

Adult Learners Find Education Breaks Down Barriers

By CHRISTINA COUCH

Take Action

When Donna Johnson took a hard look at her future, she knew she had to come up with a better plan. "I've been a flight attendant for 22 years and there's not really any position for me to move into without some sort of degree," she says. "I only have about 10 years left in the workforce and I need to make the most of them."

An employee for The Boeing Company, Johnson, 49, currently splits her time between jet-setting around the world and earning an associate in business degree online through the University of Phoenix. Completing her assignments from WiFi-enabled airports across the globe, Johnson hopes her new degree will help her land a training position at Boeing's Leadership Center in St. Louis and put her closer to reaching her financial goals. "At this point in my life, I need to be making money and contributing to my retirement," she comments. "My education is helping me do that."

Johnson is part of an ever-growing contingency of adults heading back to the classroom after 20, 30, or even 40 years. Fueled by a plethora of economic reasons—decreased employer loyalty, increased financial pressures surrounding retirement, labor shortages, reduced company benefits—older working adults are finding that upgrading their education may be more important (and lucrative!) now than it ever was in their twenties.

Opening Doors

"A new degree actually opens more doors for adults [than for traditional college-aged students]," says Michael P. Lambert, executive director of the Distance Education Training Council, a nationally-recognized accrediting organization for distance learning institutions. "Working adult learners have already demonstrated that they're good employees. Once they enter a university, they're usually fast-tracked to a promotion."

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that by the year 2020, 15 million new jobs will be created requiring a college education. Only 3 million new workers with those credentials are projected to hit the job market, placing increased importance on upgrading the education of those already in the field.

Rising recruitment and training costs play a crucial role as well. A recent survey by Right Management, a research and consulting firm based in Philadelphia, PA, found that it costs, on average, two and a half times an employee's salary to replace one bad hire. With both an upcoming worker shortage and the skyrocketing costs of bringing someone new on board, companies are increasingly leaning on their tried and true employees rather than taking a gamble on new help.

"A new college student might have a wonderful-sounding degree from a great university, but how do you know that they're going to be a good new hire? You don't," says Lambert. "That's the chance you take with a new employee, but not with someone you've had on the payroll for 20 years."

While upcoming economic shifts place veteran workers in a better bargaining position, they also put more pressure on working adults to stay on top of their field, oftentimes through supplementing their on-the-job experience with formal classroom training.

The good news, says Pamela Tate, president and CEO of the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, a non-profit organization dedicated to creating effective education options for adult students. Tate reports that older students who enter the classroom armed with a packed resume may be able to use their life experience to knock a few credits off of their degree program. "When people say 'I don't need to go back into the classroom because I have 20 years of experience,' we try to tell them how they can translate that into college credit," Tate says. "They may have a lot of experience, but a secondary credential [like a new degree or certification] can help provide new opportunities."

Why Adult Learners Are Underserved

The primary reason many adults resist returning to the classroom, says Tate, is that it's logistically more difficult for a seasoned learner to graduate than for a fresh-faced undergrad. According to the Lumina Foundation, a private research organization that specializes in studying the educational needs of underserved students (including adult learners), more than 30 percent of all college students are adult learners ages 25 and above. Even so, says Tate, traditional colleges and universities frequently focus more heavily on the needs of students below the age of 22 and oftentimes do not recognize the additional barriers that working adults face. "Students services are not offered at flexible times for working adults, financial aid is very difficult for adults to get, even the hours that institutions are open are set up to serve traditional students and that's why adults are underserved," Tate says. "We believe it's a serious problem."

On the financial end, many adult are fooled by scholarship and grant promises from Uncle Sam, adds Lambert. Although the federal government shells out a cool \$83 billion in student financial aid each year, working adults rarely qualify for need-based funding and those who do are often disqualified because they can't attend school full-time.

Scared to Death of School

Beyond scheduling and monetary constraints, adults face significant psychological barriers in the classroom as well.

For Susan W. Hall, a 55 year-old mother of three who recently completed her paralegal studies associate degree from the University of Richmond (Richmond, Virginia), fear not only prevented her from returning to school, it nearly caused her to drop out. "I was scared to death. After the first night of class, I went up to my professor and told him with tears in my eyes that I didn't think I was smart enough to take the class. I had not been in a classroom for over 30 years," she recalls. "He assured me that I was. I ended up with an

'A' in the class and graduated from the associate program with honors."

Thirteen years later, Hall has her degree in hand and has used it to land a legal administrative assistant position, one that pays significantly more than her previous job as a university student service coordinator. She is pursuing her bachelor's degree from the University of Richmond, which she plans to complete within the next two years. Hall believes that it wasn't just her new credential that helped her land the job. She credits her new position to a degree backed by more than 20 years of on-the-job experience and the wisdom that comes from being an adult rather than a recent college grad.

"My degree, along with my maturity and work experience, helped me earn this new position," Hall says. "I think it's opened a lot of doors."

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