In Practice

Liberalism on the Rebound

You've been worried lately, right? That kid of yours who's all set to graduate next month with a B.A. (art history, concentration in Athabascan textiles) from Very Small But They Have a Good Film Society College will soon have to find a job.

Being a nuts-and-bolts kind of person yourself, you find it hard to imagine who might be interested in hiring a person with such qualifications.

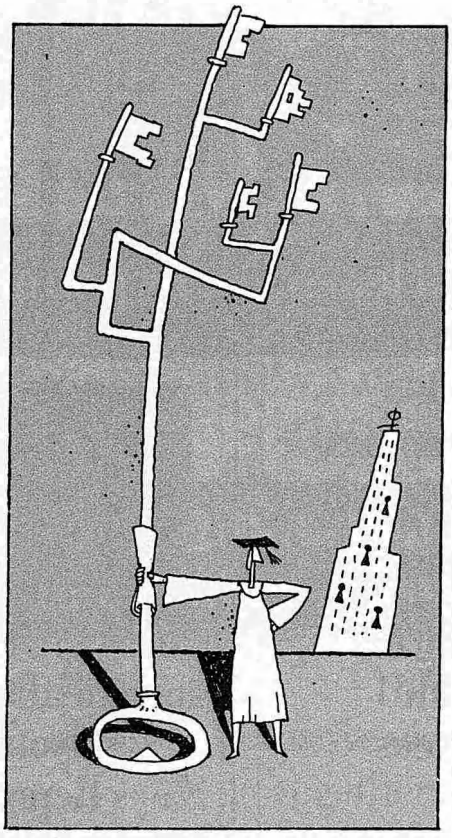
Lucky for your offspring that many people in a position to offer jobs to recent grads don't share your doubts about the value of a liberal education. In fact, when corporate vice-presidents and personnel directors were asked what educational backgrounds would best prepare young people for business in the year 2000, more of them mentioned the liberal arts than any other type of undergraduate schooling.

"College students with a well-rounded education will be in a better position to relate to sweeping changes in technology, politics, and global economics that are already shaping the decade," observed Max Messmer, chairman of Accountemps, the firm that sponsored the survey.

Granted, confidence in liberal artists' ability to do business in 2000 was not overwhelming. Indeed, the corduroy-jacketed liberals edged out the Brooks Brothers' business-administration set by a single point, 29 percent to 28. Computer-science majors got the nod from 26 percent of those polled.

Other disciplines scored significantly lower, perhaps because they seem too specialized. Only 5 percent of the VPs and personnel directors thought law degrees would prepare young people for business, and a mere 3 percent favored engineering backgrounds.

Messmer, whose company provides clients with temporary accountants and bookkeepers, may have been dismayed to find that just 8 percent of those polled thought accounting majors would be prepared for business in 2000.



David Povilaitis

The results were cause for celebration around here, where members of the *Journal* staff pride themselves on being well rounded, if nothing else. One editor noted that he spent months after graduation scouring the classifieds for an ad reading "Wanted: English major to read obscure books and explain them to us." He eventually became an instructional designer.

Is the Shoe on the Other Foot?

Through much of the eighties, career development went by another name: outplacement.

For employees who received pink slips, it was a particularly traumatic way to have their careers developed. Nonetheless, outplacement services helped thousands of "redundant" employees land on their feet and get better jobs after getting the old heave-ho.

Now it seems that outplacement specialists may need their own services, or at least be ready to undertake a marketing shift. A few analysts are saying that the merger-and-acquisition frenzy that led to much of the last decade's corporate bloodletting will subside in the nineties, leaving fewer clients in need of placement. Outplacement firms eager to survive, they note, may have to search out other ways to earn a buck.

Ironically, promoting employee retention may be such a way, suggests Madeleine Swain, who now labels her organization—Swain & Swain—a "corporate human resource consulting firm." She says her clients have begun to express interest in keeping the very workers, managers in particular, who seemed so expendable just a few months ago.

According to a recent Swain & Swain study, 20 percent of companies polled plan to offer self-development programs that will help managers take responsibility for the development of their own careers.

