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In This Issue

**Faulkner & Berman Set The Standard
in Sales & Service**

**Chris Birch Motors Along
the Digital Highway**

**Harvey Hutchison Revisits
Community-Based Programming**

**Donna Yaeger Rethinks "Soft Skills"
on the Job**

Plus

**Recent Articles in Community Services
and Continuing Education from
The ERIC Clearinghouse**



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**NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR CONTINUING
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Providing Leadership to Continuing Education, Community Services,
Workforce Development and Distance Learning Professionals

Using Sales and Service Skill Standards for Workforce Training

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Introduction

Professionals involved in the development of continuing education and training systems and products are well aware of the skill standards movement, but may not have seen concrete examples of how skill standards may be implemented.

Community and technical colleges have been in the lead in the development and implementation of skill standards for workforce preparation through assessment, curriculum development, and certification. An introduction to the concept of skill standards and examples of the ways in which community and technical colleges are using skill standards in the Sales and Service industry to facilitate workforce development and training follows.

Skill Standards: An Overview

The national organization that supports the development of skill standards is the National Skill Standards Board (NSSB). The NSSB is a coalition of representatives from business, labor, state and local governments, education, and community and civil rights organizations. The NSSB was created by the National Skill Standards Act of 1994 [Public Law 103-227, Title V] and is charged with building the framework for a voluntary, national system of skill standards, assessment, and certification for front-line workers and first-level

supervisors. This system will (a) help American businesses compete more effectively in the global economy; (b) help workers secure a firmer economic future and achieve higher standards of living; and (c) help educators create better and more up-to-date tools and curricula to teach future workers what they need to know to succeed in the working world.

Skill standards identify what people need to know and be able to do in order to successfully perform their jobs. Skill standards developed under the National Skill Standards Boards (NSSB) model answer three main questions.

- | What WORK is performed in high performance work environments by front-line workers and first-line supervisors?
- | What are the INDICATORS of competent performance of that work?
- | What are the underlying academic, employability, and occupational-technical SKILLS and KNOWLEDGE needed to perform the work to the identified competent level?

Stakeholders will be able to use skill standards that are based on a common language format through which employers can assess employees' abilities, educators can design training curricula, and students can better understand the expectations of their role at work.

Community and technical colleges are key partners in the development and implementation of the skill standards. In fact, the American Association of Community Colleges is an active participant within the Voluntary Partnerships of the NSSB along with several other community and technical college representatives.

Carrying Out The Mandate

The NSSB has categorized the American workforce into 15 industry sectors; each could have a system of skill standards, assessments, and certification for its respective industry. Representatives from each of the main stakeholder groups within each industry sector come together to form an industry coalition. An industry coalition that meets NSSB criteria is recognized as a Voluntary Partnership, which is charged with the actual development of skill standards and assessments. To date, skill standards development is ongoing in five industry sectors that cover nearly 60% of the nation's workforce: manufacturing, installation, and repair; retail/wholesale trade, real estate, and personal services; education and training; restaurants, lodging, hospitality and tourism, and amusement and recreation; and utilities. The Information Technology/Telecommunications industry sector is involved in preliminary development work and coalition building efforts

continue in the remaining industry sectors.

The remainder of this article will focus on the ways in which community and technical colleges have been using pilot skill standards developed by the retail/wholesale trade, real estate, and personal services industry under the aegis of the NSSB.

The Sales & Service Voluntary Partnership (S&SVP) includes the retail, wholesale, real estate, and personal services industries. Representatives from these industries have convened to identify common core skill standards for three different areas of work, or concentrations: customer service, sales, and inventory management. These standards are in the final stages of development and will be forwarded to the NSSB for approval in the coming months.

Use of Skill Standards

Once the S&SVP's skill standards are adopted in service industries, community and technical colleges will be in a position to develop products based on these standards for use within the college system and in partnership with employers. Some possible applications include the following:

- | Skill-based education curriculum and assessment
- | Skill-based training programs
- | Foundation/employability skill programs
- | Upgrading and validation of current programs
- | Work-based learning programs
- | Bridges to student and welfare training

- | Portfolio design and preparation
- | Joint credentials with education and employers
- | Career path design and linkage

Skill standards offer a clear framework for curriculum design, some examples of which are described below. They will also be used to develop assessment tools that will be used to certify an individual's skill acquisition and to chart clear career paths for workers. Finally, skill standards can be integrated into all aspects of a program, from assessment through certification, to ensure consistency across all program functions. Community and technical colleges are already among those on the forefront of the movement to apply skill standards to their programmatic functions.

