

Workplace Program Enhances Orchard Operation and Personal Lives

With some 2,600 regular employees and a total seasonal workforce of more than 11,000, Bear Creek Corporation (BCC) is the largest employer in Southern Oregon, where it was founded as a family business in the early 1900s. People throughout the nation have enjoyed its Harry and David brand products for decades. All of the company's operations are guided by its philosophy, "to benefit customers, employees, shareholders and the community through honest relationships and responsible actions." One of its strategic principles is, "Everything begins with people."

As a major division of this vertically integrated firm, Bear Creek Orchards (BCO) depends on the good work of its nearly 100 year-round and 500 seasonal employees, including the 38 field staff members who have first-line supervisory responsibilities. In early 2001, BCO invested in these key employees through a program to develop job-related skills in four areas: English, mathematics, horticulture, and computer use.

While the supervisors had been performing well, BCO orchard managers and human resource specialists saw that administrative processes could be streamlined, economy and safety of pesticide use improved, and advancement paths opened if these employees had stronger basic skills. After consulting with orchard managers and the supervisors to assess needs, the human resources staff planned Bear Creek's "Workplace Learning Program" in partnership with the local community college and with partial funding from the U.S. Department of Labor.

The 36 supervisory employees who took part in the program were all native Spanish-speakers, and they were paid for the 75 hours of class time, which spread over ten weeks. Participants had an average 6 years of prior schooling and had worked at BCO an average of 10 years. They were divided into beginning, intermediate, and advanced groups based on standardized skill tests.

Classroom instruction included one or more sessions every week on horticulture, vocabulary, reading comprehension, conversation, grammar, writing, mathematics, general computer skills, and specific computer applications. Guidance was provided throughout the program on how to use study supplies, reference books and periodicals, and community college facilities.

At the end of the learning program, participants' skills were reassessed and the program was evaluated on four levels: participant satisfaction, learning, behavior change on the job, and dollar return on investment for the company. Significant gains were identified at every level.



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Average indexes of participant satisfaction on several dimensions of program content and effect, using a scale of 1 (low) to 5 (high), ranged from 4.72 to 4.97. Average test scores in both math and reading increased by 5 points, a two-thirds greater gain than typical from basic skill courses. The shares of scores at the beginner level decreased and at the advanced level increased. And managers' assessments of the supervisors' on-the-job competence in reading, writing English communication, math, and computer use all leaped.

Pay and benefits for the supervisors during their time in class amounted to nearly \$40,000. Although participants spent 7 1/2 hours per week away from their orchard work sites, managers pitched in to cover, and no additional staff had to be hired to maintain normal operations. First-year savings attributable to the program were estimated at more than \$25,000, and BCO figures that its net gain from the investment was positive and growing by the middle of the second year.

Impacts of the program have been felt most directly in administrative functions at the main and field offices. Savings are expected to grow as more supervisors come to use computers for record keeping and communication, improving their speed and accuracy in various tasks. Completion of more forms, such as vehicle and work time reports, has undergone transition to electronic mode, thus speeding information flow, saving staff time in the main office, and reducing needs for follow-up clarification. Some supervisors have taken on new administrative duties, freeing orchard managers to attend to other work. Other savings have been realized from improved comprehension of pesticide labels and "mixing math," better direct communication with monolingual English speakers throughout the company, and increased employee confidence, morale, and general satisfaction.

The learning program also has contributed to the business as well as supervisors' personal lives in unanticipated ways. As of three months after the program concluded: 75% of participants had enrolled in ongoing English or GED classes, 25% had purchased home computers, three had purchased homes, two had passed citizenship exams, one had passed the Oregon license exam for private applicators of pesticides, many had reported more involvement with their children's education, and many have requested more information about and referrals to educational opportunities.

Beyond its specific benefits, this pilot program has brought into sharper focus for both the company and employees the gains that can be realized from structured learning at the workplace. In the words of one participant, "... I learned, and I'd like the classes to happen again with more time, because 10 weeks isn't enough to learn everything that we need. Thank you."