Of course, 20 percent hardly signals a trend. But here's hoping that, by teaching the still-working to stay that way, outplacement counselors can keep themselves out of the unemployment lines.

Beyond School Reform

Taken at face value, the reason why so many entry-level workers lack basic skills seems pretty obvious.

If Janey and Johnny can't read, that means they did not learn how to read in school. Same with writing, and same with arithmetic. If schools do their jobs properly, says Conventional Wisdom, then

children will learn the basic skills they will need when they become working adults. There's some truth in that line of reasoning.

But now that the definition of basic skills has grown to include nontraditional competencies such as creativity, personal motivation, and group effectiveness, the list of possible causes for basic-skills shortfalls is growing too.

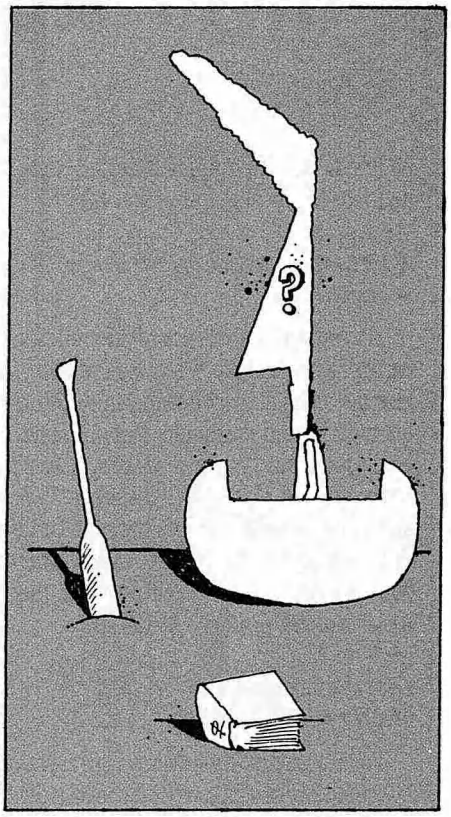
Sometimes honest efforts to match cause and effect degenerate into acrimonious finger-pointing. A group of community leaders in Columbus, Ohio, hopes to avoid that kind of counterproductive sniping. When the Central Ohio Chapter of the American Society for Training and Development last October convened representatives of Columbus business, education, government, and nonprofit organizations to discuss the area's basic-skills problems, one of the first things they decided was that there's plenty of blame to go around.

That issue settled, they are now embarking on a long-term project designed to fix the mismatch between the skills entry-level workers can offer and those local employers need.

Nonetheless, the causes they identified bear closer examination, because they go far beyond the usual calls for more rigorous, back-to-basics schooling.

To be sure, education took a hit in the Columbus group's analysis. Clearly, they concluded, schools must get better if basic skills are to get better. From the very foundations of local education ("There is too much timidity for trying decentralization," the group noted in a report on the day-long gathering) to instructional methods ("Students are not trained to translate and generalize their skills so they can use them in new situations"), the group found room for improvement.

But, they reported, other players in the basic-skills game must do more too. Skills deficits, it seems,



David Povilaitis

have as much to do with cultural upheaval and business myopia as they do with poor education.

"Drugs, teenage pregnancy, too much television and more parents in the workforce all contribute to a dissipation of young energy away from preparation for meaningful work and fruitful lives," the group observed.

Basic-skills shortcomings persist, in part, because television's you-can-have-it-all myth-making has caused "a general fogginess and lack of vision that prevents people from seeing the 'big picture,' the need for change, the long-term solutions, and the 'what is best for the whole community' perspective. There is an inability to balance desires with efforts and results, to sustain the momentum for life-long learning. . . ."

Business, the Columbus leaders decided, also must take responsibility for the continuing divergence between the skills employers want and the skills young people can offer.

"Employers do not always know their new skills needs. . .and do not adequately communicate skill needs to schools or employees," they reported.

The group contended that the failure to communicate with school-system authorities springs from businesses' inability to see themselves as simultaneous stakeholders in and customers of the education system. "Businesses overvalue their autonomy and undervalue their communities," the conferees noted.

