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FOCUS ON HUMAN RESOURCES



**Learning
your way
to the top**

This year, Anna Skae-Caldwell will enroll in college to become a radiology technician, having earned her GED with help from the School at Work program.

School at Work program builds confidence, leads to career advancement

BY DAVE RAIFORD
NASHVILLE BUSINESS JOURNAL

When Anna Skae-Caldwell came to the United States 18 years ago, she knew what she didn't know, but wasn't sure how to learn it.

The native of Malawi, a country a little smaller than Pennsylvania in southern Africa, had an elementary school education and a desire to learn, but few avenues to act on that desire.

Through a U.S. Department of Labor-funded program offered through her employer, Centennial Medical Center, Caldwell next month will take her GED exam and the road ahead leads to Volunteer State Community College and a job as a radiology technician.

"I can do this and this will be a dream come

true for me," says Caldwell. "I don't know how to describe it. That's something I never thought I could do."

And when Caldwell makes that leap from filing clerk to radiology technician, she'll be proof positive of the School at Work concept.

School at Work was born out of a U.S. Department of Labor grant through the President's High Growth Job Training Initiative to Louisville, Ky.-based Catalyst Learning.

Catalyst is a workforce development company that focuses on entry-level, adult workers.

"Our job is to update their basic skills and give them confidence to move ahead with their

employers," says Lynn Fischer, company founder and president. "We've worked in other industries in the past, particularly hospitality, but our emphasis now is health care employers who are motivated to make sure they're looking at the potential in all of their employees."

Catalyst has contracts with 65 hospitals and has worked with 125 in 20 states, including HCA Inc. hospitals such as Centennial and Summit Medical Center in Nashville. The average cost to the hospitals \$450 per student.

At Centennial, employees sign up to attend classes for eight months, meeting for two hours weekly, working through an online and DVD curriculum, says Helen Cunningham, a human resource manager for the hospital and coordinator

SCHOOL: Program increases job retention rate

of its School at Work program. The employees stay on the clock during the class sessions and are expected to do several hours of homework each week.

The company also offers tuition reimbursement for participants who want to take the next step toward secondary education, up to \$5,000 per year for nursing students.

"The first step for some is a GED. Others may have a diploma, but have been out of the school environment for some time and this can get them in the mode of getting back into school," says Cunningham.

For employees who aren't prepared for the School at Work program, the hospital is developing refresher courses to bring them up to speed. The idea, Cunningham says, is to have a tiered program leading from very basic to secondary education.

Confidence built through education has a direct effect on job performance and, in turn, that leads to higher job satisfaction, she says. Follow the ripples and job satisfaction leads to happier customers.

"If an employee is engaged, invested in, and is recognized as part of the process, they'll commit that same behavior to their customers," says John Gehring, a partner with Conner Gehring Associates, which developed HCA's STARS (Superior Treatment and Royal Service) program for its supervisors and managers.

The STARS program was developed to address turnover rates throughout HCA's MidAmerica division under the premise that job satisfaction must start with the relationship between management and employees.

"We started in September of 2000 and by the end of 2003, our turnover rates went from 35 percent to the below 18 percent," Gehring says.

Beyond happy customers, the hard dollar impact of lower turnover among support staff in a hospital can be huge. According to a study done by The Work Institute for Catalyst Learning, the turnover cost of losing one support staff worker is \$2,844.

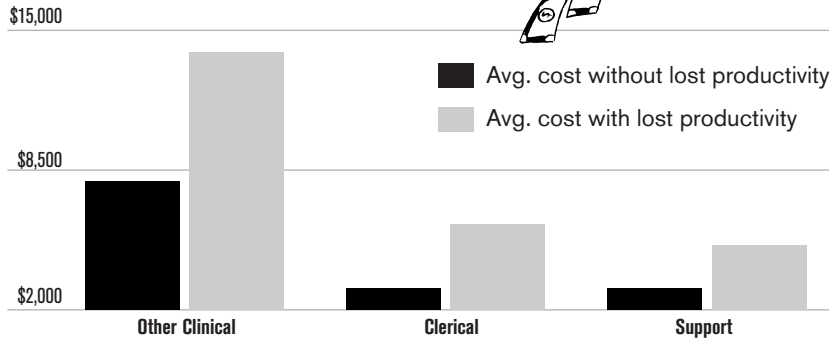
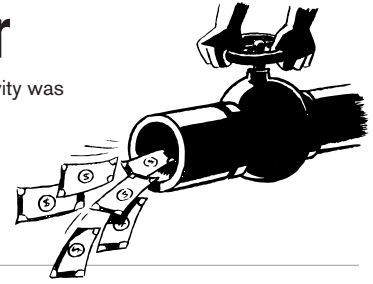
Take into account the length of time it takes to get a new employee up to speed - almost 38 days on average for support staff - and the cost of lost productivity brings that figure up to \$4,880. Employee turnover rates are highest at the bottom of the pay scale, so replacing many entry-level staff can quickly reach high dollar amounts.

"It (School at Work) helps us reduce our turnover and we feel good about rewarding hard working employees and having them move," Cunningham says.

Employees who are interested in furthering their education and are willing to make the commitment to getting the skills they need to move to a higher level position is a key indicator of future success, says Caldwell, who has taught as

The cost of turnover

■ Average cost of turnover per position. Lost productivity was estimated from the number of days for an employee to achieve 100% productivity as provided by hospitals. For example, 61.7 days is the average estimate of the Other Clinical staff and 37.9 days for Support staff.



Source: The Work Institute for Catalyst Learning

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an adjunct professor at local universities and spent her career in staff development.

"We see more professionalism in the workplace. Their attitude and self confidence in dealing with problems increases exponentially," she says.

Lack of education carries a stigma and admitting that help is needed can be a tough step for employees.

"It takes a lot of effort to come over here and meet with me about the program," she says. "To admit you don't know something is hard for anyone."

When Caldwell was a child, she loved to read and wanted to go to school. But growing up in dirt-poor Malawi, she was told that school was for boys.

"My dad never bothered putting me through school. He would say: 'Go to the kitchen, you need to cook. That's your job.' But my brothers were put in school," she says.

In the United States, she became a single mother nagged by feelings of inadequacies over her inability to help her daughter with her schoolwork and the embarrassment of telling teachers she wouldn't be much help with homework.

Her daughter, Leticia, graduated with a 4.0 grade point average, and through a scholarship to the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, is nearing completion of a bachelor's degree. She has become a cheerleader for her mother.

For Caldwell, confidence has been hard won and she holds onto it tightly. Next year, when she enrolls in college, she'll be taking another step forward. The course work will be more difficult, but making the decision to begin is easier.



Helen Cunningham

"I've worked in the (radiology) department for all of these years and I could see what they do, but didn't think I could do it. Now, I know I can," she says. "In life, you go through a lot. But it's never too late. You can do anything if you really want it."

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For additional information on the School at Work program, contact Catalyst Learning at: Phone-502-580-2670 • e-mail- info@catalystlearning.com or visit us on the web at: www.catalystlearning.com or www.schoolatwork.com