

# Training for Qualification: The Negro Worker's Dilemma

## Study Indicates Trained Negro Average or Better Worker

Fred Luthans

The average Negro worker seems to be facing a major dilemma. He certainly cannot hope to rise above his current status without more and better jobs. Yet, the biggest problem he faces in obtaining and advancing in most jobs available is his current status. The findings of a recent study may contribute to the better understanding of this dilemma and lead to solutions to help the Negro break out of this vicious cycle.

To obtain data for the study, a regional confidential questionnaire survey was conducted. During November, 1967, all chief executives or their personnel directors in Lincoln and Omaha firms with 50 or more employees in manufacturing firms and 100 or more employees in non-manu-

facturing firms were asked to participate in the study. Usable responses were obtained from 184 companies which represented 63 per cent of the sample.

Practically all (93 per cent) of the companies who responded said they currently employed Negroes. Almost two-thirds were said to be in unskilled categories and about 6 per cent in staff, managerial or professional classifications.

The study tried to determine how business executives generally perceive the Negro as a worker. A legitimate criticism could be that such an objective promotes the misconception that the Negro worker is a single entity when in fact each black employee is just as unique as is each white or

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yellow employee. In other words, some Negroes are undoubtedly good workers while others are undoubtedly poor workers. Nevertheless, the harsh reality is that the business community, along with other institutions in our society, tend to discuss and interpret the Negro as a single entity rather than as a group of unique individuals. Thus, the all encompassing executive perception of the "Negro Worker" seems extremely important in analyzing an individual Negro's employment potential.

### Job Performance

The logical starting point in analyzing Negro employment would seem to be experience with Negroes currently on the job. Table I shows that overall Negro performance was viewed by business managers as average to good. Only a very few (4 per cent) companies felt their Negro workers were poor performers. A more detailed breakdown of specific areas of performance revealed some interesting results. Absenteeism, turnover, and initiative were not viewed as favorably as overall performance. One of every four firms rated absenteeism and turnover as poor among their Negro workers. On the other hand,

compatibility with white co-workers was perceived as good by about two-thirds of the respondents. Only one company reported that there was poor compatibility between white and Negro workers.

### Earlier Studies

The performance results obtained are in general agreement with earlier studies. A 1959 study of 44 companies found the Negro employees the same or better than white co-workers in overall performance, quality and quantity of work, job attitude, accident record, illness, and turnover. They were rated poorer in both wage assignments and absenteeism.<sup>1</sup>

A 1965 National Industrial Conference Board study of 47 companies found that the comparison between Negroes and other workers was about the same on most work characteristics. On only two aspects—promotability and willingness to assume responsibility—did the Negroes rate much lower than their co-workers.<sup>2</sup>

In 1966, 117 California personnel directors and supervisors reported very favorable experience with Negroes they had hired through the Watts Service Center. In this California study they were also rated

Table I  
Performance of Negro Workers

Performance Factor	Management Rating					
	Good		Average		Poor	
	N	Per Cent	N	Per Cent	N	Per Cent
Overall Performance	54	33	102	63	7	4
Absenteeism and Turnover	39	25	78	50	39	25
Quality of Work	52	34	95	62	6	4
Initiative	35	23	92	61	25	16
Compatibility	99	64	54	35	1	1

about equal with their fellow employees in terms of promotability and willingness to assume responsibility.<sup>3</sup>

In total, managers' perception of their Negro workers' performance has been and continues to be quite favorable. Although a few specific areas, such as absenteeism, promotability, and willingness to assume responsibility, may be viewed as slightly below co-workers, overall performance and quality and quantity of work is viewed to be at least as good as and, in many cases, better than white co-workers. A particularly significant finding seems to be the high degree of compatibility between the Negroes and their white co-workers. This finding would seem to eliminate a lot of the fears associated with white workers' negative reaction to truly integrating the work force.

### Meaning of Qualification

Previous studies have shown the great concern of the business community over Negro qualifications. For instance, an extensive American Management Association Research Study found "In almost every survey response in which the executive discussed the question of Negro employment at all, the word 'qualified' appeared as some part of the statement regarding Negroes."<sup>4</sup> The meaning and implications of qualification would seem to be the major issue facing Negro employment.

If, as was found in this study, businessmen view the performance of their present Negro employees favorably, why are they so concerned about qualifications when discussing Negro employment? Has their selection process found and placed all the qualified Negroes for future hiring and advancement? Or, as many Negroes undoubtedly think, does the business executive interpret qualification to mean "white," or "superior," or "ad-

vanced education?"

To try to determine how the managers perceive qualification, they were asked on an open-ended question to specify two factors holding back Negro employment. The following gives their answers according to the number of times mentioned and a typical response.

1. *Training* (58). "It is much better to hire a skilled or trained person that is qualified for the job rather than to hire a Negro that is untrained. The biggest problem for the Negro is lack of training."

