

Toward a More Literate Workforce

MARINE
LIBRARY

GUSTAVE
FLAUBERT

INTERNATIONAL
COLLECTORS
LIBRARY

WALDEN
AND OTHER
WRITINGS

HENRY
DAVID
THOREAU

INTERNATIONAL
COLLECTORS
LIBRARY

INTERNATIONAL
COLLECTORS
LIBRARY

HOT
MELBA
WINSTON



IN THIS ARTICLE

*Literacy, Basic and Remedial Skills,
Industry/Academic Cooperation,
Case Studies*

Illiteracy is not a new problem, but it is receiving widespread attention. This is partly due to the growth of illiteracy in the past two decades. Much of the blame for the increase in the United States can be traced to the decline of public education. Our society's tendency to favor images over words and numbers also contributes to the problem. • Experts estimate that anywhere from 20 million to 80 million American adults are functionally illiterate, depending on how one defines the term. Millions more Americans, perhaps as many as half of the adult workforce, do not read, write, or compute well enough to perform their jobs satisfactorily. • A second reason for the growing interest in workplace literacy is the changing nature of work. Many production workers of the past were required only to follow instructions and perform specialized, rote tasks. Workers today must apply the problem solving, interpersonal, and statistical reasoning skills that were once asked only of the college-educated.

DID YOU KNOW THAT THERE ARE THREE TYPES OF LITERACY, EACH WITH DIFFERENT IMPLICATIONS FOR EMPLOYERS? HERE IS AN OVERVIEW OF THE LITERACY ISSUE, FOLLOWED BY THREE CASE HISTORIES OF SOME PUBLIC AND PRIVATE ORGANIZATIONS THAT TEAMED UP TO BUILD LITERACY.

BY DONALD J. FORD

As more companies foster team environments and require employees to accept responsibility for the quality of their work, they are raising the required level of job literacy to unprecedented heights and exposing a variety of literacy-related work problems.

Three forms of literacy

To understand the growing literacy problem in America, it is important to differentiate among several forms of literacy.

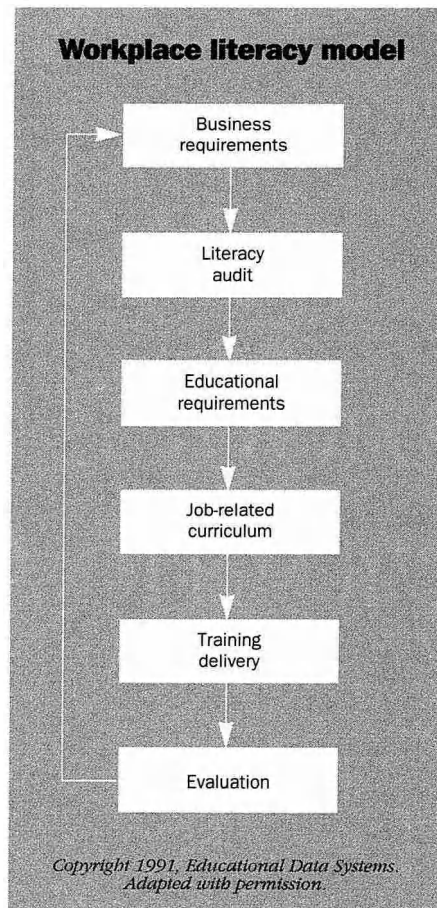
The traditional view of literacy focuses on the ability to read and write in an academic setting. An academically literate person can use a broad range of communication and computation skills to confront life's challenges. Such a level of literacy today generally presupposes a college education.

A second view of literacy that has gained popularity is called functional literacy. This refers to the ability to comprehend and use information that people need to participate effectively in society, such as the ability to open and manage a checking account at a bank. Functional literacy is less demanding than academic literacy, because it requires comprehension of a more limited set of information.

Recently, a third form of literacy has emerged: workplace literacy. This encompasses the basic communication and computation skills required to successfully perform the day-to-day operations of a job. An employee demonstrates workplace literacy when he or she reads and follows instructions contained in a manufacturing process sheet to assemble a product. This is the form of literacy that employers are most concerned about, because of its direct connection to work, to quality, and to job performance.

A systematic approach

Workplace illiteracy is not always obvious. Many illiterate employees become skillful at hiding their problems by becoming keen observers and mimicking the behaviors they see around them. Fearful of the consequences, they are loath to admit they can't read, write, or compute. So, many companies are unaware of liter-



AS MORE
COMPANIES FOSTER
TEAM ENVIRONMENTS,
THEY ARE RAISING
THE REQUIRED LEVEL
OF JOB LITERACY TO
UNPRECEDENTED
HEIGHTS

acy problems among their workers.