The S&SVP has a good understanding of how standards can be used in the service sector as a result of summary data collected by the National Retail Federation (NRF) Foundation. The NRF's not-for-profit foundation for research and education has served as a point of contact for the implementation of retail skill standards since 1992, when the Department of Labor funded a pilot project in the retail trade industry along with 21 additional pilot projects in other industries. The staff at the NRF Foundation has followed the progress of the pilot projects over the past eight years. Through interviews with implementers, the findings indicate that the initial standards are still being used by a variety of organizations, including business/education partnerships, alternative high schools, shopping center developers, and adult literacy programs. Community and technical colleges have been early adopters of skill

standards because they are the link between preparation and employment. Several colleges have, in fact, used the early versions of the skill standards for curriculum design. Two of these curriculum projects are described below.

First level of Application: Curriculum Design

The Prince William Business Academy at the Northern Virginia Community College campus in Woodbridge, Virginia, initiated a tuition-free retail and customer service skills program from November 1996 to May 1998. To build the Academy, staff recruited businesses and developed an 80-hour curriculum. The curriculum was then crosswalked with the national retail standards to identify and close any gaps. The success of the two pilot semesters proved that the program goals were relevant and timely for the retail industry. The Academy course was integrated into the regular Northern Virginia Community College offerings. The course is now available for a fee to employers who otherwise might not be able to afford the professional workforce training.

Maui Community College (MCC) in Hawaii initiated the Retail Industry Training in Excellence (RITE) program through a partnership with the Maui Chamber of Commerce and Visitor Industry Training and Economic Development Center (VITEC). The college and its partners began this three-year project in 1997. The purpose of the project was to increase the skill level of retail sales associates, build professionalism within the industry, promote the importance of superior



customer service, and increase actual sales figures. The RITE program staff developed a 16-hour Professional Sales Associate curriculum taught at Maui Community College. Retailers and college staff reviewed the pilot skill standards and added components, such as self-esteem, multicultural issues, and communications skills, which they thought relevant to the island's tourist-based economy. The process resulted in three products that were crosswalked with the pilot standards as follows:

- 16-hour Sales Associate curriculum;
- 12-Hour Retail Management Training curriculum; and
- 8-hour Basic Cashier Training curriculum.

Sales Associate classes were offered in two resort areas and a central residential area on the Island of Maui to make it easy for students to commute to classes from work or from home. Requests for the first and second cycles of classes were so great that the RITE program staff doubled the number of classes to accommodate the demand. Retailers loaned personnel as trainers, provided empty retail stores in shopping centers for classes, and supplied chairs to make it possible to offer classes in the temporary spaces.

At the conclusion of the pilot period, RITE program staff conducted a county-wide training of trainers to ensure that every island in Maui County had access to a trainer, each of whom would be responsible for training 15 additional individuals. Training was conducted under the auspices of the Retail Merchants of Hawaii and the Outreach Centers of the Maui Community Colleges on

each island in Maui County that it serves. These outreach education centers are located at the MCC Molokai Center in Kaunakakai; the MCC Molokai Farm in Hoolehua; MCC Lana'i Center in Lana'i City; and MCC Hana Center at the Old Hana School. The program will remain a part of the community colleges' regular course offerings.

Second level of Application: Integration Throughout the Program

Community and technical colleges that are familiar with skill standards have moved beyond using them solely in curriculum development and are now working to integrate the skill standards into their programs. Several community and technical colleges have partnered with the NRF Foundation to put skill standards into action on campuses and in workplaces throughout the country. The community and technical college involvement in Retail Skills Centers is an exciting example. Retail Skills Centers are pilot programs that concentrate services in one physical location in a shopping center or downtown area. The Retail Skills Centers serve as a focal point for Sales Associate training and development. The skill standards are embedded in everything the Centers do -from assessment of candidates to subsequent follow-up after job placement. Retail Skills Centers provide services to individuals who would like to learn the skills necessary to become an entry-level Sales Associate. Other services provided include counseling and career development services to those who are already employed in the retail industry and support to man-

agers for placement of employees at every level.

Anne Arundel Community College in Maryland staffs a training center on site called the Retail Skills Center at Arundel Mills, at the new Arundel Mills Mall in Hanover, Maryland. The 5,000 square foot Center opened in October 2000, just in time for the busy holiday season. With over 3,000 permanent and an additional 1,500 seasonal positions to fill just before the busiest time of the year, the partners designed a variety of outreach strategies.

A series of orientation sessions for prospective career seekers was scheduled. The orientation sessions had been previously designed for use at the Elizabeth, New Jersey campus of Union County College, which is a community college partner of the Retail Skills Center at Jersey Gardens located in Elizabeth, New Jersey. The structure and materials of the orientation sessions were drawn from the pilot retail skill standards that were developed in 1992. Information sessions for local businesses and community-based organizations described the skill standards as the basis for a set of portable skills individuals could develop at the Center. These skills translate across industries to ensure that the skills developed through the use of the sales and service standards could be applied to other industries, such as finance or hospitality.

