

EMPLOYERS ADOPT GROW-YOUR-OWN STRATEGY, LOOK INWARDS TO 'UPSKILL'

STAFF



Roddale Smith working at the Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center knew at the back of his mind that he was meant for better things than merely carrying chairs around and making seating arrangements. His desire for pursuing an education that would give him the skills to push for a better more lucrative job was answered when he found that his employer was on the same wave length as him and literally brought the classroom to him. It was win-win situation for both, Smith, only 32 and years of work years ahead of him got his nursing degree and the hospital facing a dearth of qualified skilled workers got a skilled worker on its rolls. Smith now works in a position befitting his skills and his salary has almost doubled from what he was drawing as a chair-toter. He now gets \$12 an hour. An overjoyed Smith says, "Moving furniture does not have a direct impact on patient care. I wanted a career, earning a larger salary and making a more significant difference." Out of more than a thousand employers, surveyed by ManpowerGroup in January almost 50 percent concur that they can't find workers to fill positions. It is an ironical paradox that positions remain unfilled even though nearly 13 million Americans are jobless and looking for work and another 8 million, biding their time in part-time jobs until they land the right one. The Department of Labor says that every month since February 2011, 3 million jobs have opened up every month, continuing to add to the lack-of-skills crisis. Concerned about the dearth and the effect it was having on their businesses, employers are partnering with philanthropies, governments and community colleges to upgrade and teach their existing staff new skills so that they can become more competitive, more productive and more useful to the workplace. The practice called 'upskilling' is based on the surmise that your existing workforce is a ready resource that can be worked upon and that from amongst them will emerge the most appropriate person that the management needs – there is no need to look beyond them, is the basic idea behind the scheme. It was found that upskilling workers, who had below average qualifications or needed to upgrade themselves to match workplace requirements, always resulted in increased productivity, higher wages, faster growth and improved bottom lines. Hospitals that experienced a nursing shortage ten years ago and were hugely dependent on nurses from Asian countries, are now looking inwards and selecting staff with potential and upskilling them into becoming technicians and nurses. Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center, is part of one such group, which has members from three states and is called, Partners for a Competitive Workforce. This workforce syndicate has five health-care members, who have analyzed and assessed what are the skills they need and have joined hands to prepare training programs that will help provide their staff with the requisite competencies. "It's a grow-your-own strategy," said partnership Executive Director Ross Meyer. "We are seeing employers stepping up because they're not getting their needs met. We've leveraged public, philanthropic and private dollars to fill the gap." The potential staff that can be trained to upgrade their skills or acquire new ones is limitless. It includes housekeepers, clerks, low-skilled technicians and cafeteria workers. Most of them have had no formal education beyond high school and many don't recollect when was it last they were inside a classroom. Apart from the hospitals, factories and even construction companies are restarting apprenticeships and are partnering with each other to develop similar upskilling programs. The Department of Labor values such initiatives and it is estimated that it spends about \$7 billion a year to fund jobs training and other workforce development. Jane Oates, assistant secretary for employment and training at the Department of Labor said that the money comes in useful for companies who want to train existing employees and avoid layoffs. "You get a new worker of any age who comes into a job, I don't care how qualified they are on paper, you don't know how they're going to work," she said. With an existing employee, "you know they've come to work for the last X years." Anthony Carnevale, director of the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, in Washington said that those days are history when qualified meant having a high school degree. With new workers proficient in information technology current technology, the existing workers, belonging to the old school of thought, fell out of favour. Upskilling programs help keep them on the job and put them on a par with the modern workforce. "Qualified' used to mean a high school degree," Carnevale said. "Now the qualification level has gone up so they're pressing for better people. They'd prefer to buy the skill rather than have to make it, but the skill base in the workforce is not there," he said. Employers say that being technically proficient may not suffice, worker should also possess, "soft-skills" like the ability to think on their feet, solve problems, think critically and work in collaboration with co-workers. However, efforts like these, even though worth applauding and highly commendable will not be able to bridge the yawning growing skills gap. McKinsey Global Institute in Washington in a June report said that by 2020, employers across the world could face a shortage of 85 million high and medium-skilled workers. "Business-as-usual market responses won't be enough," said Susan Lund, McKinsey director of research. "Rather than wait to fix the whole educational system, companies are saying, 'Let's just work in a micro way to do what we can do now.' The way to go about it is to start programs that will address what is needed locally. It will not only help you get you the types of workers that you need but also allow you to concentrate on specific requirements, with perhaps an even shorter gestation period. For example, in 2003, the Port of Seattle opened Airport University on the main concourse of Sea-Tac International. The airlines were increasingly dependent on contractors for food service, cleaning and other tasks. They started a classroom program free to workers that helped them reduce their reliance on contractors. Buoyed by a \$7,000 city grant, Johns Hopkins Bayview Medical Center in Baltimore started offering free classes to workers in 2010. One of the first to join was Marina Vargas-Deise, who had been working at the Center since 2006, taking care of the elderly patients, brushing teeth, changing diapers and delivering food trays. She cleared courses in anatomy, physiology, math and medical terminology and graduated in May from the Community College of Baltimore County. Her upskilling has taught her how to draw blood, perform heart tests and conduct other clinical work. "I wasn't informed about how to start a new career," Vargas-Deise said. "I didn't even know what I needed." She looks forward to more fulfilling work, more lucrative wages and more responsibility in keeping with her new-found abilities. In her, Bayview will have an employee they have known since 2006, one who has proven her worth and now one with the skills that the hospital desperately needs. "When you're hiring off the street you don't know who you're getting," said Bayview Career Specialist Karen Jones. "It's better to tap your resources from within. You have people who know the hospital; they have a good work ethic. We'd rather work with them and move them up the pipeline." Cincinnati's knew about Smith's usefulness when he applied for training at Children's Hospital. His first classes, in math and chemistry, were taught on the hospital campus in conjunction with Cincinnati State Technical and Community College. They knew that investing in him would pay rich dividends and was he not 'known quantity.' "I worked my butt off, didn't call off. I always came to work," Smith said. "That same dependability, that same toughness, I'm just taking it to another level."