workforce development and turn it into one of our largest competitive advantages.

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