

In Practice

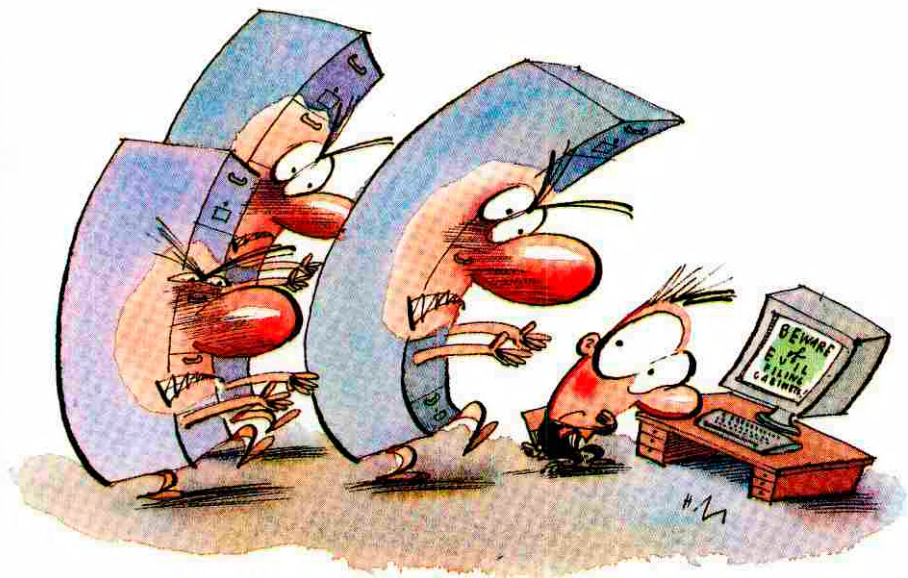
(Inter)Net Work

If you live in fear of your file cabinet, help is at hand. The U.S. Department of Energy makes available on the Internet a safety advisory called "Prevent File Cabinet Injuries."

This is just one example of the vast quantities of information that the U.S. government contributes to the warehouse of data known as the Internet.

Here are two Internet addresses to visit for government information:

- ▶ FedWorld, the federal government's bulletin-board system; <http://www.fedworld.gov>
- ▶ Consumer Information Center; <http://www.gsa.gov>.



Hal Mayforth

Workforce Quality

Most U.S. employers consider their employees completely proficient, virtually all businesses provide at least some training to employees, and few Americans labor in high-performance workplaces.

Those are among the first findings of a national survey that aims to provide a "reality check on the anecdotes and factoids that dominate coverage of workplace practices in the United States," reports the National Center on the Educational Quality of the Workforce (EQW).

The center designed the National Employer Survey (EQW-NES) to test commonly touted beliefs about employer practices. The U.S. Department of Education funded the survey, which was administered by the U.S. Census Bureau.

According to the center, the survey provides a baseline for understanding how employers recruit workers, how they organize work, and what credentials and experiences they seek in job applicants. The survey also examined

the role that education and training play in developing a skilled workforce.

The EQW-NES reports that the restructuring of the U.S. economy has not led to a de-skilling of work. Fifty-six percent of businesses responding to the survey reported that skill requirements have risen, and only 5 percent reported that skill requirements have dropped.

Employers who use high-performance work systems remain the minority, EQW-NES finds. Only one-quarter of employers reported that they use benchmarking, and only 37 percent said they had adopted a formal TQM program. On average, only 13 percent of nonmanagerial workers participate on self-managed teams, and only 18 percent participate in job rotation. But, an average of 54 percent of nonmanagerial employees participate in regularly scheduled meetings to discuss work-related problems.

Virtually all the businesses in the survey provide either formal or informal (on-the-job) training. More than half (57 percent) of the business

How can you protect yourself from office furniture? For that and other arcane but useful information, try surfing the U.S. government's electronic databanks.

establishments reported an increase in their formal training over the last three years.

On the average, businesses reported that just over 80 percent of their workers are fully proficient in their current jobs. The survey findings show that one out of five workers lacks the skills necessary to do his or her job. In some cases, workers' skills do not keep pace with changing job requirements.

The Census Bureau administered the telephone survey in 1994 to 4,000 private businesses with at least 20 employees.

