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A SURVEY OF SELECTED METROPOLITAN OMAHA MANUFACTURERS TO DETERMINE CHARACTERISTICS, TRAITS, AND STANDARDS DESIRED OF ENTRY-LEVEL EMPLOYEES IN INDUSTRIAL-TYPE OCCUPATIONS

The University of Nebraska - Lincoln ED.D. 1981

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by

C. Victor Larson

A DISSERTATION

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Under the Supervision of Professor Ronald G. Joekel
and Associate Professor Rex K. Reckewey

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C.V.L.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Although the United States has been and continues to be a relatively prosperous and affluent nation, we have always experienced some problems of unemployment and the effective use of our working force. The need for adequate numbers of well-qualified workers to serve our industrial needs has long been recognized by employers and educators alike. As early as 1917, the Congress passed the Smith-Hughes Act to encourage schools to develop vocational education programs that would serve the needs of both individuals and industry. Since that time, there has been a continued recognition of the need for improved vocational educational programs.

The last 15 years has witnessed a concerted effort to expand and upgrade the quality of vocational education. Beginning in the early 1960's, a series of vocational acts were passed. They were designed to expand existing programs and to initiate new vocational offerings. However, in spite of these efforts, unemployment among youth 16-24, and especially the 16-19 age group, has continued to be a major problem.

While overall unemployment in this country has averaged between five and six percent during the past decade, the unemployment rate for the 16-19 year olds has been much closer to 15 percent.

Obviously, this is a problem for all of society and should be of particular concern to educators who are charged with the responsibility of preparing young people for productive and rewarding lives. For many of these youngsters, this means providing them with the necessary basic skills to enter the world of work upon completion of their high school education.

It is obvious to most Americans that the technological revolution has had a far reaching effect upon employment opportunities, requirements, and needs. Many jobs today require far more skills than were needed even a decade ago. The needs and expectations of employers in industries utilizing modern technology may be quite different from their predecessors. At the same time, there are still many jobs that require more traditional or established skills. In either case, the individual entering the work force must perform certain basic skills, or minimum competencies, that will make him or her eligible for jobs that are available.

In a free enterprise system it is primarily the employer who determines what his or her needs are, and the qualifications he or she expects to find in prospective employees. At the same time, it is the educator's responsibility to assess the overall needs of American business and industry and to provide students with the specific skills which will be needed at the job-entry level.

As a vocational educator in a metropolitan area, the researcher is responsible for helping to develop vocational programs that will adequately serve the immediate and long-range needs of the student,

and satisfy the industrial interest of the community. If the unemployment rate among 16-19 year olds is to be reduced, programs need to be refined or developed to provide increased employability opportunities. One important dimension of this problem is to ascertain what the needs and expectations of the industrial community really are.

The need for this study has been documented and emphasized by a 1971 study by the Department of Urban Affairs located at The University of Nebraska at Omaha, and in a 1976 research report issued by the Center for Applied Research also located at The University of Nebraska at Omaha. In 1971, Cunningham indicated that "If a comprehensive survey of employers in the Omaha Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area (SMSA) were available, outlining their minimum educational requirements for new employees, a more accurate picture of the relationship of education to manpower would be possible."[1] He also stated, "the more industrialized the nation becomes, the more sophisticated many job requirements become, thus creating a need on the 'demand' side for more skilled and better educated employees."[2]

In a 1976 document published by the Center of Applied Research at The University of Nebraska at Omaha, it was noted that "the percent of blue collar workers within the total workforce in the Omaha SMSA is

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[1]Cunningham, John C., "Education and Manpower in the Omaha SMSA" (published study prepared by the Center for Urban Affairs, University of Nebraska System, April, 1971), p. 9.

[2]Ibid.

expected to grow from 31.4 percent in 1975 to 34.9 percent in 1985."[3] The document also mentioned that "approximately 80 percent of the paid jobs in the Omaha SMSA do not require a four-year college degree."[4]

If one accepts the above reports as reflecting the employment situation in the Omaha SMSA as reasonably accurate, and there is no particular reason to question their validity, there is a definite need to further investigate the needs and expectations industrial employers have for their prospective employees. This was the major focus of the study.