Managers may misinterpret illiteracy as a motivation problem ("she doesn't want to work"), or a technical problem ("he doesn't know how to do his job") when the root cause that is preventing an employee from performing a job may be poor basic skills.

Some of the potential signs of illiteracy:

- ▶ an influx of new immigrants into the workforce

- ▶ declines in the quality of products or services
- ▶ unsuccessful implementation of new technologies
- ▶ increases in accidents and safety problems.

If a company is experiencing one or more of those factors, chances are good that illiteracy is a problem in the workplace.

As companies awaken to their own workplace literacy problems, they sometimes rush out and hire consultants or teachers who provide them with off-the-shelf academic or functional literacy programs. Most of these companies wind up disappointed when nothing changes. Every employee should be encouraged to achieve functional literacy, but this alone will not solve work-related literacy problems, because of the specialized technical vocabulary and processes used in the workplace today.

To avoid disappointment, it is important to assess and analyze the problems that workplace illiteracy is causing and to design a training program that uses workplace materials and processes as the basis of the curriculum. A company can realize immediate payoffs when employees learn the language and basic skills needed to perform their jobs. Once they have mastered that limited set of literacy skills, they can be referred to adult schools or community colleges to gain functional and academic literacy skills.

The figure shows a model for workplace literacy programs. This model, based on the experience of Educational Data Systems in Dearborn, Michigan, includes six key steps:

- ▶ Determine the business requirements for a literacy program.
- ▶ Conduct a literacy audit of the jobs to be included in the program.
- ▶ Determine the educational requirements by comparing the current skills of workers with the skills necessary to their jobs.
- ▶ Develop a job-related (contextual) curriculum based on the materials and skills used on the job.
- ▶ Deliver the training program to workers, using on-site classes, computers, video, on-the-job training, or other alternatives.

► Evaluate the training to determine if job performance has improved and if the business requirements have been met.

Companies that follow this model should be able to affect employee performance quickly and to alleviate the most pressing literacy problems in the workplace. The model can help them avoid wasting time and money on unfocused academic literacy programs that cannot properly address workplace literacy problems.

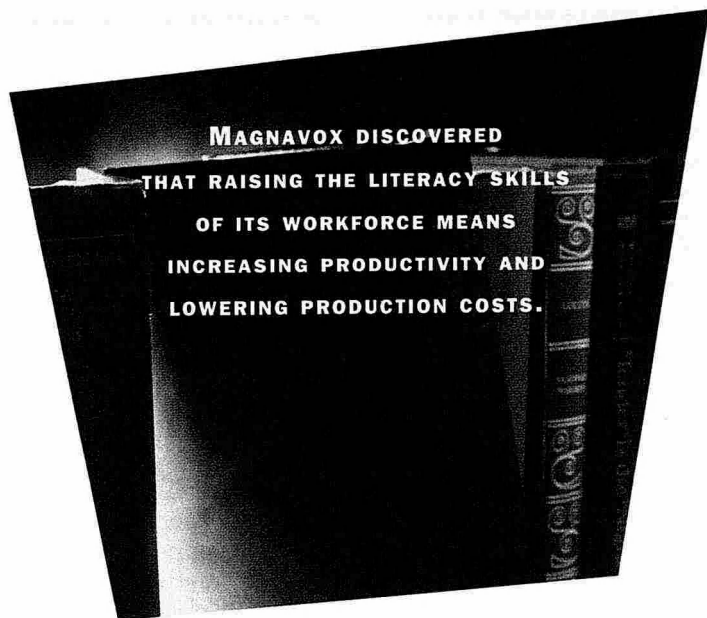
Resources for workplace literacy

Perhaps no other area of training is as ideally suited to business/education partnerships as is literacy. Adult schools, community colleges, and universities have been in the forefront of the fight against illiteracy for decades. They have much to offer the business world. And businesses, while newer to the literacy movement, can help educational institutions understand the issue of workplace literacy. Businesses have the resources and captive audience to extend literacy education far beyond its traditional boundaries in public schools and libraries. For them the key to a successful partnership is locating educational partners who have the flexibility and business acumen to design effective workplace literacy programs.

Sources of literacy training abound all over the United States. Local adult schools (usually part of a public school district) and community colleges are a good place to begin. Some four-year colleges and universities offer literacy services. In some areas of the country, state departments of education fund literacy training through local schools. Public libraries are often active in literacy education.