For more information on the EQW-NES, call 800/437-9799 or send an e-mail message to this address: eqw-requests@irhe.upenn.edu.

The Incredible Shrinking Manager

Large corporations in the United States and Europe are operating with fewer middle managers than they did five years ago, reports a survey from the Conference Board.

That's true among growing firms as

well as those that are downsizing, the survey says.

The survey polled senior human resources executives. Respondents said they abolished middle-management positions primarily to save money and speed decision making. In particular, U.S. firms cited cost-cutting as a primary reason for eliminating middle managers.

Companies also said they trimmed middle-management positions to cut bureaucracy, improve customer relations, support a team-based structure, and improve internal communications. (See the box, "Trimming Middle Managers.")

With fewer managers on deck, companies have redefined the roles managers play; generally, firms expect middle managers to possess a broader array of skills, the report says.

Responding firms described new-style managers as coaches, counselors, orchestrators, and team leaders. On average, firms outside the United States cited the ability to delegate, promote teamwork, and communicate as the most important managerial skills.

Companies also reported fewer

layers of management. Twenty-eight percent of the companies surveyed reported no more than four layers of management; five years ago, only 8 percent of respondents to a similar Conference Board survey reported similarly flat organizational structures. Only 10 percent of respondents reported eight or more layers of management between line workers and the CEO in their organizations; five years ago, 40 percent of firms reported such structures.

To order *HR Executive Review: Redefining the Middle Manager*, volume 2, number 2, contact the Conference Board order department, 212/339-0345.

Quality Pays

Investing in total-quality management pays off, reports the National Institute of Standards and Technology.

NIST, part of the U.S. Department of Commerce, "invested" a hypothetical \$1,000 in each of five publicly traded, whole-company winners of the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award.

The five—Eastman Chemical, Federal Express, Motorola, Solectron, and Zytec—outperformed the Standard & Poor's 500 by six-and-a-half to one. The Baldrige companies delivered a 188 percent return on investment, compared with a 28 percent return for the S&P 500.

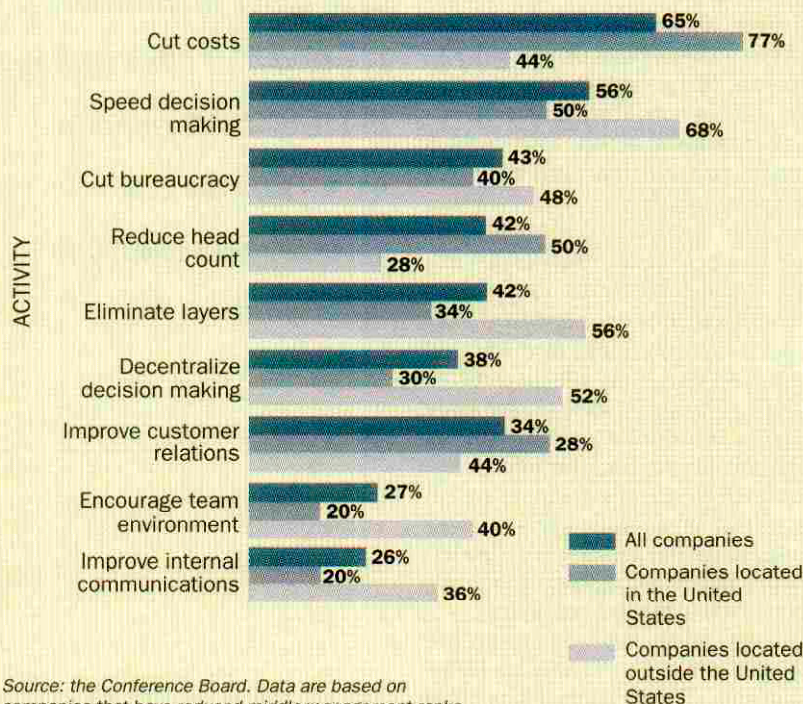
NIST also invested a hypothetical \$1,000 in each of seven publicly traded parent companies of subsidiaries that had won the Baldrige award. The parent companies were Westinghouse Electric, Xerox, General Motors, IBM, AT&T, and Texas Instruments.

The overall result for the 12 Baldrige-winning firms was a 92 percent return on investment, compared with a 33 percent return for the S&P 500.

