

Academic Credentials: a Challenge to Training

a call for total employee development and better performance prediction

James R. Wilson

Training was developed with the concept that through formal programming a person can be brought to effective performance skills with the lowest total investment of time and manpower. With this in mind organizations of all sorts came to establish training programs in order to obtain the performance and, hopefully, the overall savings generalized above.

It seems ludicrous that at the same time as so many organizations started to invest in training, they adopted in their personnel policies requirements of academic achievement which did not necessarily reflect job performance values.

In other words, while one hand was going to a performance criterion, the other was going to a credential criterion. Unfortunately, the training profession has not seen fit to fight the credential criteria policy. More often it supports and proliferates this policy through establishing these criteria for its own positions.

Academic Credentials

What is the need for academic credentials? Why did they come about? Why have they proliferated to such an extent?

There are as many answers as there are people. Different rationale is used to explain, but very frequently that rationale is based in bias rather than fact. The complexity of the job, the inflation of egos and selection discrimination are among the reasons.

It is interesting to realize that all professions had their initial perpetuation through apprenticeships. Now it is virtually impossible to enter a profession without some sort of academic credential. In fact, credential requirements are being raised and new ones created each year. Apprenticeships have fallen away from most places other than the trades, and even

here their meaning has been altered.

In the past months, more and more major publications have come out with articles criticizing the academic credential system. *Fortune* in November 1970, and *Harvard Business Review* of January-February 1971, are two notable cases.

In addition, whole programs have been developed in reaction to this system. Though not recognized as such, the programs for development of the "disadvantaged" are reactions to the credential system. In the simplest form the disadvantage is less minority race, drop-out etc., than it is the disadvantage of not having the academic credentials necessary to be able to make a career selection.

Looked on in this light, the term "disadvantaged" needs to be proliferated. As it is today, many graduates of institutions of higher learning are unacceptable outside their degree area. While they have more opportunity than the drop-out, they are also limited.

The number of positions that require licensure today is increasing, just as are the educational requirements for licensure. This has been with the encouragement of the federal government, which has been very prolific with requirements for academic credentials, while at the same time has put up funds to help the disadvantaged overcome their lack of credentials. The effect of licensure is being recognized as protective of the licensed more than protection of the public. The licensure tests one must pass are geared to academic performance rather than performance in the profession.

It is interesting to note, as things are now, that Hippocrates and Galen would not be able to practice medicine; Abraham Lincoln would not be able to practice law (with some exceptions); Florence Nightingale would not be

able to be registered as a nurse; Edison, Henry Ford, and the Wright brothers would not be hired as engineers. Alexander Graham Bell would be limited to just a few positions with the phone companies, under the assumption that some phone company might want a person trained in speech and hearing problems.

Educational Value

It should be stated that there is value in education. In every aspect of the nation, the value of an education should be supported. But the value is not one of predicting performance.

With education, the national population is in a better position to meet the challenge of life. This of course, is a generalization and can not be held true for all people. When a person who is educated is obtainable, this can be a point in his favor, as long as he can still perform.

What Does it Cost?

The cost of the academic credential system is staggering. First, there is cost we all must bear, that of the educational system. Many educators are decrying the devaluation of higher education; a devaluation forced by the need to provide more credentials for more people even if there is an increasing loss of validity of the credentials.

There is a reaction cost to be considered. The young people who protest being forced to attend college, who fight the system for placing more value on a degree than on individual worth, cause an incalculable cost. It is incalculable not because of the riots and sit-ins, but for the damage to individuals and the radiation of the damage they feel.

A more easily determined cost is the price we all pay in our organizations. In filling a position which requires academic creden-

tials we pay a higher price than we would need to, or had to before the credentials. A higher price is caused by higher salaries and frequently higher turnover.

Perhaps the most damaging cost is the price we pay in not being able to advance employees. We can guess at what happens to someone when he finds out he can go no further without academic credentials. What is his feeling toward the organization and what happens to his performance?