If the public sector does not offer literacy programs in your area, look to private-sector literacy firms and consultants who specialize in literacy. Some offer programs via computer, video, television, and other media. ■

Donald Ford is manager of human resource development for Magnavox Electronic Systems Company, West Coast Division, 2829 Maricopa Street, Torrance, CA 90503



The Magnavox Experience

BY DONALD J. FORD

A few years ago, Magnavox Electronic Systems Company began to observe literacy problems among its 250 hourly employees. (The company is Magnavox's West Coast division, a high-tech manufacturer of satellite communications and navigation equipment located in Torrance, California.)

One of the reasons behind the literacy deficiency was the workforce influx of immigrants from Latin America and Asia, many of whom had poor English-speaking skills. The number of immigrants gradually grew to about two-thirds of the hourly workforce.

The polyglot work environment began to take a toll on company communications. People never seemed to read memos, meeting announcements failed to assemble people in the right place at the right time, and misunderstandings about work assignments became chronic. Even more serious, scrap and rework

costs jumped—a clear signal that employees were making too many errors in their work.

When the company unsuccessfully tried to implement statistical process control to improve product quality and reduce inspection time, management finally got the message. Many of the employees lacked the basic math and reading skills needed to understand and implement the new program.

At this point, the manufacturing division called on the HRD department for help. After initial discussions, Magnavox created a pilot basic skills assessment program to determine the extent of illiteracy in the workforce. Magnavox teamed up with El Camino College, a community college that had expertise in testing and assessment.

Under the agreement, Magnavox purchased copies of the Test of Adult Basic Education and administered the test to a sample of its employees. The college scored the tests and helped

identify resources to help employees improve their basic skills.

One hundred and nine employees volunteered to take the test. They represented a cross-section of the manufacturing workforce, from entry-level unskilled assemblers to test technicians and supervisors with college educations. Those tested, on average, read at the equivalent of an eighth-grade level. Math ability averaged at the seventh-grade level.

Magnavox took a sample of work-related materials, including manufacturing process instructions, engineering change notices, routing cards, charts, and blueprints, and analyzed them to determine the grade levels at which they were written.

For determining reading levels, we used the Fry Readability Formula and the Department of Defense's Readability Formula. Both estimate the reading grade level of materials based on the complexity of vocabulary and sentence structure. We concluded that employees needed to read at an eighth-grade level to comprehend our workplace documents.

For math, we used the experience of other companies in our industry to estimate that people needed to comprehend mathematics at a sixth-grade level to understand our workplace documentation.

Comparing these workplace literacy requirements to the actual skill levels of employees in our sample, we were able to determine the extent of our skills gap. Although average test scores were at or above the minimum, further analysis by job function revealed significant areas of concern.

When we excluded salaried employees from the data, we found that hourly employees had, on average, seventh-grade reading levels and sixth-grade math levels. Among entry-level assemblers, average reading levels were only at a fourth-grade level, well below the level needed to read workplace documentation. We concluded that 52 percent of our hourly workers were functionally illiterate in reading and 36 percent were illiterate in basic math.

These data were the turning point in convincing management to pursue a workplace literacy training program.

Implementing a literacy program

Once the need for workplace literacy had been established, attention turned to implementing a successful training program. We considered delivery options such as private literacy firms, public adult schools and community colleges, computer-based literacy training, and federal funding.

We chose to use a federal funding program that was available through the Carl D. Perkins Vocational Education Act, which provides grants to states for adult training programs. The California State Department of Education has created a model program that teams private industry with local public schools.

Through the program, private employers pay nothing for the training but are required to finance a literacy audit to ensure that the program addresses workplace literacy issues. In return, employers receive up to \$13,000 in literacy training funds, channeled through the adult school partner.

The literacy audit, conducted by Educational Data Systems, based in Dearborn, Michigan, confirmed many of the literacy problems we had already uncovered through the assessment program. It went a step further by identifying the exact skills in reading, writing, listening, speaking, and arithmetic that employees actually needed in order to comprehend work materials and documents. The analysis identified the following seven major tasks required of production workers:

- ▶ Use work instructions.
 - ▶ Complete forms.
 - ▶ Complete mechanical assembly.
 - ▶ Complete electrical assembly.
 - ▶ Solder electrical components.
 - ▶ Perform work as a member of a team.
 - ▶ Use statistical process control.
- An analysis of each of the seven tasks provided a detailed breakdown of literacy-related work activities. For example, "use work instructions" was subdivided into three tasks:
- ▶ Read "manufacturing processes" (assembly instructions).
 - ▶ Read the *Workmanship Manual* (quality assurance standards).
 - ▶ Describe work instructions.

