Arizona Public Service:

Powering a Workforce Education Culture

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Abstract:

Arizona Public Service (APS) is one of two primary providers of electricity in the greater Phoenix area and a major provider statewide as well. As such, their workforce is both numerous and diverse in terms of responsibilities and job functions. I recently visited their main office in Phoenix and spoke to training managers for two key areas of their business – Energy Delivery and Customer Service to discuss the company’s workforce education philosophy; the content, organization and goals of their departmental training programs, and the overall impact their workforce education programs have on their business.

I also spoke with a long time employee and participant in many of their training programs. He provided some perspective on the various programs he’s participated in over the years from a learner’s perspective.

Based on those interviews, this paper will address and evaluate how well APS’s workforce education programs meet the company’s employee development, training and education needs; how well they make use of their education resources, including outside sources; and how their programs meet the company’s overall business needs.

Arizona Public Service:

Powering a Workforce Education Culture

Arizona Public Service (APS) generates, sells, and delivers electricity and energy related products and services to more than one million customers in 11 of Arizona’s 15 counties utilizing nuclear, natural gas, and coal powered generating sources. The largest affiliate company of Pinnacle West Capital Corporation, APS is the second fastest growing electrical utility in the U.S. over the last five years. As one of two electrical providers in Phoenix, and a major provider statewide, APS employs a large workforce that is highly diverse in terms of employee education and work experience and job responsibilities.

Two primary areas of their business are Energy Delivery and Customer Service. I recently visited their offices in Phoenix to discuss their workforce education programs with training managers from both these two areas. I was especially interested to seeing the different approaches for these two very different job areas, with Energy Delivery focusing more on technical training and safety for their field crews and Customer Service focusing more on communication and soft skills for their customer call center employees. As I met with these individuals and learned more about their company and their workforce education programs, I became more and more impressed with the APS workforce development philosophy, the depth and breadth of the programs they’ve designed and implemented to carry out that philosophy, their level of commitment to employee development, and the overall workforce education culture the company has managed to create.

**Energy Delivery Workforce Education Programs**

Steve Quinn is the Energy Delivery Technical Training Section Leader in charge of managing training programs for APS covering their energy tradesmen. This includes APS’s Journeyman and Apprentice programs in the classifications of Linemen, Electricians, Polyphase Meter men (their meter shop), Tree Workers, and Auto Mechanics. Due to the nature of these positions, these education programs are more technically oriented. Also, working around high voltage electricity is extremely dangerous, so safety is a major focus of their training as well.

I asked Steve to characterize the company’s philosophy regarding workforce education. He read me a quote from Daniel Froetscher, their Vice President of Energy Delivery that was taken right out of their most recent Energy Delivery Business Plan.

“Energy Delivery must provide employees with relevant, current, and just in time training programs that provide awareness, comprehension, and enhanced job skills. Knowledgeable and well trained employees can more readily adapt to changing business requirements and technologies as well as complete assigned duties and tasks in a safe and efficient manner.”

Such a strong statement by management demonstrates commitment to the cultivation of an education and training culture. This is an essential ingredient in any business based workforce education program that is to be effective. There must be buy-in both on the part of the employer and the employee. If the employer feels that there is no measurable benefit to conducting workforce education, they discontinue or curtail it. Likewise, if the employee feels that they are just going through the motions because they have to do so, it will be a waste of time. Real value must be recognized by both employer and employee for education programs to work.

Steve confided that establishing a training mind set for both employees and management was a challenge when he first took over his current position. Steve’s background was nuclear energy where extensive, ongoing training is required. When he applied those principals to the Energy Delivery Department at APS to workers who were not accustomed to the same level and frequency of training, there was initial resistance. Management was also reluctant to embrace these programs at the time. Their predominant philosophy then favored hiring experienced employees over hiring those with less experience and training them.

“In the past Journeyman were a dime a dozen. They (Management) thought they could buy the expertise and not have to spend money training. Now they are paying the price. Now you have to entice these kids to come in. These are kids that grew up playing video games, not playing outside. They don’t want to go out and work in the hot sun.”

