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Work-Ready, Guaranteed

In a world where *promise* too often means *if convenient*, it's refreshing to find an organization that offers a warranty with teeth in it—especially when that organization is a local school system.

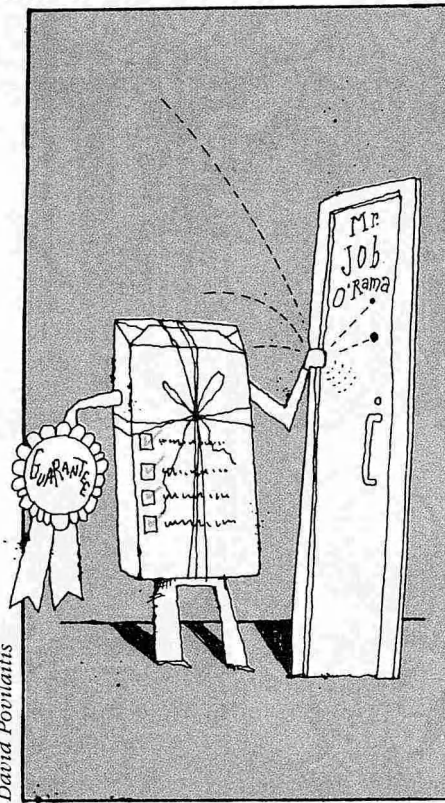
The Prince George's County (Maryland) Board of Education now certifies to area businesses that graduates of its Guaranteed Employability Program (GEP) have mastered reading, writing, and arithmetic, as well as such basic workplace skills as punctuality, reasoning, problem solving, and teamwork. If companies employing recent grads find that their new workers fail to measure up, the county says it will provide free skills counseling and remedial training for up to one year.

So far that hasn't been a problem. In the 18 months since the Guaranteed Employability Program began, no one has invoked the warranty. In fact, business leaders in Prince George's County, which abuts Washington, D.C., say they are more enthusiastic than ever about the program they helped start.

"If I'm looking at two applicants and, all other things being equal, one has a guarantee saying he or she has mastered basic skills required by an employer, then I would certainly choose that applicant," says Gary Lachman, a local builder who served on a business panel that developed the standards on which GEP is based.

Almost one-third of the county's 1989 high-school graduates—some 2,600—earned wallet-sized GEP certificates they can show to potential employers. Companies that hire GEP participants are asked to monitor performance and complete "report cards" that evaluate new workers' basic skills.

Last October, Prince George's officials announced plans to begin offering warranties on students in



the school system's college-preparatory curriculum.

The Prince George's GEP program is just one example of innovative business/education partnerships that have emerged in the last 18 months, as entrepreneurs and academics increasingly bemoan the poor quality of students coming out of the nation's public schools.

Other promising programs with distinctly local emphases include ■ The "Work and Learn" cooperative venture run by the Atlanta public school system's Adult Education Department, an area Private Industry Council, and Equifax, which is a business-services firm based in Atlanta.

Designed to help dropouts earn Graduate Education Development (GED) certificates and gain practical work experience, the program places candidates in closely supervised entry-level jobs at Equifax. The company provides a learning

center where participants can study self-help materials, and employees volunteer to tutor dropouts. Weekly group-counseling sessions help keep the program on track.

The payoff for young adults who successfully complete "Work and Learn": a full-time, salaried position with Equifax or another Atlanta employer.

■ The Miami Springs High School Academy of Tourism, a joint venture of the Dade County (Florida) public schools and American Express.

The academy, which prepares high-school students for careers in South Florida's vital tourist industry, features a special curriculum and summer internships at Miami Beach hotels and resorts. The program burdens students with about 50 percent more coursework and homework than usual, and they continue to study throughout the summer when they intern—weekly reports on their job activities help determine final grades.

American Express has donated \$240,000 to the Dade County School Board to operate the academy, and sponsors similar efforts in New York City.

■ Baltimore Gas and Electric's wide-ranging outreach to a Baltimore County elementary school, a middle school, and a high school.

