Designing Workforce Education that Works:

Applying the Critical Elements to Home Buyer Meeting Training

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Abstract:

For any workforce education program to succeed, a desired positive effect or effects must be realized as a direct result of stakeholder participation in the program. For purposes of this paper, those stakeholders are students or employees and employers or other industry expert representatives. To achieve this end goal, education programs must be carefully designed to ensure that desired outcomes are achieved. This paper will examine the essential elements embedded in the design process for effective occupation-specific workforce education programs, the methodology employed in the design process to assure that program outcomes align with needs of all stakeholders, and identify and discuss those elements that are unique to workforce education.

The paper will then apply this model to a real world workforce performance issue – educating homebuilder superintendents how to consistently conduct home buyer client meetings that inform and educate the customer, proactively establish and promote positive superintendent-customer rapport, and reinforce buyer confidence in their builder and buying decision.

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*“Luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity.” Seneca*

The ancient Roman philosopher Seneca recognized that the key to achieving success is prior preparation. For modern man seeking employment in the modern labor market, that preparation includes some measure of workforce education. The success of any workforce education program begins with successful educational design. If the program fails to educate, if the participant does not learn, if no connection is made, if no learning is transferred or applied, there is no preparation. This paper examines the elements of workforce education design and how those elements are assembled to create viable, productive workforce education programs.

Workforce educational design functions as a methodical process. This process is worked in phases, following common project management principles. “The benefits in using a structured phased approach is that the end product is more likely to meet the genuine needs of the client and other stakeholder groups (Business Performance 2010).” The steps in that process are often expressed in the form of the ADDIE model. The ADDIE model consists of a five stage process – Analyze, Design, Develop, Implement, and Evaluate. In order to achieve the desired end result – a workforce education program that successfully prepares students for the labor force in a specific occupational role or roles, each step in the process must be successfully executed before moving on to the next. That successful execution requires that key people are included and participate in each phase of the design process and that these people clearly define the objectives and desired outcomes. From there the process entails devising learning strategies and delivery programs to get students from point A (their competency level prior to participating in the education program) to point B (the desired, enhanced competency level, i.e. the desired outcome of the program).

The initial stage in the design process using the ADDIE model is the Analyze Stage. At this stage, the critical first step is determining who should participate in the design process to identify the program learning objectives. This question is answered by first answering other key questions. Who are the end user stakeholders? Who will realize a benefit or benefits from having others participate in the program? Who are the subject matter experts representing the occupation or industry?

Typically for a workforce education program focusing on a specific occupation or cluster of occupations such as programs found in secondary schools or post-secondary occupational training centers, these stakeholders would be employers, tradesmen, practitioners, and/or other industry experts associated with the pertinent career field working in partnership with educators and instructional designers either as full or part time instructors or consultants to the school.

For internal workforce education programs generated within a specific company, these stakeholders might be representatives from different departments or other work group managers within the organization.

Regardless of the scope of workforce education, the participation and recommendations of these subject matter expert end users are a critical element in the success of any program. These experts are needed to clearly identify and define the scope and desired outcome(s) of the education program. They bring “real world” expertise to the table and their input establishes learning parameters and objectives for the program that are “real world” based. These experts are needed to address the variety of issues and questions necessary to construct a design foundation for the education program.

What is the purpose of having the training? What are the program objectives? What should students in the program achieve? What knowledge and skill sets should the program provide the students and what benefits will potential employers derive from hiring students successfully completing the program? Should the program emphasize job specific training only, or is soft skill training to be included as well? What are the prerequisite student requirements to participate in the program? Utilization of this information aligns student and employer needs in the analytic phase of the planning process and provides a framework to facilitate the alignment of those needs at the conclusion of the education process as well.

What kind of information might be included in workforce education programs? For a workforce education program designed to prepare students for specific jobs or job clusters, typical topics addressed in the program might include industry terminology and/or jargon, applicable federal, state, and local laws, safety requirements, environmental requirements, proper use of tools and equipment, manufacturing processes, industry related technologies and technical information such as industry specific software applications, and interrelationships and occupational diversity within the industry to name a few.

Following the ADDIE Model, the next stage in the program development process is the Design Stage. During the Design Stage, the desired and agreed upon outcome goals identified in the Analyze Stage are applied to the construction of a learning program framework to achieve those goals. Once again this stage of the instructional design process requires a cooperative collaboration between the end user subject matter experts and the course designer(s). Program logistics are addressed in more detail at this phase. Some of the questions to be answered at this phase include:

Who will conduct the training? How will the education program be structured? Will the program be accomplished in phases? If so what competency milestone assessments or certifications should be incorporated into the learning process? Will these certifications define the stage parameters and learning levels of the program? How, when, and where will the instruction occur? What venue(s) will be utilized, and what logistics must be taken into account to use them? What will be the duration of the program? How will learning be transferred to the students? What methods of instruction will be used? Will it be classroom? Will it be internet based? Will it include on the job training? Will it use a combination of delivery systems? What type of assessment instruments will be utilized to measure the effectiveness of the program? How will the success of the program be measured?

