

All Work and Some Play

Four-year-old Gretchen used to cry when her mother left for work in the mornings. Not any more. After attending the American Hospital Association's "Day for Play at Work" at AHA's Chicago headquarters, Gretchen has a better understanding of what her mother does at AHA during the workday.

About 100 AHA employees brought their children "to work" one day this summer, for the second annual Play Day, which is designed to teach children just what it means to go to work.

"To children, 'work' is an abstract place," says Bonnie Michaels, president of Managing Work & Family Inc. "When they see for themselves where their parents work, how long it takes to get there, who they work with, and what they do all day, it creates a better understanding. Family days give children a positive feeling about their parents' work."

Managing Work & Family produced AHA's Play Day in conjunction with Express-Ways Children's Museum, Chicago.

Kathy Anderson, coordinator of AHA's Employee Assistance Program, said that her own daughter, eight-year-old Jennifer, was fascinated by what her mother does all day.

"Work and family are the biggest elements in our lives," said the elder Anderson. "The development of a program like this is acknowledgement of that."

The objectives of family days at work are as follows:

- to bring parents and children together for a day of fun, structured activities at the workplace
- to teach children more about their parents' work (including what they do, where they work, who they work with, and how long it takes them to get to work)
- to improve communication between children and parents about work
- to reinforce for children the positive aspects of working.

Activities at the AHA event included making a "memory button" of the day, creating a "family

album" of what kind of work each member of the family does, having a Polaroid family portrait taken in the work environment, and playing with typewriters, phones, and other office equipment.

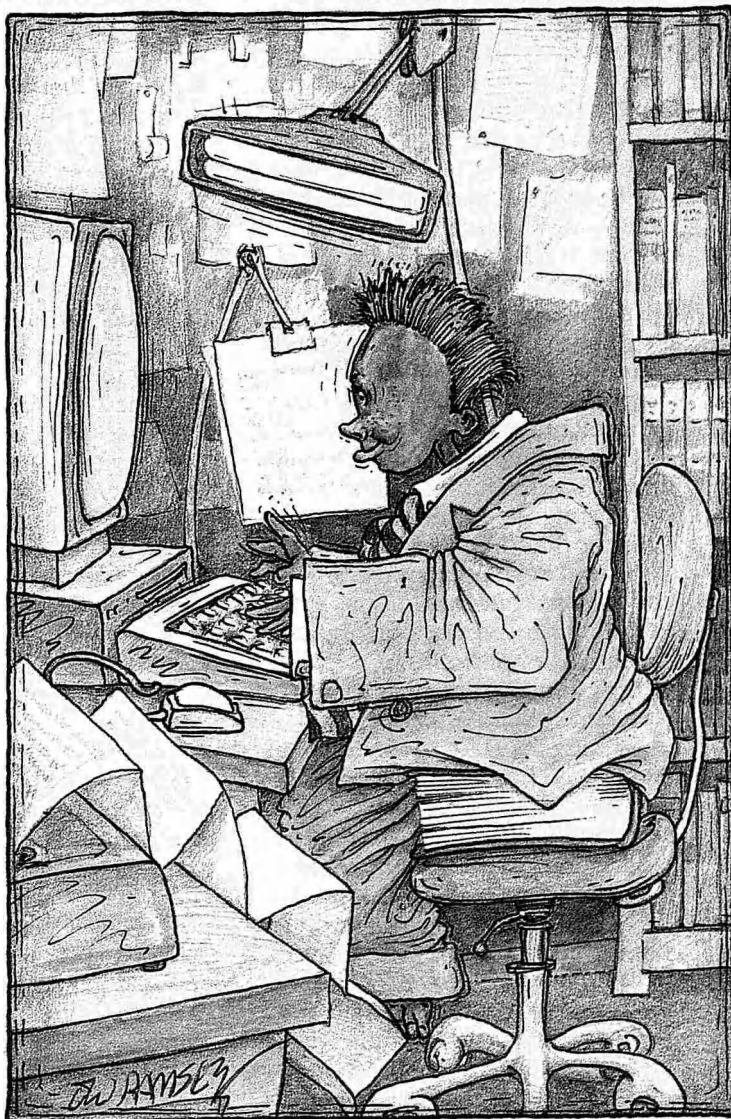
Play Day also provided refreshments, balloons, Frisbees and other "party favors," and a take-home activity booklet for parents and children to do together. In the afternoon, employees and their children took a boat ride on Lake Michigan.

Managing Work & Family Inc. is a Chicago-based consulting firm that also offers organizational assessments, child care facility design, training, dependent-care referrals, and relocation services.

