

*"If a man empties his purse into his head, no one can take it away from him. An investment of knowledge always pays the best interest."*

Benjamin Franklin

The Maine Center for Career Preparation is a private, non-profit committed to improving the economic prospects of Maine citizens.

Improving the linkages between education and workforce development is our goal.

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# Education Works!

## Worker, Heal Thyself!

### The Training Paradox— Why people with the greatest need get the least.

By Tom Broussard

#### Consumer Appliances

When we were kids, our dads fixed things. When we were kids, the toaster could be fixed with a screw. The TV could be fixed with a wire. When we were kids, appliances didn't fail all at once. Their performance got worse over time. The toaster would burn the toast or the TV picture would flutter and it was time for Dad to fix it again. Eventually Dad couldn't fix it anymore and a decision had to be made. Do we send it "out" to get fixed or give up and buy a new one? The essential question being—Is it worth fixing?

Today those same appliances cannot be fixed (not by Dad, anyway!) They just stop working. Either they are returned to the factory or they are discarded. Today appliances are so cheap that it doesn't make sense to put a lot of money into fixing an old one. They became known as "consumer appliances"—use until they break and get a new one.

#### Consumers as Appliances

In many ways, people are now treated as consumer appliances themselves. If the factory fails (or moves or closes) most of the people that work there are not ready to be "fixed." No one has ever told them they might be considered "broken." As a result, they are simply discarded. It is much more cost effective than to try and "repair" them. Where once we bought consumer appliances, we have become them.

#### Who needs training?

Everyone. Everyday. Every job changes. New skills are required. New software needs to be learned. New tools need to be used.

#### Who gets training?

People with training get more training. Untrained people get less training. This is the paradox—people with the greatest training needs receive the least.

An employer's selection of who gets trained is not arbitrary either. It is based on an assessment of whether the investment in training will pay dividends. Those dividends are defined as contributing to the bottom line—adding profit and value to the company. Essentially, is this appliance worth fixing, upgrading, retooling?

A discussion of workplace training takes place at two levels. One is a theoretical discussion of specific, skill



needs required of employees to accomplish a certain task. One person needs software training, another person needs a writing class and so on.

The second level is much more a discussion of what an employee may be able to do with that training. This discussion then becomes one of employee potential.

**Learning how to learn**

Substitute the word 'potential' in the earlier sentence and read it again. Who gets training?

- People with *more potential* get trained.
- Who gets less training?
- People with *less potential* get less training.



**Potential for Improvement**

How do you improve potential? Improving performance is one thing. Improving one's capacity to perform—essentially improving one's potential—is another. This is where the schools get criticized by businesses. Students may graduate with some level of skills that allow them to pass tests but when asked to work effectively, the recent graduate flunks miserably. Why? Because businesses use a different set of rules.

**Businesses want people with more potential**

The largest complaint that businesses have isn't really about skills. They are complaining about the workers' lack of potential to acquire skills.

Employers are in search of these fundamental skills—

- the ability to get along with others, the ability to work on a team, the ability to

communicate, to be reliable, trustworthy, etc. How many times have you heard, "He's a great worker when \_\_\_\_\_ (fill in the blank—"when he's here, when he's sober, or not angry, etc.")"

**Got Learning?**

Who needs more training? People with less skills. But employer training is needs based and dependent on the employee's potential. The employee must bring potential to the table. Only then is the employer interested in providing skill training.

Prospective employees need to display sufficient potential to make further investment worthwhile. Then employers are more than willing to train (invest). Employers do not want to invest in what they perceive to be remedial training.

Employers want a larger number of fundamentally qualified workers from which to choose.

Employers will provide additional investment in training in current employees if they are worth the investment. What does that mean? That they are already performing at a high level of competence and that they have the potential to learn new, even higher skills, to the benefit of the current employer.

**Worker, School Thyself!**

Education prepares a person to acquire and accommodate more education. It works the other direction too. Less

education leaves a person less prepared for more.

**The self-fulfilling nature of education**



Individuals in need of training and education are least likely to acquire it. They may not even be aware of the need. They are also the most likely to be displaced during periods of economic downturn.

How do you retrain individuals who themselves are not yet aware of the need to be retrained? The challenge is to lead people to a conclusion, the cause of which they have yet to see.

**Winning requires lifelong learning—essentially self-directed education**

Globalization has created winners and losers who can otherwise be characterized as those that are either self-directed or those that aren't. A growing percentage of people need direction in a world less interested in providing it.

The more direction you need, the less you're likely to get. The more training you need, the less you're likely to get.

In a global economy neither countries, nor companies, and certainly not individuals—can be thought of as anything less than a good investment.

This is the question we need to ask ourselves everyday, "Am I a good investment?" We may think we work for somebody else, but first and foremost, we really must work for and invest in ourselves.