In addition to socio-cultural and business-related causes, basic-skills mismatches may also be ascribed to what the Columbus group called superordinate causes:

"There has been an unwillingness among education, business, human services, and the community to assume mutual responsibility for solving the mismatch between jobs and people. Furthermore, respect and trust are lacking among these sectors. There has been no adequate attempt at creating a global, holistic view and common goals, or at [setting new priorities.] There are cultural biases as to whom is employable. Stereotypes are neither challenged nor redefined. There are conflicting laws and regulations.

"There is a short-term, tunnel-vision perspective that sees nothing beyond the bottom line. People are still trying old solutions for new situations. There is a lack of understanding of present employment markets and changing labor pools. The changing expectations of incoming workers are not taken into account.

"There are not enough people pulling, stretching, and challenging other people to fulfill their potential. There is too little emphasis on collaboration-skills training. Interdependence is not yet sufficiently valued."

That's a fairly daunting litany. And it would be only so much

kvetching if the representatives who drew up the list weren't determined to tackle each item on it.

The Columbus group freely acknowledged that quick-fix solutions are unlikely to emerge. But, through ongoing and widespread dialogue and action, they hope to chip away at the region's basic-skills problems. Because they have probed the deeper causes, it looks as though they have a good chance of succeeding.

Have a Nice Weekend

Of those managers expressing a preference, 65 percent said Friday is the day they would choose to fire an employee. Twenty-two percent told Adia Personnel Services they usually waited until Monday to let the ax fall.

Productivity and Quality Scorecard

They're not sure how much good it's doing, but American businesses are spending a lot of time and money trying to learn how to achieve higher productivity and create high-quality products and services.

That's what the American Productivity and Quality Center found when it polled 218 of its members last year.

Almost 70 percent reported that they attended more than one productivity- or quality-training session during the previous 12 months, usually to find out about six hot topics: employee involvement, quality management, productivity management, productivity measurement, statistical process control, and gain sharing.

But for all their efforts to learn more about productivity and quality systems, most respondents said they're still not certain of the payoffs. Many of the people questioned reported that the sessions they attended varied widely in quality, some providing excellent results, and others proving worthless.

A surprising 51.5 percent said they spent six or more days in training during the year preceding the poll, and almost 10 percent partook of more than 15 days' worth. They were willing to pay for it, too: 61.7 told the AP&QC they shelled out more than $1,000 for their instruction. Most paid between $1,001 and $5,000 for productivity and quality sessions.

Those with fixed training budgets—about two-thirds of the sample group—typically spent the most on productivity and quality training. Nonmanagers often had to negotiate with their bosses to cut loose the funds for training.

Consulting firms and corporations' own in-house training departments were equally likely to provide the necessary instruction, followed by professional organizations, industry associations, schools and colleges, and other corporations. The best sessions used small-group discussions to impart new information, according to 73 percent of those polled. Only 5.7 percent said interactive video resulted in effective productivity and quality training, and even fewer—3.3 percent—said computer-based training modules worked well for these topics.

When pollsters asked an open-ended question about the value of the training respondents had received, two themes emerged:

- Hands-on, how-to training was perceived as much more valuable than training that emphasized theory. Survey participants said they most appreciated sessions conducted by people with real-world experience in productivity and quality improvement.
- Training alone cannot make an organization work more productively or produce better quality. The American Productivity and Quality Center acknowledged that this seems cliched and obvious, but restated the case for good measure: training accomplishes nothing unless senior management commits to change.

For more information about the survey, which appeared in the AP&QC's *Consensus* newsletter, contact Charlotte Scroggins or Steve Stewart at 713/681-4020.

Bringing Out the Best in College Hires

By Milan Moravec and Kevin Wheeler of National Semiconductor in Santa Clara, California.

High-tech companies have long been known for their aggressive recruiting efforts on engineering college and university campuses. The brightest stars from academe are highly prized for their technical expertise and innovative ideas, and—importantly—their enthusiasm.

Once they leave school and join the corporate ranks, most new hires are eager to hit the ground running. Too often, however, companies drop the ball. The new employee—given little more than a desk and a stack of materials to read—founders for far too long before getting a chance to contribute. The excitement and entrepreneurial spirit begin to fade.