Statement of the Problem

The primary purpose of this study was to ascertain the opinions of industrial-type employers concerning characteristics, traits, and standards desired of entry-level employees in industrial-type occupations. The second major purpose of this investigation was to determine the educational implications of the needs and expectations expressed by selected industrial employers in the Omaha SMSA. More specifically, the study sought answers to the following questions:

1. What are the hiring practices in regard to the educational qualifications of the prospective, entry-level, industrial-type employee?

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[3]Adams, John J. "Omaha SMSA Workforce," (published study prepared by the Department of Urban Affairs, University of Nebraska at Omaha, 1976), p. 15.

[4]Ibid.

2. What are the hiring practices in regard to the abilities and skills of the prospective, entry-level, industrial-type employee?
3. What are the hiring practices in regard to social and personal characteristics of the prospective, entry-level, industrial-type employee?
4. What implications and recommendations can be made to the public schools to improve the effectiveness of pre-employment training in the Omaha SMSA?

Methods and Procedures

The primary type of research employed in the conduct of this study was the descriptive or survey type of research. As explained by Best, the descriptive method is concerned with what is; the relationships that exist; the practices that prevail; processes that are going on; or the trends that are developing. The descriptive method is also involved with the gathering and tabulation of data along with the element of interpreting the meaning or significance of what is described.[5]

The following procedures were followed in the conduct of this study. First, a comprehensive review of the literature and related research was undertaken to establish a proper background for the study. In addition, interviews with selected vocational educators

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[5]Best, John W. Research in Education (2nd ed.; Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1970), pp. 116-117.

and representatives of manufacturing firms in the area were conducted to further develop the rationale for the study.

Additional information was obtained from these sources: (1) Omaha Chamber of Commerce, (2) Nebraska State Employment Service, (3) Industrial Relations Association of Nebraska, (4) Interviews with persons directly concerned with the hiring of industrial workers in selected Omaha SMSA industries, (5) record forms relating to hiring practices of the selected industries interviewed, and (6) The Center for Urban Affairs, University of Nebraska at Omaha.

The second phase of the study was to identify all of the manufacturers in the Omaha SMSA. From a total population of 673 manufacturers in the Omaha SMSA, a random sample of 209 firms were selected.

The third phase of the study involved the development of a questionnaire. In addition to the demographic information and a summary response, the questionnaire included 46 items in three sections. This questionnaire was submitted to a jury of twelve vocational educators and manufacturers for validation.

After minor changes, the final form of the questionnaire was mailed to the 209 firms on October 22, 1979. Two weeks later, a telephone follow-up was made to all firms that had not returned the questionnaire.

Responses to the 46 items in the three sections of the questionnaire involved the rating of each item on a modified Likert scale; the responses were then keypunched on 80-column key cards at the Omaha

Public Schools computer center. After verification for accuracy, the data were tabulated and analyzed using the computer terminal facilities at The University of Nebraska at Omaha. In all instances, the number and percent of the responses, as well as the mean score for each item, were determined.

Definition of Terms

For purposes of this investigation, the terms listed below have been defined as follows:

Metropolitan Omaha area. The three-county area composed of Douglas and Sarpy counties in Nebraska and Pottawattamie county in Iowa.

Omaha SMSA. The Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area consisting of the three counties referred to above.

Vocational qualifications. Includes both the curricular background and personal qualifications needed for regular employment in an occupation, or any endowment or acquirement which fits a person for employment.

Entry-level occupation. An occupation that a person may enter directly without previous work experience.

Industrial-type job. A job held by a person receiving an hourly wage, or working under a piece-rate system doing direct or indirect production work in an industry.

Small-sized manufacturers. Firms which employ between one and ten industrial-type employees.

Medium-sized manufacturers. Firms which employ between 11 and 49 industrial-type employees.

Large-sized manufacturers. Firms which employ 50 or more industrial-type employees.

Limitations of the Study

The study was limited to the investigation of randomly selected manufacturers located in the Omaha SMSA. The study was restricted to an investigation of the hiring practices and preferences of the employers of industrial-type workers at the entry-level.

