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Lessons Learned from a Workplace Literacy Initiative

During a recent evaluation study of an Indiana workforce literacy initiative, Upjohn Institute staff members revealed two surprising findings. First, there was a significant pent-up demand for college education by incumbent workers, many of whom were in full-time, career positions. These workers said that they experienced barriers to their careers by not having some college education. The other interesting result pertains to the innovative digital literacy component that Indiana incorporated into its traditional initiative. Despite being highly supported by both workers and employers, the state had great difficulty finding appropriate curriculum and assessment materials for the digital literacy. Consequently, most of the adult learners struggled considerably, and a large percentage did not pass the certification.

Background

In 2005, the Indiana Department of Workforce Development (DWD) funded an innovative set of 10 projects, which comprised its 21st Century Workplace Skills Initiative. Each project was a partnership of one or more employers and a literacy training provider, such as a postsecondary institution or workforce development agency. The projects devised their own training regimens, which varied in terms of time and place (on- or off-site), curriculum, paid release time or not, use of technology, class size, and most other characteristics.

The initiative had two broad goals. First and foremost, it was intended to demonstrate whether basic skills training provided to incumbent workers can translate to a stronger and more productive state economy. Second, it was

intended to contribute knowledge about best practices to the field of workplace skills development.

The core of the 21st Century Workplace Skills Initiative was a certification system. The DWD awarded certificates to workers who achieved certain levels of proficiency in reading, math, critical thinking, problem solving, and computer literacy. Three levels of certification (gold, silver, and bronze) were based on specific achievement levels in reading and math as assessed by the Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System (CASAS) and computer literacy as certified by Internet and Computing Core Certification (IC3).

The Indiana literacy initiative was intended to raise the basic workplace skill levels and to explore different models of workplace education.

The Upjohn Institute was awarded a contract to evaluate the 21st Century Workplace Skills Initiative for the DWD. The evaluation used both a qualitative and quantitative methodology. Site visits to the funded projects, which were located at firms all across the Hoosier state, were the basis of the qualitative data. In addition, learning gains and earnings histories of participants were quantitatively analyzed. This article focuses on the qualitative findings.

Qualitative Findings

College was a key motivator. Many of the sites promoted their programs as a chance to earn college credits or to prepare for college. In interviewing participants, this seemed to be a strong

motivator. Many of the programs' participants had not attended college, and they feared that their lack of education jeopardized their job security and/or limited their promotion potential. One person said, "I'm tired of all of those individuals passing me by because I don't have any college." The College at Work program at one site, where participants could earn credits in Ivy Tech's basic curriculum, was a prime example. Although they were less explicit in terms of curriculum, Vincennes University programs at two other sites offered participants college credit. At one of the health care sites, participants were motivated to attend the basic skills program because they wanted to succeed in a postsecondary technical program in a health services occupation.

Workplace programs need to be flexible. The instruction in this demonstration needed to be tailored by two factors: first, the learners were adults and second, the instructional setting was in the workplace. Our observation of instruction suggested that sound adult education was taking place. For the most part, the learners were serious and highly engaged. On the other hand, as with most adult education, other responsibilities got in the way of attending class. Sometimes workloads or personal situations would preclude an individual's attendance. Instructors had to be flexible because they were never quite sure about how many or which students they would have in class. An instructor at one of the programs, who was a retired high school teacher, opined that this was perhaps the most important challenge she faced.

Contextualization. At the onset of the initiative, the expectation had been held that the work site instruction would involve considerable contextualization. Employers presumably would see the benefits of inculcating workplace materials into the training. We were therefore somewhat surprised by a relative lack of contextualization. As a generalization, the typical site had made some effort to include workplace materials, but they were generally not as

central to the instructional materials as we expected.

IC3; digital literacy emphasis.

In the design phase of the effort, the digital literacy feature was not primary. As it turned out, this feature became one of the predominant aspects of the demonstration. However, sites struggled to find appropriate curricula and with the difficulty level of the certification itself. The DWD realized that technologically delivered instruction had pervaded basic skills instruction (as it has most levels of education and training), so it decided to include digital literacy as part of the 21st Century certificate, but found a paucity of certifications that were competency-based instead of “seat-time”-based. An investigation led to IC3 as virtually the only candidate.

Business return not foremost for employers. We would characterize the partnerships that we observed between programs and employers as quite solid, but we were surprised by a relative absence of interest in measureable return. In general, employers seemed to be motivated by providing the training as a benefit for employees that would likely improve morale. They were less motivated by an expected business return. The business perspective seemed to be that if workers improved their skills and had improved morale, they were likely to be somewhat more productive, and consequently, the business will benefit. However, the workers’ benefit was the primary motivation for participation, not the business’ benefit.

Keys to success: Program champion and paid time. Two characteristics were associated with the most successful programs. First, the program needed to have a “champion” in the business firm; a midlevel or higher manager. Because of the pilot nature of the program, many changes were made along the way, and it was important for an individual to have enough authority to exercise the flexibility that was required to make the adjustments that were needed. The other characteristic that seemed to be associated with program success was

compensating workers for their time spent in training. About half of the sites had this feature, and those sites had no difficulty in recruiting individuals, and they had very high attendance rates. On the other hand, when the training was on employees’ own time, attendance faltered, and the expected number of participants lagged well behind what was expected.

