

# SCHOOL at

## Employer-Supported Education That Gets Results

# Work



By Stephen Wasilewski

**H**ospitals are challenged by the need to develop their workforce and provide an internal pipeline of skilled workers. An effective development program should provide incentive for employees to boost their skill level and serve as a way to improve employee engagement.

At the Detroit Medical Center (DMC), entry level service workers such as dietary aides, housekeepers and nursing unit secretaries had little opportunity to advance their skills and contribute to the success of our hospital system. Acknowledging the problem, our management and union leadership began working together to create a program that could help meet to the development needs of both the employees and the organization.

When we became aware of Catalyst Learning's School at Work Program (SAW), we recognized its potential to provide skill enhancements that would help us develop our human resources, strengthen our internal pipeline and have the added benefit of improving employee engagement. Thanks to the strength of the School at Work model – as well as the commitment of DMC employees, management and executive staff – we have seen employee development that exceeded our expectations.

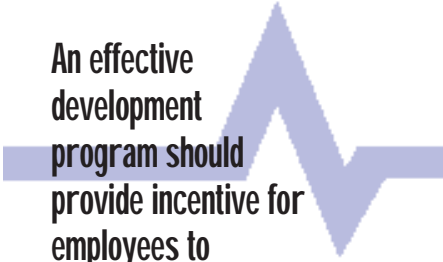
## Implementing a Successful Program

The SAW program was initially funded through a Department of Labor grant. The first eight-month, two-course program was designed to increase entry-level employee access to training and education. The program offered training in math, reading, communication, customer service, problem solving, team building and specific health care skills affecting performance and customer service.

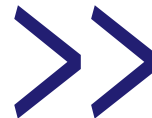
Several program components drive success when it comes to implementation. First, the marketing/communication plan promotes the advantages employees can expect from participation – improved skills that can benefit the individuals and their work units and increased earning capacity. Seeing the commitment DMC made to their development, employees were motivated to make their own commitments to the program.

Second, the program's entry-level requirements, which include reading at a 9th grade level, make the program a good match for our employee pool.

Another success factor is the investment of both employee and employer in the program. Employees participate in paid-time classes over two semesters that are taught during and after work hours. Once admitted to the program, employees are assigned coaches who deliver computerized, video/DVD and live training and coaching.



**An effective development program should provide incentive for employees to improve skills and serve as a tool to boost employee engagement.**



Success builds on itself and leads to the next level of excellence. In our case, we are working with Catalyst Learning to develop other advanced skills courses that will support the career needs of our entry-level workers.

While SAW has a national completion success rate of 61 percent, DMC saw a two-year success rate of 72 percent among our 65 participants. We attributed our high rate of success to four factors:

1. **Employer Commitment** – Most of our participants have family and financial obligations that make attendance at traditional education programs challenging. The cost of tuition and supplies, providing for childcare and scheduling class around work are sometimes insurmountable hurdles. When given an opportunity for employer-supported education that included class time during normal work hours, employees found the support they needed to commit to furthering their education.
2. **Employer Financial Support** – DMC committed to providing paid work release time. This investment by management was a key factor in employee engagement in the project and meant that limited personal finances did not have to be a barrier to participation.
3. **Educational Model** – Rather than using professional trainers, we chose to use clinical management and peer champions who demonstrated the value of improving employees' skills. Having manager coaches assured employee perception of competence and commitment. Our coaches sought out the coaching opportunity as a way of helping fellow employees and the hospital. Small class size coupled with one-on-one coaching was a major factor in the program's success. Participating in a work environment with peers and coaches where relationships already existed was key to engagement of all students and coaches.
4. **Employee Commitment** – Employees came to the program with personal growth goals and formed a bond within the group and with management. Participants committed to 100 percent attendance and a 100 percent graduation rate. The shared values that led to their decision to enter the program cemented bonds among the students and provided a nurturing culture that virtually guaranteed student success.

#### Tangible Results

Student success has had a profound effect on their engagement in the program and in the workplace. Employees have improved their resume and presentation skills, as well as demonstrated knowledge growth and improved technical skills. These factors have led to internal promotions and individual decisions by participants to enter advanced training programs in technical positions such as nursing and radiology that will lead to further promotions.

Employer gains are documented in the School at Work Return-on-Investment Study: Results and Analysis. Essentially, we know the program can help cut the cost of hiring a nurse by 50 percent and

reduce the amount of time it takes to fill a position by 50 percent when we can opt for an internal candidate.

One of the most visible changes at DMC has been in workplace engagement. Employees have become advocates for the hospitals in which they work. They credit their SAW experience with increasing their confidence, changing their view of hospital management and understanding their role in advancing customer service.

DMC has gained several insights from our experience:

- Providing worksite career training creates employee opportunities to grow and builds employee engagement.
- In a challenging environment where the external candidate pipeline will become more limited, employer-supported worksite training builds the internal pipeline.
- Employee-centered training and development programs enhance employment selection and retention for entry-level workers.
- Partnering with literacy groups assured us being able to provide services to all interested employees regardless of academic success.
- The cost of recruiting or replacing a nurse or technical employee is estimated as high as one year's salary. The cost of employee development and tuition reimbursement for growing internal candidates is a small fraction of external recruitment costs.

#### Expanding the Program

The pilot program at the first 2 hospitals inspired other hospitals in the system to implement SAW. We now have three hospital partners with goals to expand to other sites in our system. Eighteen employees were enrolled in 2006 at two hospitals, with others to join this year. Support for the program continues to build as employees and supervisors see the mutual benefits from the SAW program.

Success builds on itself and leads to the next level of excellence. In our case, we are working with Catalyst Learning to develop other advanced skills courses that will support the career needs of our entry-level workers. Pilot courses are under development for an accelerated version of the existing program to meet the needs of students reading at a higher level and who already have good computer skills. ■

*The author is director of Employment for Labor and Employee Relations at the Detroit Medical Center. DMC operates nine hospitals and institutions, including Children's Hospital of Michigan, Detroit Receiving Hospital, Harper University Hospital, Huron Valley-Sinai Hospital, Hutzel Women's Hospital, Kresge Eye Institute, Michigan Orthopedic Specialty hospital, Rehabilitation Institute of Michigan and Sinai-Grace hospital.*