These are the types of issues addressed in the Design Stage. By this stage of the process, the education program design plan is documented and can be referenced and reviewed. When the Design Stage is complete, the Develop Stage begins.

During the Develop Stage of the ADDIE model, teaching tools to be utilized in the training are created by the designers. These tools include PowerPoint presentations, session plans, and trainer guides for the teachers. Materials are developed for the students as well including booklets, written exercises and handouts as well. If internet learning is to be included in the program, pertinent software must be developed by information technology professionals. In addition, instruments for evaluating the program and instruments for testing competencies taught in the program are developed at this time. Once developed, these materials should again be reviewed and approved by the end user subject matter experts to ensure clarity and accuracy of information and further ensure end-result outcome alignment with stakeholder needs - both student and employer. At the conclusion of the Develop Stage, a pilot program can be implemented to test the effectiveness of the developed curriculum prior to full implementation of the program.

The fourth stage in the development process using the ADDIE model is the Implement Stage. At this point the workforce education program becomes operational. All necessary learning materials developed in the prior stage are produced, necessary technologies are put in place, and trainers are trained in the material. The workforce education programs are scheduled, advertised, and executed. The program is mobilized in full and if the design process has worked, the fruit of the workforce education program comes to bear. At this point the success of the program becomes measurable. Student participation assessments and feedback information is collected into a data base for the last stage in the process, the Evaluate Stage.

During the final stage of the ADDIE model, the Evaluate Stage, assessment data provided by the program’s students is collected, translated, and interpreted by the design team including the contributing end user subject matter experts, the instructional designers, and any pertinent support personnel such as IT. This evaluation process weighs the effectiveness of the program in its current state and helps determine what adjustments and/or changes are advisable, if any, to make the program more effective. If there is any disparity of alignment between the intended and actual results, adjustments can be made to correct the issues. If program expectations for students or employers are not being met by the program, corrections can be implemented.

In today’s working world, evolving technologies spawn rapid change in industry and workforce knowledge requirements. As a result of this ever changing reality, workforce education program assessment frequency must increase to stay current. This element of the design process for successful workforce education programs is somewhat unique to those types of programs. Traditional academic programs focus on disciplines that seldom change much in the short term. Workforce education programs must be dynamic to be successful. This requires constant assessment and frequent retooling to keep up with the evolving knowledge and skill demands of the workforce in a global economy. Teaching today’s students yesterday’s technology does not serve the needs of students or employers.

In fact, the entire project management approach to workforce education design is somewhat unique when compared to traditional academic education programs. The design process is methodical. Each stage must be completed before the next stage is addressed. The entire process includes stakeholder feedback and input at key stages. This includes students (primarily at the Evaluate Stage) and subject matter expert end users (at the Analyze, Design, and Develop Stages). Employers and/or industry as well as the participating students have a voice in the content, delivery, and assessed effectiveness of the program. Such approaches are rare in academic education programs.

To demonstrate how the workforce education program design can be applied in real life, consider the following case study based on a workforce challenge I encountered early in my trainer career. For purposes of this demonstration, I’m going to address it as if it were a current issue.

**Case Study: Training Builder Superintendents to Conduct Home Buyer Meetings**

Traditionally in the home building business, customer contact prior to closing has been reserved for sales staff. Sales Counselor communication skills are deemed superior overall to those of the typical Construction Superintendent who is in charge of managing the building process. Consequently, customer contact between Superintendents and home buyers has been discouraged. While it may be true that in general Sales Counselors have more effective communication skills, there have been some negative consequences resulting from this common policy. Buying a home is a unique consumer experience in that the customer has the ability to see the product being manufactured in real time. They are often curious about things they see happening or not happening and tend to seek out the superintendent for answers. When builders discourage this or bypass their inquiries through the Sales Counselor, misunderstandings often occur, and in extreme cases mistrust develops on the part of the customer. They misperceive this policy as an attempt to hide problems or mislead them.

This public relations dilemma has caused many home builders to rethink the role of the Superintendent in the buyer communication process, and many have added pre-scheduled superintendent-buyer meetings to the superintendent’s work regimen to accomplish a variety of goals. One primary goal is educating buyers as to the how the construction process unfolds, common production challenges that may occur, and setting realistic expectation associated with the building process. A second goal is establishing and promoting rapport between the superintendent and buyers to facilitate a productive, mutually beneficial customer relationship during the building process. A third closely related goal is reaffirming for the buyer that they chose a builder who is sensitive to their needs and genuinely cares about them as customers.