To Russia, With Flip Charts

McDonald's is in Moscow, Soviet circus performers are in Salt Lake City, and Mikhail Gorbachev is more popular in some U.S. cities than homegrown politicians. What's next in the exchange of culture and information between the United States and the Soviet Union?

You guessed it—human resource management policies. OK, so it won't get the glitzy TV news footage that dancing bears command, but the potential impact is nothing to shake a sickle at.



**Play Day teaches
employees' children
just what it means
to go to work**

This summer, the personnel management arm of SPECTR, a large, Moscow-based scientific and industrial association, signed an agreement with U.S. human resource management leaders, pledging to share information regarding the countries' HR policies and practices.

The historic agreement came after a small delegation from the Society for Human Resource Management responded to Soviet President Gorbachev's request for help. Representatives of SHRM, based in Alexandria, Virginia, traveled to the Soviet Union in July at SPECTR's invitation and expense.

The agreement, the first between an HRM organization in the United States and one in the Soviet Union, calls for the following:

- an exchange of technical and professional information
- training and development programs and opportunities
- the possibility of an internship program
- training for U.S. citizens who want to do business with organizations in the Soviet Union
- a commitment between the two associations to collaborate in the future.

"As their economic policies rapidly change," says SHRM president Ronald C. Pilenzo, "the Soviets are realizing that they also need to make immediate and significant changes in their human resource systems to keep pace with the transition to a free-market system."

On Writing and Relating

Executives polled in a recent survey decry the lack of writing skills among job candidates. But another survey shows that many executives and managers don't have the "write stuff" either.

The first survey, developed by Robert Half International, polled 200 executives at the nation's 1,000 largest corporations. The executives answered this question: "Other than job-related skills, what skills are the hardest to find in job candidates?"

The answers, followed by the

percentage of executives who cited each:

- interpersonal (people) skills, 37 percent
- writing skills, 24 percent
- oral communications, 13 percent
- problem solving, 6 percent
- organizational skills, 5 percent
- leadership and management skills, 5 percent
- other or undecided, 10 percent.

But the results of another survey show that many executives and managers could use a writing refresher course, themselves.

This survey polled vice-presidents at 200 of the nation's 1,000 largest corporations (no word on whether they were the same 1,000 largest corporations mentioned above). The key findings are as follows:

- Managers and executives spend an average of 21 percent of their time writing business letters, memos, and reports. That adds up to one day a week—or 11 work days a year.
- Thirty-four percent of reports, letters, and memos are unclear, poorly written, or confusing.
- Forty-one percent of the VPs rated the writing ability of most executives and managers as weak or poor. (Three percent rated it as excellent.) Their biggest complaints about letters and memos were that they are long or wordy, poorly organized, or confusing.

"Corporate America still doesn't realize the toll poor writing takes," said Roger Flax, president of Motivational Systems and developer of the writing survey. "All business writing is expensive—studies show that the average cost of a business letter has climbed to \$100—but the hidden costs of inferior writing are enormous."

He says the consequences may include costly errors, reduced productivity, lost business, and low morale.

Flax's recommendations for better writing:

- Determine the exact purpose of your communication and don't digress from it.
- Be concise. Pretend you're being charged a dollar a word. But be aware that less isn't more if it results

in incomplete or incoherent writing.

■ Grab the reader's attention. Get right to the point in a stimulating opening sentence.

■ Long sentences and paragraphs are tedious to read, so you should use short sentences (under 15 words) and short paragraphs (one to four sentences) and avoid lengthy, compound sentences, instead limiting each paragraph to one main idea and occasionally using a one-sentence paragraph or bullets to make important points stand out. (See what he means?)

"The bottom line," Flax says, "is that poor writing can shrink corporate profits and damage careers."

I Think, Therefore I Am . . . a Dying Breed

Written communication skills are not the only skills that are dying out. The ability to think may be going the way of the pterodactyl, as well.

At least, that's what the National Assessment of Educational Progress reports in a new study, *America's Challenge: Accelerating Academic Achievement*.

The report presents a summary of student progress in the United States over the last 20 years. The basic message is that our current education performance is abysmal and not improving.

That's bad news for employers in search of workers with high-level thinking skills, especially in an age in which organizations are flatter, workers have more autonomy, and even many of the lowest-level jobs require some order of problem solving skills.

Across all subject areas, the report says, the results show a "remarkable consistency" in that students are learning facts and skills, but seem to lack the capacity for complex reasoning and problem solving.

For example:

- Students can read at a surface level and get the gist of basic material, but they cannot read analytically.
- Students have a basic understanding of the major events in

American history, but they are vague about the significance of those events and about the connections among them.

