The Educational Needs of Dislocated Workers in Minnesota

by Rosemarie J. Park, Rebecca L. Storlie, René V. Dawis

Changes in the national economy—the trend to internationalism and rapid technological growth—have led to considerable loss of jobs in heavy manufacturing, steel, lumber, agriculture, and even the computer industry. Nationally, five million workers were displaced from 1981-86. In Minnesota alone it is estimated that 89,000 jobs were lost in the years 1979-83.

This 1986-87 study was designed to obtain detailed information about dislocated workers in Minnesota. What types of job goals do they have? Are they planning to retrain? What resources are required to facilitate these transitions? And what can the unions, companies, government, and educational institutions do to aid the workers?

More specifically the study hoped to determine the nature of the training in basic skills that workers need. Do workers in industries facing closings or widespread layoffs have the basic reading and mathematical skills needed to learn new jobs or to successfully complete training programs? By obtaining information about the types of basic skills training needed, the support services workers required, and the most effective modes of delivering education and services, we sought to provide a base on which to build policy recommendations. Educators in the United States have consistently touted the importance of basic skills programs but most of these programs have failed to attract and retain adult participants. If a need for basic skills instruction exists, what is the most effective way to provide it to those who need it?

Setting up the Study

This research targeted four key Minnesota industries: lumber, manufacturing, taconite mining, and agriculture. A representative randomly-selected sample of laid-off workers from each industry was interviewed. The group included workers from a lumber products plant in the northeast part of the state; manufacturing workers from a suburban Twin Cities location; production, clerical, and technical workers from a large Twin Cities computer corporation; taconite workers from the Iron Range; and farmers from the southeastern, southwestern, north-central, and west-central regions of the state.

An interview questionnaire was developed with questions about retraining, the perceived need for basic skills, interest in and importance of basic skills, the needs of co-workers for basic skills brush-up, perception of the current job "crisis," and workers' ideas about what public and private sector agencies and the unions should do about the current employment situation.

A project advisory committee composed of key interested persons from state government agencies, the Minnesota AFL-CIO, the Farmers Union, the University of Minnesota's Extension Service, and private industry was organized to give advice on research content and process and to make key linkages with agencies, unions, and employers. The committee identified four representative plants where substantial numbers of the work force had been laid off in the preceding six-month period. Either thirty workers or not less than 10 percent of the number laid off were randomly selected.

In all 168 in-person interviews were completed from June through September in 1986. Follow-up telephone interviews were conducted six to nine months later with 119 of those originally surveyed to determine the basic skill requirements in subsequent training or employment, to chart hiring and wage patterns, and to elicit additional worker suggestions for public policy.

Jobs dislocated workers seek and interest in retraining

Most dislocated workers did not envision making radical changes in their occupation. When asked "Ideally what job would you like to get?" most wanted something similar to the job they had just left. Most cited jobs where they already held some qualifications and few envisioned long-term job training that would lead to an entirely new career path.

Will dislocated workers enroll in job retraining programs and what influences that decision? Approximately 54 percent of all workers intended to enroll in retraining. Most likely to enroll were workers leaving manufacturing and least likely to enroll were farmers and taconite workers. The intended retraining was both long-term and short-term. A preference for long-term retraining was indicated by 71 percent of the farmers
who were interested in retraining, 63 percent of the manufacturing workers, 75 percent of the taconite workers, and 55 percent of the lumber workers.

Strongly predictive of the intention to go into retraining were workers’ perceptions that jobs in the future would require more reading, their stated interest in math brush-up programs, and their willingness to attend basic skills programs. The strongest dis- incentive to attending both basic skills classes and retraining programs was age. Older workers were the least inclined to seek retraining.

Not surprisingly, six months after the initial interviews, fewer workers actually re-trained than those who had originally expressed an interest. Approximately 8 percent of those still unemployed at that point were enrolled in training courses. Time and money were the most frequent deterrents cited for not retraining, particularly with long-term training programs.