Significance of the Study

The study will attempt to establish the vocational qualifications desired by industry for high school graduates who are seeking entry into industrial-type jobs. This information will be made available to prospective employers and public school administrators, counselors, and instructors.

The results of this study should be valuable to educators in determining the curriculum that should be available to students in vocational and prevocational programs at the junior and senior high level. The value of accurate occupational information has been well established in the educational planning and counseling of students. Thus, guidance counselors should also benefit from the results of this study.

Organization of the Study

Chapter I contains an introduction to the study, states the problem, presents the research procedures used, defines the terms, summarizes the limitations, and projects the significance of the study.

Chapter II presents a review of the literature and related research.

Chapter III contains the presentation and analysis of the data.

Chapter IV summarizes the findings and the conclusions and recommendations drawn from the data.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF RELATED MATERIAL

This review of the literature was undertaken to determine the characteristics, traits, and standards desired of entry-level employees in industrial-type occupations. The investigator found very little material that pertained specifically to this topic. However, there were a number of studies that were concerned with similar characteristics, traits, and standards in other areas. The review begins with studies completed in the late 1930's and early 1940's and proceeds chronologically to the present.

One of the earliest investigations was made by Graf in 1938. Graf's study was a questionnaire survey of Central Missouri employers. He discovered that employers considered intelligence more important than a high degree of specialization, and that there was a need to develop broader social and ethical qualifications among apprentices.[6]

Drumright used a mailed questionnaire to gather information about the background and training of operating employees in selected Tennessee industries.[7] In this study, operating employees were

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[6]Graf, Max O. "Qualities and Skills Central Missouri Employers Seek when Employing Apprentices." (Unpublished Master's Thesis, Colorado State College of Education, 1938).

[7]Drumright, William T. "The Background and Training Desired in Operating Employees by a Sampling of Tennessee Industrial Plants" (Unpublished Master's Thesis, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, 1949).

defined as persons who worked on a production or service job at a level below that of foreman. He sent out 102 questionnaires which included 15 questions. Drumright found that the majority of jobs involved pre-employment training at the high school level that could be of benefit to youth seeking employment for the first time. Few of the responding firms required high mentality as a prerequisite for positions at the operating level.

About one-third of the firms participating in Drumright's study, believed that there were definite values obtained in the high school by prospective employees that carried over to the job. He further reported that there was only a slight possibility that job progress would be enhanced by a student having received special training in high school. Shop work, business arithmetic, chemistry, mechanical drawing, physics, and English were the subjects upon which most employers placed the greatest emphasis when indicating the subjects that high schools should include in their curricula.

At the time of Drumright's study, very few specific skills and abilities needed by operating personnel were or could be obtained in the local high schools. The majority of his respondents believed that the high school could better prepare students to become operating personnel and advance on the job if they would offer a more specific vocational program. In addition, he recommended that schools should work more closely with industry in planning high school programs. In this manner, he felt they could better meet the employment needs of the individual and of industry.

An interview study was conducted in 1950 in thirty-six Seattle, Washington, industries by Martin.[8] This investigation sought information relative to the hiring policies of these firms as applied to beginning workers. Martin interpreted vocational qualifications as including personality and curricular background. The major items from his study that are significant to this review include the following:

1. Two-thirds of the responding firms reported that a general high school education gives sufficient and satisfactory training for successful work.

2. A vocational curriculum in a general high school was favored over an academic course in a general high school. The interviewees further indicated decisive agreement that vocational training within the general high school should provide the student with broad training on many different applications of the various skills rather than a high degree of achievement on one specific skill.

3. There was no clear-cut agreement that the diploma was the criterion for promotion, although the value of a high school education was appreciated by the personnel managers. The personnel managers interviewed were specific in stating that it was the education which a high school graduate or non-high school graduate possessed that they valued most.

4. The personnel managers stated that the public schools should bear the primary responsibility for the vocational training of the youth.

In 1953, Koerble made a longitudinal study of the machinist apprenticeship program in the state of Wisconsin. The study appraised

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[8]Martin, Robert Morrison. "A Survey of Selected Seattle Industries to Determine Vocational Qualifications Desired in High School Graduates" (unpublished Doctor's Dissertation, University of Washington, Seattle, 1950).