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"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!

Training, Education & the New Loyalty

By Tom Broussard

Basic Skills in Demand

Maine's economic future is dependent on a better-educated workforce. This is true for Maine's traditional industry base and for the growing technology sectors. In order to stay in business, employers are upgrading their use of technology *and* requiring greater skills from their employees. Traditionally education was a one-time investment and additional training or education was minimal over a career. Today's jobs require more of a *lifelong* approach building on a foundation of basic skills.

Basic Skills Lacking

Many Maine employers report that too many of the applicants they see do not have the basic skills needed to compete in the global economy. These skills are described in Teaching the New Basic Skills (Murnane & Levy, 1996) as the "new" basic skills. They include: "hard skills" including basic math, problem solving and reading ability; "soft skills" including the ability to work in groups and to make effective

oral and written presentations and lastly, the ability to use personal computers to carry out basic tasks. In their book, Murnane and Levy characterize the new basic skills as skills that all high school graduates need to perform in the new economy, whether they go to college or not.

The level of mastery demanded by business of even its lowest level workers comes as a surprise to many educators when exposed to this fact. How can educators be held accountable to implement something of which they are so uninformed? Therein lies the rub. It is imperative that all high school graduates master these skills and the schools don't know it.

Career Preparation

The Career Preparation portion of the Maine Learning Results must be implemented as part of the overarching Maine Learning Results reform program. Career Prep can do its part by shifting

the operational paradigm within which the current system works.

The danger of the current educational system's approach to Career Prep is to be thinking of it as an unfunded mandate. Career Prep is currently thought of as a program such as Band or football which will run only if there is enough funding to do so. We never consider cutting English or science or



math when budgets are tight. The key to successful Career Prep implementation is to appreciate that it is not a program. It is a mindset—a belief system.

Building Bridges

The Building Bridges program helps teachers think critically about how they teach by exposing them to the world of work. Building Bridges should be required of all teachers statewide as a first step towards Career Prep implementation.

Any program that builds linkages between the schools and business in a sustainable way can provide similar benefits. In the Building Bridges program, teachers typically discover for themselves (and self discovery is critical to success) that there are legitimate reasons for them to consider adding new themes to their teaching that begin to incorporate an emphasis on the new basic skills.

The irony is that for the most part the technical components of the new basic skills are taught already. What is most often missing is the day-to-day grounding of how these skills will be used. Why are they important? Why should I learn this? How will it help me? The world of work provides the answers to those questions.

Businesses Must Change Too

For all the discussion about how much the educational system must adapt, the business world has at least as far to go.

In answer to the question employers often ask, “What happens if I train my people and they leave?” Valerie Landry, Maine’s Commissioner of Labor always responds, “What happens if you don’t train them and they stay?” By training them, incumbent workers may be the greatest source of new human capital available to an employer today.

Employability Rules!

In short, business must acknowledge that training their employees makes them more employable. So what? Get over it! This is clearly a case where you cannot have your cake and

eat it too. You cannot have highly trained employees who aren’t also highly employable.

Loyalty is Dead

There can be no doubt that in the new economy change is a constant. People are footloose as

are corporations. Employment arrangements are fluid. Loyalty as we once knew it is dead. The training paradox is a risky one. The more qualified employees become, the more employable they are. Then the “old” conventional wisdom steps in—the more employable the employee, the greater the risk that employees will leave for greener pastures.

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The New Loyalty—Train Them and They Will Stay!

The New Loyalty

But there is a new conventional wisdom—the more an employer contributes to training and education, the more likely the employees are to stay. Build it and they will come? Train them and they will stay! There is still loyalty at work but it is more about mutual needs—call it the “New Loyalty.”

People are Assets

Employers will only adjust when the market drives them to acknowledge that employees are assets. On the Balance sheet, a building is an asset. When it needs painting—you paint it! You don’t begrudge it the paint. In economic terms, we invest in assets. We cut costs. In light of the constraints on growth caused by the lack of qualified workers, businesses are vulnerable to new ideas right now. This is certainly one they should consider. People are assets.

Would I work for me?

Business must be prepared to answer the question—How do you treat your people? If they treat their employees as costs to be minimized, people can tell. People can tell when they are not appreciated. People can tell when they are not being told the truth. People can tell when they are supposed to be part of a team and they really aren’t. They all read Dilbert.

The common denominator that rationalizes an otherwise thought-to-be risky approach to training employees (in this global economy) is to treat employees as assets and invest in them. Training and education is one way. Employees finding themselves in this all-too-rare relationship with their employer will surely be loath to leave.

