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There is an increasing tension between the demands of the organization for individual development and the needs of the individuals themselves. In today’s world, this tension point is emphasized by the issue of “downsizing”, as seen from both sides of the action. How can individuals be secure in their capability base in this atmosphere? How can an organization assure itself that the “learning organization” is not just rhetoric?

This presentation concentrates on filling in the framework behind such slogans as “Professional Development is Everybody’s Business.” How does “everybody” become involved and supportive of professional development? What is the role of a conference as a development activity? How can development compete with on-the-job demands in the high-priority work situation? Development is usually considered a career enhancement, and can be thought of as only a personal responsibility. But the healthy organization enhances its skills by sponsoring training, widening of roles, and encouraging professional participation away from the job. Examples of successful development activities are cited in order to prompt ideas about practical ways of having an organization that is attuned to improvement.
In September of 1971, RCA Corporation took what was at the time the largest corporate writeoff in business history by jettisoning its computer business. I was working for another division of RCA at the time, but it signaled for me the end of a career at RCA, because my association and expertise within the company was identified closely with computing. Subsequently, in October of 1971, I became part of higher education’s information technology team. My father, when I was in Graduate School, had urged upon me the philosophy he had developed, influenced as he was by the Depression, to link my career with that of a large company which could offer security and career advancement. The events of the fall of 1971 convinced me that my father’s notion (and mine at that point) was not going to be permanently applicable. In fact, what had happened with me was a growing realization that the organization and the individual within that organization might very well have totally different aspirations. Not only did I need to actively manage my career, but I needed to be wary of anything that did not prepare me for a personally better future. Twenty-five years later, that kind of realization now crops up with increasing frequency in the business press and in legislative debate. Principles have come into conflict in the battles over family leave, the minimum wage, down-sizing, insurance regulation, and many other issues. Nowhere is this clash between organizational needs and individual needs more evident than in the area of professional development. This paper explores that natural tension, with the hope of striking a reasonable compromise.

In its simplest form, the clash between organizational need and individual need can be characterized as the difference between training and education. Actually, I believe it can be better understood as a clash of short-term versus long-term goals. To better understand that, let me put the issue of professional development in the context of the sweeping changes that are affecting all organizations as they deal with employee problems today.

**Context--Downsizing**

Legislators and Boards frequently enjoin institutions to “act more like a business”, a direction noted in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* by numerous articles on the downsizing of the service or components of colleges and universities. A very recent article even discusses downsizing in academic departments¹, a notion unthinkable to administrators twenty years ago. Hardly a day goes by without the popular press seizing on some aspect of downsizing:

- “More than 43 million jobs have been erased in the United States since 1979, according to a New York Times analysis of Labor Department numbers. Many of the losses come from the normal churning as stores fail and factories move. And far more jobs have been created than lost over that period. But, increasingly, the jobs that are disappearing are those of higher-paid, white-collar workers, many at large corporations, women as well as men, many at the peak of their careers. Like a clicking odometer on a speeding car, the number twirls higher nearly each day.”²

- “Pessimists point out that the first people to flee a shrinking company are the bright people who can take the ‘buy-out’ packages and immediately get better jobs elsewhere. The dullard employees who remain produce low-quality work, but they compensate by working long hours and producing more low-quality work per person than ever before.”³

- "I think it all has to do with Wall Street. Every day, there's that stock price staring at you. If it's too low, managers say, 'Why let's get rid of some more people and watch it rise.' I wish corporate executives could see all the faces of these people they're
downsizing. I wish they could see them shopping for food and putting their kids to bed. All they seem to care about is the bottom line. And therefore all of us are nothing but Social Security numbers.”

• “Our love affair with layoffs is decimating the ambitions of the very people who should be preparing to run IS departments in the future.”

• “The mantra of the bottom line attempts to convince us that our lives are secondary to the market. . . . Yesterday we were laid off, today we’re downsized and tomorrow we’ll be rightsized. . . . It is people, not products or profits, who create meaning. And that’s what desperately needs to be said.”

In fairness, it should be noted that there are various forms of apologia, denial, and backlash to the downsizing phenomena. One of the most interesting dialogues occurred in *Newsweek*. First of all, an article appeared which characterized Robert Allen, head of A T & T, as a hit man, who “felt bad about firing people but saw no point in giving up some of his pay or perks as a shared sacrifice with the workers.” Subsequently, Robert Allen himself wrote a rebuttal in which he noted that competition meant painful decisions had to be made. But that prompted a raft of letters in backlash arguing that Allen “still misses the point”, by ignoring the sharing of pain, by promoting CEO greed, by not understanding economic reality for families, and by being self-serving.

