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Ronald J. Burke

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Trainee Experiences in Industrial Retraining Programs

A Case Study

Ronald J. Burke

The present study reports on the experiences of a group of 58 former Canadian Admiral employees who enrolled in academic upgrading or retraining programs sponsored by the Federal government. The emphasis is placed on their student role, and expectations for the future, since all were still in retraining.

The closing of the Canadian Admiral plant in Cambridge, Ontario in November 1981 received a lot of attention in the media. At that time, Ontario was plagued with a rash of plant shutdowns and unemployment was steadily increasing. Cambridge, with a population of about 71 000, already had a high unemployment rate and the Admiral closing put another 450 men and women out of work.

The Ontario Ministry of Labour, concerned about preventing plant closing, and mitigating the consequences of plant closing when such was inevitable, created a unit to assist in the process of plant closing and manpower adjustment. This unit typically involves a community college serving the area in which a particular plant is preparing to close to assist in the process of closure and employee relocation. When the Admiral closure was announced, Conestoga College of Arts and Technology was asked to work with the management and employees of Admiral.

One of the services offered to employees of Canadian Admiral was a five-day counseling and job search workshop. Attendance was voluntary but encouraged by Canadian Admiral who offered full salary to those employees who chose to attend, for the duration of the workshop. About

* BURKE, Ronald J., Professor, Faculty of Administrative Study, York University.

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170 employees participated in the workshops, which were conducted by Conestoga College on the company's premises. Seventeen workshops were conducted January through March, 1982.

The counseling and job search program had several purposes. These included: (1) a chance for employees to spend time thinking about their aptitudes, interests, and past work experiences, (2) an opportunity to receive feedback, i.e., test results, on skills and abilities, (3) information on jobs that were available, and jobs that perhaps better matched their aptitudes and interests, (4) information on the possible avenues open to them for undertaking industrial retraining, and how this might equip them for jobs in growth areas, thus increasing their chances for re-employment and reducing the likelihood of further job loss, and (5) strategies for getting another job, e.g., using newspapers and friends, preparing a resume, and dealing with the selection interview.

About 70 former Canadian Admiral employees decided to seek additional education. This took the form of (1) English as a second language, chosen by recent immigrants to Canada, (2) academic upgrading in English and mathematics, and (3) skill training. Competence in English and mathematics were prerequisites for entry into the skill training programs. Allocation into the various programs was made on the basis of proficiency tests conducted as part of the counseling and job search workshops.

Previous research (Daniel, 1972; Herron, 1975; Schultz & Weber, 1966) has shown that only a small number of redundant workers take advantage of the opportunity for retraining. This figure has ranged between one and five per cent. The Admiral figure was almost fifteen per cent. In addition, most of the published research on plant closings was undertaken when the economy was growing. What impact would a declining economy and the increasing scarcity of jobs have on the ultimate success of the retraining program.

Warr and Lovatt (1977) conducted a study of the effects of retraining involving about 2 200 redundant men and women. The national unemployment rate at the time of the research was 3.2 per cent and 4.3 regionally. They found that a majority of retrainees found the courses of value. They also found that several of the retrainees (the figure varied with particular courses) failed to reach the proficiency standard set for successful completion of the course. About half of those who lost their jobs and found new jobs six months after the plant closing, and the figure was slightly higher among those who had taken retraining than those who had not. Finally, retrainees who had found jobs were slightly more satisfied with them than were employed individuals who received no training. It is difficult to generalize these findings into the current Canadian environment. It is likely that retraining will be less effective after redundancy when the national unemployment rate is twelve per cent.

The present study reports on the experiences of a group of 58 former Canadian Admiral employees who enrolled in academic upgrading or retraining programs sponsored by the federal government. The emphasis is placed on their student role, and expectations for the future, since all were still in retraining.

METHOD

Respondents

Respondents were 58 former Admiral employees enrolled in upgrading and retraining at Conestoga College. Table 1 presents some of the demographic characteristics of the sample.

TABLE 1
Characteristics of the Sample

<i>Sex</i>		<i>Years at Admiral</i>	
82.5% male		1 to 5 —	24.1%
17.5% female		6 to 10 —	51.7%
<i>Age</i>		11 to 15 —	19.0%
21 to 30 —	29.3%	16 to 20 —	5.2%
31 to 40 —	44.8%	Average: 8.4, S.D. = 4.2	
41 to 50 —	17.2%	<i>Rate of Pay</i>	
51 to 60 —	8.6%	\$7.34 to \$8.86 per hour	
\bar{x} age = 35.7, S.D. = 8.5		Average: \$8.28, S.D. = \$0.40	
<i>Education</i>		<i>Satisfaction with Job et Admiral</i>	
Grade 8 and lower —	24.6%	Very satisfied —	22.8%
Grades 9, 10, 11 —	50.9%	Satisfied —	43.9%
Grades 12, 13 —	21.1%	Fairly satisfied —	19.3%
Post Secondary —	3.5%	Dissatisfied —	14.0%
Average Grade: 9.9		<i>Satisfaction with Admiral as Employer</i>	
<i>Country of Birth</i>		Very satisfied —	8.9%
Canada	78.6%	Satisfied —	33.9%
Other	21.4%	Fairly satisfied —	33.9%
<i>Marital Status</i>		Dissatisfied —	23.2%
Single	12.3%	<i>Receiving UIC</i>	
Married	73.7%	Yes	77.2%
Divorced or Separated	14.0%	No	22.8%

