Learn your way into the corner office

BY BRIAN BANDELL

Whether it’s a technical skills course or an advanced degree program, education is one of the most effective ways to advance from a rank-and-file desk job to a manager’s chair or even the executive suite.

Advanced degrees often mean more money and more responsibility. In 2004, men with a master’s degree earned $71,530, compared to $57,220 for men with a bachelor’s degree. For women, it was $51,316 and $41,681, respectively.

Educational programs are a catalyst for promotions and raises in most careers. They also help people jump between departments as they work their way up the corporate ladder.

An added degree helped Cybelle Chamas take a leap in responsibility. She worked at a desk job in business development before enrolling in Florida International University’s executive MBA program. After graduating in 2004, she negotiated a 20 percent raise at her new job as sales manager for Lucent Technologies’ Latin American region.

“The MBA places you in a different bracket of the company in the way they compensate you and the way they see you,” said Chamas, who works in Lucent’s Miramar office.

Educational attainment on a resume can be the difference in landing that managerial or executive job and being passed over by someone with similar experience coupled with an advanced degree, said Romayne Berry, senior VP in human resources firm Right Management’s Fort Lauderdale office. She consults executive- and VP-level employees on their career choices.

Plus, Berry credited the MBA program at Florida Atlantic University for furthering her own career. Her undergraduate degree was in Russian.

Think like a manager

MBA programs teach people who are specialized in departments how to think like company managers. Berry said. Unless it’s an Ivy League program, it doesn’t matter what university the MBA comes from. Most people choose the program most convenient for them and sometimes that means going online. That’s fine, Berry said, as long as you review the course material to make sure they’re teaching what you want to know.

Someone who manages a human resources or marketing department could use the executive MBA program to learn about the other aspects of the business, said Sarah Perez, the director for that program at FIU.

“Instead of just learning how to calculate the numbers, you’ll learn how to make decisions from those numbers,” Perez said.

The program also teaches leadership skills and public speaking, a skill quite valuable for companies that use the CEO as their public mouthpiece. While workers view degree programs as paths to career growth.
Workforce agencies in South Florida

Services include individual career counseling with educational training grants and skill training for companies’ existing employees supported by grants.

South Florida Workforce (Miami-Dade and Monroe)
- **Phone**: (305) 594-7615
- **WorkForceOne (Broward)**
- **Web site**: www.wf1broward.com
- **Phone**: (954) 535-2300

Palm Beach County Workforce Alliance
- **Web site**: www.pbcalliance.com
- **Phone**: (561) 340-1062

For people who aren’t sure what direction to go for career advancement, county workforce agencies are inexpensive resources that can put people on the right academic track. These agencies also help companies bring in training programs to upgrade their employees’ skills. When someone comes the Palm Beach County Workforce Alliance for career help, they are given a skills assessment and a counselor determines what training they would need to qualify for their desired job, said Workforce Alliance CEO Kathy Schmidt. There are 40 vendors for the degree and training programs. The most commonly used is Palm Beach Community College, where Workforce Alliance often picks up full tuition for the unemployed. More expensive programs are partially covered. If someone has the experience but is a bit rusty in their job interviewing skills, Workforce Alliance has a professional placement network to get them up to speed.

Karen West worked in retail for 20 years but left the field for a few years to pursue other interests. Brushing up on her job hunting at Workforce Alliance seminars and networking meetings helped her land a job managing sales at the new Lay-Z-Boy Furniture Galleries store in the Mall at Wellington Green. The agency’s programs aren’t only for unemployed workers. Its most popular program this year has been workforce training for grants, Schmidt said. Companies that want to teach employees new skills, whether managerial or how to operate a new computer system, can use Workforce Alliance to find the right program. The agency usually provides a 50 percent match for training cost and the company can count salaries and the cost of its facilities (if the classes are held there) toward its share.

Some industries even have specialty programs. Construction companies can receive up to $2,500 per employee to teach them how to operate heavy machinery through Rebuild Florida. People with science or math degrees who want to get into the biotech industry can take a certificate program at FAU funded by a $2 million federal grant Workforce Alliance received.

"Any business can show us they have the need for a skills upgrade," Schmidt said. "It allows businesses to be more competitive and have greater opportunity for promotions of their employees."

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