

THE NEW WORK ETHIC

BY ROGER E.
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There has been a growing concern about the sluggish productivity in the United States. Improving our productivity will not be easy since numerous factors have contributed toward that decline, such as working conditions, obsolete machinery, etc. Records of recent years have made worker performance a topic of intense scrutiny and debate. An old joke is being revived in organizations lately where one executive asks another "How many people work in your organization?" and the other replies, "About half." It is far from a joke, since our productivity, as a nation, has declined during recent years. Most business leaders and economists agree that without workers' support the task of improving productivity will be nearly impossible.

Worker attitude, and their skills have been identified as having some effect on productivity. Recent studies by the University of Michigan's Research Center show worker dissatisfaction at the high-

est point in at least a decade. Opinion Research Corp. of Princeton, N.J., shows a portrait of deepening discontent among American Workers through analysis of data gathered over a 27-year period (1950-1977). As employees have become more educated and have developed new values, their expectations for responsiveness from their companies have changed. Workers, in fact, have an expanding sense of what is due them as rights of employment. Many younger workers are more apt than their older counterparts to reject transfers, decline promotions or refuse to work overtime for personal reasons. While companies seem to be doing more today than during the '50s, what they are doing today is simply not being viewed by employees as acceptable.

Other studies reveal that affluence and success of the younger workers' parents exact another toll on middle-class youth. Gail Sheehy, author of "Passages," stated, "following their fathers' route to happiness is seen by many younger men as a fate marginally better

than suicide. They dread waking up at the age of 55 from the money, power, fame, success grind they watched their fathers pursue to find they have only a few years left to enjoy life between the first and final heart attack."

Is the weakening of productivity growth in the United States a result of a deterioration in attitudes toward work? Most economists think not, but Thomas A. Murphy, chairman of General Motors, said, "Our national production rate has fallen behind those of other countries because many of them are prepared to make more sacrifices than we are. The workers of Japan, for instance, are motivated by a relentless work ethic. As a nation, they are prepared to work harder, even cut corners to keep goods flowing abroad."

It took seven Japanese workers to produce as much as one American in 1950; now the ratio is two to one. It took three West Germans to match the output of one American in 1950; now the ratio is less than three to two. U.S. productivity has not even kept pace with countries normally considered

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economically stagnant.

Of course, the problem is hardly ever just one facet like attitude or work ethic. Part of the problem may be that workers are unable to do the work that is available. Part of it has to do with lack of skills and this is one of the areas where training could be most important in the next decade. However, it will be costly.

Peter Drucker wrote in the *Wall Street Journal* regarding profits and costs. His chief point was there is no such thing as profits, there are only costs; that is, if a product costs you less to produce, you will simply make more profit. Let's make no mistake about it: "training is a cost!" Every enterprise must measure its ability to cover the costs of its basic resources, its people, physical plant and capital. Machinery, employees, development of marketing and distribution systems are all understood as business costs. Training and development are part of these costs. Believing you can hire people who fully understand their jobs, your company, and how to competently do your business without expending any training and development effort is like looking for a free lunch. Training is as necessary an expense as any other part of the business and the question is not "should you have training or not?" but rather, "are you getting the best for your training dollar?"

Insurance Against Setbacks

All free enterprise is based on some form of risk taking. Investments are made on future expectations. In most all of our business ventures we seek some form of insurance — some way of protecting our investment against unforeseen catastrophes. Investment in human resources through improved hiring practices and improved skills through training is a way of providing some protection against productivity losses due to changes: changes in work values, changes in the economy, and, especially, changes in the tools we use to do our jobs.

Insurance premiums are paid to protect against loss. So also should training and development "premiums" be included in your annual

profit planning or budget cycle. The loss of productivity caused by employee inability to deal with a new technology, or loss of key personnel due to retirement, can have a catastrophic impact on your business. Such losses can be covered by a policy of business planning that includes individual training and development.

Unlike some types of insurance, training and development can pay off while you are still around to enjoy the benefits. Robert Mager and Peter Pipe, in their book, "Analyzing Performance Problems," cited this example: "On a production line making very tiny products, for example, a foreman complained that one (employee) . . . made considerably more mistakes than anyone else. Like the others, she peered through a binocular microscope to see the tiny parts and assist in their assembly. She assembled the same product as the others, and under the same conditions. But she was considerably 'clumsier' than the others. The foreman wanted to get rid of her; that was his solution.

"This case came to the attention of the training department, and its members looked around and asked questions. They quickly discovered that (she) . . . was not looking through the microscope with both eyes as she should have been. She looked only with one eye at a time. She didn't know that looking with both eyes at the same time made any difference when the instrument was properly adjusted. But without the depth perception that comes with using both eyes simultaneously, she could not see well enough to assemble accurately. Hence, she was labeled 'clumsy.'

"After only two or three minutes' instruction in the proper use of the microscope, (her) . . . work was the equal of all the others in the department. She wasn't clumsy, or unmotivated, or incapable of learning. She was simply prevented from doing the job well by lack of information."

Many supervisors ask newcomers to learn a task by copying skilled employees. This has long been known as the "sink or swim" approach of learning a task. "But,"

you may ask, "why do my workers need training to learn the skills and information? Why can't they learn them on the job, with some help from an experienced employee?" No one can perform a task well without the proper information and skills, and experience is often a slow and poor instructor.