Eighty-one per cent of the respondents were educated in Canada. Education was correlated negatively with age ($r = -.48$, $p = .001$). On average, respondents were out of school for 18.6 years. Respondents were generally very satisfied with their former Admiral job. All of them reported that they would have remained at Admiral had the plant remained open.

Procedure

Data were collected in semi-structured interviews. The study was launched while these individuals were attending classes at Conestoga College, on campuses at Cambridge, Kitchener and Waterloo, Ontario. Most of the students began their programs in April and May, 1982, some later. With one or two exceptions they were interviewed on campus during October, November and December 1982. Each interview lasted thirty to forty minutes and was conducted by two researchers. One asked the questions and probed; the second took verbatim notes. Interviews were also conducted with two teachers of these students, and a senior administrator responsible for these programs.

Measures

The interview examined the following areas: (1) personal demographic characteristics; (2) current academic or skill training program («Why did you choose this program? Was it your first choice? If not, why did you not enroll in your first choice?»); (3) the career counseling program («What did you learn in this session?»); (4) their work experiences at Canadian Admiral, and before; (5) their experiences in the college («What does it feel like to be back at school?»), and their motivation for undertaking retraining («A lot of the others who left Admiral along with you looked immediately for another job why did you decide to enter a retraining program?»); (6) their current views on the wisdom of their decision to seek retraining, and their hopes of finding a job in this area of work; (7) their feelings about their life at this moment; and (8) their experiences in dealing with various government agencies (UIC, CEIC, welfare). The interview protocols were content analyzed by two members of the research team.

RESULTS

Our findings are presented in two sections: the first deals with the characteristics of the sample; the second, with the experiences and feelings of the trainees with regard to their training program and their more general life situation.

Characteristics of the Sample

Was the sample of former Admiral employees different from former Admiral employees in general. It was possible to compare this sample with 183 former Canadian Admiral employees who completed a questionnaire about four months after the interviews with the 58 retrainees were finished. The group of 183 represented about half of those former Admiral employees for whom addresses were available (Burke, 1984). The two groups were similar on: levels of education, sex, years at Admiral, and pay rate in last job. The two groups were different on age (trainees were younger, 35.7 vs 41 years, and job satisfaction at Admiral (trainees were less satisfied in their jobs).

Experiences and Feelings of the Trainees

Counseling and job search program

The trainees were asked what they had learned during the five day workshop. Of the 51 respondents: 15.7% reported 'quite a lot'; 60.7% 'something'; 19.6% 'not very much'; and, 3.9% 'nothing'.

Those born in Canada seem to have learned more than those born abroad ($r = .23$, $p = .05$). Those who reported less satisfaction with Admiral as an employer seem also to have learned more than the more satisfied ($r = .25$, $p = .05$).

The trainees were also asked what effect the counseling and job search workshop had on their decision as to what to do. Of the 40 respondents: 5.0% reported a 'major effect'; 45.0% a 'moderate effect'; 25.0% 'some effect'; and, 25.0% 'no effect'.

Stronger effects were reported by: those reporting more learning at the workshop ($r = .28$, $p = .05$); those educated in Canada ($r = .24$, $p = .05$); those with less formal education ($r = .27$, $p = .05$); those less satisfied with their job at Admiral ($r = .28$, $p = .05$); and, those at the lower end of the pay scale at Admiral ($r = .29$, $p = .05$).

It is interesting that those trainees who learned the most from the workshop and were more likely to have used their learning in deciding what to do were those least satisfied with their jobs at Admiral and with Admiral as an employer. One may speculate that their more 'satisfied' colleagues chose to believe the many rumours about the imminent reopening of the plant, and just 'went through the motions' at the workshop.

Choice of training program

The trainees were asked to what extent they had the opportunity to choose their retraining program. Of the 49 respondents: 49.0% reported that they had a choice; 18.4% 'more or less'; and, 32.7% no choice. 44.7% of the respondents reported that they were given their first choice.

Asked why they chose a particular program, trainees who were given their first choice reported a similarity with skills already possessed, liking for the work, and a belief that it would provide for steady employment. Those who were not given their first choice of program gave reasons such as not being qualified, there being no immediate opening, it not being sponsored by Canada Manpower, or it not being available locally. Not surprisingly, the better educated were more likely to have been given their first choice ($r = .27$, $p = .05$).

