

OPPORTUNITY FOR THE DISADVANTAGED

*a successful program
for clerical training
in Newark*

On June 3, 1968, ten young Negro women from Newark's ghettos began a special clerical training program at Blue Cross-Blue Shield designed to help them fit effectively into the business community. We called it our "Opportunity Program."

The girls were not considered regular employees, but were paid an allowance starting with \$30 per week and increasing periodically to a maximum of \$50 per week. They did not have to pass any employment tests or possess any special skills to get into the program. The only actual requirement was the passing of a routine company physical. Outside of one rejection for this reason, we literally took the first ten applicants sent to us by BICC (Business Industrial Coordinating Council).

With one drop-out in the 10th week, and the successful placement of the other nine girls in permanent jobs at Blue Cross-Blue Shield, we considered our first program successful beyond our anticipation. We have since held two more programs with similar results. However, we began our third program under a government MA-4 Contract, which meant that the girls were hired as employees right from the start at a trainee salary of 10% less than normal, or \$63 per week.

THE TRAINEES

All thirty trainees in these three programs were Negro women from the Newark area. Twenty-six were referred to us through BICC, the other four through SES (State Employment Service). Although we gave the second and third set of applicants our usual employment tests (Junior Clerical Series), they did not have to attain any pre-set score to qualify, and in fact if a girl did pass the tests, we tried to place her in a regular entry-level job instead of the training program.

THE PROGRAM

The basic components of our program were:

- Orientation:** 20 hours
Subjects: Human relations, money management, health, where to find help, career development, leisure time activities, counselling
- Filing:** 20 hours
Trainee To organize and maintain
Goal: files using alphabetical, numerical, chronological, or coded filing systems.
- Typing:** 60-120 hours
Trainee 40 wpm for 5 minutes with
Goal: less than 5 errors.

SUMMARY OF TRAINEES' BACKGROUND

Average age:	25.7	Range: 18-43
No. on Welfare:	13 out of 30, or 43%	
Avg. no. of children:	1.37	Range: 0-3
No. married:	4 out of 30, or 13%	
Avg. years of schooling:	11.43	Range: 8-12
	18 out of 30 had high school diplomas	
Avg. no. of months unemployed during year previous to entering training program:	7.87	Range: 0-12
Previous work history:	Factory: 17 out of 30, or 57%	
	Salesgirl: 4 out of 30, or 13%	
	Waitress: 3 out of 30, or 10%	
	Office: 7 out of 30, or 23%	

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Arithmetic: 27 hours
 Trainee Perform routine computational operations manually including addition, subtraction, multiplication and division with whole numbers, fractions, decimals, percentages, and related word problems.

Remedial Reading: 34 hours
 Trainee Attain 8th grade reading level or above

Employment: 9 hours
 Subjects: How to fill out an application, reading the want ads, office dress, office manners, resumes, practice tests

Speech: 9 hours
Usage: 27 hours
 Subjects: Grammar, composition, how to use the dictionary, spelling, vocabulary

On the Job Training: 80-150 hours in various files or copy-typing areas of the company

The trainee's day was divided so that her mornings were spent in the classroom learning academic subjects, participating in discussion groups, etc. She spent her afternoons at first learning a skill in filing or typing, sometimes both. When she reached a certain skill level, such as 40 wpm with less than five errors in typing, she spent her afternoons in OJT where she had a chance to apply her skills on actual work, and learn to adjust to the office environment.

In addition, we had several special programs: (1) lecture and lab in telephone usage by a representative from the telephone company, (2) trips to Newark Library and Museum, (3) films and lecture by a representative from Planned Parenthood, (4) TV Day: our Manpower Development Dept. spent a full day with each class developing proper employment interview techniques and job-

related problem solving through role-playing on video tape.

ABSENTEEISM AND TARDINESS

Although we had heard that the biggest problem experienced with the disadvantaged employee is absenteeism and tardiness, we thought we were sailing through with almost perfect attendance the first three weeks of our first program. Then we were suddenly hit with a plague of absenteeism. By the time we struck back with counselling, discussion sessions on responsibility, etc., it was almost too late.