The task analysis formed the basis for the instructional design. Each task was subdivided into work activities;

learning goals were sorted according to their difficulty level. For example, reading the manufacturing processes required 12 enabling objectives, such as understanding technical terms and abbreviations and following a written sequence of events.

We created a management steering committee to guide and oversee the literacy program. The steering committee was composed of the vice-president of operations and the managers of manufacturing, quality control, quality improvement, and HRD.

The committee served as liaison to Torrance Adult School, our public education partner. It interviewed and hired an instructor from a pool of applicants provided by the school and helped the instructor develop a work-related curriculum of the manuals and documents employees were expected to use to do their jobs.

Marketing the literacy program

The steering committee played an important role in marketing the program to hourly employees. We recognized at the outset that this training would require skillful marketing; employees were reluctant to come forward on their own and seek help.

One strategy was to avoid calling the program a literacy class, because the term "literacy" carries negative connotations. Instead, we called the program, "Process Improvement and Communications," or PIC.

We circulated a survey in English, Spanish, and Chinese to all hourly employees. The survey briefly described the PIC classes and asked employees to choose one of four class sessions. To encourage attendance, the company donated two hours a week of work time to the program and required employees to attend an additional two hours a week on their own before or after work.

Once the initial survey results became available, the vice-president of operations scheduled a series of informational meetings for all hourly employees to explain the program in more detail and solicit additional enrollments. These meetings, held on company time, helped double the enrollment to 60 employees.

During the first week of classes, employees took the Test of Adult Basic Education. The results estab-

lished a baseline so that progress during the course could be measured. The results were used as a diagnostic tool to ensure that students were placed in the proper class levels.

The four PIC sessions included two English as a Second Language (ESL) classes for foreign-born employees, a native-language literacy class for English-speaking employees, and an advanced class in math and communications skills.

The 18-week program was divided into three 6-week terms. We wanted employees to remain for the entire 18 weeks, but recognized that such a long commitment might discourage participation. By offering shorter terms, employees could enroll, try the classes, and finish courses without making lengthy commitments. Half of the original enrollers completed all three terms. The rest completed one or two terms.

Evaluating the literacy program

State and federal funding groups required us to evaluate the project. We evaluated four levels:

- ▶ reactions of employees—measured by postcourse surveys
- ▶ levels of employee learning—measured by pre- and posttest results
- ▶ changes in behavior of employees—measured by their daily actual efficiency ratings, based on daily work output
- ▶ results in productivity—measured in dollars saved from reduced scrap and rework costs.

The literacy training project produced positive outcomes. First, 109 employees were tested in English and math, establishing a baseline of literacy. Of the 60 that enrolled in PIC classes, 30 completed an 18-week, 72-hour literacy program in both English and math that used actual workplace materials as the basis of the curriculum.

Reading skills for the 30 students who completed the program increased by an average of 1.1 grade levels, from 7.3 to 8.4, a 15 percent improvement. Mathematical skills improved an average of 1.4 grade levels, from 6.8 to 8.2, a 21 percent gain.

Job performance, the ultimate measure of the program's success, has shown steady improvement from

the beginning of the program.

The average actual efficiency of the 30 employees who completed the program was tracked over a nine-month period. Before the class, the average monthly efficiency of students was 18 percent of the ideal efficiency for their positions. In the four months since the program started, the average monthly efficiency of students rose to 26 percent, a 45 percent increase in employee productivity that can be directly attributed to the program.

Additionally, scrap and rework rates for the company as a whole declined dramatically during the course of the workplace literacy program. As of September 1991, the company had saved \$262,000 on scrap costs over 1990, a 35 percent reduction. It saved \$74,000 on rework costs, a 25 percent decline.

Many factors contributed to these savings; it is impossible to isolate exactly how much Magnavox could attribute to the workplace literacy training. But Magnavox estimates that the training may have saved about \$2,300 a month in 1991 in reduced scrap and rework.

Suggestions for improvement

Despite its success, we can improve the program in two ways. First, the dropout rate was higher than we would have liked. We attribute this to the requirement that employees attend half of each class on their own time. This restricted the initial sign-up to about 22 percent of the eligible workforce and was the main factor cited by the students who dropped out. To ensure maximum participation, literacy programs should be entirely on company time.

