



A Union of Professionals

Unions *Skills*

PREPARED BY THE
AMERICAN FEDERATION
OF TEACHERS
FOR THE AFL-CIO

Unions Skills

Economic theory predicts that, under ideal conditions, competitive markets will bring about an efficient allocation of resources. One of the key assumptions is that all market participants have “perfect information” about prices and market conditions, so that they can make well-informed economic decisions. But economists have long understood that information is imperfect at best, is often shared unequally and is costly to acquire. An entire specialty in the field of economics examines the market failures arising from imperfect information. The need to correct these failures provides the rationale for government programs to intervene in markets to ensure their smooth functioning. When information is not accurate or freely available, then resources are not efficiently allocated, prices become distorted and no longer bring supply and demand into the equilibrium that theory predicts will make markets clear. In other words, all sorts of bad consequences ensue.

The labor market is especially prone to information-related failure, oscillating from information scarcity to information overload, with some players having vastly superior information. Moreover, as the pace of change has accelerated, employers and workers alike face added uncertainty in making employment and skills decisions without having sufficient time to collect and evaluate all the relevant information. Employers have difficulty evaluating the skills of prospective employees; job seekers do not know where the jobs are, or how best to develop their skills; and education and training providers, either unwittingly or wittingly, provide inadequate training and misinformation about qualifications.

This “sub-optimal” market outcome opens the way for third parties, or labor market “intermediaries,” to provide information services to compensate for these failures. Examples of these intermediaries include employment agencies, temporary help agencies, and online job banks that provide job brokering and career advice. Sometimes, however, these intermediaries compound the problem. State public employment offices originally came about at the turn of the 20th century to stem abuses by for-profit employment agencies that were sending job-seekers to nonexistent firms in distant locales and bribing firms to temporarily hire job-seekers so that the agency could collect a commission.¹ Thus, market failure justifies a role for government programs to improve the functioning of the market by disclosing relevant information. In this case, information is a public good.

Education and training are widely seen as key to solving the nation’s jobs crisis and restoring a vibrant economy. But in today’s rapidly changing economic and technological environment, employees and job-seekers have difficulty matching skill requirements to jobs, let alone continuously updating those skills in order to stay employed and advance in their careers. As confirmed by a recent workforce survey, Americans who want to further their education and

1. Lee, Wong. December 2009. “Private Deception and the Rise of Public Employment Offices, 1890 – 1930.” in David H. Autor (ed.), *Studies of Labor Market Intermediation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

training feel they do not have adequate information to make decisions. Forty-one percent of workers surveyed are unsure of what skills will be required in the future and if training will pay off.²

Our ability to leverage scarce training resources, promote greater uptake and match the right skills to the right jobs will depend on how well we collect, evaluate and disseminate reliable, timely and low-cost information to labor market participants. In today's fast-paced economy, workers do not have a good sense of the opportunities available or the skills and training needed to take advantage of them.³ One cannot reasonably expect workers to be able to access and filter all this information without support. There is a need for career counseling to ensure that job-seekers have the fullest information about job openings, skills requirements and training. But there is also a need for an expert peer advisory role in the workplace to help workers update their skills, to move up a career ladder, or to find other employment and training if a career change becomes necessary.

Professional Workplace Learning Advisers

A network of professional workplace advisers, based on a United Kingdom model of "learning representatives," could make more efficient and effective use of taxpayer dollars and help to mitigate the market failures arising out of imperfect information. The U.K. began to experiment with this model more than 20 years ago. Union learning representatives provide career counseling to employees, conduct learning needs analyses, coordinate activities at on-site learning centers and help to improve workers' confidence in their ability to gain education and skills that will enable them to progress on the job. As many employers in the U.K. have attested, these representatives also help employers by facilitating information flow that is grounded in both accuracy and employee trust. Today, the program's effectiveness has been acknowledged by employers, unionists, researchers and elected officials.

The AFL-CIO concept paper "Professional Workplace Learning Advisers" describes in more depth the professional workplace adviser concept, adapted for the United States. In short, it would complement the role of the state and federally funded U.S. Employment Services. A reinvigorated U.S. Employment Service having access to local, regional and national occupation information as well as related education information could provide career coaching services in the One-Stop Career Centers funded by the Workforce Investment Act. Their services and the information they provide could be extended throughout the labor market via a system of voluntary workplace advisers. The advisers would serve as a resource to co-workers, making them aware of the information available at the Career Centers, and referring them to Employment Service coaches when appropriate.