But then some economists chime in with impressive statistics showing much greater job formation than job loss, while other economists note that the new jobs are invariably lesser jobs. The rumble has even prompted George Will to call it all a problem of “worker’s anxieties inflamed by hyperventilating journalists.”

This atmosphere causes someone like Aaron Feuerstein, who invested his own money in rebuilding a burned-down plant and retaining the workers rather than laying everyone off, to be considered a hero. And Feuerstein himself becomes quotable: “The working man has intelligence . . . and he will tolerate certain things that seem reasonable, but he’ll never accept things that seem unreasonable, so what’s going on today is unfortunate, and there’s a countermovement going on and things will change. It’s the reason I get 5,000-7,000 letters from strangers all over the country.”

In higher education, downsizing is fueled more by genuine problems with cost accountability than anything else, but in our rush to copy business, we still need to keep in mind our different perspectives. As Hans Koning puts it, “The idea that the great industrialists and bankers have the selfsame interests as the average citizen is hype that no democratic country but the United States takes seriously.” Additionally, “the downsizing trend may be ebbing, . . . because some firms that tried downsizing as a cure-all aren’t reporting increasingly higher operating profits.” This particular analyst thinks the solution lies in re-engineering.

**Context--re-engineering**

Re-engineering has come recently into vogue as a means of clarifying an organization’s mission and the way it carries out that mission. Rather than engage in micro-level evolutionary changes, the organization that re-engines backs off its current practices and engages itself in a comprehensive self-examination designed to effect revolutionary change. As one business analyst put it, “Companies most likely to succeed . . . are re-examining the way employees do their jobs. . . . How can
we change the way we do business so the people we have are better able to contribute to the organization’s success? It may mean cutting some jobs, but it also means adding some jobs.”

At first glance, re-engineering seems to workers to have the same negatives as downsizing. While the intent is to re-focus strategic and tactical direction, too often there are perceived hidden agendas.

“We’ve reorganized to focus on our core competency” Ratbert, trying to be a VP. Dogbert’s response: “That was good, but try saying it as though your soul just abandoned your body.”

Re-engineering causes worker anxiety to soar as jobs undergo change and relationships are challenged. Too often re-engineering clashes with one of the liberating ideas of the 80s, worker empowerment. Loss of control concerns workers.

**Context--Increasing Demands**

Although much of the publicity concerning why companies need to engage in radical change, as represented by downsizing and re-engineering, concentrates on the need to become or remain competitive, increasing demands play no small part in today’s pressures. This is especially true in higher education. “Doing more with less” has become every vice president’s rallying cry. And then technology itself has prompted demands to do entirely different things—often without the means to invest or the ability to give up traditional activities. The Internet phenomenon is one such example. As people rush to establish Web pages, other service elements of the organization are abandoned. Anyone who has tried to look at PC sellers web pages, as just one example, is a frustrated buyer because the specifications cannot be kept up-to-date fast enough. But the hidden cost of that Web page is that it is harder to find a knowledgeable representative to talk to on the telephone.

The representative note of bitterness is struck by the comic strip author Scott Adams, when he defines a Mission statement as “a long awkward sentence that demonstrates management’s inability to think clearly.”

**Context--Technical Changes**

Our field of information resources is itself responsible for some of the most wrenching changes affecting all of the rest of our organizations. After all, many of us have been preaching that technology was a way to save money (and to eliminate costly jobs). Whether or not that was ever true is open to serious doubt, but many executives still believe in the power of technology to leverage jobs. I believe it is the single driving force behind the incredible emphasis on distance education in our institutions today. While it is a certainty that there are idealists who see distance education as a better way to serve students—and there are realists who see it as a competitive necessity—the people who hold the power invariably see it as a way to increase instructor productivity.

Technical changes more often allow us to do things we could not do before. Could anyone thirty years ago have foreseen the features of a modern student information system: automatic admission, electronic financial aid processing, registration by telephone or in kiosk, detailed personalized student advisement, electronic transcript dissemination, executive information systems. Yes, the world of thirty years ago was simpler, but this kind of technical change has drastically altered the jobs of admissions officers, registrars, counselors, financial aid officers and others.
In many cases, technical change has elevated job requirements, causing additional pressures, both on the institution and the individual. How can the institution become competitive in seeking and retaining the kind of talent necessary? How can an individual stay abreast of modern methods while holding down a demanding job? The answer, not surprisingly, lies in a two-sided enlightened view of personnel development. In the framework outlined above of downsizing, re-engineering, and vast technical changes, extensive personnel development is the only answer.