"Relatively few children are receiving the education they need for life in the 21st century," says the report. "Large numbers of students graduate from school lacking the skills needed by employers. . . . These young people are not at-risk, yet they are not workforce-ready. For the at-risk populations, the mismatch between workplace needs and workforce skills is even greater."

Among the cheery findings:

- Most students do not communicate effectively, orally or in writing.
- By the time students near high-school graduation, many cannot handle even moderately challenging mathematical problems.
- Minority students have made gains relative to those of white students, but the gap in average performance between white students and their black and Hispanic classmates is still a gaping chasm.
- Students aren't spending nearly enough time on core subject areas, and are not taking more rigorous, advanced courses.
- Parents do not encourage students to spend much time on their homework.
- Most classroom work is still dominated by passive learning activities such as lectures, although research shows that active, student-centered approaches are more effective.

The usual finger-pointing about who's to blame for our educational woes isn't going to solve the problem. Revitalizing the academic achievement of U.S. students will require "a concerted effort of all Americans," say the report's authors.

"Our changing world has led to new expectations for academic learning that go beyond reciting facts and displaying routines to encompass reasoning, solving problems, applying knowledge, and communicating effectively. Yet, as the data in this report show, it is in this domain that students have regressed most."

Random Stats

Out on a Limb . . .

The number of Americans who say they are being given more authority at work to make decisions than they were five years ago: 64 percent.

Responses were most positive among people under 35 years old and people in the northeast. The survey, developed by Accountemps, polled 1,000 people nationwide.

. . . Without a Net

The number of people who rated their bosses good or excellent about giving them autonomy on the job: 85 percent.

The number of people who rated their bosses good or excellent about giving them regular feedback on performance: 32.8 percent.

The moral: make your own mistakes, but don't expect any help in learning from them. The lack of feedback "dramatically dilutes freedom," says consultant Mark Hordes, who devised the survey that yielded the data. "People have no benchmarks to see if they are doing the right things."

The figures are from the American Productivity & Quality Center's "Rate Your Boss" survey of 417 of its members.

Closing the Computer Productivity Gap

By Barry M. Keesan, president of Logical Operations, a computer training, publishing, and support services firm, at 595 Blossom Road, Rochester, NY 14610.

Computer technology is moving ahead at a pace that overtakes the ability of end-users to keep up. Each new round of hardware and software upgrades puts the average person further behind in the quest for product mastery, and we just can't train end-users fast enough to absorb the technical progress.

As a result, a relatively small number of corporate power-users drives the market to produce faster and more feature-laden products, while the average end-user struggles to effectively use a mere part of

what is already on his or her desk.

Those who are enamored of technological advances often forget that the fundamental business issue of computing is productivity. Because productivity is hard to measure, business relies on the computer industry to define productivity through faster systems and more complex and capable software. But the industry tends to confuse potential with productivity.

In their quest for increased productivity, U.S. companies have invested billions in technology over the last 10 years. And what have we to show for it? We are the number-one consumer of microcomputer technology, but we are rapidly losing ground in productivity. Why? One reason is the large gap between the capability of the technology and its actual use as a productivity tool. Stated another way, a vast amount of unused computer potential is out there.

The gap between hardware potential and software capability is well understood. No one will dispute that hardware technology is far ahead of software technology, and that today's software is unable to take advantage of current hardware capabilities.

But it is less often recognized that, in much the same way, software has become more advanced than the skill levels of today's business end-users. According to one recent article, 70 percent of the people working with computers use less than 20 percent of their software's capabilities.

The recognition that a productivity gap exists will have a great effect on how computers are implemented in the future. For example, a company may invest a lot of money in a computer system that greatly boosts processing speed. But the new system will provide only marginal productivity value if employees use only 20 percent of their software's capability.

Training end-users to master the software may produce striking productivity gains. And it is easy to justify an investment in user training instead of—or in conjunction with—an investment in hardware or software.

That is one reason why many businesses are now saying to computer salespeople, "instead of selling us more equipment, help us to better use what we already have."

Training will become a major issue for the nineties because of the following factors:

- The gap between technology and end-user skill levels is growing wider.
- Technology upgrades will become relatively more costly as end-user skill levels lag further behind.
- Businesses will spend relatively more dollars on training than on systems and software upgrades for maximum productivity gain per dollar. As H. Ross Perot said recently, "developing people exceeds the value of capital expenditure 10 times out of 10."
- The U.S. competitive problem results from a crisis of people, not of technology. As companies downsize, output per employee must increase if the United States is to remain competitive in the world market.

There are already indications of the trend toward training for productivity in the area of computer use. Training is an emergent issue for hardware and software manufacturers; virtually every major hardware and software producer has some sort of training program. Large computer resellers and retailers are also focusing more on training. Such growth in the computer training industry demonstrates the market's need for enhanced end-user skill.

