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*Secretarial & Clerical Skills, Retraining,
Case Studies*

Instant Secretaries: Just Add Training

**IBM'S UNIQUE TRAINING
PROGRAM OFFERED
EMPLOYEES THE OPPORTUNITY
TO ENTER A NEW CAREER
PATH—FROM LINE WORKER
TO SECRETARY IN ONLY
SEVEN WEEKS.**



BY CAROL HENNEBACH

Is it possible to train blue-collar workers to become secretaries in only a matter of weeks? IBM thought so, and set out to prove it with a pilot training program.

The program started with a problem. IBM's Austin, Texas, site had a critical shortage of secretaries; headquarters had declared a hiring freeze. As a solution, the administrative services department in Austin decided to recruit candidates from overstuffed departments—including manufacturing—and to train them for six weeks. Presto! Instant secretaries.

Retraining IBM employees to fill the vacant secretarial positions would offer new job opportunities and save hiring costs. But the solution raised questions. How would the company determine suitable

candidates? What should be the curriculum? Was it realistic to expect an employee to make the transition from assembly-line worker to secretary in just six weeks?

The administrative services staff, headed by Lillian Davis, led the pilot program. Class managers Sally Ward and Pat Knudsen moved quickly to recruit suitable candidates for training and to develop a curriculum. They disseminated information about the program to managers at the Austin site and announced it on company bulletin boards. Each candidate was required to have administrative experience, a high-school diploma, a manager's recommendation, and a typing speed of at least 35 words per minute. Out of 45 applicants, 10 employees were selected to be candidates for secretarial training.

Developing an appropriate curriculum was more complicated. Trainees would need more than basic orientation and a few computer classes. They needed a soup-to-nuts curriculum that covered every aspect of secretarial performance. IBM asked several external training suppliers in Austin to submit bids and suggest training goals and content.

Those suppliers' suggestions showed widely divergent views on what a secretary is or does. After considering the proposals, IBM selected a program proposed by the Business and Technology Center of Austin Community College. The center would provide two weeks of courses in basic skills, customized to IBM's needs. IBM would follow up with four weeks of in-house training on software usage, keyboard skills, and company procedures.

A customized curriculum

The Business and Technology Center contracted Alice Moseley, of the Business Training Source in Austin, to design and teach the initial two-week course. Moseley spent two months developing 14 different workshops and customized manuals. IBM staff members were involved in the design process. They reviewed drafts of the materials and suggested content.

The 68-hour curriculum was divided into the following workshop segments:

- ▶ automated office procedures (2 hours)
- ▶ keyboard skills (6 hours)
- ▶ telephone communication (6 hours)
- ▶ time management and organization (6 hours)
- ▶ filing and records management (2 hours)
- ▶ business writing, grammar, proof-reading, and editing (10 hours)
- ▶ business math (6 hours)
- ▶ professional communication skills (8 hours)
- ▶ introduction to personal computers (4 hours)
- ▶ introduction to MS-DOS (4 hours)
- ▶ business manners and corporate etiquette (4 hours)
- ▶ dealing with difficult people (4 hours)
- ▶ problem solving (3 hours)

- ▶ stress management (3 hours).

"I built in a lot of practice and discussion time," says Moseley. "I had to be sure that participants mastered the skills. There would be no time for relearning once they started their new jobs."

To ensure accountability, IBM requested that trainees pass written exams on the content of the workshops that required technical knowledge. The training manuals were printed and a classroom was reserved at Austin Community College. All of the participants were ready to begin. Or were they?

Surprising developments

The participants would have to make many changes in a short time. It was clear that successfully making those changes depended greatly on the class managers. They would have to know each trainee's strengths, weaknesses, and preferences and how to adapt the training to each person's

WHAT IBM KNEW— AND DIDN'T KNOW— BECAME CRITICAL

abilities. What IBM knew—and didn't know—about the 10 participants became critical as training progressed.

When training began, the participants didn't know each other. They came from different areas of the company. They were assembly-line workers and payroll clerks. One was a food-service worker, one was a solderer, and another was a drafts-person. Two had post-secondary education in junior colleges.

Only two participants had secretarial experience, but they all felt they could handle a secretarial job. A trainee said, "I like administrative work. I like to deal directly with people. IBM offered me the chance to be a secretary, so I jumped at the opportunity."

What IBM didn't know was that most of the trainees' reading and math skills were below the 12th-grade level, the level at which the training materials were written. Also, some of the participants hadn't been in a

classroom for 20 years and were apprehensive. At least half of them weren't comfortable with closed-book tests and initially resisted taking them.

Several participants were heavy smokers and required a smoking break every 20 minutes, particularly when they felt under stress. One trainee had a broken arm and couldn't type. Another was drowsy from taking sinus medication and fell asleep in every class. One participant didn't own any clothing that was appropriate for the professional status of an IBM secretary.

The problems weren't insurmountable. But they had to be dealt with quickly, before they became full-blown crises.

Good news/bad news

The first week went well. Trainees developed a camaraderie with each other and with the trainer. Despite their unfamiliarity with a classroom setting, they quickly adapted to varied learning styles such as role play, discussion, lecture, and written exercises.

"Trainees brought a lot of humor to the classes," says Moseley. "They immediately determined how their job experiences applied to the secretarial field. And they figured out how to adapt to being in the front office."

The training participants did well in keyboard skills, office automation, telephone communication, and time management. But they started to have trouble when the training turned to academic subjects.

Moseley explains: "Some of them could handle academic tasks, but others struggled. Four of the participants always completed the written tests in 15 to 20 minutes. The other six took 90 minutes. Five of the trainees wanted to use their notes and to confer with others during tests. They were surprised and unhappy when I stopped them.

"We really hit a wall when we got to the workshops on business writing and business math. The posttest writing scores were low; the math scores were worse. Only two participants passed the math tests. We were running out of time and making no progress."

Trainees were afraid that failing the writing and math tests would cause them to be dismissed from the

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