Organizational Needs for Development

So organizations are under special strain nowadays. So what? If people are, in fact, an asset, how they are deployed is critical. Organizations need to ensure that there are backups, successors, and cross-training in order to guarantee organizational continuity. There is nothing so damaging to organizational health than to have someone leave who has become “irreplaceable.” Enlightened organizations recognize the need to be protected from too-critical personnel by allowing enough time and attention to be paid to the issue of secondary support. This has to be a conscious decision; sometimes the issue is as simple as being sure two persons attend a key seminar instead of going on the cheap and sending only one.

If ‘change’ is the only constant, as has been repeatedly (and correctly) told to us, organizations need to have people who can adapt to change. How does this happen? By exposing them to new ideas and other circumstances. The person who sits with nose firmly pressed against the grindstone of daily work can never expect to change. Nor can his employer get change, no matter how dedicated that employee is, unless there is some outside stimulus.

In 1983, I laid out a rationale for an organization’s needs for it to promote personnel development in an article published in CAUSE/EFFECT. My observations still seem pertinent today: “The goal of personnel development is to make of each person a repository of broader or deeper skills. This is important to every organization, for otherwise how could there be justification for salary increases? Salary increases... have to be related to productivity gains.”

One of those skills that has come most recently to be emphasized as necessary for the modern organization is “soft” or “people” skills. If Dilbert’s cynicism isn’t enough to convince us that this is a crying organizational need, what will? Seminars involving team-building, coaching, mentoring, communication, and other so-called “soft” skills are typically over-subscribed as people and their organizations try to correct an obvious area of deficiency in many organizations, particularly those that are technical in nature. The hey-day of the hostile nerd is ending.

Methods of Personnel Development That Organizations Need to Use

First of all, the easiest personnel development to justify is training, the more specific the better. Training focuses on job-related skill improvement, with immediate results. Even so, Robert Whalen (president of the National Association of Temporary and Staff Services) cautions that the organization owes itself and its employees some examination of training programs to determine the specific benefit, noting that training must have an impact on the “bottom line”; “For a department or division, there should be a financial or productivity difference between pre- and post-training performance” or else the training will be valueless to the organization.

But non-specific training opportunities also abound. Too often we don’t realize the value of a seminar or conference as an enriching experience. One reason may be that we do not adequately leverage those opportunities. People who go to seminars ought to required to come back with
specific ideas to pass on or teach others; all attendees at conferences should, at the least, write a trip report in sufficient detail that the value of the conference as a development activity can be determined--both for this attendance and for any future ones. In my experience, conferences may have very light support among executive administration. There are many reasons for that phenomenon, chiefly that conferences can be viewed as perks (a trip to some locale for a rest cure) rather than an extension of work.

On-the-job development cannot be overlooked. A good manager in a lively and healthy organization looks for opportunities to encourage development of personnel. Some people have termed this “job enrichment,” defined as “the process of taking existing jobs and broadening or changing them in the hopes that the person in the job will also broaden or change. It is a form of personnel development because it alters conditions in the workplace, to which the individual must adapt in some way. Job enrichment has been characterized . . . as a growth in horizontal responsibilities (the analyst learning about systems other than his or her ‘home’ system) or growth in vertical responsibilities (the programmer learning [details] about user requirements or the hardware requirements of his or her system.)”

Another on-the-job development activity comes from special project assignments, an opportunity for more in-depth work: an investigation of software or hardware for the area; a user survey; Web page design, etc. This challenge of job specialization can yield great results with the correct project assignment and short-term goals.

Finally, the opportunity to help personnel development with a continuous program of personnel evaluation and counseling cannot be overlooked. It is important that evaluation occur at times other than the formal evaluation process. Sometimes, all an employee really needs is an encouraging push to find the right mix of motivators that starts him or her on the path to gaining value for the employer. As I noted back in 1983, “The manager should also counsel employees on career planning. Some people need to be lifted above their low expectations of themselves. . . . The manager who has induced a career orientation into people has accomplished something great, because people frequently find it difficult to think as much as five years ahead or to see beyond the emergencies on their desks.”

The effect of managerial encouragement is going to be enhanced if higher education can be induced to dealing substantively with the issue of merit pay, anathema yet in many places. At the very least, competitive pressures for employees who have gained talents as a result of any development program should be tangibly rewarded. They are in industry. After all, the reward of hard work at improving competencies ought not to be more hard work, as some cynic has put it. The organization has a responsibility to understand how value added in personnel skills needs to be compensated. Needless to say, merit recognition is definitely needed in the dynamic fields that deal with information resources.