NIST tracked the hypothetical investment from the first business day in April of the year in which each company won the Baldrige award (or the date the firm went public) to October 3, 1994. NIST made adjustments for stock splits and stock dividends. Each time that NIST invested in a

Trimming Middle Managers

Percent of respondents citing each reason as "very important"



Source: the Conference Board. Data are based on companies that have reduced middle-management ranks.

Baldrige winner, it also invested \$1,000 in Standard & Poor's 500 for the same period.

Unions and Training

At many unionized firms, management and labor are forging new kinds of partnerships in which they share decision making. The federal Commission on the Future of Worker-Management Relations reports that when labor and management shift from confrontation to cooperation, firms strengthen their competitive stance, and employees are happier and more productive.

When a firm and a union are trying to forge a collaborative relationship, trainers can support both entities by ensuring that all materials used to inform, educate, and motivate employees reflect a positive labor/management relationship, says Bob Leventhal of Restructuring Associates, a Washington, D.C.-based training firm.

"The union's commitment will be strongest when its needs, as well as those of the company, are recognized and met through training," says Leventhal.

For example, if you use off-the-shelf training materials, consider whether you need to adapt the materials, Leventhal advises. Many standard training packages overlook the roles played by unions in collaborative settings, he says. For example, in collaborative workplaces, union members as well as managers play key roles as change agents by serving as trainers, team leaders, and facilitators, Leventhal says.

Unions offer trainers a potentially valuable resource, Leventhal adds, and union involvement can help ensure that training initiatives succeed.

Leventhal also offers the following tips for delivering training in ways that support labor/management collaboration:

- ▶ Monitor the use of the terms "manager" and "management." Refer to "management and the union," or "managers and union leaders" whenever appropriate.
- ▶ When describing the economic, social, and technological forces that drive change efforts, include the

MANY STANDARD TRAINING PACKAGES OVERLOOK THE ROLES PLAYED BY UNIONS

trends and factors that motivate or affect the union.

- ▶ Recognize the union as an institutional resource that can support the change effort.
- ▶ Adapt or modify training materials, such as scripts, case studies, and discussion questions, and monitor simulations such as role plays to ensure that they accurately represent an organized setting.
- ▶ In particular, monitor training programs for examples of teamwork that address team members' roles in evaluating or monitoring a teammate's performance. Some employees might willingly learn and use performance-feedback skills. But because of union traditions and values, union members almost certainly would resist taking disciplinary action against fellow union members.
- ▶ Revise training content that undermines the status or role of the union.
- ▶ Recognize the traditional—and legally recognized—role of union stewards in ensuring employees due process, even while they reinforce new employee roles and responsibilities.
- ▶ Revise training content that contravenes or undermines the collective-bargaining agreement.
- ▶ Model the joint nature of the change effort through the joint delivery of training by both managers and union members.

Help for Businesspeople With Disabilities

A new distance-learning program aims to develop the entrepreneurial and leadership skills of people with disabilities.

George Washington University's

School of Business and Public Management in Washington, D.C., and DIAD, a firm in Reston, Virginia, jointly developed the program. DIAD specializes in developing innovative approaches to helping people with disabilities.

The course originates in the university's learning center in Crystal City, Virginia. Instructors simultaneously teach students in the Crystal City classroom as well as students participating via interactive live video from a site in Montgomery County, Maryland. A private firm—Users Information System—provides a classroom for the Maryland site, which is sponsored by the Montgomery County Office of Economic Development.

The technology delivers both sound and pictures over telephone lines, enabling participants at all sites to see and hear each other. AT&T developed the technology and provided it at a discount to help get the program started.

University professors teach the program's business content, and DIAD staff teach practical skills such as listening and communicating well, negotiating contracts, coping with anxiety, and building business relationships. The sites, delivery methods, and pacing are designed to enable people with disabilities of any kind to participate. The first class started in March.

During the one-year course, DIAD helps students locate appropriate sites, secure equipment and start-up funds, and take other steps to launch or develop their businesses. Jim Merklinger, DIAD's legal counsel, notes that some students take the class as a way to further their careers as managers rather than as entrepreneurs.

"We could have sent students videotapes, but we wanted to alleviate the isolation that many people with disabilities encounter," Merklinger noted. The course also is open to people who are economically disadvantaged and to members of minority groups who own their own businesses.

