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## Continuing Education for Blue-Collar Workers

**T**he need for continuing education has been intensified for many groups, including blue-collar workers. In the production of manufactured goods, coming changes may prove to be as revolutionary as those that already have occurred in agriculture.

Education and training within corporations of the United States is an important and growing industry. The dollars spent and the numbers of company students trained are comparable to the totals experienced by all the country's 4-year colleges and universities. A substantial portion of the training efforts of corporations is devoted to upgrading the capabilities of their blue-collar workers. The circumstances under which teaching is conducted vary from company to company, and at different locations in any given company. For the most part, the curricula are dictated by the company to serve company objectives, and the courses are conducted during working hours.

The United Auto Workers and Ford Motor Company have cooperated to create a novel and flexible UAW-Ford Employee Development and Training Program\* that merits close attention and possible replication elsewhere. In part this program represents recognition of the need for labor to be more literate and computer-knowledgeable if this nation is to compete in the future. The program is also responsive to deeply felt needs for self-improvement on the part of many of the employees. It focuses on the individual interests and goals of the worker, uses customized individual and group guidance materials, and provides networking and partnership of local educational and training organizations.

The two partners, labor and management, have sought the collaboration of the University of Michigan, which employs life-education advisers who have important roles in facilitating educational programs. The advisers are stationed at the various production plants and serve many functions, including friendly counseling. They help employees formulate and implement programs for self-improvement that are geared to the individual's talents and goals.

In the United States, Ford employs about 100,000 people who are represented by the UAW. They work at more than 70 locations where parts are made, subassemblies are produced, or vehicles are assembled. The previous educational attainments of the employees vary. About 25 percent have not completed high school. Another 60 percent stopped studies after completing high school. About 20 percent have had some college or university experience. Corresponding to this, a diversity of opportunities are available at each level. There are remedial programs for some. There is paid college tuition for others. More than 500 outside college-level institutions are involved. Nearly 100 of them conduct classes within the production plants. The union and the company jointly administer the program for which funds are available. An individual can obtain \$2000 in tuition support annually to attend an accredited college or university. Attendance in classes is on the individual's time, not the company's. When training is required to meet specific job needs, the instruction is conducted during working hours. The fact that many employees are willing to spend their limited free time on classes and studies is impressive.

Many of the courses chosen by employees add to their literacy, communication skills, or mathematical competence. Courses on computers leading to and including programming are popular, as are courses in robotics. Some of the students choose subjects not directly related to their work, such as public speaking.

In the initial phases of the program, the workers were slow to respond to the educational opportunities. But with the passage of time, favorable testimony by co-worker participants led to increasing numbers of workers joining the program. One said that the program was the best thing that had happened in all his years at Ford. Two other comments of the students follow: "An active and learning mind seldom faces the problem of senility. Our minds need 'exercise,' not just our muscles." A second comment: "I feel that the better our work force is trained, the better vans we build. When a person starts thinking and learning in the classroom, it doesn't stop there. It becomes a habit, and you carry it not only to the job but everywhere else."—PHILIP H. ABELSON

\*UAW-Ford National Developmental and Training Center, PO Box 6002, Dearborn, MI 48128.