Availability of new employment did not seem to make a major difference in whether workers entered retraining. For the two nonmetro groups where unemployment was 67 percent and 63 percent respectively, 13 percent and 0 percent were in training. In the metro area where 59 percent and 78 percent were re-employed, 12 percent and 9 percent were in training.

All groups were willing to blame age and time factors for their not wanting to attend retraining programs. For the lumber workers, their location and the lack of any job possibilities also weighed heavily. There was not a great deal of enthusiasm for job retraining although many workers saw it as necessary given the job market.

Use of basic skills on the job

Taconite workers and farmers saw reading and math as important in performing the jobs they had held. When asked “How important would you say reading and math were in your previous job?” all of the groups we surveyed rated reading and math as above average in importance. Math was seen as slightly less important than reading.

Groups varied significantly, however, in the degree of importance they attributed to reading and math in their previous jobs. Farmers rated them highest (8 for reading and 9 for math on a scale of 1 to 10, where 10 was the most important). Lumber workers rated them lowest (5 for math and 5 on the same scale). Lumber workers, then, tended to see future jobs as requiring more reading.

Steel workers and those in computer-related manufacturing, who rated reading high in previous work, were less inclined to see more reading as being required in future jobs.

The more education a worker had, the more likely the worker was to see the importance of reading on the job. This is not surprising because better educated workers generally go into jobs where reading is relatively important.

On follow-up, it was expected that workers would find that increased reading was required in their new jobs. This, however, was not the case. The lumber workers who read less on their old job did find more reading required on their new jobs in assembly or service work; however, relatively few lumber workers were employed. The taconite workers rated reading on their new jobs as less important, whereas manufacturing workers in the metro area reported relatively little change.

Although the majority of all nonfarm workers maintained that they liked to read (67 percent), only half stated that they used math regularly. Less than a third of lumber workers used math on a regular basis. Writing was used regularly by only a third of the total sample.

Workers laid off from Minneapolis Electric Steel Castings Foundry and Royal Crown Beverage Company are retraining to become welders through the United Auto Workers’ Dislocated Workers Program at St. Paul TVI. The instructor, far left, works with (left to right) Bob Palmer, Marvin Huisenga, Edwin Severson, and Richard Kron.
Perceptions about needing more reading and math

Four of every five workers we interviewed agreed that co-workers needed to brush up in basic skills and would benefit from programs in those areas. The high tech manufacturing group differed from the others in that, better educated themselves, they saw less need for brush-up programs and saw less need for co-workers to have such programs. All groups universally agreed that they themselves had the reading, math, and writing skills they needed to enter training.

Most likely to enroll in brush-up programs were heavy manufacturing workers who were offered a basic skills class on site. Least likely to attend were taconite workers, who as a group did not see more reading being required on a new job.

The effect of age on retraining

The average age of the workers interviewed was forty-six, with job tenure averaging twenty years. Older workers tended to be displaced from jobs that required lower levels of reading and writing. They saw more reading and math being required in the workplace. In addition, they were less likely to say that they had the reading they needed to be successful in retraining.

There was a significant correlation between years of age and the perception of how severe the current employment situation was. Perhaps this pessimism prevented many older workers from participating in basic skills programs including the one offered on site.

Learning preferences

Most workers (64 percent) saw the technical vocational institutes as the logical place to retrain in job skills or basic skills. However, those with more education in computer-related manufacturing (34 percent) and, to some extent, farmers (29 percent) were attracted to community colleges. Taconite workers saw the high school as a logical place for skills improvement (50 percent) mainly because of commuting distance.

There was a heavy preference for hands-on learning rather than a lecture approach: 83 percent of all workers preferred hands-on. Workers identified lack of knowledge or experience as reasons for preferring classroom (88 percent) over computer-aided instruction. Workers also tended to feel they needed a teacher in order to learn (74 percent), expressing less of a preference for self-taught teaching materials.