This reality caused Management within Energy Delivery at APS to change their viewpoint. Training became a viable solution to changing business needs. Over time, the programs he implemented became accepted and embraced as the perceived value emerged for both employers and employees.

As for the programs Steve manages, the structure and content seem to produce the desired results. Although APS does still hire some Journeymen, many of their positions are filled through their Internships and Pre-Apprenticeship programs leading to their Apprenticeship programs.

According to Steve, “We have an intern program where we specifically recruit from colleges and line colleges. These people have made a commitment and spent time and money to attend a college.”

The primary source for these interns is Chandler-Gilbert Community College, one of twelve schools that are part of the Maricopa County Community College System. Specifically their interns are graduates of the school’s Electric Utility Technology Program. In addition APS recruits from Northwest Lineman College as well. Northwest Line College is a technical school specifically for electric lineman training with campuses in California, Idaho, and Texas.

For those entering the workforce with less than Journeyman status, employees start out in the Pre-Apprentice program working as entry level utility workers out on the crews . To come into the program they must have some education including basic math skills. These individuals participate in a series of classes taken on Saturdays. Through their test scores for these classes and their performance on the job, they are evaluated every 6 months for the Apprenticeship program. They must pass all the evaluations to be accepted. If they have not achieved this within a 3 year period, they are dropped from the program.

Those who are accepted into the Apprenticeship program learn while they work through a highly structured education and training program consisting of eight 6 month steps totaling 8000 hours of instruction. Students attend both day and night classes with the curriculum changing every six months. At the conclusion of each step, they have a job performance evaluation conducted by committee. This serves a number of purposes.

First, it is one way to measure the effectiveness of the training and the transfer of learning to the job. For the company, the results of their training efforts are measurable. For the learners, these evaluations are not only achievement mileposts in their progression through the training program, there are financial incentives to succeed as well. Those who pass each evaluation receive a modest pay raise. So, as they traverse the program over time, their income rises. Therefore, this element of the program contributes to employee motivation on a couple different levels. Motivation is a key element for learner success in workforce education programs.

With few exceptions, all front line employees are represented by The International Brotherhood of Electric Workers Union (IBEWU). Consequently, the evaluation committee grading the performance of those in the Apprenticeship program consists of both APS representation and IBEWU representation The Apprenticeship evaluations give the Union a voice in the employee education and career development process. If the committee decides that someone should be dropped from the program, the Union will not file a grievance, because they have a say in the decision. The APS – Union relationship is a major key to the success of their education programs.

As Steve says, “It’s a really great working relationship. The union takes ownership in providing evaluators and all the instructors for day schools and night schools. They see it as their responsibility to provide the right people to be trained.”

As with many workforce education programs, APS employs a variety of teaching methods to reach it’s generationally diverse workforce. All the department’s programs utilize a variety of delivery methods including classroom training, internet training, and on the job training.

Per Steve, “Right now is a very hard time for training departments because we have some of those first baby boomers who don’t even want to log onto a computer, and then we have these new kids that come into the program who want you to text them when to come to class. So we have to have multiple ways to deliver the training through media, through conferencing…We have to have blended learning.”

Recognizing the importance of tailoring their programs to accommodate the different learning styles of their workers is critical to the successful delivery and transfer of their training. It also demonstrates the dynamic nature of any successful program that must constantly adapt and evolve as needs change.

Program integrity and cost effectiveness are other important themes guiding the workforce education philosophy that Steve has developed. He has built an instructors’ training program to ensure consistency and quality. Those who teach the programs are aligned in purpose and scope. In addition, all employee programs utilize a blending of purchased and internally produced training materials.

“We try to maximize our training resources. We’ll purchase basic training, then customize it to our needs. We don’t need to reinvent the wheel. I’ll buy as much as I can. I will use any training that I see as a good value for the money. I won’t pay good money for a course that I see doesn’t really fit our industry. I have instructors that can develop training. We have a systematic approach to training. I have several developers that build our programs.”

Finally, APS is participates in The National Energy Center of Excellence (NECE), a consortium of companies that develop training programs for the utility industry through Bismarck State College in Bismarck, North Dakota. This means their training programs carry college credit.

