

A real education

To survive and excel in the rapidly changing workplace, employees need social and technical skills that aren't necessarily taught in school.

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Street smarts vs. book smarts. Diplomas vs. diplomacy. The classroom can take you only so far in the boardroom, and workers are finding that the basic skills of reading, writing and arithmetic no longer are enough to ensure their survival.

Nowadays, they need to know how to speak so others get their message. They need to cooperate with others and solve conflicts. And they need to know how to adapt to new technology and new ideas.

"Our current education system has not evolved with the changing demands," said Lisa G. Silvershein, founder of Ark Career Coaching in Basking Ridge. "Many graduates enter the workforce with an inability to take risks and responsibility for their mistakes. They are used to taking tests and pleasing teachers rather than thinking critically, making decisions and taking action."

The demand for an ever-widening skill set comes as the technology-dominated global economy moves full

steam ahead, forcing New Jersey employers to become more innovative and more productive.

"For workers to survive and do well, they need a whole bunch of skills and knowledge they never needed before," said Dana Egreczky, vice president of work-force development for the New Jersey Chamber of Commerce. "The amount of skills needed today are exceedingly more than our parents needed."

So what's a degree-decorated employee who needs a crash communications course, time management tips or leadership refresher to do?

While some companies provide in-house training or seminars to address these needs, many employees are taking their own initiative by joining networking groups or career coaches to help move them along in any stage of what Silvershein called their "career life cycles."

Students seeking majors. Executives climbing the corporate ladder. Downsized professionals. Active retirees.

"I always emphasize their strengths and interests," Silvershein said. "You have to make mistakes to grow. And growing means taking initiative, responsibility and owning up to your mistakes."

Answering such calls for profes-



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sional improvement growth is Toastmasters International, a 225,000-member club dedicated to honing skills of speaking, listening and thinking, said William Markert, chief financial officer of the Patriots' Path Council in Florham Park.

"(These are) vital skills that promote self-actualization, enhanced leadership potential, foster human understanding and contribute to the betterment of mankind," Markert wrote in an e-mail to the Daily Record.

A member of the Open Door Toastmasters, Denville chapter, he said businesses tend to bite on Toastmasters-trained leaders specifically in the sectors of sales, consulting management, finance, insurance, government and education.

"All of us are in sales," he said. "We may be promoting our company's products, our individual qualifications, family values, etc. The degree to which we are effective largely depends on our ability to listen to others, evaluate their needs, and communicate solutions/abilities. The better we communicate, the more successful we are

likely to be in attaining our objectives."

A lot is at stake. New Jersey employers are under pressure to remain competitive with companies that can provide the same product or service overseas less expensively. To stay ahead, employers here need a highly skilled work force that can continually evolve and solve problems on the fly, experts said.

"Successful employees are able to look beyond the current reality and try new strategies," Silvershein said. "It is essential that they are able to work with others, communicate effectively, embrace change, negotiate, and adapt to new technology and opportunities. Individuals must be willing to take initiative and think beyond the here and now. Adaptability is essential."

At the same time, workers who have those skills have access to higher-paying jobs, which are needed to keep up with the state's high cost of living. U.S. workers age 25 and older who had a bachelor's degree earned 60 percent more than workers who had a high school diploma, according to a 2001 study by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Yet there are signs the work force is falling short of the demand. As many

as 40 percent of the nation's high-school graduates said they were inadequately prepared for the demands of college and employment, according to a 2006 study by Achieve Inc., a Washington-based nonprofit group hoping to raise academic standards.

But for all the talk about improving students' book smarts, experts say students also need skills that they would be hard-pressed to find in a high school curriculum: the ability to express themselves; to work in teams; to be curious enough that they can help in departments that might be outside of their expertise.

Ruth Ann Virgil, human resources manager in New Jersey for Wegmans Food Markets Inc., a Rochester, N.Y.-based supermarket, said her company searches for workers who can get along with each other, listen to customers and solve problems, figuring they can be taught about culinary trends later.

"We look for people who really are very respectful of others, people who care about the people they work with and our customers, people who go the extra mile for customers," Virgil said. "They want to be empowered. They want to make decisions."

Daily Record staff writer Ellen S. Wilkove and Gannett New Jersey contributed to this report.





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