Lessons Learned

The Indiana Department of Workforce Development designed and funded the 21st Century Workplace Skills Initiative to raise the basic workplace skill levels of Indiana workers while exploring the viability and effectiveness of different models of workplace basic skills education. To use a cliché, the pilot demonstrations were intended to be win-win-win-win programs. Indiana

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workers would gain basic skills, which would result in more stable careers and higher wages and productivity. Employers would gain more productive workers who would exhibit better workforce attachment that would translate into business payoffs such as enhanced productivity or profitability. The field of basic skill instruction would learn from the experiences of the Indiana partnerships offering innovative programs in diverse workplace settings. The state would house more competitive employers with more productive workers and would develop a workplace basic skills training capacity. We summarize here the initiative’s payoff to workers, the companies, and the literacy field.

Payoff to workers. Our technical report notes six lessons learned about the payoff to some or all of the workers who participated in the initiative. First,

most participants genuinely were appreciative of their employers offering the opportunities. Significant morale improvements occurred in virtually every site. Second, the level of participation and excitement among many of the workers underscored a substantial demand for and interest in upgrading skills. Employees seemed to understand clearly the importance of training and skill acquisition to their own job and career prospects. The third lesson we learned was that the possibility of earning college credit was a strong motivator for workers in addition to upgrading skills for their own productivity.

Fourth, as implemented in this initiative, the opportunity to earn a skill certificate was not a strong motivator for workers. Workers seemed to understand the linkage between their own skills/knowledge and productivity but were less clear about the value of certifying the skills/knowledge. Workers apparently did value computer training because it became a major component of the initiative. There seemed to be two motives for this: some workers had absolutely no background and wanted to get very basic training, and other workers were interested in upgrading their skills. Most participants, but especially the former group, found the IC3 certifications to be quite challenging. Finally, the benefits to the workers were quite variable. A few workers blossomed. Many workers had positive experiences, and some workers probably benefited only a little. Of course, when you add all of these together, you get a substantial aggregate payoff to workers.

Payoff to companies. The employers came to this initiative as voluntary partners or as grantees. None of them seemed to regret their participation; rather, they expressed appreciation for the chance to train their workforces. Whether it was the manufacturing, health care, tourism, or human service sector, all of the business owners and managers interviewed clearly noted the growing competitiveness of their businesses. Attracting and retaining employees was a continual issue. Owners and managers viewed training as a key strategy for

operating efficiently and as a means to grow their own workers through promotions.

Despite their understanding of the strategic nature of training, perhaps the most notable observation about employer involvement was the lack of interest in or attempt to measure potential business outcomes from the initiative. It became apparent through interviews that businesses became engaged in the initiative mainly as a benefit for employees. They saw it as a way to improve employee morale. Most of the business representatives understood and articulated the fact that if workers would improve their basic skills and exhibit higher levels of morale, then they would likely be more productive. However, virtually none of the employers attempted to measure such outcomes.

Payoffs to literacy providers. While the payoffs were not of a financial nature, the initiative contributed a number of valuable lessons to the field of workplace literacy. First is an issue with which the field needs to grapple. The impetus for the Indiana initiative was a belief that the basic skills of a substantial share of workers were deficient and were jeopardizing economic growth and competitiveness. However, the scores on the CASAS appraisal and pretest were quite high. Workers seemed to possess reasonably high levels of skills, and as a consequence, far less basic skill training was pursued by sites than planned. Naturally, the question is raised as to how this occurred. Was the underlying assumption of deficient basic skills in error?

Hypotheses include the following: The initiative may not have tested the lowest-functioning employees. At most of the sites, participation was voluntary. Individuals with extremely low levels of literacy may not have wanted to be identified out of fear of being stigmatized. For sites that had a limited number of participants, only the more motivated (and more capable) employees may have volunteered. Another hypothesis is that CASAS doesn't measure the literacy and numeracy skills that are important in the workplace. That is, employers' reports of deficient basic

skills may be referring to a workplace vocabulary or problem solving that is not tested by CASAS. If this hypothesis is true, then there is an imperative to contextualize the instruction in workplace learning programs.

The computer skills of participants were extremely heterogeneous. Some individuals had never turned on a machine; others used computers in their jobs on a daily basis. IC3 certification seemed difficult for the latter and impossible for the former. There seems to be a pressing need to design a valid preassessment of computer skills, and to develop a training curriculum for those who have very little background or knowledge. Furthermore, there seems to be a need for an alternative assessment tool that is not as technical as IC3 for individuals who have limited expertise.

Lessons learned from this initiative in terms of motivating participation were the not surprising finding that paid time for training was important, but perhaps more surprising was the importance that workers placed on receiving some college credit. Most of the workers who were interviewed had not attended any postsecondary institution, and they were usually quite proud of the fact that they were going to get some college credit, and a college transcript; all at the expense of their employer. This finding suggests that employers or providers interested in offering workplace basic skills instruction should try to collaborate with a postsecondary institution.

Note

This article summarizes the 2008 evaluation report titled "An Evaluation of the 21st Century Workplace Skills Initiative," by Kevin Hollenbeck and Bridget Timmeney. Individuals interested in obtaining further information about the program and evaluation can contact Terri Schulz at the Indiana Department of Workforce Development: (317) 233-5663; tschulz@dwd.in.gov.

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