BG&E, one of the region's largest employers, sponsors summer internships for 30 local students and holds workshops for parents and teachers. Two BG&E employees teach applied economics courses at the high school, and the company last year provided more than 5,000 books and other resource materials for learning centers.

Baltimore Gas and Electric also pays conference fees for the principals of partner schools, and that emphasis on helping school officials improve their own skills signals what many consider to be a rising trend.

■ BellSouth, a regional phone com-

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pany whose CEO John L. Clendenin has become an outspoken advocate for workplace learning, focuses its education partnerships on management development for principals, administrators, and school-board members. BellSouth serves nine southeastern states. Education executives in that region can take part in the same training programs the company offers its own managers.

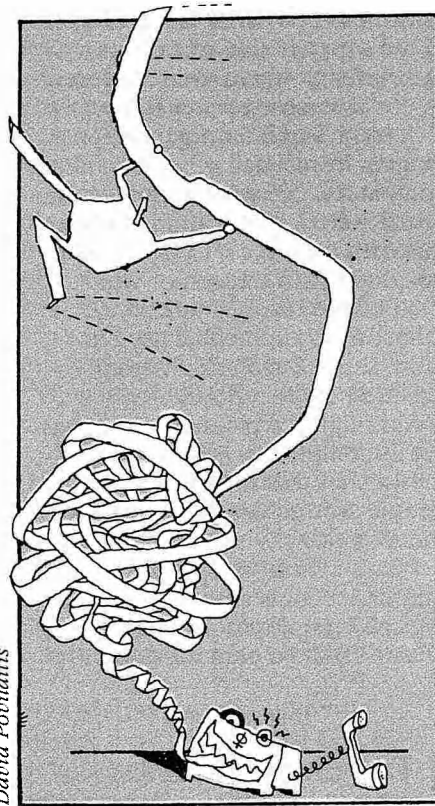
"Some principals carry the ideas back to their home districts and pass them on to other principals and teachers," Clendenin said at a recent meeting of the Conference Board. "The program has become so popular we can't keep up with demand."

Such programs are good news for students attending local schools and for the local employers who depend on the well-qualified students now entering the workforce. According to Prince George's County Chamber of Commerce President Wayne Curry, who worked with school officials to start the Guaranteed Employability Program, "We as employers in this county understand the importance of the school system. It is important to [our] economic health."

Faxes: Can't Live With 'Em, Can't Live Without 'Em

Something there is that does not love a fax.

A talisman for type-A types, facsimile technology compresses urgency—once measured in days—to mere seconds, creating deadlines where none existed before. An icon to impermanence, it carries messages of immediate but transitory import: preliminary confirmations of matters already agreed to and soon to be certified through the mails. The proliferation of faxed deli orders, radio-station HitLine requests, "Far Side" cartoons, and



Rotisserie-league baseball standings seem to brand the technology as a tool for trivialization.

Even the paper on which faxes are printed heralds their ephemeral nature. Built for speed but not to last, fax paper curls up and fades to uselessness within weeks. It fails miserably as a medium for two-way written communication, successfully repelling most inks. Documents that have been faxed, annotated by the recipient, and refaxed often blur to graffiti-like illegibility.

And although faxes are commonly seen as time savers, one wonders about this when standing in line to use the machines, hovering over them to feed in sheets of paper, and waiting for confirmations of receipt. The presumed advantage—that people can rapidly get their hands on time-sensitive documents without actually being there to receive them—dissolves quickly in offices where messages successfully

sent can languish in the fax machine's paper catcher because no one bothers to route them to the recipients.

Yes, there's a lot to dislike about fax machines. The trouble with all this grouching is that fax machines work.

For quickly needed purchase orders, design specifications, and engineering drawings, nothing beats a fax. Although the facsimile versions aren't picture perfect, they'll do in a pinch, and—for short documents anyway—fax is cheaper than overnight mail.

Fax even wields political power. Last spring's pro-democracy uprising in China was fueled in part by uncensored news faxed from the U.S. to machines at Beijing University. The French magazine *Actuel*, as well as *L.A. Style* and *Spy*, recently published lists of Chinese fax numbers so readers could continue to send dispatches into the People's Republic.