In every way, Steve has made great strides molding the training programs at Energy Delivery into state of the art workforce education. These programs integrate employee and employer, training and job performance, and commitment and benefits with union and company cooperation to produce a winning formula for both the worker and the company. Without a doubt, the education culture is very strong in the worker development programs under his sphere of influence.

**Customer Service Workforce Education Program**

The second half of my visit at APS consisted of a discussion with three of their training managers for Customer Service, Bill Brubaker, Virginia Sawyer, and Stacy Smith. These individuals are charged with designing the curriculum, delivering the training and measuring the performance results of that training for those workers employed at the APS customer call centers. As I anticipated, these programs place more emphasis on soft skills, such as communication consistency, etiquette, and customer service. Consequently, their program is not as long or diverse as the programs for Energy Delivery. There are some similarities however.

Like the programs for Energy Delivery, the Customer Service workforce education programs also strongly rely on a hand’s on approach to learning. The scope of the training is focused on one topic primarily – customer service, but within that topic the program is highly comprehensive.

Per Bill, “Our programs emphasize learning by doing. We try to incorporate opportunities to practice, including role playing.”

Those programs consist of three segments spread out over a 13 week period. The program employs different learning delivery methods, although instructor led training accounts for approximately 70% of the program. The rest is made up of first simulated then later live on-the-job training and web based training. The content of the programs covers the gamut of possible customer inquiries and service situations, as well as periphery topics such as the communication system utilized by APS and call center ergonomics. Training topics metrics taken right off their training agendas include “Uses Appropriate Tone, Pitch, Volume, Uses Courtesy Words”, “Processes Customer Requests & Summarizes Call. Offers Solutions and Additional Service”, and “Allows Customer to Complete Sentences.” Each of these topics is separately addressed as unique focus areas on different days during the programs. They also learn the various payment options available to customers, service area geography, and how to process turn on and shut off requests, as well as other topics. They even spend time training their representatives how to deal with potential customer concern calls relevant to a possible emergency at Palo Verde, their nuclear facility located on the outskirts of the Phoenix metro area. Throughout the training process, learners provide and receive feedback related to their learning. This two way feedback is useful when measuring the transfer of learning. Learners have the chance to provide constructive criticism of the training process through surveys, and trainers provide criticism back regarding the learner’s performance and ability to apply the training through evaluations and debriefings. Learners are scored on their performance east step of the way during the training program.

As Stacy explained, “Both during and after training, all live call center conversations are subject to monitoring. This gives us a valuable tool to determine not only the effectiveness of our training, but their job performance as well.”

During the training, all conversations are monitored and evaluated. Afterwards, monitoring is done randomly to assure continued consistency in performance. Individuals are coached as to their strengths and weaknesses. By the time their 13 weeks of training is complete, each leaner has had plenty of practice with simulated and live customer service situations and been coached along the way by the training staff.

“Consequently, our people know what to do as a result of this extensive training and practice prior to going live full time for us.” Virginia added.

“We prefer to teach our people processes.” Bill noted. “We’d rather that they didn’t have to think. However, sometimes they have to be able to make decisions and not just follow a script. In the past, when so many new homes were being built, our calls mainly focused on turn ons and turn offs. Now, its people calling to tell us they can’t pay their bills.”

So, for Customer Service as with Energy Delivery, their training programs must adjust as their business needs and the needs of their customers change. This keeps the training department busy working to design new instruction and modifying their programs constantly.

As for workforce education and training prerequisites prior to being hired, candidates only need a high school education. Some call center experience is desirable, but not necessary. APS relies on their internal programs to provide all the training that is needed. They do not use any outside sources to train their Customer Service staff. However, they are in partnership with Rio Salado Community College, another of the Maricopa County Community Colleges, to award credit for the instruction they give in their program.

As with Energy Delivery, I found that Customer Service has developed workforce education programs that seem to cover all the bases. Their trainers are not only skilled as trainers, by in large they have done the same work themselves. They understand the nature of the job and can offer insights that only come with experience. This gives them a measure of credibility with their learners that cannot be overemphasized. All this contributes to the education culture at APS.