Second, the curriculum development process was more time-consuming and difficult than we anticipated. Instead of taking two weeks to develop a customized, work-related curriculum, as originally envisioned, the instructor and the steering committee worked on the curriculum throughout the 18-week course. Many hours went into this effort, taxing everyone's schedule. It would be better to allow more time and budget for curriculum development, because this is a key element to the success of the program. ■

New from KET!

KET WORKSITE SKILLS ENHANCEMENT SYSTEM

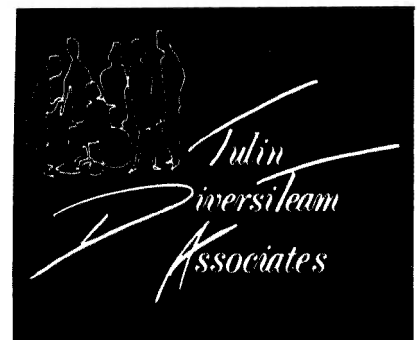
A flexible basic skills education program containing videotapes, workbooks, a program planner's manual, and consultant services.

For more information and/or a free preview, call:
(800) 354-9067

KET, The Kentucky Network
Enterprise Division
560 Cooper Drive
Lexington, KY 40502-2200

KET
The Kentucky
Network

Circle No. 137 on Reader Service Card

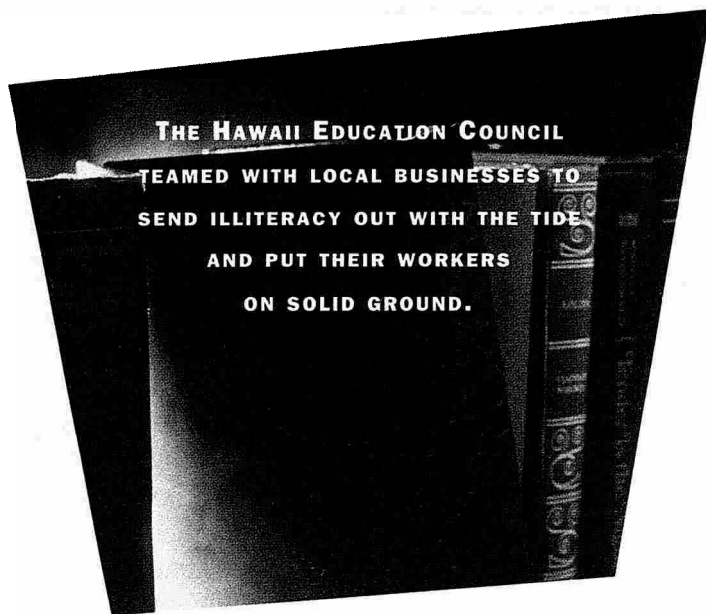


HARNESS THE "BOTTOM LINE" BENEFITS OF YOUR DIVERSE WORKFORCE

*"Recognized for Dealing with
Sexual Harassment
and
Diversity Issues
in a Spirit of Camaraderie,
Absent of Guilt and Blame, with
the Focus on Professional
Behavior, Productivity & Quality
Organizational Change"*

Tulin DiversiTeam Associates
5 Curtis Park Drive
Philadelphia/Wyncote PA 19095
215-884-7325
Fax: 215-886-5515

Circle No. 173 on Reader Service Card



Aloha Means Goodbye to Workforce Illiteracy

BY DRAKE BEIL

In 1988, data from the Hawaii Department of Education and the University of Hawaii indicated that participation in the Hawaiian public education system progressively declined for native Hawaiians as they advanced from elementary to secondary levels, and from the secondary level to university graduation.

According to figures from the 1986-1987 school year, native Hawaiians represented about 22.1 percent of total public-school K-to-12 students and 20 percent of students in grades 9 through 12. They made up 11 percent of community-college enrollment and only 4.8 percent of the students at the University of Hawaii. Data from 1977 to 1984 indicated that native Hawaiians represented

only 2 percent of students who actually graduated from the University of Hawaii, Manoa.

To help counter these statistics in the state's workplaces, the Hawaiian Education Council designed the Program for Occupational Skills Training (POST) with funding from the U.S. Department of Education, offered through the ALU LIKE Vocational Education Hawaiian Natives Program.

The council's goal was to help native Hawaiians adapt to the changing occupational requirements of today's economy.

Other programs by the vocational education project centered on elementary, secondary, and community-college students. The council decided

to target native Hawaiians employed in low-level positions with no readily available opportunities for additional education.