So, how do you assess PC productivity in your own organization? For starters, take a look at the following questions:

- Do you include PC training as part of on-the-job training for new employees?
- Do you give training the same priority as hardware and software?
- Do you train managers in the potentials of the software used by their employees and in the basic skills needed to use that software?
- Do you allow guided or unstructured exploration time before formal PC training?
- Do you train managers in how to

apply PC technology to job-relevant problems?

- Do you commit workers to specific PC solutions to job problems before and after training?
- Do you build in on-the-job PC practice time?
- Do you monitor worker's progress with new PC skills and provide timely and positive feedback?
- Do you upgrade the "challenge level" of workers' PC assignments over time?

If you answered "yes" to at least five of those questions, you are making long strides toward closing the productivity gap.

Reaching for the Stars

Managers are only as good as the people who work for them. If that's true, then it stands to reason that a manager's own career would shine if she or he could only find some star employees.

The top performers are out there somewhere. How does a manager attract and keep them?

According to career counselor and management consultant Marilyn Moats Kennedy, a manager needs to look at the issue from the star performer's point of view.

"At the risk of being impertinent," she says, "we must ask a couple of questions: Why would top performers want to work for you? What can you do for them that would make it worth their while to sign on?"

Kennedy recounts the kinds of reasons that most managers would give in response:

- The manager is bright and reasonable.
- The company is great.
- Jobs in the department are interesting and pay well.

"These reasons will hardly attract flies, let alone stars," she scoffs. "Every manager believes in them but stars do not."

Instead, she urges managers to consider building some real incentives into job offers. Better yet, the boss can renegotiate with her or his current employees—some of them may be latent stars, just waiting to

be motivated to shine.

The idea, Kennedy says, is to screen out people who are looking for a resting place rather than a launching pad. The goal is to find people who have that star quality and to harness their energy to power the department and propel the manager's career.

Kennedy suggests promising star performers (or potential stars) the world—and delivering. For instance, instead of offering stability or longevity, a manager can make deals with the best candidates (or current employees). For instance, "If you work like a potato bug for me for the next two years, I promise I'll move heaven and earth to help you get a much better job here or elsewhere."

Other star incentives Kennedy recommends include training and development opportunities, protection from the vagaries of top management, tons of exposure, and the manager's enthusiastic and appreciative support.

She cautions that it may not be easy. Managers of star employees have to withstand the jealousy—or even sabotage—of peers who can't understand why their own people aren't as productive.

"Is the effort worth it?" she asks. Well, that depends. "What's the limit of your ambition? Are you working at a job or building a career? This is the payoff: you won't have to work as hard because your subordinates will be working much harder. Making the leap of faith across the chasm between managing and leading is the hardest part."

Her comments are from "The Savvy Manager's Secret Weapon: Attracting Top People," in the April 1990 issue of *Kennedy's Career Strategist*.

The Temp-Services Seal of Approval

Don't let just anybody place a temporary employee in your firm. Beginning soon, placement professionals in the temporary services industry can verify their professionalism by earning the designation of

Certified Temporary-Staffing Specialist (CTS).

The first certification exam for temporary placement professionals was given November 17 at 51 sites around the country. Those who pass the exam and meet other requirements will earn certification.

While the CTS designation isn't proof-positive of professional excellence, it may be a good indication of professionalism, knowledge, and adherence to industry standards.

The exam, which is sponsored by the National Association of Personnel Consultants, asks candidates about temp operations, equal-opportunity employment regulations, and standards of business practice.

In addition to passing the exam, CTS candidates must also meet the following requirements:

- have one year of experience in the temporary services industry

- be currently employed in the temp business as owners, partners, managers, or regular full-time employees

- be willing to uphold the NAPC's ethical standards and program rules

- be willing to participate in continuing education.

More than 6 million Americans are now employed on a temporary basis. According to federal government projections, temporary services will be one of the five fastest-growing industries in the 1990s.

Four Easy Pieces

Things are moving fast. Competition is tough. Corporations are searching for excellence while thriving on chaos and swimming with the sharks. Yet, top executives are still more interested in the old-fashioned values of loyalty and hard

work than they are in trendier traits such as quick thinking, creativity, and risk taking.

A new study came up with the four characteristics that CEOs say they most want in their subordinates. In order, they are as follows:

- loyalty
- a sense of humor
- the capacity for hard work
- integrity.

That list is brought to you by Goodrich & Sherwood Company, a human resources consulting firm in New York.

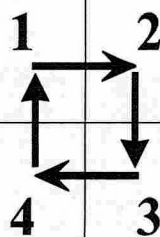
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