

Reverse Education: A Step Back to Move Forward

John Noblitt

In one of my administration classes for my master's degree, the professor said the most important thing any leader can do for the organization he or she runs is to hire the best possible people for that organization. It's hard to dispute this fact, since the employees are what make an organization succeed or fail. Most job descriptions include education requirements, whether a high school diploma, an associate's or bachelor's degree, or more advanced or specialized training. Employers might see the ideal candidate as somebody who has followed a linear progression—schooling, a few years in the work force, perhaps then some advanced education or certification.

Not everybody, though, follows this progression. It is becoming increasingly common for people to return to school for retraining, whether because of layoffs, a change in job responsibilities, or a desire for a new career. What are the advantages to hiring a reverse-educated employee in the medical technology field? And, as an employee, what is the potential return on the investment?

Benefits of Reverse Education

Reverse education, or job retraining, has many benefits to both employee and employer. First, there is a long-term financial incentive. According to a Bureau of Labor Statistics report, college graduates age 25 and over earn nearly twice as much as work-

ers with only a high school diploma. College graduates have experienced growth in real (inflation-adjusted) earnings since 1979. In contrast, high school dropouts have seen their real earnings decline. Any additional education is going to pay off.

Second, reverse education can bring job security. Some degrees and professions are more immune to shifts in the economy than others.

"In today's market with mass layoffs in the manufacturing industries and even tougher economic climate, middle-aged men are twice as likely to lose their jobs in a permanent layoff as they were 13 years ago," says a report headed by Harvard economist James Medoff and published by the National Study Center. "About one million men a year suffer this devastating midlife job crisis at a time when their financial and family responsibilities are greatest," adds Joseph Cooper of the National Study Center. "Millions more face the threat."

In the areas surrounding Caldwell Community College in Hudson, NC, where I teach, we are not immune to these sobering facts. At one time Caldwell County was one of the furniture manufacturing capitals of the world. In the neighboring county of Catawba, some of the biggest plants in the world for making fiber optic and coaxial cable were mainstays of the local economy. In its heyday several years ago, a company called ComScope made coaxial cable

Check Points

Reverse education is nothing more than job retraining. If you are considering a new career, a four-year degree is not the only way to pursue it. Consider the following:

- ✓ Community College
- ✓ Certificate programs
- ✓ Internships (you may be old enough to be the parent of your fellow interns, but you'll learn a lot!)

at a rate that flew out of the plant at 105 miles per hour 24 hours per day seven days a week. Another company called Alcatel made fiber optic cable and employed 7,000 people; today that plant has a staff of 700.

Caldwell and Catawba counties are not unique: Unfortunately, layoffs and outsourcing are a nationwide problem—auto manufacturers in Michigan; airline mechanics in the Pacific Northwest... the list goes on. Many of the people being laid off are in management, engineering, and other fields that require higher education. Many of these highly skilled workers have lost their jobs to overseas workers, which entitles them to government benefits to be retrained for different job opportunities. These workers are looking for employment that is not so dependent on the economy, such as the healthcare industry.

Over the past several years as program director for biomedical equipment technology at Caldwell

Community College, I have seen a tremendous enrollment growth among students who already have a bachelor's or even a master's degree. This is what has given birth to the phenomenon we are currently seeing in the community college called reverse education. These laid-off workers have many skills to bring to an employer's table, but they may not have the skill set for a career in healthcare, particularly in biomedical equipment technology and clinical engineering.

Benefits to Employers

Industry leaders have often debated the educational requirements of entry-level biomedical technicians. Is an associate's degree sufficient, or is a bachelor's degree preferred? What about education and training in the military vs. in the private sector?

As an educator, I believe that a two-year degree and specific training on different technologies is sufficient for the entry-level biomedical equipment technician. But education does not stop with the degree. I attempt to instill in all my students that they must be lifelong learners to be effective biomedical equipment technicians.



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Employers will find in this candidate a person who has the personality to flourish in the ever-changing field of biomedical equipment—one who is highly motivated and very focused on the opportunity and the excitement of a new career. The reverse-educated candidate usually already has the experience of another career and the advantage of a degree. Even if that experience and degree is in another field, the candidate has learned the value of a good work ethic and knows the responsibilities that are attached to a career and not just a job.

Some might worry that if a field rebounds, some of these reverse-educated employees might return to their former careers. In my work, however, I have not found this to be the case. The security of the healthcare industry has a lot to offer, and once an employee has invested the time and money to get their training, they are in the field for life.

Pursuing Reverse Education

Reverse education is nothing more than job retraining. One does not have to attend a traditional four-year college, with the inherent cost of both money and time. There are many focused and job-specific training opportunities available. Training centers, such as Diagnostic Imaging Technical Education Center (DITEC) in Solon, OH, specialize in repair of medical imaging equipment for those who already have a background in electronics. Other opportunities, such as NET+ or A+ certifications, are highly sought after in the job market.

Of course one can also return to community college to sharpen ever-changing job skills. One advantage of the community college system, or any accredited institution, is the availability of student loans or government assistance to help offset the expenses of job retraining.

Reverse Education Success Stories

Two prime examples of reverse education students are Monte Oitker and Lawrence Kodack. Monte is currently

a second-year student at Caldwell Community College and he has his B.S. from Sul Ross State University in Alpine, TX. His degree is in industrial technology. Although Monte is an excellent student and a recent recipient of a North Carolina Biomedical Association scholarship, his opportunities with his first college degree were limited. So, he returned to college to pursue a more focused degree in biomedical equipment technology.

The most “reverse educated” person I know is Dr. (yes, “doctor”) Lawrence Kodack. Lawrence, or Larry, as he prefers to be called, earned a B.A. from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in political science and a second B.A. from UNC in zoology. He continued his education at Duke University in Durham, NC, and received his Ph.D. in biochemistry. As a research scientist for 25 years at Duke, he returned to college to receive his A.A.S. from Alamance Community College in biomedical

equipment technology. Larry is still employed by Duke University Medical Center in the clinical engineering department, with his primary responsibilities being taking care of the equipment in intensive care units.

If in the future you hear of someone who is “reverse educated” please do not think that this person is losing knowledge. They are gaining more knowledge with what is perceived as a lesser degree but is really a more focused degree. Reverse education is nothing more than training for a new career, but with an advanced educational degree already in hand. ■

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