Workers everywhere are more likely to confide in and seek advice from their colleagues than from total strangers or their employers. Because learning representatives/advisers are on the job and in the office, they have relationships and knowledge of their workplaces that make them uniquely effective. They also have an understanding of their sectors and education and training options that can greatly enhance the value of the information provided by the Employment Service. Technology offers huge possibilities to create more effective information flows that would build job counseling and training capacity by feeding the best public and private training entrepreneurs with serious recruits. Workplace advisers could also draw from private sector offerings, such as MIT's OpenCourseWare, and local community college offerings.

Union Programs

Since their inception, labor unions and craft guilds have played the role of intermediary with a heavy emphasis on education and training, counseling and job-matching. Apprenticeship programs typically include career paths within their industry, coupled with training, certification and ongoing courses to stay abreast of changing technologies. A number of programs have positions that resemble that of workplace adviser. These could serve as a foundation for a network of professional workplace advisers, a role that offers a ready-made basis on which to build a

2. The Springboard Project. December 2009. *Getting Ahead—Staying Ahead: Helping America's Workforce Succeed in the 21st Century*. The Business Roundtable.

3. Louis Soares. June 2009. *Working Learners: Educating Our Entire Workforce for Success in the 21st Century*. Center for American Progress Report.

deeper and more comprehensive structure for job information, career counseling and training. In addition, many union programs have established connections to the public workforce system and accredited community colleges, reaching beyond their own membership in the services they offer.

IBEW, CWA and Their Management Partners

In New Jersey and Pennsylvania, the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) and Verizon representatives serve on a joint Advisory Council on Career and Life Strategies (ACCLS) that has local union “education advocates” who help members access career and life-balance learning programs that include educational opportunities, career counseling, job skill development, as well as health and personal issues.⁴ This is part of a larger IBEW and National Electrical Contractors Association partnership that has trained more than 350,000 apprentices to journeyman status in about 60 career paths.

The IBEW and Verizon also have partnered with the Communications Workers of America (CWA) in a joint education and career program named FutureLink that has a network of work-site “learning advocates,” fellow union members who can refer colleagues to FutureLink’s offerings. These volunteers distribute information about FutureLink services and help the certified advisers schedule work-site activities.⁵

As a union that has seen rapid technological change, the CWA has long been a proponent of lifelong learning, providing training opportunities and career counseling through a number of partnerships. The first effort, the Alliance for Employee Growth and Development, followed the breakup of the Bell System and serves more than 88,000 workers nationwide. CWA’s National Education and Training Trust Academy (CWA/NETT) is open to CWA members and their families, military veterans and those on active duty through arrangements with the U.S. Department of Labor. The program has served more than 25,000 participants. The National Advisory Coalition for Telecommunications Education and Learning (NACTEL) is another partnership of the CWA, IBEW, their employers and Pace University offering online courses to help members learn about the work environment. An online career planning tool for telecom workers is under development by the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL). It will be available to the public and will focus on jobs in the present and future telecommunications industry, the requisite skills and experience required for those jobs, as well as the education and training to prepare workers for those positions.

The AFT

The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) recently has begun to test the learning representative advisory model based on the one found in the United Kingdom. The union has launched pilot programs in Baltimore, Md., Illinois, California and Rhode Island that provide workplace-based “learning representatives” who give teachers and school support staff advice on learning opportunities and career development.⁶

The pilots have begun to create an audit of the education and training programs locally available to educators and to survey members to determine whether their professional development needs are being met. A somewhat different counseling model is under way in Minneapolis where the union has a team of people who are specifically trained to help members design their own professional development plan. It is believed that the employee will assume increased responsibility for professional growth because of the support of the team and the focus on student achievement.