So despite the drawbacks, despite the fact that "Fax it to me" has replaced "Let's do lunch" in the lexicon of pinstriped trend-followers, and despite their occasional superfluousness, we still embrace fax machines because the little beige boxes can perform valuable work if they are employed the right way.

Xerox Corporation recently celebrated its 25th anniversary in the fax business by releasing a handy little tract on fax facts. Certain that most businesses can get more out of their machines by using them properly, the company offers these fax tips:

- Use a cover sheet with your name, telephone number, and fax number, even if you're sending a fax for someone else. The recipient may want to contact you for clarification.

- Number pages clearly to make it easy for the recipient to keep them in order.

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■ For documents that will be faxed several times, use large type and plenty of white space. As noted above, those third- and fourth-generation faxes are hard to read.

■ Be careful when transmitting documents that contain color. Dark colors—as on your letterhead, for example—can block out copy and slow down the transmission process.

■ Don't use correction tape or fluid on documents to be faxed. You'll gunk up the machine. Make a copy and fax it instead of the original.

■ Always remove paper clips and staples.

■ Finally, don't send unsolicited documents—advertisements, in particular—by fax. Recipients pay by the page just as senders do, so faxed junk mail costs money. Even more importantly, unsolicited documents tie up the phone lines.

The Michigan State legislature recently had before it a measure that would have outlawed junk faxes. The importance of the bill was underscored when State House phone lines were jammed by lobbyists who obliviously faxed in position papers opposing the restrictions.

Revenge of the AV Club Members

Remember those kids in high school who wore about 30 keys on their belts, kept their glasses together with tape and paper clips, and proudly pushed projectors up and down the halls as members of the AV Club? Plenty of them, it seems, have made careers of it.

Hope Reports, an audiovisual industry research group, says that 440,000 Americans now earn a living in the AV field.

(Actually, considering the definition they used to come up with their figure, we think Hope Reports underreports. "In order to be considered part of the AV industry, at least half of a person's earnings

must be for AV work, as someone in the supplier side of the business," the group announced recently, "or as a user, customer.")

Some 1.5 million organizations, ranging from small schools to large companies, use some type of audiovisual media. Business and industry make up the largest category with 860,000 organizations, of which 193,000 are manufacturers. All tolled, AV equipment is used in more than 12 million different facilities, Hope reports.

Although the research group has yet to complete a worldwide study, it estimates that more than a million people around the globe work in the AV field.

That's a lot of people walking into dark rooms and asking technologically perplexed projector users, "First off, didja plug the thing in?"

Training Linked to Salesforce Retention and Satisfaction

A lack of adequate training appears to be a significant cause of rampant turnover among sales professionals, according to a survey conducted for Learning International, the Connecticut-based training services supplier.

In 1988, the average salesforce turnover rate was 27 percent, found R.H. Bruskin Associates, the research firm that polled 500 salespeople and managers in the United States and Canada. More than half of all firms lost at least one salesperson in 1988. Sixty percent of the employees who left had been with their companies less than a year.

Forty percent of the people surveyed said they were only moderately satisfied in their current jobs, and an additional third appeared to be on the verge of quitting.

That dissatisfaction cut across many lines. Those working in manufacturing environments were

somewhat less satisfied than those working in the service sector, but pay scales appear to have little effect. Indeed, 57 percent of the salespeople polled said they were "quite satisfied" with their compensation packages, regardless of how much they made.

If thin pay envelopes don't cause dissatisfaction and turnover, what does? Poor management support, says Learning International. Of those who complained about lousy managerial practices, only 8 percent told pollsters they were satisfied with their jobs.

Training appears to constitute a big part of the support salespeople desire, especially for those new to the organization. Sixty-five percent of the salespeople polled considered sales training "extremely important" or "very important" to effective selling, yet fewer than half of the corporations surveyed—45 percent—provided such instruction to new employees.

Training seems to have clear payoffs for those who receive it. Almost half of the salespeople who have gone through formal training programs said they have exceeded their sales quotas. Employers appear to benefit too: Learning International says sellers who have had formal training rated their companies higher in virtually every respect than did their untrained counterparts.