Individual Needs for Development

If institutions are under pressure to emulate business’ “lean and mean” attitudes and if managers may have an uphill battle serving as advocates for their staff needs, then isn’t it up to individuals to promote their own professional development? To be perfectly crass, this may be the best way of ensuring flexibility in employment and workplace independence. One of my correspondents has pointed out an interesting byplay by noting that “what is happening in the work force today is another pendulum swing and . . . this is the extreme right before the correction. My solution is to retire at the earliest possible moment. The interesting thing is that the closer I get to being able to do this the more independent I can be from the company demands--thus possibly being able to
stand working longer than I thought.” And too, as many advisors have pointed out, while this may be a poor time to work toward climbing the corporate (or institutional) ladder, there is a burgeoning demand for up-to-date technical skills that can be marketed to a more appreciative audience than one’s current employer.

There are quite a few development activities that the individual should use to increase his or her value:

- **Professional activism.** The individual should seek to join selected societies or associations. Besides some possible benefits in terms of networking, participation provides a means of learning new personal skills. Certainly any good association will also serve as a fountain of education, either through meetings, sponsored seminars, or publications.

- **Conferences.** Depending on one’s orientation, it could be that the single most valuable event of the year is the conference of your peers: hopefully the CAUSE Conference; but also more specialized conferences sponsored by Educom, CUMREC, Nacubo, the ALA or others. Vendors have users’ conferences which may be truly indispensable in terms of specific product plans and synergies.

- **Writing.** One of the single most satisfying activities is setting out and delivering an essay, article, or paper that is published. It satisfies because sometimes that is what it takes for the writer to clarify and focus thoughts on important, previously inarticulated, procedures, ideas, or visions. While being published helps exposure, I think that in my case the research and reflection I have done while writing has been very valuable for my own development professionally.

- **Management Training.** The CAUSE Management Institute is the premier event in our field for introduction, development, and enhancement of management skills. Each year classes leave the Institute with uniform praise for the experience. Nacubo also has an institute that draws excellent reviews.

- **Networking/Mentoring.** The kind of networking that should be emphasized is with faculty members at your own institution. (Or, conversely, faculty members ought to be networking outside of faculty ranks.) Understanding perspective might be the best reason for networking, but it never hurts to have people to whom you can bring issues who can guide you. There are management experts who assert that unless you are a mentor and are also being mentored by someone in your institution, you will miss out on a necessary social interaction.

- **Volunteer Work.** One of my friends, a former bank Vice President in charge of computing activities, parlayed a volunteer job working with AIDS patients into a full-time counseling job with more rewards than her old job. Another of my correspondents (currently out of the work force) has gotten involved with Talking Books for the Blind and Dyslexic. It is too easy to call these mid-life crises; I think they are forms of out-of-field professional development, which should not be overlooked when contemplating a stalled or unsatisfying career.

- **Additional Education.** A supreme irony is that often folks working in the information resources occupations are uneducated by the standards of the academy. Too often, our professionals stop after achieving the vocational education that they need. But we are
working for educational institutions, which value education. A firm belief structure nurtures the idea that there is value added to the student by our own diplomas and certificates. Become a student in order to fit.

It may seem as if some of this will develop people right out of our professions. Is that so bad? Some kinds of turnover and change are beneficial for all parties. If there is no long-term match between the worker’s sense of achievement and the profession, the organization, or the occupation, development that enables a transition should be encouraged.

Now if the institution supports any of this development financially (and/or by granting time off), so much the better. But each of these costs may have to be borne by the individual, taking responsibility for his or her own professional development. One of my faculty friends recently attended a key conference for his discipline in Thailand. The fact that his institution did not support his trip financially was annoying but not a deterrent. That is fairly common among faculty and also illuminates executive reluctance to support technical conferences in our areas--it isn’t consistent with traditionally meager support for faculty professional activities.

Organizational Health Issues

Concern over organizational health issues should be encouraging anyone who can to try to work toward a more healthy dynamic in regard to professional development. Where many organizations are going today is sick.

