

Breaking Down Perceived Barriers to Lifelong Learning

Gene E. Fusch

Ph.D. Student, Southern Illinois University
6710 Grandview Road
Arlington, WA 98223-8643 USA
Tel: (+1)-360-435-4085
gfusch@siu.edu

ABSTRACT

As companies implement corporate universities and other dynamic strategies to transform the workplace into an environment that fosters worker participation, decision-making, teamwork, and continuous learning, some traditional industries have met varying levels of resistance from their hourly blue-collar workers. This resistance often is a result of the workers' perceived barriers to learning. In this paper I will discuss my conceptual foundations leading to my research on the perceived barriers some workers have toward learning. I will describe a customized work-site based college-industry partnership program that employs dynamic and trendy delivery methods. I will analyze intended and unintended consequences this program has had on the resistance that some blue-collar workers have had toward participating in lifelong learning opportunities. And, I will argue the pretense for developing college-industry programs that provide lifelong learning opportunities for blue-collar workers and suggest directions warranting further study.

Keywords

Education-Industry Partnership, Corporate University, Company Sponsored Educational Programs, Worker Participation.

Introduction

As Western companies implement strategies to transform the workplace into an environment that fosters worker participation, decision-making, teamwork, and continuous learning, some traditional industries have met varying levels of resistance from their hourly blue-collar workers. This paper describes the phenomenon wherein employers provide a college degree program for industrial manufacturing "blue-collar" workers at the workplace. In particular, I will describe the worker perceptions and reactions to the program. From the perspective and involvement as the college administrator that implemented the program and later a participating observer, I will suggest worker and employer perspectives toward educational opportunities. Reviewing the results after the first year of this program, I will recommend methods to assist the workers in removing their perceived barriers to lifelong learning and suggest future directions for study.

Insight into the Blue-collar Workers' Perspective

My emergence from a blue-collar industry and craft milieu to obtain educational opportunities, and from a decade of technical college teaching, administration, and advising vocational students, has led me to suggest that many blue-collar workers in manufacturing jobs do not pursue higher education due to perceived barriers. This perception may come from the blue-collar workers' cultural, social, familial, personal, or financial barriers. If an employer provides educational opportunities, blue-collar workers may perceive that the barriers no longer exist and may participate in educational programs.

Darkenwald and Merriam (1982) support my experiential discernment over environmental issues in their Psychosocial Interaction Model vis-à-vis perceived value, incentive for participation, and barriers to participation.

Likewise, the Tomasko and Dickinson (1991) case study of the UAW-Ford Education, Training, and Development Program found that perceived barriers were a major deterrent to workers' participation in education programs. Similarly, Gordus, Kuo, and Yamakawa (1991) illuminated the impact life/education advisors (education and career guidance counsellors) had on participation in the education and training opportunities in a comprehensive study of the UAW-Ford Education, Training, and Development Program. In particular, they employed a quasi-experimental design incorporating a pre-test and post-test sampling of both an experimental group and a control group in four different facilities. All subjects of their study had access to the programs and tuition; however, only the experimental group had access to on-site life/education advisors. Their study supported their hypothesis that social support and guidance agents had a direct influence on females and both a

direct and indirect influence on males by reducing their perceived barriers to participation in educational opportunities.

Affirming my assertion that employer provided educational opportunities at the workplace may diminish the workers' perceived barriers to participating in education, Gordus, Kuo & Yamakawa (1991) found that the on-site course offerings in the UAW-Ford Education Development Training Program eliminated some barriers to education, such as travel time. After removing the barriers, and in the absence of many complicating factors, they found that workers vary their behaviour and engage in new productive behaviours due to a shift in mind and attitudinal change.

Indeed, to construct a hypothesis concerning the perceptions blue-collar workers have about the meaning of general educational opportunities and any changes they may have experienced in their attitudes and behaviors, one should consider studies on the individual's needs. Maslow (1970) maintains that the individual has needs, wants, and desires that if left unfulfilled may hinder self-esteem and self-actualization. If one assumes that individuals need to establish an identity through their position in society, that individuals want opportunities to progress toward fulfilling their goals, and that individuals desire improvements over their current situation, then one may conclude that individuals have concerns about self development and fulfilment. Although one may make this inference, Maslow's humanistic approach to individual needs may not present a motive for workers to participate in an employer provided education.

