Skills Enhancement Program

Johns Hopkins Hospital (JHH), a part of the Johns Hopkins Health System, has created a Skills Enhancement Program (SEP) that enables entry-level employees to receive workforce readiness training and job skills that improve their employability and career opportunities at Johns Hopkins. SEP, once open only to entry-level employees, is now available to any system employee who wishes to improve his or her skills. Courses offered through SEP include:

- GED Prep (Levels I, II and III);
- College Prep (Algebra);
- Medical Terminology (Basic and College Level);
- Computer Training (Microsoft Word);
- Keyboarding;
- Front Line Spanish;
- English as a Second Language;
- Math Skill Booster; and
- Reading, Grammar and Writing Skill Booster.

Johns Hopkins is a $5 billion system that unites the physicians and scientists of the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine with the health professionals and facilities that make up the broad, integrated Hospital and Health System. Under this broad umbrella, many employees hold nonmedical jobs in General Services — in positions including nutrition services, facilities management (e.g., janitorial or cleaning jobs), materials management and patient transport.

In earlier days, such positions were open to candidates without a high school degree. In today’s economy, those options are increasingly scarce, which has motivated JHH to invest in renewed
training for its entry-level employees and give them a chance for upward mobility. As JHH sees it, the potential benefits are threefold: Expanded job opportunities will help keep General Services workers employed within the Hospital System and reduce turnover, improve on-the-job performance for workers with front-line responsibility, and improve customer satisfaction as these workers become better able to interact with the community residents or hospital employees.

Background

In 1993, JHH and a network of seven (now 12) other hospitals in the Baltimore area received a National Workplace Literacy Grant from the U.S. Department of Education to provide literacy training to meet workplace needs. The National Workplace Literacy Program funded competitive demonstration grants for programs involving partnerships among business, industry, labor organizations and education organizations. Three community colleges in the Baltimore area — Essex, Dundalk and Catonsville — acted as Hopkins’ partners in this grant, and Essex Community College was the grant administrator.

In 1997, when the grant ended, Johns Hopkins accepted a proposal from Essex Community College to continue the program at JHH. The Director was hired as the Workforce Education Manager of Hopkins’ SEP, and the program was moved to the Office of Community and Education Projects. Despite subsequent budgetary constraints and the economic downturn, the program has survived — and expanded — largely because employees and hospital professionals lobbied the President about its intrinsic value to the institution. The program is now fully funded and located in the Human Resource Office of Organization Development and Training.

In its later phases, SEP expanded its course offerings beyond basic literacy to encompass a greater number of skills that front-line employees need. Additionally, more accountability was built into the program. Under the initial grant, only a few minimum requirements were set, such as employees were required only to show up for class. After institutionalizing the program, JHH began testing as well, and now, when they complete the courses satisfactorily, employees receive a certificate. This certificate is a stepping stone to other courses, training and postsecondary education. For example, participants who successfully complete the Medical Terminology courses are awarded three college credits. JHH pursued this agreement with the Community Colleges of Baltimore County so they would accept JHH’s curriculum and award academic credit. The planned next step is to expand the agreement to the Baltimore City Community College system.

What Works and Why

The courses offered by JHH are taught on the hospital campus and by adult education teachers, some with experience in hospital professions. The courses are shorter than those offered by education institutions, with the intent being to quickly enhance the workplace skills of the front-line workforce and provide maximum impact that can be put to use immediately.
Several factors have helped make SEP successful. These include:

- An organizational open-mindedness toward education generally;
- The quality of the adult education teachers;
- Employee satisfaction with the training (rating of 4.8 on a five-point scale, fall 2009);
- Visible senior-level support (including attending graduation); and
- Responsiveness on the part of the program to the needs of the business units while providing training in a timely fashion.

One of the most important benefits for SEP course-takers is that they can get remedial help in basic skills before they apply to college, thereby reducing the risk of getting sidelined with remedial course requirements once in school. SEP helps prepare entry-level workers to earn college credits immediately if they decide to go on to postsecondary education.¹⁷

Initially, the Grant Officer in Community and Education Projects was the champion for the program. She understood the value of workforce readiness training for employees and for the institution. Today, the President of JHH supports the program, but the program must continually make the case for its support. The Workforce Development Manager does this by providing training reports to senior executives and by creating awareness of the program’s benefits for JHH’s employees and for the community.

### Return on Investment

JHH enjoys a substantial reduction in employee turnover, and hence a reduction in the cost of hiring, as a result of its workforce readiness program. For example, during the most recent fiscal year, not a single employee (ages 16 to 26) in SEP quit or was terminated. The overall employee turnover rate in General Services is 14 percent. This percentage is a conservative estimate of what turnover would be among this group of young employees in the absence of SEP because young employees typically have higher turnover rates than older employees.

JHH estimates that the cost of turnover of a single employee in General Services is $6,396. The cost per pupil of its SEP program varies by year depending on the number of participants and other factors; in 2009, it was $514. Hence a conservative estimate, based only on one-year reductions in employee turnover rates, of the return on investment for SEP is 74 percent = ((.14 x $6396) – $514)/$514.
Into the Future

While the expansion of course offerings is constrained by budget and space availability, program leaders are working on solutions that would encompass classrooms with multiple teaching modalities, including computers for online learning. These would not replace “real-time” teaching but would provide more of a blended learning approach. The program’s future, says SEP Program Manager Barbara Edwards, will be determined by the continued endorsement of senior leadership, the instructional needs of the hospital staff and the program’s resourcefulness in responding to a changing environment. “People need to keep learning,” says JHH Vice President of Nursing Karen Haller. “Those who stand in place are doomed to fall behind. The Skills Enhancement Program helps our people move forward.”

Lessons Learned

Edwards believes that a training program of this nature must be very specific to the culture, mission and instructional needs of the organization — just as SEP is at JHH. The program’s goals align with JHH’s human resources vision of “growing their own”: retaining loyal, productive employees and giving them a way to advance their careers and enrich their futures through training. This training, says Edwards, serves as a win-win for the hospital and its employees. Moreover, when participants come to SEP to improve their skills, they will find confidentiality, encouragement, guidance and congratulations.

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