The main objective of the POST program was to work with selected employers to ensure that their native Hawaiian employees had the opportunity to close the gap between their own literacy levels and those demanded by existing and anticipated occupational requirements.

How it got started

At the beginning, the project team decided to form an advisory committee of human resource experts to provide guidance and policy recommendations regarding the program's development and implementation.

The council invited 50 senior human resource executives in business, education, and government throughout the state to join the advisory committee. Seventeen accepted and formed the core planning group for the project.

At their first meeting, advisory committee members selected three companies to participate initially in the project: Aston Hotels and Resorts, First Hawaiian Bank, and Robert's Hawaii Tours. These firms represented a cross-section of Hawaii businesses and had enough employees who needed occupational skill training and development.

The companies were asked to contribute training time for the employees and to cooperate in any necessary evaluations.

The council custom-designed the educational programs for each company, taking into account its specific needs. The council also provided the firms with information on how to implement the training.

To help implement and coordinate the training and evaluation efforts, each firm formed a core committee of three people: the firm's advisory committee member, the person in the company responsible for the project's implementation, and a representative from the POST planning team.

With help from the project coordinators at each site, the council developed a target population of at least 25 Hawaiian or part-Hawaiian employees to receive training and

development. The council provided POST training programs to other company members if space was available.

The council assessed the needs of the participants through interviews with the trainees, their managers, and the project coordinators. The council contrasted the skills the participants already had with the skills they needed to move to the next levels of their company, and then designed training to meet those needs.

As we suspected, most participants did not need basic literacy training. Most needed skills in communication—listening and oral-communication skills. They needed training in problem solving, decision making, creative and critical thinking, team building, goal setting, self-esteem, career development, organizational effectiveness, and leadership development.

The next step was developing the evaluation component. The POST project aimed at improving productivity, increasing retention, and increasing promotions of participants within each company. The council decided to measure productivity from supervisor comments, employee evaluations, and overall company performance. And it agreed to track participants' retention promotion rates as part of the evaluations.

Along with these basic curriculum modules, the council developed variations to enable some customized training delivery at each site. Each firm chose to implement the project in a different way. Variations in the training implementation made the evaluation process more challenging and more susceptible to questions of internal validity. But the council agreed to support each company's needs rather than require the firms to conform to its standards for training and program implementation.

The initial curriculum design phase lasted through the first six months of the project. Additional design components were developed after this initial phase and during the project to meet client needs.

Implementation issues

First Hawaiian Bank was the first firm to identify a core group for training. The bank was eager to

begin the improvement process and scheduled classes based on the assessed training needs. Because the bank had a well-established career development ladder, and because the POST participants were primarily entry-level employees, the range of basic communications techniques and communications training programs was appropriate for the bank's employees.

Aston Hotels and Resorts also identified participants for the POST program. The challenge was to get the training to them in a way that didn't disrupt day-to-day operations. Because staffing levels were thin, pulling people away from their workplaces for training for extended periods was not possible. Also, the training logistics were a challenge because the people were located in more than 20 worksites.

It was decided to conduct training at three centralized locations so that employees could shuttle over, receive up to a half-day of training, and then return to work.

Robert's Hawaii went through an initial assessment process to determine training needs and discovered that it didn't have sufficient information about job requirements. Company project planners asked whether POST could assist them in developing job descriptions for the POST participants, and for the next levels or positions for which the participants would be eligible. The job analysis helped create position descriptions to establish a preliminary career development program for participants.

The firm had a difficult time scheduling and releasing people for training because of the nature of the business that requires employees to be available during peak tourist seasons, but the training was eventually scheduled.

During the third year of the project, Robert's dropped out of POST and a new partner, AMFAC/JMB-Hawaii, was invited to participate in its place.

In working to implement the program with AMFAC/JMB-Hawaii, the project team developed an agreement outlining the corporate partner's roles and responsibilities. Among them:

- ▶ designating corporate training sites
- ▶ guaranteeing release time for a core group of employees to receive assessment interviews, training, and career counseling
- ▶ publicizing workshop schedules that are open to all employees, giving the core group priority status
- ▶ developing a recognition program for participating employees
- ▶ committing to provide travel expenses when needed for employees to further their educational and vocational goals
- ▶ holding regular monthly advisory council meetings that provide full briefings on training status and upcoming developments
- ▶ providing specific evaluations for the affective and cognitive components of training.