My employer has decided to adopt this policy as well. Since this is a new job responsibility for the superintendents requiring customer communication skills previously not expected of the superintendent, there is a need to design a workforce education program specifically to train the company’s superintendents to effectively communicate with the customer and to consistently achieve the desired goals of the program.

The first step in the process utilizing the ADDIE Model is identifying and enlisting key personnel within the company to participate and provide expertise and input as members of the education program design team. As company trainer, I would include myself. Key Construction Department personnel to invite would include the VP of Construction, Project Managers who oversee the superintendents, and a couple of the most experienced superintendents. To balance out the team, others to include in the planning stages of the process would be a member or members from the Sales and Marketing Department and the Director of Warranty. Their input into the process is needed to keep buyer communication consistent throughout the customer company interaction, both before and after closing.

Once the design team is assembled, the Analyze Stage in the design process can begin. Program goals and learning objectives are articulated and discussed providing each team member the opportunity to bring their personal and departmental perspectives into the discussion. The program’s overall goals and learning objectives are defined. The goals of the program are improved customer relations achieved through a series of on-site meetings conducted with their Superintendents. Meetings objectives include enhancing customer understanding of the home building process through education and cultivating informative, mutually productive Superintendent-Customer relationships that establish and promote customer rapport and reinforce customer trust and confidence.

With these objectives established, the Design Stage of the process beings. As with the Analyze Stage, each member of the design team provides input. The training “game plan” is discussed in detail. It is determined that following the training, each Superintendent should be able to demonstrate proficiency conducting those buyer meetings. That proficiency will be measured taking into account consistency, completeness and accuracy of information presented; ability to answer buyer construction related questions; and overall buyer satisfaction expressed as a result of the meeting. Programs parameters are established. Training schedules are proposed and timelines for implementation are discussed.

It is agreed that initially informational classroom training will roll out the program for Superintendents as well as Sales and Warranty staff. Then, the actual participants will be divided into smaller groups and utilize role playing exercises to conduct mock buyer meetings, with self-critique sessions to follow. Lastly, each Superintendent will be asked to conduct a mock meeting with a design team member demonstrating adequate proficiency prior to actually meeting with any buyers as kind of a “final exam”. Constructive feedback will be provided following these mock meetings.

It is also agreed that survey instruments will be developed given to buyers at the conclusion of the meetings to gauge the effectiveness of the meetings. With the program parameters established and agreed upon, the program is ready for development.

At the Develop Stage the team creates, assembles, and organizes learning materials, instructional aids and meeting paperwork. Standardized agendas are drafted for each of the buyer meetings. These agendas include a list of talking points developed to assist the Superintendent with the communication of vital information. In addition, a list of common buyer questions and concerns with the appropriate responses is generated to be used in the role play element of the training as well. This exposure to real world buyer situation will add authenticity to the training. Lastly assessment instruments are created to be used at the conclusion of each training session and the actual buyer meetings as well. Superintendents provide input as to training effectiveness following each session, and the mock “home buyer” can present feedback following the final exam.

Once the course materials are developed, a test program can be initiated with a few of the Superintendents prior to full implementation. If any modifications or fine tuning is deemed necessary as a result of the pilot program, it can be done at this time.

At this point the plan is set and the program moves to the Implement Stage. All the learning materials are produced, classes are scheduled, and the training commences. Feedback information data is assembled through training participant and home buyer assessments following the meetings.

Once implemented, the program can move to the Evaluate Stage. Based on the assessment information provided by the program participants and the home buyers themselves, the effectiveness of the program and the end results of the program can be judged. Over time a large enough sampling should provide clear indication as to whether or not the program’s goals are being achieved. Where improvement is possible, modifications should be made to facilitate those improvements. As a result of this evaluation process, more training and different types of training, such as more comprehensive communication training may be in order. As with any business decision, a cost-benefit analysis should be conducted. This is especially important given the other responsibilities the Superintendents carry and time constraints they operate within. However, the material benefits of satisfied customers are often immeasurable, and should not be taken lightly.

**Conclusion**

The path to career success is often guided by opportunity, but without proper preparation those opportunities may not be viable. Workforce education should be regarded as an ongoing process that carries throughout the career life of the worker. Programs are most effective when they result from comprehensive planning utilizing the contributions of many stakeholders. Using a systematic, project management approach such as the ADDIE model, workforce education can be and is effective. Through teamwork, focus, and dedication to improvement, effective instructional design is the mechanism that makes workforce education work.

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