You may think the "sink or swim" approach is a form of training. Not so. The two are as different as night and day. The difference is not one of location. Training can take place on the job as well as in the classroom. The difference is planning.

A training program will have objectives and written plans for reaching the objectives whether in the classroom or on the job. These plans map out the *order* that information will be presented. The plans map out the *way* that information will be presented — the setting (e.g. a lecture or group discussion, or the workplace); the media (e.g. books, films, chalkboards, film projectors or the actual working equipment). These plans describe the special exercises and devices that will help employees learn the necessary skills. A training program will have tests or other evaluation instruments. Tests tell which objectives were met and where the training program needs to be improved.

An experiment with the task of mending cloth showed the difference training can make in learning skills and knowledge. Before the experiment, newcomers had to learn the task by copying other menders. It took the average novice a year or more to mend as well as experienced employees. Then researchers studied the task and set up a training program with specific objectives. Now trainees mend as well as the experienced after 12 weeks of training and practice. A further advantage is that now almost all of the trainees can handle the new and more difficult weaves. In case after case, training has helped employees learn a task more swiftly than the "sink or swim" approach. In case after case, training has increased the percentage of employees who

succeed in learning a task.

Supplementary Training

Sometimes, training is not the best answer when a job aid can be substituted for a specialized skill or knowledge. Job aids hold information of value to the task. They are placed at the work site, and workers are free to use the job aid while they perform the task. Dictionaries are job aids. The instructions printed on machines are job aids. Calculators with square root keys are job aids. When job aids exist, workers don't have to memorize the information. Give them extra or better equipment. Thanks to new or improved machines, many employees no longer have to learn perceptual and motor skills or large amounts of information to do a task. Drivers no longer have to learn the skills involved in changing gears, because their cars have automatic transmissions. Clerks no longer have to learn stenography, because their supervisors have dictaphones. Make sure your performance standards aren't tougher than necessary to get the job done. The more difficult the standard, the more difficult the skills that have to be learned. If you can lower them, you may cut training costs.

Another way to reduce training costs is to give the task to a person who has already learned the skills and knowledge.

Give tasks that use the same skills and knowledge to the same person. Then only one person will have to learn the skills and knowledge. When filling vacancies, look for persons who have already learned a good many of the skills and knowledge of value to the positions' tasks. These suggestions can help you cut training costs. Take care, however, that savings in training costs will not be more than offset by new problems. For example, it would be a mistake to hire a person with all the job skills, but who would not fit into the organization for other reasons.

The personnel — human relations — persons will play significant roles in identifying training needs and discovering what training programs have been effective. You will, of course, have records

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on each employee's past experiences in training; by looking at those records you can, at times, easily and quickly tell what an employee has learned and what training programs have been effective. But, records are sometimes vague, especially if it reveals nothing more than a title. You may have to employ the technique of observation. That is, watching employees to see what skills and knowledge are evident in their work. Observation is a good way to spot the good performers. Then you can interview them or test to find out what skills were learned through training or on the job.

A training need may be uncovered through an employee's request. Employees can often tell more easily than supervisors when they need training. After all, nobody has more data about each of our skills than we do ourselves. As mentioned earlier, tests can be helpful, but as each of you know, when using tests, it is important to be sure that they cover only those skills and knowledge of value to the tasks you are trying to predict success on, and, of course, be validated.

Needs of the Manager for the '80s

I can't think of anything as important to an athlete than a good coach, nor can I think of anything more important to a business group than a manager to whom all can look for leadership. Emerson said, "An institution is the lengthened shadow of one man." That being true, a skilled manager can have tremendous impact on the productivity of the organization.

A recent bulletin from the American Society for Training and Development reported: "The training and development of future managers represents a challenge that we have yet adequately to address . . .," according to a conclusion from the Diebold Group's *Management and Business: A Briefing Book*. The book is a report of the consulting firm's analysis of changes in the business world over the next 25 years and, in particular, the way information technology advances will affect the world of work.

According to the report, some of the essential characteristics managers of the future must develop are:

An Effective User of Information: Accurate information available for the asking requires this must include better understanding of what information to use; the ability to determine accurately those factors to be included in the decision making process; and the ability to recognize opposing factors and tradeoffs.

Capable of Remote Management: The manager must be able to manage more by "remote control" since he/she will not see subordinates every day in the office.

Flexible: The manager must be oriented toward change in the way managers work, in the way staff works and in the way the company functions and responds to discontinuities.

Work Well in a Participative Environment: Workers will have a voice in decision making; executives must be willing to listen to and accommodate worker participation.

Work Well in Unstructured Environment: Less face to face contact with people will result from work day broken up to accommodate customer needs and modern work schedule.

Highly Motivated and Disciplined: Working in unstructured environments requires high degrees of concentration. Knowing how to use time to best advantage will continue to be important.

Can the Trend Be Reversed?

Increasing productivity or, at least, minimizing its decline will be a continuing business concern. Personnel and training departments have an important role to play, because workers' attitudes and skills have a significant effect on their productivity. Better personnel practices can improve attitudes and training can improve skills. And, if workers have the right attitudes and the right skills we have every right to expect improvements in productivity.

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