Day-long orientations aren't enough to remedy the situation. Nor are rotational training programs, in which individuals spend time in various departments, often feeling more like visitors than contributing members of a team. In organizations that need to respond quickly to dynamic market conditions, both practices waste talent.

To overcome those limitations, National Semiconductor developed a College Hire Assimilation Program (CHAP) that has brought immediate, noticeable benefits to new hires, their managers, and the organization. The program helps young engineers get to know the company

In Practice

and begin planning their careers, and helps managers and the company learn about new hires' goals and strengths.

CHAP sessions begin about two months after new employees have started to work at National. By that time, they have settled into the community, gotten to know their managers, and had firsthand experience with National's culture.

They have begun to wonder, "What is it going to take to be successful here?"

CHAP consists of several elements spread out over a year. These include a Peak Performance workshop, a day of networking and team building, and a series of seminars on technology, human resources, and leadership and influence skills.

In addition, each new hire is assigned a management adviser—someone other than the employee's day-to-day supervisor—to facilitate the process of career discovery and growth.

Here's a closer look at some of the CHAP activities:

■ **Peak Performance and Interpersonal Skills Workshop.** In the first day of this two-day workshop, the graduates learn what it takes to go beyond average and become a peak performer. They zero in on what peak performance in their particular jobs involves and begin forming career- and life-mission statements.

The second day focuses on interpersonal relations. Although much of an engineer's work is solitary, studies show that successful employees develop significant networks of peers and colleagues. National's own culture places great emphasis on using contacts within the company to become accomplished and influential. CHAP's focus on interpersonal-skill development and team building, therefore, is vital.

Group scavenger hunts, in which the mission is to gather information about various aspects of the company and its products, let participants get around, meet new people, locate important resources, and begin to work together.

Adventure-learning-style exercises give them a visceral feeling for the importance of trust, communication, and joint problem solving.

The "corporate web" exercise, for example, finds new hires and their managers working together to pass one another through a wide mesh without touching the web. Each person is considered a "product" and each touch is considered a "product defect." The exercise demonstrates the importance of quality (each team must decide how many defects it will tolerate), setting and meeting goals, and working as a team.

■ **Strategic Seminars.** Later in the year, CHAP members participate in a variety of two-and-a-half-hour symposiums on technical, human resource, and business issues important to National. Small-group discussions with corporate presenters generate ideas and challenges, and show the new hires that, through their questions and comments, they can influence these senior people. That makes it clear to new hires that they are expected to contribute to the corporation's mission from the earliest stages of their careers.

■ **The CHAP Adviser Program.** This program places new hires into a partnership with knowledgeable, visionary, and experienced managers within their own groups. Managers and their advisees meet at least once each quarter for a year. Managers help new hires translate their career missions into specific assignments or work activities.

Because National believes that career planning is primarily the employee's responsibility, each new hire formulates "discovery objectives" designed to provide information about areas that he or she wants to know more about. Managers provide contacts and identify resources the new hires can use to explore the objectives.

Discovery objectives ideally involve more than gathering information, instead requiring new hires to work on real issues. For example, a process engineer who wants to know more about product engineering might actually do a specific piece of product engineering. This part of CHAP helps new hires learn more about the company, and serves as a valuable mechanism for cross-pollinating technology and technical ideas.

National Semiconductor has discovered that CHAP produces great dividends for everyone involved.

For newly hired engineers, the program eases the transition to worklife, reducing anxiety and channeling energy positively while helping to build peer and professional networks. New hires gain a better working understanding of the business.

For managers, CHAP assists in refining goals and—by requiring managers and new hires to spend one-on-one time together—accelerates the time it takes for them to talk in "shorthand."

For the organization, it makes the most of the school-to-work transition, facilitating the transfer of technology and ideas between universities and the company. CHAP has also boosted National Semiconductor's recruiting image, by demonstrating the company's commitment to developing new graduates.

Turnover among recently graduated employees is down too. When CHAP began in 1985, turnover among newly graduated engineers stood at 26 percent. By 1988, that figure was down to 8 percent.

"In Practice" is edited and written by John Wilcox. Send items of interest to In Practice, Training & Development Journal, *1630 Duke Street, Box 1443, Alexandria, VA 22313.*