2. *Education* (44). "Those employers who try to hire Negro employees are faced with the very real problem of finding sufficiently qualified candidates. This is a problem of education. School counselors could put a greater effort into helping to keep Negro students in school at least through high school levels, and possibly help with expenses if the student would want additional education."

3. *Motivation and Desire* (40). "I have found that most Negro workers have plenty of ability, but my experience has shown these workers have a decided lack of desire."

Many responses (44) only stated that there were too few qualified applicants but gave no particular reason for this situation. Dependability (17), absenteeism and turnover (9), and transportation difficulties (6) were also mentioned. In total, it seems that businessmen generally perceive lack of qualification to mean insufficient training, education, and motivation. No one's response to the open-end question stated that prejudice or the color of the Negro's skin was holding back his employment. Therefore, the evidence seems to indicate that managers do not perceive, or at least are not willing to admit, that qualification means "white," "superior," or "advanced education." Tabulated results

and many comments, such as the following, support this interpretation.

“With the very low percentage of unemployed, we, like all other companies that I am familiar with, just can not find qualified recruits. It would seem fantastic to think that under these circumstances a company would turn down a qualified person because of the color of his skin.”

### Solving the Dilemma

The dilemma posed in the introductory comments—the Negro cannot rise above his present status without more and better jobs but he cannot obtain or advance in jobs because of his current status—remains to be solved. The solution, if left to the Negro himself, is not going to be easy. As one executive stated,

“Since there are few examples of Negroes in the more attractive jobs, it is difficult to persuade young Negroes to undertake the rigorous and expensive education necessary to attain jobs that may exist only in theory.”<sup>5</sup>

Yet, somehow this vicious cycle must be broken.

The study produced two major findings. First, business executives view the Negro as a relatively good worker once on the job. This good performance did not seem to be a result of *superior* training and education which was necessary to get the job in the first place. Second, business managers feel that the average Negro who applies for a job or is considered for promotion is unqualified in terms of required minimal training, education, and motivation.

These major findings seem to lead to two major conclusions. One conclusion is that the Negro who can meet the necessary minimum qualifications to be hired or promoted will

subsequently perform on that job just as well, if not better, than his white counterpart. Another obvious conclusion is that a tremendous amount of *potentially* good Negro manpower is being wasted because of the lack of minimum qualifications to be hired or promoted.

### Motivation for Business

The solution to the Negro's dilemma thus becomes one of bringing up his qualifications to meet the minimum standards for hiring or promotion. The business community is going to have to meet this challenge. Besides the moral issues involved, the business sector has many practical reasons for solving the problem. As Chester Brown the chairman of Allied Chemical recently stated, “Business can broaden its markets by increasing people's purchasing power. One way to do this is to lift the economic status of poverty stricken slum dwellers.” The head of a Los Angeles employment council added, “Shall we go on paying \$400 million a year in Los Angeles welfare costs, or shall we go down and take a realistic look at the potential workers in the slums?”<sup>6</sup> The study verified that these workers are potentially very good performers, if given the opportunity.

The question naturally arises what can a company specifically do to alleviate the Negro qualification problem. There are no clear cut answers. The best approach is simply learning by doing. Here are some of the things the business community has learned so far:<sup>7</sup>

1. The key to success—and the toughest part of the whole problem—is the right kind of training. As one experienced manager advises, “The first question an executive must ask himself is: ‘Are we ready to spend the extra time to prepare

these employees? Unless the answer is a flat yes, the program won't go."

2. The key to effective training is a job at the end of the training cycle. Only business can guarantee both training and a job instead of training to be unemployed which frequently happens with community or government sponsored programs.
3. Effective training isn't always limited to job skills—you may even have to teach the three R's. As one personnel director points out, "The under-educated worker is often unable to get over even the first hurdle in getting a job. A simple application form holds terror for him if he can neither read the questions nor write the answers."
4. Effective training may also immerse you in the personal problems of your trainees. The differ-

ence between training and therapy is not always clear-cut. For example, fear of failure is almost universal with this type of trainee.

5. Sometimes the waters are murky—you may have trouble communicating with your trainees. Because of real or imagined discrimination and/or failure in the past, many of the trainees have had bad attitudes and poor motivation. This must be recognized and overcome by proper methods of communicating with and motivating the trainee.

This learning by doing seems to be a valuable start. The future must have more business involvement in training and educating the unqualified Negro to help him solve his dilemma and break out of the vicious cycle in which he currently finds himself.

## References

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5. George A. Spater. "Breaking the Bias Barrier," *Management Review*, Vol. 53, No. 4, Apr. 1964, p. 21.
6. See: *Business and the Urban Crisis*. A McGraw-Hill Special Report, 1968. Contained in *Industrial Distribution*, Feb. 1968 or available from the publisher.
7. *Ibid.*

## Handicapped at GM

Everybody has limitations, but what really counts are the abilities that remain . . . Dr. Clarence D. Selby, first

medical director of General Motors Corporation.