The current climate seems to generate sullen employees. One of the letter writers to Newsweek, in objecting to a businessman’s article lamenting the cost of constantly training new workers, says that “the social contract between worker and employer . . . is very much a dated idea. Loyalty to anyone but oneself is a liability. Until companies start to reassure employees that they are valuable resources and not costs to be slashed away during the next downturn, good companies . . . will continue to suffer a revolving door of employees caught in the siege mind-set of looking out for No. 1.”23 Note that the observation is that not just bad companies are affected by the poor business climate. Many employees are weary or misunderstood, a mood Dilbert taps into with surprising trenchancy. Finding the proper ways to motivate such employees is definitely a management and organizational challenge. On another plane, some employees are diffident about professional development because they are close to retirement or have a substantial life outside of their occupational life in the workplace. Then there are employees who recognize that they are caught in a technical backwater and want to bail out rather than step up.

But any organization that ends up with only employees who are uninterested in professional development, by whatever means, finds itself unable to meet changing needs. In our technical fields, this is especially tragic, because executives do note the mouth-watering advances other organizations make, just by reading the business press, and then when they find total inability within their own area to come close to the same kind of application excellence, go berserk, contributing to poor organizational health.

Another organizational health issue has to do with adaptation to change. The challenge posed by the accelerating pace of change in technical areas is one that can only met by the lithe organization with employees open to meeting challenges. When employees are, instead, constantly looking over their shoulders to see what horror may be creeping up on them, they don’t look ahead. They also may not have the means to look ahead if development and training opportunities are not readily apparent. Current Secretary of Labor Robert Reich has been a vocal spokesperson for the view that the wage and job crisis in the United States is brought about by a skills base that is not keeping up
with the skills needed for the future. His contention is that Business needs to step up to the
opportunity to develop that skills base among their prospective and current employees. As might
be expected, there is an abundance of contrary commentary citing other reasons for the wage and
job crisis so angrily noted in early 1996. For example, a recent book claims that other organization-
al mistakes are the actual cause for worker discontent and organizational sluggishness.24

The deepest secret of all is that if technology is terribly expensive, so is the business of keeping
up. Being sure that one’s employees can have the time and the opportunity to “keep up” is
something that requires unusual executive dedication. Unfortunately, in higher education, travel
and training budgets are in greater jeopardy of being cut than are hospitality funds. The healthiest
organizations protect and expand development; in fact, when ComputerWorld publishes its annual
list of Best Places to Work, the relative amount of training opportunities is given great weight,
because they recognize that as a significant organizational health issue.

A final health issue has to do with recognizing, for the employees’ sake, work as the center of
much of their sense of accomplishment. Once that is devalued by the employer, by whatever
conscious or unconscious means, workers also lose interest, causing a lessening of quality and
caring.

**Conclusion**

Perhaps what is needed is a wider recognition that organizations have a vested interest in actively
promoting professional development. After all, “companies need stable and skilled work forces,
precisely because excessive turnover raises recruitment and retraining costs and--more important--
disrupts the continuity often required for efficient production, sales, and service.”25 As another
observer has put it, “corporate IS managers complain a lot about the skills crisis, but they should
point the finger of blame upward--and at themselves. Corporations have relentlessly hacked,
outsourced, downsized, and consolidated their IS employees for years in the name of ‘efficiency’
and ‘flexibility’ . . . . In the process, corporations have created a generation of technologists who
care more about their own skills than the companies for which they work. These people have no
loyalty to their employers because their employers have no loyalty to them. . . . Corporate America
created its own skills crisis by choosing not to invest in its employees’ skills.”26

An overwhelming irony is that we may be faced with the situation in which the institution,
intrinsically basing its survival on continuity and a bias toward playing for the long-run, has placed
itself in a position for short-term benefit, while the worker, traditionally one to look to immediate
gratification, is the only party willing to think in terms of the future. More entities need to look at
the example of United Technologies, whose president, George David, has launched an ambitious
$11 million employee training subsidy plan, in which employees can even study things that have
nothing to do with UT’s business. “‘We’re not soft-hearted,’ said David . . . . ‘It’s in our interest
to have an educated work force.’”27 We need, all of us, to clearly understand that life-long learning
is not just a convenient phrase we use when describing continuing education offerings at our
colleges. It needs to be a rallying point both for individuals and the organizations for which they
work.

The current typical business environment is both a motivator and a deterrent to professional
development. As some institutions become less prone to adopt active support of employees’
development needs, it becomes incumbent on individuals to provide that support. Sometimes that
will take the form of the crusading manager, who seeks to make sure that the area of his or her
responsibility does not become a backwater. Very often, it will be up to the effort of the individual
employee, with a personal investment of time, money, and attention, that assures a better future.
Endnotes


20. LeDuc, *op. cit.*, p. 27.


