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Equity and Economics

Technology is preparing a world in which we may be learners all life long. In this world delight will not be a luxury but a necessity.

—*George B. Leonard,* Education and Ecstasy

Oh, Mr. Leonard—that sounds exciting to me and at the same time confusing. In the good old days it was much easier: (1) birth, (2) school, (3) work, (4) retirement, and (5) death. In the good old days the democratic ideal of equity had much to say about educational opportunity during the years of our youth. Society, like Robin Hood, took from the rich and gave to the poor so that every child had an almost equal educational opportunity. Once provisioned, adolescents were ejected from democracy's "warm-learner-nest."

Now, Mr. Leonard (and most others) says that education throughout a lifetime is a necessity. Just who is responsible for the "delights" of lifelong learning? The individual, the public, or the employer? Ten seconds of thought is enough for even the slowest of us to focus on the financial implications of this issue. Truly, the economics of education for work is becoming an interesting business.

At one time we had plain public education and on-the-job training. In the United States, the 1914 Vocational Education legislation added to public education an agenda of explicit education for work. Simultaneously, the demands of the workplace led to a shift from unstructured on-the-job training to structured employer sponsored training. The momentum of both these private and public sector developments is now coming to a head. The private sector wants the money that is being spent through the public sector for work education.

Training professionals from both sectors are not unbiased observers in this developing tension. In my view, the entire issue will get more complicated. One of the fundamental tenets of the United States is equality of educational opportunity. Society has been willing to collect wealth from the public in an attempt to distribute the wealth more evenly for the purpose of educational opportunity. This principle was established long before Mr. Leonard's essay. Today, however, we find that much of our education has a short shelf life—we no longer have schooling and then life-long work.

A major question facing us is whether the wealth of the public should be collected and redistributed for company-specific job training. Traditional American thinking would oppose subsidizing the private sector in this way. But can society afford *not* to have public support (tax incentives or direct support) for company-specific training programs? Clearly, companies are not equal in management practices, technological development, and commitment to developing individual employee interests and aptitudes. Public funds made available on an equity basis to companies will almost assuredly be made available to individual employees on an unequitable basis.

Issues of equality of educational opportunity and public good are further complicated by national needs to compete in the international marketplace with nations which have different economic/political ideologies.

As companies look increasingly to the human resources side of enterprise for their financial competitive edge, issues of equity and economics will become as fundamental to the field of human performance technology as needs assessment and design are today. The tension between the issues of equity and economics will become intense. In pursuing these issues, we will find that what is best for the company is not always best for the employee, and what is best for the employee is not always best for the company. How we manage this conflict will be interesting. P&I

Richard A. Swanson,
Editor