

PART **7**

**FURTHER EDUCATION
AND LIFELONG
LEARNING**

CHAPTER 45

HOW TO GET AN EDUCATION FROM YOUR COMPANY

From the previous chapters one can see that higher education is an absolute must for career development. However, obtaining this is not a simple undertaking, nor does it guarantee career advancement. You must make absolutely sure that the large amount of time you will be investing in furthering your education will pay off. This chapter identifies how to use and get the most from your company's educational system. Helpful guidelines are discussed to ensure that the type of further education you choose will be appreciated by your company and will result in career advancement. Choosing the correct type of further education for you benefits everyone.

WHY FURTHER EDUCATION IS A WIN-WIN SITUATION

Most companies gladly support more education for their employees and there are several reasons for this. First, an employee who has received additional education is often exposed to new and improved methods. These new methods may allow them to solve problems more quickly and easily. Applying these new methods to the job can result in cost savings for the company or better products. The cost savings can be significant and easily pay back the employer's educational costs. Education usually has a good return on investment for the company. Second, educational expenses can be recouped by the company since they are tax deductible.

A third reason companies support further education is shared knowledge. Oftentimes, a company will send one employee to a class. When the employee returns they must share with their fellow employees the new

knowledge they have gained. In turn, the company can effectively educate many employees through the training of only one person.

Another reason companies support employees returning for further education is the contacts the student can make at the classes (Figure 45-1). Often classes offered at technical symposiums are attended by people with similar backgrounds looking for solutions to their problems. Your classmates may even be customers or competitors. By attending technical symposiums and making contacts, an employee may learn what the competition is doing or encounter future customers.

Finally, most large multimillion-dollar engineering contracts require a company to have university professors on staff acting in an advisory role. These consulting professors provide the high level technical expertise often required to successfully complete the project. Therefore, sending an employee to take courses and establish one or more contacts while at the university is extremely important to the company.

For all these reasons companies gladly offer further education or tuition reimbursement plans for their employees. Both the company and the employee will benefit.

► **Career Tip.** Further education is a win-win situation. You win and the company wins!



FIGURE 45-1 Further education is a win-win situation.

Your first challenge once you have decided to return for further education is to find out how your company's tuition reimbursement plan works. The best starting point in answering this question is your supervisor. Contact your supervisor and discuss your ideas with them on returning for further education. Watch for their reaction. If they think it is a good idea, you now have one of the most important people in the company supporting you. If they object to you returning, find out why. Maybe their department has no budget for you. In this case, don't panic; try to get them to budget for your education in the next planning cycle. They may also say no because the timing is bad and they need you at work. If this is the case, discuss with them when the timing would be better and start your plans there. Make sure they know you will not let them down while you are returning for your education.

Your supervisor may object for still another reason—insecurity. They may feel threatened by your returning to school. If this is the case, go slowly. Your supervisor will probably not tell you this directly, but continue to make up a thousand and one excuses why you cannot take the classes. If you sense this is the case, proceed cautiously. This is a major roadblock. Give your supervisor time to adjust to the idea. Maybe this is what they need. You might also point out that by giving you the opportunity to pursue further education, they are really developing your career and that is part of the supervisor's job. Developing you as a junior employee is part of a supervisor's job and they will look good doing so. It is considered a feather in their cap. If none of this works you should consider a department move. It would be very difficult without support from your supervisor while you are attending school.

As difficult as it may sound, you may have to change supervisors or even departments. If you should change supervisors, search out a supervisor who will support you with encouragement and funding. In any case, just remember:

► **Career Tip.** Do not take no for an answer about further education. It's your career!

Often your supervisor may not be up on all the latest rules and regulations regarding your company's tuition reimbursement program. Your next contact should be Human Resources or Personnel department. The Human Resources department is usually responsible for administering the employee tuition reimbursement program. Meet with Human Resources as soon as you can and discuss the details of your company's plan. Learn everything you can about the program. Here is a sample list of the things you might inquire about.

1. Which employees qualify for the program? Do I qualify?
2. Is there a limit on tuition reimbursement costs? Do they cover tuition, books, travel, etc?

3. Am I required to pay for classes in advance? What conditions must I meet to qualify for reimbursement?
4. What courses and majors apply for tuition reimbursement?
5. Are there restrictions on the universities or schools I can attend?

► **Career Tip.** While you are at the Human Resources department make sure you get the names of coworkers who are also using, or have used, the program. Contact these people immediately and meet with them.

The company cafeteria during lunch is a very good place to do this. Meet with as many people as possible and discuss their experiences. Any helpful direction or shortcuts they have learned could save you hours later on. By contacting other people who have used the program you may find someone who is returning for the same courses you plan on taking. Their help could be valuable in setting up your program, or helping you with classes they have already completed. These contacts within the company allow you to draw upon them for support during tough times.

Normally, the company tuition reimbursement program requires the completion of several forms. These forms will require information about the courses, expenses, and explanations of how the courses relate to your work. (Courses must be related to your work in order for the company to claim the expense as tax deductible.) Forms can scare people away from ever getting started. Don't let them intimidate you. In fact, if you handle the situation correctly, filling out the forms and getting approval can actually help advance your career.