Perceptions about employment and the need to retrain

There were significant differences among the groups as to how they rated the seriousness of the dislocation crisis. Those in computer-related manufacturing in the metro area saw the crisis as less severe. The follow-up interviews confirmed that this group was most successful in getting jobs. Seventy-eight percent had found new jobs six months later.

Taconite workers in the northern part of the state saw the crisis as most severe. Their fears were founded. Six months after the initial interviews only 37 percent had found new jobs. Farmers rated the severity of the crisis high and saw less chance that things would improve for them in the future. Only 36 percent thought that they would emerge better off.

Many workers interviewed in the follow-up were earning less on their new jobs. For the non-metro sample this was true for 100 percent of those interviewed; in the metro area 48 percent were earning less.

What workers felt should be done

Workers' solutions as to what should be done were strongly influenced by the specific problems facing each group. Taconite workers, for example, wanted to limit imports. But all the workers felt victimized by companies opting for cheap foreign labor. Workers talked about improving the business climate, reducing taxes, and working for less in order to keep their jobs. Although few specific solutions were suggested, all wanted to extend unemployment benefits and to receive adequate warning of job closure. Health benefits were particularly a problem for lumber workers, many of whom found themselves facing joblessness in their 50s and at a time when they were beginning to experience the long-term
health consequences of exposure to asbestos and formaldehyde.

**Overall Recommendations**

The project findings point to a series of discrete problems that could be addressed without major adjustment in either policy, programs, or funding. The problems with potential solutions are as follows.

- **For basic skills and job training**

  Problem 1: Workers perceive there is a need for basic skills brush-up but are unwilling to enter basic skills programs.
  Recommendation 1: Job training and basic skills training must be integrated in Minnesota. This means all job training programs must provide the basic skills brush-up necessary to help those who are educationally less prepared complete job training programs successfully.

  Problem 2: Workers need to know which training options are open to them as soon as possible and before their unemployment benefits are in danger of running out.
  Recommendation 2: There must be a plan at the state and local levels for coordinating the efforts of agencies who serve the training needs of dislocated workers. The coordination should be the full-time responsibility of one individual and not an add-on to existing responsibilities.

  Problem 3: Workers see technical vocational institutes as a logical place to retrain, but older workers generally are not rushing to retrain.
  Recommendation 3: The TVIs must plan customized programs for dislocated workers. These programs must be flexible in terms of scheduling and location. The TVIs must continue to maximize their efforts to attract older workers into training.

  Problem 4: The majority of workers have lost much of the math skills they learned in school.
  Recommendation 4: Basic skills programs should stress teaching of math skills needed in jobs and retraining.

- **For public policy**

  The problems and solutions presented here stem partly from informal discussions with workers and union members and partly from an overall analysis of the economic situation.

  Problem 1: Insufficient notice of job loss limits plans for job search or training.
  Recommendation 1: Early notice of plant closures or sales will enable workers to retrain or find new jobs.

  Problem 2: Workers cannot afford to undertake long-term training.
  Recommendation 2: Public policy should consider methods of ensuring the financial stability of dislocated workers while they retrain. Methods must be found to protect pensions and health insurance.

  Problem 3: Workers, unions, and government employees see layoffs as endemic rather than symptomatic in the state's economy.
  Recommendation 3: Public policy should continue to develop programs for the dislocated workers.

  Problem 4: Current basic skills options are not attracting dislocated workers in sufficient numbers.
  Recommendation 4: Public policy should develop model programs that integrate job training and basic skills training.

**Further Research Needed**

This study leaves unanswered questions. More research is needed into the feasibility of restructuring training programs to allow marginally skilled adults to succeed. It is now obvious that the so-called literacy gap between the level of basic skills of the work force and the escalating demands of the job market is not as easily defined as we would have liked to believe. Specifically, more needs to be known about the match between workers' reading, writing, and math skills and what it takes to successfully perform a job.

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