The Retail Skills Center at Arundel Mills offers a four-week curriculum. The curriculum has been crosswalked with the proposed retail standards as well as other credit and non-credit services such as English as a Second Language, Adult Basic Education test

preparation, and citizenship classes. The Retail Link to Education materials, developed by the NRF Foundation and based on the standards, are being used in conjunction with high school programs at the Center. In addition, the Center houses a testing room built to comply with the prospective requirements for testing of the S&SVP standards so that it may become a registered testing center for certification.

At The Retail Skills Center at Jersey Gardens, which is close to the Newark International Airport, Union County College has been a critical lead partner in this effort, although the NRF Foundation facilitates the day-to-day operations. This major shopping center in northern New Jersey was one of the first pilot Centers to showcase the use of skill standards throughout the programming process. Union County College has worked closely with the City of Elizabeth, the County of Union, and the New Jersey State Department of Labor to compile a comprehensive recruitment and placement program for Union County residents. In fact, college personnel provide the Center training, using the pilot skill standards in almost everything they do. The following is an example of how skill standards were used throughout the training cycle.

When the Skill Center partners met with staff from community-based organizations, they introduced the pilot retail standards to indicate the concrete and applicable skills that would be taught at the Center. Representatives from these community-based organizations were trained to conduct half-day orientations at Union County College for students and com-

munity residents seeking employment at the new shopping center. The curriculum, called "Step Up," provided an introduction to the retail industry that included vocabulary, major work activities, and possible career paths. A large portion of the lesson plans was adapted from the RetailingSmarts™ series, which incorporates the pilot retail skill standards.

As part of the half-day session, attendees completed the Retail Readiness Assessment, also based on the skill standards, to ensure that partners could direct individuals who scored below a certain level to preparatory programs and those in the middle range to one of several career fairs. Those in the upper scoring range were referred to positions at the management level, rather than the Sales Associate level. All were welcome to enroll at the Retail Skills Center to upgrade their skills regardless of score.

Once enrolled at the Center, students attended workshops and used computer-based and paper-based curriculum that was founded on the skill standards. The Center employs a video-based tool that uses retail scenarios to determine new students' skill levels when compared to the pilot standards, which can be used either as an assessment or as a discussion starter in classes. When used as an assessment, the scoring report is structured to convey results in terms of the skill standards so that the trainers may determine which subjects are needed during training. During the winter of 2001, the Retail Skills Center at Jersey Gardens will pilot the use of a retention model that integrates basic work skills and the pilot skill standards in

weekly counseling sessions with Sales Associates at the shopping center. Program participants may not be aware of the standards per se, but every part of the system with which they come in contact expresses the same core, consistent components - the pilot retail skill standards.

Conclusion

If the successes of the past few years are any indication, community and technical colleges will find the future S&SVP skill standards a valuable tool in preparation for the growing service economy in the United States. Because they will focus on Customer Service, Sales, and Inventory Management, these standards will encourage the development of portable skills that will be applicable to other industries - or even to sectors within industries. For example, an individual with a certificate from the S&SVP will be able to present the certificate to an insurance company's customer service division or to a hotel for a sales position within the hospitality industry.

Finally, community and technical colleges will have the opportunity to become central figures in the national certification process by becoming assessment centers for the standards. The S&SVP is developing a certification test that will be computer-based and will include still graphics and video to simulate realistic situations. This initial certification test will be designed to test current employees with one to three years' experience in their industry. After approval of the test for certification at the basic level, the S&SVP envisions higher-level exams and certifications. Many

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munity and technical colleges will be able to accommodate candidates using their existing testing facilities or computer laboratories. As skill standards are developed, community and technical colleges will find themselves increasingly working with standards-based curriculum and certification. As a result, both students and employers will be better prepared to meet workforce requirements and raise the level of performance of the American workforce.

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Resources

National Skill Standards Board
www.nssb.org

Sales & Service Voluntary
Partnership
www.salesandservice.org

Criteria for Proposal Selection:

- Clarity in describing purpose, objectives, outcomes, content and strategies for audience involvement and learning
- Adherence to proposal guidelines and requirements
- Value of the session to the audience and the profession
- Qualifications of the presenter(s)
- All breakout sessions are 60 minutes in length. They may be presented by an individual or a team.

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To be considered by the Program Committee, a proposal must contain the following components:

Title of Presentation - Please submit a title that accurately conveys the content of the session.

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Content of Presentation - Please provide a 250 word description of the purpose, objectives, content, activities and outcomes of the session.

Support Requirements - Describe any audio/visual or computer equipment requirements and any special seating arrangements desired. Note: No internet access will be provided.

Value-added — Describe any visual aids or handouts, and the strategies you plan to use to ensure audience involvement and learning

Description of Presenter(s) - Please provide a brief summary of the background, qualifications and current position of each presenter.

Contact Information please provide the following information for each presenter: name, title, institution, address, city, state, zip code, telephone, fax, e-mail address.

Mail two copies of the complete proposal to the following address for receipt no later than MAY 15, 2001.

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