**A Learner’s Perspective**

Jeff Creedon has worked in various positions at APS in locations throughout Arizona for more than 25 years. He’s participated in a vast array of training programs within the organization over that time period. Given his extensive background with the company, I sought Jeff’s perspective as a learner on their workforce education programs. His comments largely reaffirmed and reinforced the themes and philosophies that resonated from my other interviews at APS. For starters, Jeff explained a little about his current assignment and training regimen.

Per Jeff, “I am currently on a 12-18 month job rotation getting hands on training in another department far removed from my assigned job. At the beginning of the rotation, my new leader and I got together and made a list of all the new things I would get exposed to and get involved in. We get together and talk about it on a monthly basis.”

Once again, this is another example of APS management demonstrating commitment to workforce development. In Jeff’s case it goes even further with his leader proactively participating in the goal setting, teaching and ongoing assessment process during his current job rotation. Management is participating in the education process.

Just having a job rotation program speaks volumes about the company’s workforce development philosophy. Training teaches how. Education teaches why. By giving employees the opportunity to temporarily take on different roles within the organization, they gain new perspective and understanding of the big picture as it relates to the company’s overall goals, challenges, and performance. There is no substitute for knowledge in the decision making process. Through workforce education, including job rotation, APS gives their employees the tools to make good decisions for the company.

Jeff also elaborated on other programs he’d participated in.

“Other trainings I have been involved with include many classroom type training sessions on all sorts of items from ‘value based’ leadership training to safety. These are all interactive classes where the instructor solicits input and feedback from the students. Sometimes the classes are too large to get good interaction. Smaller classes seem to work better. More employees participate.”

As he elaborated on his experiences, he touched once more on the role of management in their programs.

“Often many of the classes are kicked off by a member of executive management, setting expectations and some personal stories relating to the class.”

Again, the workforce hears and sees company management involved and engaged in the training process. The training culture is reinforced. Employees are asked to participate in leadership training that addresses and answers the proverbial question, “What’s in it for me?” They see value and personal benefit in earnest participation, and do not just go through the motions when training. Again, the training culture is reinforced.

One final theme that Jeff reaffirmed was APS’s commitment to realism in their training through on the job instruction.

“We often have safety training classes hand on in the field if needed using real equipment so everyone can see/feel and experience the situation. Hands on fire extinguisher training was one of the better ones we did like this and it worked out well. Not many people get to practice with a fire extinguisher until you really need it. Plus, we partnered up with a local municipal fire department and helps strengthen our working relationship.”

Jeff’s comments to me concerning workforce education at APS largely ran parallel to my findings learned through my interviews with the training staff. They are obviously an organization that strongly supports and practices continuous employee development. Their commitment starts at the top and works down from there. Jeff and most of the employees I spoke with have been with the organization for decades. It would appear that they are committed to the company because the company is committed to them.

**Conclusion**

After visiting APS and conducting the research for this paper, I give Arizona Public Service high marks for their commitment to employee education in their workplace. Their programs are both thorough and focused. Their programs are well planned and well executed. Their programs do what they are designed to do – create a workforce that is skilled and knowledgeable that performs.

From the very start of my interviews, I realized that APS is a company that not only supports and sees value in workforce education, they mandate it from the top levels of management. Management commitment is a core requirement for any organization conducting internal training programs. Strong commitment provides evidence to the rest of the organization that a training culture does exist there and participation in training is not optional, but an essential element in their jobs. Additionally, and equally important, the employees in such a culture see personal value in their participation as well. Workforce education in this scenario is mutually beneficial to the employer and employee.

I can offer little in the way of advice to improve the programs I researched. They are operating at the state of the art. However, if I had to say something, I’d echo Jeff Creedon’s comments and suggest that whenever possible, classroom and lecture training should be confined to a manageable group size.

Also, each department at APS does its own training. It is not centralized. While this obviously works well, it might benefit the company to get trainers from the various departments together on a regular basis to discuss and educate their associates on their techniques, themes and best practices. Sharing knowledge is always a good thing.

APS may be in the energy business, but it also does a great job energizing its workforce through its education programs. The education culture that defines Arizona Public Service is a model for any industry to follow in this era of globalization.

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