Evaluating the results

The intense training schedules and the many programs the companies completed clearly helped develop the basic skills of the employees involved. Instructors' assessments and positive feedback from the participants' supervisors confirmed that the trainees had made cognitive improvements and affective gains.

Two factors mitigate the apparent successes. Participant turnover was one factor. Except for the AMFAC implementation—in which the target population was controlled from the beginning of the project throughout the training series—the partners were not able to maintain a sustained experimental group for a scientific evaluation. We had expected to see some changes in the trainee groups over the three-year period, but measurements became impossible because of frequent participant changes.

Part of the reason behind participant changes was that some of them received promotions, a desired outcome of the program. But the second factor mitigating the programs' apparent success was the fact that the council couldn't tell for sure that the training was the primary or only cause of these promotions. Factors such as longevity with the firm, good work habits, normal career development moves over the years, and limited availability of other candidates also contributed.

Participants' productivity also seemed to increase after the training, but we faced the same dilemma in attributing the results to POST.

For example, we could not segment the gains for front-desk people at Aston, since their profitability and productivity is linked closely to the sales and marketing department. The Gulf War caused a dramatic downturn in the number of visitors to Hawaii in the last three months of 1990 and the first three months of 1991. That downturn had much more of an impact than three years of POST.

Similarly, several national studies have shown that First Hawaiian Bank is one of the most stable banks in the country, and have shown high productivity for the bank over the course of the three-year program, but it is impossible to attribute those positive results to POST. National interest rates, international competition, real-estate values, a merger with another financial institution, and the Hawaii economy have all played much more significant roles.

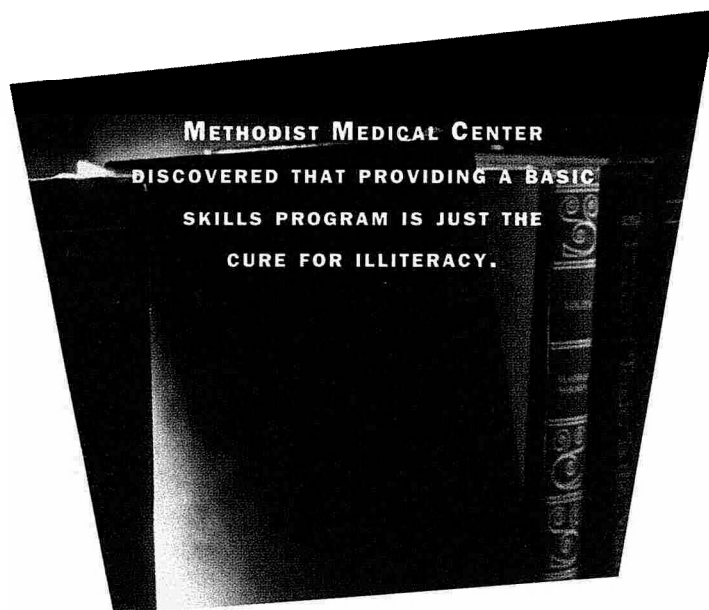
This pattern of multiple variables exists with all of the corporate partners, and makes any attempts at more sophisticated statistical analysis useless.

The third program goal was to improve the companies' retention of participants. Retention levels at the firms have been extremely high compared to national averages.

Again, assigning any of this success to POST is problematic. First, the unemployment rates for the state of Hawaii are uncharacteristically low—around 2 percent—when compared to the national average. The lower availability of labor, especially of semiskilled labor, and the remote location of the state both contribute more than POST does to the excellent retention numbers reported by the participating firms.

The presence of POST in the participating firms may have helped each firm accomplish increased and improved productivity. POST certainly was not responsible for decreases in performance; its presence was not a problem or a hindrance. ■

Drake Beil is president of Solutions Inc., 2234 Aba Niu Place, Honolulu, HI 96821.



A Hospital's Prescription for Illiteracy

BY LINDA SOLOVY-PRATT AND RITA M. VICARY

After years of providing continuing-education opportunities for employees, including college tuition reimbursement for full- and part-time employees, Methodist Medical Center of Illinois realized it needed to do more to train its employees who were deficient in basic literacy skills. The nonprofit hospital in Peoria employs nearly 3,000 workers. Methodist has a long-standing reputation as a dedicated teaching institution. It has many health-care education programs in place.

Many of the continuing-education refresher courses and management development classes available at Methodist are designed for clinical and management staff. Other classes offered at the medical center, such as medical terminology and writing

skills improvement, are available to all employees.