We learned the hard way that this area has to be tackled from Day One with constant reinforcement throughout the program. *Before* a girl loses her baby-sitter she should be encouraged to find an alternate. *Before* she takes off for a routine doctor's appointment she should have participated in discussions about scheduling appointments after work hours. Babysitter and health problems were the most prevalent causes of absenteeism.

While we have not *solved* this problem, I think the following indicates we have made some progress:

- First Program:**
5.6 average days absent per trainee
- Second Program:**
3.0 average days absent per trainee
- Third Program:**
2.1 average days absent per trainee

SUMMARY OF RESULTS

- Of the original thirty trainees:
- 93-1/3% completed three-month training program
 - 93-1/3% passed employment tests at end of training
 - 86-2/3% placed in permanent jobs with BC-BS
 - 6-2/3% moved or found other jobs at end of training

- 73-1/3% still employed as of this date (6/25/69)
- 6-2/3% did not pass probation period
- 3-1/3% left during probation period to move back South
- 3-1/3% left after six months, reason unknown

Our normal turnover rate in low level jobs for regular employees who have been pre-screened and tested by employment is 50% within the first six months. Only 6-2/3% of our trainee terminations were involuntary.

I think the key to our success has been our basic philosophy that *every* trainee is going to make it. IQ, education, background, are all irrelevant. The only things that really matter are desire and effort. The effect of this philosophy on the trainees is illustrated by these two quotes from essays the girls wrote:

"Our teacher drives you so hard that you have to learn something, but she drives us because she wants to help us."

and

"The help we are getting from the teacher makes each person feel that she is able to accomplish any task put to them."

I had a girl in my first class who entered the program with below 5th grade reading level, extreme fear and inability to speak out loud in class, and very slow learning skills. A typical example would be for her to get 20 words out of 25 wrong on a spelling test. No one expected her to make it.

But this girl brought those spelling words home with her and studied them in her "spare time" (she also had a husband and two children to care for). At the end of the training period she was able to pass the employment tests and was placed in our lowest level job — an "A" file clerk position.

A few weeks later I questioned her manager. He stated that she learned faster than some of his regular employees, was a lovely person, worked hard, had initiative and he wished he had more like her.

She has since been promoted to a higher level job.

COMPARISONS

We were curious as to how these "disadvantaged" employees compared, after at least six months on their permanent jobs, with regular employees at the same level. Since the third class had only been on their jobs for a few weeks, we took the 15 girls from the first two classes who were still with us and asked their managers to fill out a rating sheet on each girl.

The results of these three programs were attained with applicants who were not pre-screened in any way except the physical. In future programs we plan to use two simple screening devices in an attempt to improve our success: (1) ELCAT (Entry Level Clerical Aptitude Test) — a programmed instruction test designed to measure ability to learn and follow instructions; (2) ELAQ (Entry

SUMMARY OF RATING SHEETS

In comparison with the average employee at this level in my department, I would rate the subject employee as follows:

	Poor	Below Average	Average	Above Average	Superior
Attitude Toward Job		6-2/3%	80%	13-1/3%	
Initiative (Self Starting)		20%	66-2/3%	13-1/3%	
Cooperation			66-2/3%	33-1/3%	
Performance of Job			93-1/3%	6-2/3%	
Performance Speed		20%	66-2/3%	12-1/3%	
Attendance	13-1/3%	13-1/3%	53-1/3%	20%	
Compatibility with other Employees		13-1/3%	60%	26-2/3%	
Promotional Potential	6-2/3%	26-2/3%	53-1/3%	13-1/3%	

Level Applicant Questionnaire) — a motivation questionnaire designed specifically for this program. The applicant will also be interviewed and rated subjectively on this basis.

We hope, through this screening process, to eliminate applicants with extreme

learning disability, lack of motivation, and emotional disturbances which might interfere with their success. With better screening, constant analysis and improvement of training curriculum and methods, we hope to approach our goal of 100%.

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