Feelings about being back in school

Of 52 respondents, 34.6% reported positive feelings about being back in school; 32.7% negative feelings; and, 32.7% neutral feelings.

Those with positive feelings gave reasons such as: «it occupies my time»; «I can work at my own pace — there's no pressure»; «I'm learning new things»; and, «I like the teaching staff». Several of these respondents also reported that they had dropped out of high school early and saw their lay-off as an opportunity to make up for lost time.

The most commonly cited reasons by those students having negative feelings about being back in school were 'heavy work load' and 'lack of money'. The reference to heavy work load did not refer to the physical aspects of the retraining but rather the intellectual demands associated with the more theoretical aspects of the program. In other words, some of the less literate and less numerate students felt pressured by the bookwork and study required by some programs.

Those respondents with more positive feelings about being back in school were also more positive about their decision to retrain ($r = .33$, $p = .05$), and had a working spouse and/or dependents ($r = .37$, $p = .05$).

Feelings about decision to retrain

Of 49 respondents, 77.8% reported positive feelings about their decision to retrain. 17.8% were neutral, and only 4.4% negative. Those who felt more positive were those who were given their first choice of program ($r = .29$, $p = .05$).

Consideration of dropping out of program

Of 45 respondents, on third reported that they had considered dropping out of their programs. The fact that they did not actually do so seems to have been the perceived absence of any acceptable alternative. Those more likely to have considered dropping out were those receiving Unemployment Insurance benefits ($r = .26$, $p = .05$). About 75% of the total sample were receiving such benefits while the remaining 25% were receiving specific training allowances.

Those least likely to have considered dropping out were those more positive about their decision to retrain ($r = .53$, $p = .001$), those with more seniority at Admiral ($r = .29$, $p = .05$), and those more satisfied with their job at Admiral ($r = .28$, $p = .05$).

Family feelings about retraining

Respondents were asked how their families felt about their being back at school. Of 40 respondents, 47.5% reported a positive response on the part of their family, 47.5% an ambivalent response, and only 5.0% a negative response. Ambivalent family feelings were more likely to be reported by respondents with larger families ($r = .27$, $p = .05$), and by those feeling more positive about their decision to retrain ($r = .28$, $p = .05$). The latter aspect is somewhat surprising and might be explained if families tend to be more supportive of trainees who lack confidence in themselves.

Hope of finding a job after retraining

Of 41 respondents, 12.2% reported that they were very hopeful of getting a job on completing their program, 51.2% that they were somewhat hopeful, and 36.6% not hopeful at all. The more hopeful seem to be those who felt more positive about their decision to retrain ($r = .25$, $p = .10$). Not surprisingly, hope seems to decline with age ($r = .37$, $p = .01$), and as the number of years out of school increase ($r = .27$, $p = .05$).

Feelings about life in general

Of 52 respondents, 19.2% expressed positive feelings about their lives in general — «I'm enjoying life», 46.2% ambivalent feelings — «life is O.K.», and 34.6% negative feelings — «it's depressing», — «it's not satisfying».

More positive feelings about life in general were expressed by those given their first choice of training program ($r = .35$, $p = .01$), and those with more seniority at Admiral ($r = .19$, $p = .10$). More negative feelings about life in general were expressed by respondents owning or buying homes ($r = .20$, $p = .10$). Those with homes feared losing them, while those with working dependants may well have been feeling a loss of self-esteem engendered by our cultural mores.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Clearly, many of the correlations cited are modest (less than .30) and supportable sometimes at no more than a 90% level of confidence. However, they are worth including if only to suggest how those enduring job loss and retraining view and respond to their situation. In general, the following conclusions seem warranted.

1. Most of the trainees were satisfied with their jobs at Admiral;
2. Most of the trainees learned something from the counseling and job search workshop, and were thereby influenced in their decision as to what to do about their enforced unemployment;
3. A slim majority of the trainees had some choice as to the retraining program undertaken;
4. Most of the trainees were positive about their decision to retrain;
5. Most of the trainees held only modest hope of finding a job on completing their retraining program;
6. The trainees may have been 'oversold' on the pay-off for retraining — their expectations may have been raised unrealistically high by well-meaning counselors and teachers, anxious to encourage the trainees in their efforts to 'bootstrap' themselves;
7. It is not clear that the programs chosen for retraining were 'sensible' choices — some chose to learn skills for which there was already an over-supply;

8. Canada Manpower's policy on 'buying' seats in skills training courses caused difficulty for some trainees — notwithstanding that an appropriate course was available at a nearby campus, the fact that Canada Manpower had not bought seats precluded the timely enrolment of trainees graduating from upgrading courses.

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