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Workers and students are more than “skill-sets”!

Helping teachers and entrepreneurs think and talk about the same subject, at the same time in the same space.... now there's a challenge!

Let's look for a few minutes at the issue of student placements, co-op placements, job-shadowing, or any of the other ways by which high school and college students are integrated into the workplace.

Naturally, if entrepreneurs are facing competing applications from community college and from high school students, they will likely prefer the former over the latter. They want individuals who will bring “something to the table” some skill set, some “value-added” so that there is a measurable benefit for the employer, given the time and energy required to supervise the student.

Skills necessary for the best fit of the student into the workplace require identification, and some work needs to be done to research this inventory. But there is a huge divide in the thinking about a potential worker/student/placement from the perspective of the education facility/faculty and the prospective employer.

In another life, I happened to study the piano, along with the required examinations. There were mark categories for examiners to distinguish between the technical aspects of the

student's performance and the musicianship of the student. While subjective, this latter category of the grade comprised at least 40% of the final mark.

If we were to examine the qualities inherent in the broad category, they would include imagination, interpretation, intuition, memory / history understanding of the mood and the dynamics and the themes of the piece of music, and the capacity to translate these into “beautiful sounds”. Such intangibles as the “sense” of the composer's musical intent would be included in this category.

With a human resource mind-set which reduces individuals to a “skill-set” and with this mind-set being translated to the schools, in order to “fit” the needs of the employer, there is a serious risk that the student will be reduced to a “skill-set” of deliverables, which list will exclude the notion of “musicianship” in those old Royal Conservatory Examinations:

- Reading at X grade level;
- Writing at Y grade level;
- Computing math, geometry, algebra and trigonometry at Z levels;
- Performing science experiments at the level of X-Grade students;
- Operating the following software programs at W level;
- And demonstrating the capacity to volunteer, lead, follow instructions, and engage people at ?? level...

And then there is the “passion” to spend several years learning and then working in the chosen field...

And as I write these categories, I am wondering if the students eligible for placements, from the high schools, will be able to satisfy the basic requirements of the employers, to make a reasonably comfortable “fit”.

Driving the model, of course, from all perspectives are words like “accountability” “standards” “competition” for university and college seats, and “performance”... all of them summed up in “Quality Control” or ISO or some similar measure of standards.

I never, as a piano student, felt there was something unfair in the subjectivity of the musicianship mark, given the experience and the depth of understanding of those who traveled the province as examiners. Nor did I feel that the technical mark, while important, ever took precedence over the “quality” of the performance. Furthermore, even though the examinations themselves were only a quarter-hour to a half-hour in length, depending on the grade, for that time, both examiner and student were literally and metaphorically “on the same page”.

How do we translate this kind of experience into the workplace, so that placements are both enjoyable and profitable for all participants?

Is *peer mentoring* one of the potentials to create the kind of “attention to the details” of the individual that the entrepreneur does not have either the time or the patience to pay?

Is the *buddy system* between the employer and the students’ teacher part of the answer? (There seems to be very

little contact between the two “sectors” the school and the workplace.)

Is there a need for business operators and educators to meet frequently and to really listen to the stories from all participants?

Is there a need for both teachers and employers to sit in the same *orientation classes*, with respect to the potential to influence the student to achieve his/her full potential, and the true compatibility of expectations of each group, regardless of the language barrier?

Is there a need for teachers to re-enter the workplace, for a semester, to reconnect, or to connect for the first time, with the private sector world, and to better understand the ethos of the workplace?

Cultural diversity does not apply only to different ethnicities. It applies to different workplaces and to different learning spaces. Bridging the gap of “cultural diversity” in the interests of the placement students, for the mutual benefit, in the short-run of student and employer, and in the long-run, of the economy at large, is a goal worth striving to achieve.

Are there any courses in cultural anthropology, or in cultural history at the high school/community college level? If not, this might be a place to start, especially if the cultural “species” under investigation were to include the different workplace cultures and expectations.

Are there courses for employers to learn how important their part in the puzzle really is, especially for the student who

may be lagging in interest and in motivation in the classroom, but have considerable talent, which can be noticed and reinforced by the employer during a placement?

Intellectual and social and political ghettos, even those between the school and the workplace, divide the community's interests into controlled segments preserving the isolation and mental models of both groups, and the price is the failure to fully develop our most important natural resource...human beings!

Feedback?

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