A superior rationale for worker participation is Vroom's (1959, 1964) expectancy-valence theory. Vroom's model suggests that workers believe that participation will have certain desirable consequences (expectancy) and they perceive the participation as a means to satisfy their needs (valence). Hence, the workers may subscribe to a philosophy that education is directly proportional to career and financial opportunities, and in effect, align themselves with variations of human capital, screening-credentialism or competition theory. These theories may identify an expectancy-valence rationale for workers to participate in educational opportunities at the workplace.

It appears that we can construct a valid argument showing the benefits for the worker participating in educational opportunities at the workplace vis-à-vis fulfilling personal needs, self esteem, upward mobility, and/or ability to market oneself to other employers. However, why would a company wish to incur the expense of providing a general education for workers?

The Employer Perspective

The answer to why a company may provide workers with educational opportunities may lie with new management philosophies that are in response to the rapid technological growth and increased global competition. Indeed, many contemporary Western enterprises have restructured their organizations from the Taylorist model to examples exhibiting workplace environments that foster worker participation, decision-making, teamwork, and learning. As Watkins (1995) maintains, in the post-taylorist organization, enterprises are striving to correlate workplace learning with performance and production. She suggests that credentialing systems such as Motorola University and Mastercard University and related workplace strategies will become increasingly prevalent in post-taylorist enterprises. Indeed, the rapid emergence of employer tuition reimbursement programs is one such workplace strategy.

Eurich (1985) states that "80-90 percent of corporations have well-established tuition refund policies for employees to study in colleges and other higher education institutions"; however, a small percent of eligible employees take advantage of tuition reimbursement opportunities. Nash and Hawthorne (1987) found that only a small percentage of workers enrol in campus-based employer tuition reimbursement programs; whereas, a much higher percentage of workers participate in on-site courses. This leads to a question that workers may perceive barriers such as travel time, distance, and/or parking to enrolling in campus-based programs.

In addition to tuition reimbursement schemes, numerous corporations provide on-site professional education for engineers and management; however, there are few enterprises offering general educational opportunities at the workplace for blue-collar workers. One notable program stems from a partnership between Ford Motor Company and the United AutoWorkers (UAW) that offered employees education and training opportunities through arrangements with local educational institutions at twenty-nine plants. Ford provided classes at no cost to employees and scheduled them on site to accommodate all shifts. An employee participation study of the 1980s through 1993 demonstrated that: 1) fifty-five thousand employees and their spouses participated in basic skills enhancement, of which over seven hundred have completed high school; 2) thirty-nine thousand active

employees participated in personal development courses, such as time management, computer skills, and interpersonal communication; and 3) forty-eight thousand active employees enrolled in college and university offerings held on site at twenty-nine plant locations. Eighteen hundred employees and eligible family members graduated from this program, with twenty-five Associates, nineteen Bachelors, and six Masters Degrees (Hequet, 1994). Gordus, Kuo & Yamakawa (1991) concluded in their UAW-Ford study that the program benefited Ford and the employees via the life enhancement opportunities.

As I will discuss the notion of having an instructor/mentor at the workplace below, it is interesting that the Gordus, Kuo & Yamakawa's (1991) survey of the UAW-Ford life/education advisors on the impact of participation, and the Tomasko and Dickinson's (1991), Fernberg's (1993), and Hequets (1994) case studies of the UAW-Ford, imply that there are benefits to the blue-collar worker and to the enterprise.

It was evident that some companies were exploring ways to enhance their workplace environments by providing educational opportunities for blue-collar workers at the workplace. This is an intriguing phenomenon and suggests that if an employer provides educational opportunities at the workplace, then blue-collar workers may perceive that the barriers no longer exist and may participate in educational programs.

The Operations Management Program

To learn more about the perceptions that blue-collar workers may have toward employer provided educational opportunities at the workplace, I studied an Associate in Applied Science degree program in Operations Management that began in September 1998. The program is offered at a two-year technical college to provide local industry with an alternative to campus-based programs. By customizing each course to fit the needs of the student this program allows workers to study at their own pace and directly relate their learning to the workplace. Through multiple learning methods (i.e.: coaching, mentoring, discussion, team projects, research, e-mail, and the Internet), customized instruction assists the individual's professional development. Students assess their needs (with the instructor's assistance) and develop methods and requirements for meeting program outcomes.

Although it may sound similar to some self-paced distance learning programs, this program was designed to have an instructor acting in the capacity of a mentor and meeting with students at the workplace on a regular schedule. The instructor provided the students electronically a syllabus for each course during the students' orientation meeting and students enrolled and worked through each course at their own pace.