Jacksonville Community College in Jacksonville, Florida, and Goodwill Industries of Northern Florida are slated to sponsor a training site starting in the fall on the college's campus. DIAD expects the program and its

spin-off versions to be available nationwide eventually. For information, call DIAD, 703/715-0760.

Office Potatoes

Shifting images, distracting camera work, and complex narrations—these problems plague instructional videos, says one expert.

When instructional videos entertain more than they instruct, viewers stop learning and shift to couch-potato mode, says Katherine S. Cennamo, an assistant professor of instructional development in the School of Education at Purdue University.

"The couch-potato response may be appropriate for TV as entertainment," says Cennamo, a former producer of instructional videos, "but we have to get the learner to play a more important, more active part when we're using video for instruction. We have to overcome the viewer's expectation that television is a passive cognitive activity."

Cennamo offers the following tips to trainers who use instructional videos:

Tell viewers that they are expected to learn from the video. Follow up with questions.

Use simple videos. With a complex production, learners pay more attention to the medium than the message.

Make sure the words match the pictures. For example, if a narrator is explaining a surgical procedure, the video should be showing the procedure—not a scene of a patient being wheeled into an operating room.

Avoid complicated graphs and charts. Viewers need time to process information presented in complex formats. If they're still concentrating on that information, they might miss the next part of the video.

Make a traditional video more interactive. Stop the tape to ask questions and discuss information.

What Works in Job Training?

The U.S. Department of Labor recently assessed the results of government employment and training programs. In *What's Working (and What's Not): A Summary of Re-*

TRAINING ALONE IS NOT ENOUGH TO LIFT DISADVANTAGED ADULTS OUT OF POVERTY

search on the Economic Impacts of Employment and Training Programs, the department reports the following findings:

▶ Long-term postsecondary-school training helps people acquire new job skills that lead to employment.

▶ Short-term training—especially for disadvantaged youths—has a mixed record of success.

▶ Government-paid training for disadvantaged adults produces positive results and often proves a cost-effective investment for society. But, training alone often is not enough to lift disadvantaged adults out of poverty.

▶ The federal government's major long-term training program for disadvantaged youths—the Job Corps—appears to produce solid benefits for participants and society.

▶ Job-search assistance helps most people and is a highly cost-effective investment for the government.

The U.S. Department of Labor released the report in January. The report reviews data collected on government job-training programs in four categories: programs intended to help people younger than 21 land their first jobs; programs for disadvantaged adults; reemployment programs for dislocated workers; and other sources of education and training, including employer-provided training.

Haphazard Hiring

What mistakes do managers make when interviewing job applicants? Development Dimensions International surveyed human resource managers and compiled the following list of interviewing errors:

▶ Pressure to fill a position affects

the interviewer's judgment.

▶ Interviewers determine that the candidate can do the job but do not consider whether the candidate wants to do the job.

▶ Interviewers do not collect enough job-related information during the interview.

▶ Interviewers' decision-making processes are not systematic or consistent.

▶ Interviewers permit one aspect to influence their overall judgment of a candidate.

▶ All interviewers of a candidate ask similar questions, which duplicates information and wastes time.

Stop Sexual Harassment

The Stop-It Hotline is a national help and information line for companies to offer their employees a resource for coping with problems, complaints, or questions about harassment and discrimination.

The hot line is a service marketed by Pacific Resource Development Group in Seattle, Washington. Employees call the toll-free line to talk with a trained hot-line representative. The representative will refer the information or complaint to a designated contact within the company—keeping the caller's identity a secret, if requested.

According to Pacific Resource Development Group, the Stop-It Hotline

▶ provides employees with a safe place to voice their concerns

▶ encourages all employees to help stop harassment

▶ helps employees and employers resolve problems without outside agencies or litigation

▶ demonstrates a firm's commitment to eliminating inappropriate workplace behaviors.

Companies pay \$150 per month for the service for a six-month trial period. The fee covers up to four employee calls per month; additional calls cost \$50 each. For information, call 800/STOP-IT8.

This month's "In Practice" was compiled by Erica Gordon Sorohan. Send items of interest to "In Practice," 1640 King Street, Box 1443, Alexandria, VA 22313-2043.