Methodist began a new program called "People In Progress," the first the medical center has offered to teach employees the basic skills of reading, English, math, and English as a second language. The program is named after a similar program at the Tallahassee Memorial Regional Medical Center in Florida.

The medical center offers the program to employees during paid work time. Methodist also pays all fees for tuition, books, and classroom materials.

Development and implementation

To begin, Methodist's department of human resources gathered information to use in developing guidelines for the program. Sources included

professional journals, the state literacy office, and hospitals with similar programs in place.

HRD staff members approached Illinois Central College (ICC) to become involved in developing and implementing the program. ICC offers basic skills training, GED preparation, and English as a second language classes on its campus. Its adult basic education program curriculum was adapted to fit the needs of the Methodist program.

Before we made it available to the whole organization, we piloted the program. The program identified four departments that had large numbers of employees who would be likely to enroll: supply, processing, and delivery; consolidated linen; environmental services (housekeeping); and food service.

Before the program began, the potential participants learned how Methodist supported the program, how they could enroll, and how classes are designed. They also learned the purpose of skills testing, the format of the classes, and the expectations the company would have of trainees.

The response to the initial meetings far surpassed the expectations of the program developers. Sixty-five employees took skills assessment tests and met individually with ICC representatives to discuss their test results and courses of study.

Fourteen employees tested out of the program; the other 51 enrolled in classes. The 14 employees who tested at higher skill levels received free career testing and counseling.

The supervisors of the 51 employees helped develop class schedules that would allow the trainees to attend during paid work time. Supervisor support and encouragement is an important impetus for the employees to remain in the program and work toward their goals.

Individualizing instruction

Methodist keeps class sizes to eight or nine students to allow for individual instruction. ICC requires at least 15 students for an off-campus class, so Methodist pays tuition for 15 but limits class size in order to maintain the effectiveness of the smaller, personalized classes. The employees work

INSTRUCTORS USE
EVERYDAY ITEMS
TO COMBINE
LESSONS IN LITERACY
WITH LESSONS IN
LIFE SKILLS.
EMPLOYEES MAY
LEARN HOW TO
ALPHABETIZE WHILE
LEARNING HOW TO
LOOK UP NUMBERS IN
A PHONE BOOK

and progress at their own levels.

The students enrolled in Methodist's GED preparation classes use most of the same textbooks and materials as students in ICC's regular program. But they are not pressured to finish in a specific number of weeks, as in the ICC program. Methodist allows its employees to take as much time as they need to prepare for the GED examination. Each student's progress is kept confidential.

Many different materials, including self-correcting workbooks and flash cards, are available for teaching basic reading, English, and math to adults. Because the instructors work closely with their students, they are able to choose the appropriate materials to suit individual needs.

Instructors use everyday items to combine lessons in literacy with lessons in life skills. For example, employees may use telephone books to learn how to alphabetize while learning how to use the same books to look up telephone numbers. They learn how to use calculators while learning numbers and simple mathematical equations. Newspapers geared toward slow readers help increase employees' knowledge of current events as they boost their reading levels.

The instructors encourage students to bring in materials they deal with at home or in the workplace.

Working with items that are pertinent to their lives helps students maintain higher levels of interest and quickly adapt the knowledge into their daily routines.

Enthusiastic response

Class attendance in the "People in Progress" program has been excellent. The instructors praise the students' enthusiasm for learning and their rates of progress. The employees seem comfortable and are not outwardly embarrassed about participating in the program.

Supervisors already have reported positive changes in several of their staff members who are enrolled in the program. According to Environmental Services Supervisor Doug Shambaugh, the most noteworthy change in the employees is greatly improved self-esteem. Many of the employees have more confidence in themselves and in their abilities to perform their jobs.

Housekeepers are required to check off items on their schedules as they complete assignments, and to document pertinent information about their work areas. They must be able to read labels and comprehend the mixture ratios of the chemicals they use every day. Shambaugh has seen marked improvement in the employees' ability to accomplish these tasks.

Employees who speak limited English are rapidly improving their communication skills through their participation in the program. This has been instrumental in improving overall employee communication and interaction.

The ultimate benefits are immeasurable. Because of the pilot program's immediate success, the program was opened to all interested employees three months later. Nineteen additional employees took tests to assess skill levels; all 19 enrolled in the program. ■

Linda Solovy-Pratt is employee education coordinator in the HRD department, and Rita Vicary is a writer in the Marketing, Research, and Publications Department, both at the Methodist Medical Center of Illinois, 221 Northeast Glen Oak Avenue, Peoria, IL 61636.