

1970s—Productivity Decade

Trainers spent the decade convincing executives that training positively influences productivity.

By Paula Ketter

THE “ME DECADE” of the 1970s was full of mood rings, lava lamps, leisure suits, and platform shoes.

But for workplace learning and performance professionals, the decade was all about an economic recession that reduced personnel, not workloads. It was about a movement by workplace trainers to educate managers and employees that training is not a fringe benefit. It was also about convincing top management that training is a positive influence on workplace productivity.

Training in the 1970s also was geared toward helping individuals prosper economically by giving them the tools they needed to adapt to workplace changes and expectations.

March 1973

In an article in the March 1973 *Training and Development Journal*, Britain’s Minister of State in the Department of Employment stated, “Training for the future recognizes our continuous concern for people as well as things.”

Mr. Robin Chichester-Clark, addressing the Annual Conference of the Institution of Training Officers, said training for the future recognized that training is the basic means by which individual men and women can obtain a chance during their working lives to improve their economic prospects and also to achieve greater satisfaction in their work.

“Training officers have traditionally regarded themselves as ‘agents of change,’” said Chichester-Clark. “Helping people adapt to new roles and new situations is one of the most important tasks that training can perform. There has perhaps never been a time when the ability to respond and adapt to change has been as important as it is now.”

August 1973

In Louis E. Tagliaferri’s *Training and Development Journal* article, “The Productivity Crisis: and What You Can Do About It,” he

claims that 1972 was a spectacular year for corporate profits, but rising unit labor costs coupled with a static worker productivity level has taken a bite out of most of those profits.

While profits drop and employment compensation skyrockets, labor productivity remains static. What is important to note is that the 25-year long-term productivity trend rate is a very static 3.1 percent.

A more subtle cause is that today American workers are questioning old values and are becoming increasingly dissatisfied with their work environments. This has a direct and substantial effect on productivity.

The battle to reduce labor costs by improving worker productivity has been a long one involving numerous approaches. Today, however, industry has found that productivity can be boosted on a sustained basis by the proper application of the behavioral sciences. In doing so, great care must be taken to avoid such pitfalls as buying a solution before the problem has been identified or failing to set up a critique procedure by which performance improvement and return-on-investment can later be determined.

An effective way to identify and resolve employee productivity problems is to follow a systematic four-step procedure that involves 1) establishing a climate and commitment for change; 2) establishing a fact base; 3) identifying and analyzing problems and needs; and 4) developing and effecting corrective action programs.

Experience has shown that the behavioral sciences can be highly effective tools for eliminating the productivity crisis—if used properly.

January 1976

In an article titled “1976 Looking Ahead,” nine experts in the field were asked about the problems facing workplace learning and performance professionals and how they are planning to cope with them.

Don Schrello said 1976 will be another tough year for the training profession. *In the midst of a stumbling or uncertain eco-*

nomie recovery, the top decision-makers in all companies will continue the cost-cutting emphasis that’s marked the last six to nine months in order to protect their profits and assure a stable base for future growth.

We must demonstrate that training can be an effective cost-reduction tool. The way I see it is that trainers should concentrate on the areas which most directly affect their organization’s profits: product selection, marketing activities, and capital equipment or expansion plans.

Joe Lowell said employee training—to survive, no less prosper—cannot be seen as a bonus or fringe benefit freely granted by a progressive employer. *Employee training must be seen as work, as an official assignment! It may take place at a location separate from the normal work site; it may take place at hours different from the normal tour of duty. But it is work and therefore must be managed, developed, and conducted with the principles for organizing, planning, doing, and reviewing work.*

Trainers should see and encourage the relationship between successful completion of training and personnel actions.

The successful trainers will be those who not merely adapt themselves to this trend but who lead it.

Paula Ketter is managing editor of *T+D*; pketter@astd.org.