Special Programming

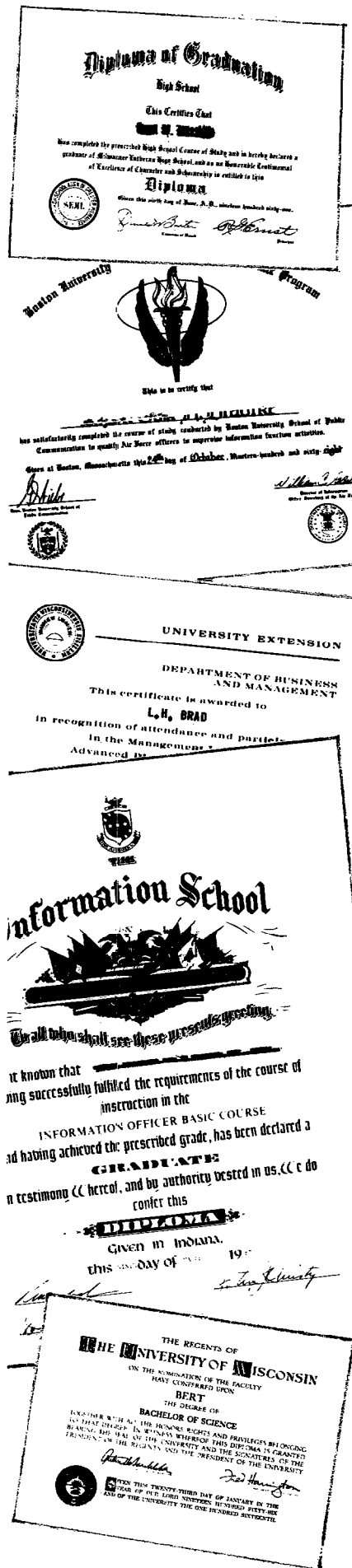
In recent years there has been a great deal of consideration toward helping people gain academic credentials. It seems strange that in an area when so much has been done to destroy discriminatory practices, that one of the most practiced methods of discrimination has been reinforced.

We are struggling today to create career ladders; to develop programs where a person can be developed on the job and go one step to the next as long as he is capable of performing. It is a struggle because no matter how we start to build we soon reach the point where an academic credential requirement stops us. How meaningful is a career ladder of three rungs? One of the complaints of life today appears to be that we are willing to spend a lot of money and resources with little consideration toward results in terms of individuals.

Performance Criteria

A great deal of lip service has been given to the need for performance criteria. We all seem to agree with the basic premise that the person who should have the job is the person available who can best perform in the job successfully. It is in the next step where the division of routes occurs.

Basically, we say we must establish some criteria by which



we can predict how a person will perform in a job. Various tests have been tried, with results that generally are not reliable enough, at a reasonable cost, to merit use. We have used academic standards but again studies show this to be unreliable.

In fact, the only apparently reliable prediction of performance is to see how the employee performed at a similar task, either for you or for someone else. While you run into obvious weaknesses, running from lies to personality conflicts that influence this criteria system, it has proved to be reasonably successful. In hiring a drill press operator the most predictable performance comes from a person who has been a drill press operator. When hiring a fiscal manager, one who has been a fiscal manager successfully, will probably give the best performance, assuming in both cases that there is reasonable orientation before evaluation.

The same sort of criteria can be applied to the professions. A person who has demonstrated his ability to perform neurosurgery to a neurosurgeon, panel of neurosurgeons or both is capable of performing neurosurgery, even, in theory, if he can't read or write.

Performance criteria should be very readily attainable for employees. If the selection of an existing employee is contemplated, a review of his performance at his current position, training and even subjective opinion as to his growth potential can be a part of his performance prediction.

Here again, we have the problem of lip service, because for the most part we really do not know all the jobs performed in our organizations. Yet, if we do not know them it is hard to determine performance.

Some attention should be paid to the structure of jobs as well. If

performance is to be criteria, there needs to be some requirement in each job for demonstrating performance at the next higher step. If this does not exist, selection becomes completely subjective, with an increase in the application of the Peter Principle.

The Challenge to Training

In order to meet the challenge of today, the training professional must grasp the broader concept of development. If the training professional is true to his profession, he must refuse to be sidetracked with the simple nuts and bolts operational programs, and involve himself in the problem of developing each employee to his highest performance level.

There will be only one president, of course, but there is no reason why everyone should not be developed to rise to this point. Obviously, not all employees will be able to rise this high. But it is equally obvious that if the person who is chosen is the person who, of the top people, has demonstrated the best performance potential, he will stand the best chance of success.

The concept of total development may sound very ambitious, even God-like. This should not be. It is rather a concept of giving all employees the opportunity of growth and the encouragement to grow. They have, and rightly so, the right to say "enough," just as the organization has the right to use selection criteria.