This new approach builds on an AFT history of helping its members with professional development, and of adapting innovative models that have sprung up overseas. The AFT’s current network of teacher centers also had roots in a British model. The late AFT president Albert Shanker saw that these centers could greatly enrich the professional lives of teachers by enabling them to share skills and pedagogical experiences with one another. His support for the concept resulted in 1976 congressional authorization of a law providing federal funds for centers run by policy boards

4. <http://www.accls.com/about.php>

5. http://www.vzfuturelink.net/advocate_center/default.aspx

6. See <http://go.aft.org/learningreps> and www.unionlearn.org.uk for more information.

comprised of a majority of teachers. This federal program was the catalyst for a number of large AFT locals to begin to provide professional development within a union structure.⁷ These centers have been particularly valuable in providing support for new teachers during their first few years in the profession, especially for low-performing schools and staff.

IAM-Boeing

The Quality Through Training Program (QTTP) is a labor-management partnership between the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers and the Boeing Company that provides training and counseling services to eligible active and laid-off Boeing employees helping them prepare for the industry's ever-changing work environment.

Professional career advisers at each of the six QTTP sites offer skills assessments and educational and career guidance, developing individual career development and training plans. Advisers also can offer educational assessments that help employees explore their own knowledge, skills, abilities and goals. Besides personal assessments, advisers assist with resumés and offer direction for obtaining training and education. Computer labs at each site host an array of computer, skills and personal development classes, and instructors also go into the factory with customized training. QTTP Career Guides and Career Explorer provide a way for employees to select, apply for and document that they have met the entry-level requirements for new jobs.

The USW

In another volatile industry, the United Steelworkers created the Institute for Career Development (ICD), headquartered in Merrillville, Ind., originally in partnership with major steel companies that today includes rubber companies as well. The ICD also experimented with a learning rep program and has developed a curriculum to train learning advisers. Courses range from basic skills, such as GED preparation, to graduate-level college courses, as well as personal enhancement courses, like photography and foreign languages, and a variety of classes that teach technical skills, such as plumbing, electrical wiring or small engine repair. The most popular course offerings are computer related, and many Steelworkers earn certifications through the program. The emphasis is on teaching “portable” skills Steelworkers can use to enhance their existing careers or take with them beyond the steel mills, rubber plants and iron mines should they change jobs. Many Steelworkers have used the program to prepare for pre-apprenticeship tests.

District 1199C Training and Upgrading Fund, AFL-CIO

In the healthcare sector, the District 1199C Training and Upgrading Fund of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) is a national model of a joint labor-management partnership whose programs include access to a career counselor and comprehensive career counseling supports, e.g., assessments, career plans, and connections to education and training. The fund was created by collective bargaining agreements between District 1199C of the National Union of Hospital and Health Care Employees (AFSCME) and nine Philadelphia hospitals in 1974. Under the provisions of the Taft-Hartley Act, the parties agreed to create the fund to provide educational benefits to union members and the community.⁸ The fund provides healthcare workers with the opportunity to advance into better jobs. More than 2,000 students per year receive basic and job skills training. About half are union members and half are community residents, including laid-off workers and welfare recipients. The Fund has also experimented with a version of learning representative.

Conclusion

Other unions in other industries have training funds, learning centers and career counseling services, including the United Auto Workers, the Seafarers International Union, the Operating

7. Despite the sunset of the federal law in the 1980s, locals supported their continued operation through creative, collaborative designs.

8. This section draws on an unpublished report by Victoria Choitz of Jobs for the Future, commissioned by the Center for American Progress.

Engineers, and the Painters and Allied Trades. Numerous central labor councils also operate training and education programs, working closely with their communities and dislocated workers. Other labor-led consortia, such as the Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership, assist many small and mid-sized companies that lack the resources to run their own education and training programs.

The U.S. labor movement has broad reach into major sectors of the economy—sectors that are crucial to a healthy economic recovery. By working with unions to institute a system of professional workplace advisers, the administration could magnify the impact of its own workforce programs and improve the flow of labor market information. But even though these advisers would be voluntary, it is important that they receive training to perform their role—as they do in the U.K.—and that they be certified. The U.S. Department of Labor has in the past played an important role in spurring the development of skills standards and should be given the lead in doing so for professional workplace advisers, as described in the AFL-CIO concept paper. Only by reaching into individual work sites will we be able to create an effective 21st-century workforce development system, and professional workplace advisers offer the best means of doing so.



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