



Highline Community College (HCC) Distance Learning Programs

Learning Modules: Personal Qualities and Customer Care

Context

Highline Community College (HCC) regularly consults with and provides training for employers. A consistent concern of these customers has been the lack of basic soft skills in applicants. Often this is expressed by a widely echoed statement of frustration: “Why do you keep sending me people who don’t have the skills we need.”

In researching this broad area, HCC discovered that its State’s Chamber of Commerce, the Association of Washington Business – AWB – had similar concerns. They selected Learning Resources, Inc. (LRI) as the provider of choice for soft skills assessment. AWB is making the on-line, video-simulation soft skills assessment program, Workforce Readiness Skills (WRS), available to employers and workforce developers in WA. WRS is comprised of two modules, Personal Qualities and Customer Care. WRS was developed in partnership with The Johns Hopkins University and the SCANS Commission’s Executive Director, Dr. Arnold Packer.

Many within states’ educational systems recognize that soft skills are missing. However, the problem is often seen as more of an attitude problem than as a skill deficiency. A central question arises as to “how” to best teach and develop learners’ soft skills, skills that range from responsibility, self-management, customer service and many others. These competencies are widely valued by education, but they are rarely objectively measured and they are seldom an explicit part of academic or technical curricula. The old cliché, what is measured is taught, seems especially true in this area.

Many educators within educational and workforce development institutions do not have experience in building soft skills. HCC identified the need for a structure – a curriculum - to support faculty and trainers seeking to teach and develop soft skills. LRI’s nationally recognized assessment technology and the WRS program served a guide to which competencies employers required of entry-level workers. The WRS assessment program provides a pre-assessment of learners’ strengths and developmental needs. Post-assessment identifies this programs’ effectiveness at soft skills development, so the continuous program improvement is integral to this curriculum.

The college enlisted a team of experts to develop an online curriculum that will support faculty and trainers around the state who seek to offer - and achieve - soft skills development. The modular curriculum is designed to serve as either a self-directed or blended approach to understanding and developing fundamental employability skills.

The program

Participants in the WRS program pre-assess to determine their soft skills strengths and developmental needs. This is followed by individual lessons on each skill set; these are delivered over the Internet and followed by a post assessment. HCC's curriculum was created with the knowledge that the first step in soft skill building is recognition of deficiencies, and awareness of the knowledge and skill sets that are required. The content described below provides these first steps. HCC and LRI recognize that reinforcement is needed over time for learners and for incumbent workers to effect behavioral change and expectations.

Structure and Outline

Both the Customer Care and Personal Qualities Workforce Readiness Training Modules are designed to serve as a self-directed, modular approach to learning fundamental employability skills.

Upon entering the program's learning management system, the learner is expected to take LRI's Workforce Readiness Assessment, completing either or both modules (Personal Qualities and/or Customer Care). Once the learner completes the video assessment, a feedback report will reveal the person's areas of strength and where specific soft skills development is needed. The learner will then embark on a series of learning modules, based on key themes included in the assessment modules.

The Customer Care Modules extract and address the key themes from LRI's Workforce Readiness Assessment program as follows:

- Module 1: Nonverbal Communication: What You Don't Say Says So Much
- Module 2: "What Did You Say?": Improving Your Listening Skills
- Module 3: "Which Way Should I Go?": Improving Your Decision-Making Skills
- Module 4: "How Do I?" "How Do You" "What's Next?": How to Ask Effective Questions
- Module 5: It's Time For A Good Talk: Improving Your Verbal Communication
- Module 6: Fighting the Good Fight: Conflict Management
- Module 7: "I'm Only Trying to Help.": Dealing with Difficult Customers
- Module 8: Customer Service at a Distance: Improving Your Telephone and E-mail Skills

The Personal Qualities Modules extract key themes from LRI's Personal Qualities Assessment as follows:

- Module 1: "The Whole Truth": Enhancing Your Integrity
- Module 2: "Yes, that IS my job!": Strengthening Responsibility
- Module 3: "I Like Me!": Enhancing Your Self-Esteem
- Module 4: "I am the boss of me": Enhancing Your Self-Management
- Module 5: "I'm a people person": Enhancing Your Sociability

Pedagogy

The modules are based a specific learning theory, specifically educational researchers' Caine and Caine's theory of brain-based learning and "immersion." Immersed learning carries the individual through a hierarchical progression of cognitive identification and performance-based applications. For the modules, the immersed learning proceeds in the following example:

Module 1: Nonverbal Communication: What You Don't Say Says So Much

Part 1: Watch and Read About It

The participant will watch a less than 7-minute PowerPoint presentation, voiced over with Camtasia software that presents:

- a. how the topic relates to an area of LRI's assessment;
- b. basic theories behind nonverbal communication; and,
- c. examples of how the theories relate to the real workforce; and,
- d. tips for improvement

Part 2: Now Write About It

The participant will watch a less than 2-minute video clip of an actual interaction between two co-workers. An open-ended, reflective question will trigger the learner to analyze the clip, based on what the cognitive material in the PowerPoint presentation, and then interpret that material in his/her own words.

Part 3: Now Practice It

The participant will respond to five multiple choice questions that focus on both rote terminology and scenarios, based on both the cognitive and the application sections.

When the learner has completed all of the modules, the LRI Workforce Readiness Assessment should be repeated. The goal is for the learner to make more work-related soft skill decisions and that are better-aligned with how employers' most effective workers act on- the-job. A measure of improved performance would be that the competencies or soft skills (identified on the assessment or Feedback Report as) needing development will reduce in number.

Implementation Options

The development team's goal was to design a program that was available when and where needed. The curriculum is designed to be completed at the pace most beneficial to the individual, learning organization or company. The program is built so that a person can work through the training without a faculty, mentor or coach and receive their assessment scores and or soft skills credential to present to an employer. Because the learning platform is designed for education, it allows this self paced approach without losing the teaching and learning aspect.

Research shows that many traditionally structured programs are also in need of an infusion of soft skill content. For this reason, the program was developed so that it could serve two distinct format needs, one for individuals, industry, and state programs, and one for the Community College or other learning system.

While the program can be used in a self-instructional fashion, many learning systems, we believe, will elect to use the program as a soft skills curriculum component within a more traditional, instructor-led and blended academic or career class.

LRI provides those who use this curriculum with a discussion resource for faculty and trainers to further support in-class/in-training soft skill understanding and development. Faculty, teachers or trainers do not have to be experts at soft skill training. Trainers within a company can also use this curriculum and the discussion resources in their incumbent worker development training.

Program Length

At this time, most of our use of this program has been within the Washington Community College system. We are not sure, therefore, how long it will take other groups of learners to complete the program independently, or in a blended learning delivery of instruction. We are enlisting volunteers and groups of learners from many levels to work through this program and provide feedback.

For additional information about this distance learning-delivered soft skills curriculum, please contact:

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