NISOD INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

WORKING HARDER ON "SOFT SKILLS"

"I need employees who can get work on time and work productively once they get there." These are examples of the "soft skills" employers want from our students—non-technical skills such as:

- teamwork
- telephone etiquette
- attitude
- judgment
- truthfulness/honesty
- loyalty
- conflict resolution skills
- decision making
- communication
- diversity training
- critical thinking skills, and
- attendance/punctuality.

We may assume that once students have completed the requisite work for a certificate or degree that they are ready to be employed. Surveys of employers indicate a strong desire for non-technical training, and they indicate that lack of such training, or perhaps just poor training, is the primary reason for employee turnover. Turnover is costly to the employer—and, ultimately, to the public— because it increases the cost of goods and services.

Business owners lament the lack of "soft skills" and frequently refer to them as the "'home training' your mother should have given you." At a recent workforce development collaborative, I visited with several business owners about their *primary* workforce needs. To a person, they all indicated that getting employees who can fill out the application and answer questions correctly was a basic need. They observed that far too many applicants showed up late for the interview or did not have a pen with which to complete the application. Several applicants arrived without proper interview attire. Overall, there was a general sentiment that colleges and other training entities are doing a very poor job of addressing the basic job-readiness needs of potential employees.

There were questions about where and when these concerns first began to surface and then became such important issues in the workplace. One widely held theory was that "soft skill" development was weakened considerably when we began to de-emphasize vocational training as part of our curriculum. At least, vocational training historically provided some rudimentary training in areas such as teamwork, critical thinking, judgment, and other skills of similar ilk. Employers talked openly about the "good ol' days" of vocational training, home economics, and wood shop. Many said that this was a period in our history when recognition of the value of "soft skills" was at its peak; and, therefore, we produced trained individuals who were accomplished in all skill areas. While there may be debate on the merit of this argument, we are hard-pressed to come up with alternative explanations.

Even as we grapple with the "soft skill" issue, another phenomenon is developing. The labor market is aging, and so many workers who received "soft skills" training and developed them on-the-job are retiring in massive numbers. Their retirements are becoming critical issues for community colleges that are moving expeditiously to meet the growing demands for a trained workforce. Developing the requisite technical skills is a major component of training programs; another is developing the "soft skills" that provide employers with employees who can work well in a team-based, budget-limited, self-managed environment.

What can we do now?

We must recognize that poor "soft skills" development is a problem in the workforce, and we need to build collegewide consensus on addressing it. We must also consider:

- Developing multi-disciplinary collegewide teams to develop a core curriculum in job-readiness for all students
- Developing business advisory committees across disciplines
- Developing instructor externships in business and

industry
- Bringing business and industry into the classroom on a routine basis
- Providing more resources for college career center offices
- Developing soft skill training in feeder-pattern secondary schools
- Encouraging workforce and academic deans to serve on at least one committee together
- Encouraging businesses to sponsor on-site (college} workshops on employer expectations during first-semester student orientations, and
- Soliciting grant funds to develop workforce-training institutes which will serve as incubators for innovative training on "soft skills" and other types of training.

Clearly, there is no "quick-fix." But, the Houston Community College System has developed a job-readiness curriculum as a result of its entry into the self-sufficiency grant arena. We discovered that many of the employment barriers for welfare-to-work grant clients were the same as for traditional college students. We found that we needed to show clients/students that there is a *direct* relationship between their *attitude* and their *altitude.* Once students realized that their behavioral change has a proportional relationship to their earning potential, their motivation increased substantially. Our curriculum and skill-development emphasis will have a direct impact on the workforce needs of our community.

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