Most courses have text as well as web page links that students study on line. The students use the wealth of management material on line and the instructor continuously updates the syllabi. Some courses use on line quizzes provided by a text book publisher. Each course requires two or three short written essays and a written project. The short essays are exercises in analyzing what the student has studied. The written projects are in the form of papers and proposals that demonstrate the students' ability that compare their learning to their workplace.

Voices from the workplace

During the first year of the programs operation, I had several discussions with prospective students as well as students participating in the program. In addition, I met with several industry representatives and facilitated industry advisory committee meetings. To honour their privacy, I refer to all informants in my study with pseudonyms. Correspondingly, some of the blue-collar workers and industry representatives have shared some interesting insights.

One October afternoon Jill Wilson, a single mother with two children burst into my office filled with enthusiasm. After hearing about the program at her plant she had enrolled in the program. She explained that she was thrilled that there was a way she could pursue the education she always wanted and also earn a college degree! She explained that with two small children and her work shift at the plant she could not attend classes at the college or university and this program let her work at night after her children were asleep. Moreover, her company had computers online located at her workstation and she could do a lot of the coursework during her work shift.

Similar in enthusiasm with Jill, Scott Johnson a young family man enrolled during the first quarter of the program and has completed a couple of courses each quarter. Working a traditional five-day workweek in a

plant that does not provide access to computers online, Scott does his coursework on weekends often working half the night. When I arrive in my office Monday morning I can frequently expect to find a copied e-mail from Scott with some exciting new information he learned. The training director from Scott's company reports that he is impressed with Scott's progress and enthusiasm.

From a hourly supervisor perspective, Dave Smith represents his company on the advisory committee. Dave became so excited about the program that he decided to enrol himself. Dave has completed several courses and is promoting the program throughout his plant. He calls the program the "poor mans MBA" and explained that "my company sends a few upper management people to Harvard for short courses...this program provides anyone in the plant the practical skills from an MBA program and has a very reasonable cost." He goes on to explain how his company pays all the cost and allows him to do his studying at work. In his coursework he has been studying what other companies are doing throughout the world and is developing a project for his company.

One advisory member talked about how her company had considered implementing a corporate university in house. However, after they looked at the Operations Management program they dropped the notion and "this became our corporate university." During the first annual program review in May 1999, the advisory committee applauded the program for its availability, interactive format, that it was self-paced and a win-win proposition – stating that the individual and the company wins. They indicated that the cost was reasonable and that many companies pay all cost including allowing individuals to study at work. They indicate that the program is a business solution for the fundamental building blocks of developing people.

Although the advisory committee and participants in the program herald what appears to be ideal, the program has suffered minimal enrolments. And has met scepticism from blue-collar workers in some plants. Jim Thompson attended an informational meeting in his plant and asked the question "will my supervisor see my papers?" Although he was assured of confidentiality, Jim never enrolled nor did any of his co-workers. Jim's training director indicates that his workers were afraid to use the Internet and he feels that they must overcome that barrier before getting the workers in his plant interested. The training director may be correct and perhaps informational sessions where the workers were given a basic computer and Internet orientation may enhance participation in the program. However, from Jim Thompson's question it appears that there may be additional labour-management issues and labor may need to show support for the program before workers will participate. Additional study is needed to determine what the perceived barriers to participation are in this company and if there are similar perceptions in other organizations.

Another issue was the deviation from the original strategy which would have had the instructor at the workplace at regularly scheduled hours. This did not happen because only a few students from any one facility had enrolled and they met with their instructor on campus and communicated with him primarily through e-mail. It would be interesting to have an instructor at the workplace and ascertain if there is a change in participation such as Gordus, Kuo & Yamakawa (1991) found that the impact life/education advisors (education and career guidance counsellors) had on participation in the education and training opportunities in the UAW-Ford Education, Training, and Development Program.

Directions for Further Study

In this paper, I have described one college-industry partnership program. In my study of this small program that is still in its infancy, I cannot yet defend my hypothesis that if an employer provides educational opportunities at the workplace, then blue-collar workers may perceive that the barriers no longer exist and may participate in educational programs. However, as a pilot study, several additional questions emerge.

Further study may concentrate on finding 1) if introductory meetings at the workplace in which blue-collar workers experience finding the web sites on the Internet will influence their participation in a employer provided educational opportunity, 2) if getting labor leaders involved will increase the participation in a employer provided educational opportunity, 3) if an instructor on-site would increase the participation in a employer provided educational opportunity, 4) if an employer provided educational opportunity at the workplace will lead to blue-collar workers experiencing a reduction in their perceived barriers toward participation in higher education, and 5) what effect participating an employer provided educational opportunities at the workplace has on blue-collar worker attitudes and behaviors.

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