Total development means that the training professional needs to apply himself. He must know his resources and utilize them all. He needs to know the organization and its requirements. He needs to know the employees. Mostly he needs to provide opportunity.

Opportunity comes in many forms and differs according to the role played by the employee. It may be the ordinary in-plant and

external resources programming most people use today. It may be using educational systems, not for academic credentials but for the fastest, most economical methods of presenting developmental programs. It should be added that in using educational facilities, it is well to get the facility to provide what is necessary to the employee rather than spend the time and resources in trying to bend the employee to the institution. It may be necessary to present programs which have been considered strictly academic for in-plant programming. While in most organizations it would seem ridiculous to hear of a custodian being excused for a program in logic, it may be the course that is necessary.

A Possible Course of Action

Each training professional will have to evolve a program of meeting the challenge before us that will be most readily assimilated by his organization. Some points of commonality should exist. The following is a suggestion:

1. Sell the concepts of development of the individual's opportunity for growth, and respect for a person's individual performance. They need to be sold to the entire organization, starting with yourself.
2. Recognize academic credential systems as costly, discriminatory and of questionable validity. Eliminate them.
3. Concurrently with one and two above, establish accurate, performance oriented job analysis for the entire organization, and develop and institute a reasonably accurate method of performance evaluation.
4. Structure or restructure the organization so there will be reasonable growth steps in each position.
5. Encourage employees to pattern their own growth, and set their own career limits.

6. Structure the training unit to be a purveyor of programs of opportunity and catalyst of individual development.

This is not an attack on the value of education. It is meant to show that the challenge to training is to create opportunity.

Meeting this challenge is very difficult for the training professional. It means in most instances, advocating changes in systems and practices that now seem sacrosanct, but are daily coming more under attack. While it is necessary for the entire organization to realize the need for change, the training professional is the key. He must advocate the necessary changes, as he is the person who must bring opportunity to the front.

A major dissension of youth today seems to be that society is forcing them to do things they do not wish to do, to accept labels they do not wish to accept, rather than giving them the chance to work toward what they want to be. While youth is expressing this concept (not always in a way that is readily understood,) they are being supported by many of their elders who resent how they have been pushed into a label and out from opportunity for individual growth. There are too many people like the practicing engineer who was told he could go no further because he had not actually completed high school. Lack of opportunity for individual satisfaction breeds dissension and dissension brings change, forced or not.

James R. Wilson is manpower development coordinator, University of Minnesota Hospitals, Minneapolis. He was formerly on the faculty of South Dakota State University, Brookings. He has worked in training and development for 12 years and operated as a consultant primarily to service industries for the past six years. His special interest is the application of the behavioral sciences to the training situation. Mr. Wilson has a Bachelor of Arts degree and is currently working on graduate programs in industrial relations and psychology. He is a member of the Southern Minnesota ASTD Chapter.

“Degree Mills” Exposed in new Book

Two Orthodox rabbis pleaded guilty to fraud charges for swindling prospective students out of more than \$200,000 for mail-order degrees from nonexistent Marlowe University, according to a recent New York Times story. Another Times story reveals that “a number of people in the fields of education and mental health in the New York City area — some in responsible academic positions, many others treating emotional problems or teaching others how to — are equipped with doctorates from an unaccredited Bible college in Canada.”

In a just published book, *Degrees for Sale*, Arco Publishing Co., 219 Park Ave. South, New York, N.Y. 10003, Lee Porter exposes America's educational underworld, explores the problems resulting from its activities and suggests solutions. The author is executive director of course programs at University College of Syracuse University and holds a fully accredited doctoral degree in education.

The book's principal focus is on unethical mail-order colleges that sell academic degrees and bilk the public out of an estimated \$75 million a year. Other areas of educational malpractice are also covered — vocational training schools which promise employment, then don't provide it, fraudulent counseling services, ghost writing services for term papers and theses, and other related abuses.

According to Mr. Porter, degree mills exist for a variety of reasons — society's tremendous emphasis on academic achievement, lack of legal regulations controlling educational institutions and dictating the degrees they can or cannot award, and of course, profit. Though mail-order degrees may be had for as little as \$10, most are in the \$500 range, and that's a handsome profit indeed for an “institution” whose costs are limited for the most part, to printing diplomas.