Random Stats

Getting through hard times

About half of the companies surveyed by Adia Personnel Services say their employees can receive mental-health counseling through insurance or assistance programs.

Health-insurance plans cover these sessions 55 percent of the time, while 49 percent of companies provide employee-assistance programs to help workers cope. Firms in the banking and insurance

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industries are most likely to offer EAPs, Adia says.

Only a fifth of the firms polled say they have no policies or programs in place to help employees in need of counseling.

Dollars and cents of accidents

The National Safety Council reports these alarming facts:

- Work accidents cost \$47.1 billion in 1988. The figure includes lost wages, insurance administration costs, medical expenses, uninsured costs, and fire loss.

- Thirty-five million work days were lost due to accidents.

- Cost per worker death was \$550,000, while disabling injuries cost \$16,800.

Other data indicate that a U.S. worker is injured every 16 seconds, and that one out of 11 workers will be killed or seriously hurt on the job. That adds up to 70,000 permanent disabilities per year, with 10,000 fatalities.

Although rigorous training cannot entirely eliminate danger at work, the National Safety Council contends that instruction in occupational safety represents one of the most cost-effective ways of reducing the carnage.

Straight From the Horse's Mouth

One way to gauge the mood of the business community is to find out what it looks for in a conference keynoter or after-dinner speaker. According to those who make a living catering to audiences on the rubber-chicken circuit, business leaders are hot to hear about change and customer service.

Mergers and acquisitions, buy-outs, and downsizing make change the most popular topic by far. "My clients are asking for my help on situations that are related to change," says Jim Cathcart, a professional speaker and the immediate

past president of the National Speakers Association, "how to build a team from two sets of employees as a result of a recent merger. . . how to motivate personnel after a layoff."

Bernie Swain, head of the industry-leading Washington Speakers Bureau, agrees. "Change is often perceived as a negative and companies want to hear a speaker who can teach them to turn a negative into a positive," he observes. "They're looking for speakers who can address change directly."

Barbara Kincaide, president of the International Group of Bureaus and Agents, notes that global business trends fall into the change category too. "We get a lot of interest in the Canada-U.S. Trade Agreement and how it affects companies," Kincaide says. "And lately we've had interest in the 1992 European economic Common Market too."

What's the second most popular topic?

"Customer service continues to come in a close second to change," Swain says. "The companies that provide good customer service excel over those that don't, but that hasn't sunk in to some corporations. Clients want to hear from a speaker who succeeded in business because he or she offers excellent customer service."

According to Al Walker, another professional speaker, leadership rounds out the top three topics. Walker says, "[Business audiences] want to hear two things: management training and how to involve and unify employees."

Heard in Passing

On the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the NTL/American University master's program in behavioral sciences, management consultant and president of AFS In-

tercultural Programs Stephen H. Rhinesmith had this to say about the challenges facing the HRD profession in the nineties:

- "If current reforms continue in the Soviet Union, it's estimated that 14 to 16 million people will lose their jobs in a society that has had full employment. That's a retraining exercise of enormous proportions. There will be tremendous dislocations in the Eastern European countries, and relocations in Western Europe after 1992."

- "Flexible, fast, talented, multi-disciplinary teams are one of the major keys to success on a global scale."

- "We are going to have to come up with better ways to help people adjust to rapid change. We've spent the last 40 years teaching people to create order out of chaos, but in the next 10 years we're going to have to teach people to create chaos out of order. We've spent so much time teaching our organizations to be systematized and orderly that now they can't respond to the environment they're facing."

- "We also need to find better ways to help people through personal changes in their lives. They will face inevitable upheaval and insecurity in organizations trying to operate globally."

- "I think many people have difficulty understanding what it means to be from their own cultures. Americans on overseas assignments often 'discover' their own culture because they are so often asked why Americans act in certain ways."

"In Practice" is edited and written by John Wilcox. Send items of interest to In Practice, Training & Development Journal, 1630 Duke Street, Box 1443, Alexandria, VA 22313.