The tuition reimbursement forms will usually require several levels of management to sign and approve. The reason for this is to make sure that management is aware of the tuition costs that they, or you, will be accruing and be able to budget for them. Don't ask anyone to get your forms approved for you. Do it yourself by scheduling time for a one-on-one meeting with each manager who must sign. This gives you an excellent opportunity to meet your managers who will most likely be the same people that approve your raises and promotions.

► **Career Tip.** One-on-one meetings with your manager to discuss your further education are a great career move.

A one-on-one meeting with the managers who must approve your forms is an excellent way to get visibility. Go to these meetings well-prepared and ready to discuss your further education: which courses you are planning to take and the benefits you see coming from the courses. Ask them if they have taken any similar courses or you might also inquire who the manager recommends you should contact when you need help.

If you are required to obtain the signature and approval of upper management, use the time wisely. Be sure to point out all the help your supervisor has been, how the class will benefit the company, how you plan on sharing with others in the company, and what you will learn. Remember, after each person has signed and given their approval, shake their hand and thank them. They, too, will be investing a significant amount of money in your education, and they deserve a “thank you” for it.

DIFFERENT TYPES OF CONTINUING EDUCATION (PROS AND CONS)

Choosing the best type of continuing education for you will depend upon your long-term career goals. There are various forms and types of education that you can pursue. Advanced degree programs leading to a master’s or PhD are offered through most major universities in the United States. The starting point is contacting your local university and requesting their extension or night school programs. Programs usually exist for advanced degree programs in both engineering and business.

Another avenue available to receive graduate level education is through remote courses. Most universities use net meeting or video feeds to transmit their courses throughout the local area and even across the country.

► **Career Tip.** Check with your company to see if they have a remote hookup available to receive classes. This is an excellent way to take graduate courses.

Further noncredited education is available through seminars offered by experts throughout the country at various times during the year. The best sources for finding out what types of seminars are being offered are the company library and trade journals. These seminars are usually intense week-long seminars taught by experts from universities or industry. Their purpose is to provide the student with the opportunity to quickly “come up to speed” on the latest technological advances.

Another noncredited method of obtaining further education is by attending symposiums offered by the various engineering or business societies. By joining an engineering society, you will automatically be sent information about upcoming symposiums and training seminars. These symposiums provide excellent reviews of fundamentals as well as knowledge on the breakthroughs. They offer the opportunity for you to meet with people of a similar background and exchange ideas. You can find out what other people across the nation are doing to solve problems. They also provide a very good means for new job contacts. During these symposiums, many companies post their job openings. You can quickly compare what other people are making

and which companies are growing and expanding. This is an excellent means to find out what other career opportunities are available for you.

Finally, some companies offer in-house training or courses given by experts from within the company. This training usually consists of short courses taught at lunch time or after-hours. Contact your supervisor or Human Resources department to find out if any internal courses are planned. Instructors of in-house courses make excellent contacts to have within the company. There is no better way to meet the company's experts than in a non-threatening one-on-one after-hours course. After taking the course, these in-house experts become valuable resources for you to call upon in times of trouble. They also become another vote of confidence for you. When engineering teams are being staffed, management often calls upon their experts to make recommendations for staffing the new, advanced engineering projects. If the expert has already met you in their class and knows your ambition and capabilities, it is highly likely that they will vote in your favor.

► **Career Tip.** If you are a company-recognized expert give a class in your area of expertise!

The best courses for in-house training are those that teach you how to use your company's resources to get the job done quicker, easier, and hopefully, with higher quality. Good examples of these courses are those in computer training. They may include courses in such things as training on spreadsheets, email, computer-aided design (CAD), computer-aided manufacturing (CAM), and computer-aided engineering (CAE).

Another excellent idea is to participate in company "Brown Bags." Brown bag meetings refer to lunch time meetings where people gather to discuss and learn, and exchange ideas while eating their lunch. Oftentimes, everyone brings their brown bag lunch hence, where the name came from. These informal meetings can serve a multitude of purposes. The Brown Bags can set up a lecture series with guest speakers. Usually, a department will organize brown bag meetings to have guests who speak about subjects important to the group. They can also be used to help train people in a new process or tool. I organized brown bag meetings so I could learn about other parts of the company. I had guest speakers from other groups and divisions come and present what they were doing. It was a great educational experience as well as an excellent means to network. The skills I learned in arranging the brown bags carried over into my own work meetings and helped me significantly enhance my ability to organize and conduct meetings.

In each area of further education you choose, each type has advantages and disadvantages of which you must be aware. First, all further education is not a guarantee of career advancement. It only becomes a guarantee of advancement when it is combined with excellent job performance. Obtaining further education and performing poorly on the job is of no benefit.

► **Career Tip.** Further education is a basic building block to career advancement. Take advantage of the opportunity!

Second, further education qualifies you for higher level job assignments. If the job assignments are not available in the company at the moment you complete your degree, you may be stuck in the same job as before. Or you may have to change departments or even companies to receive the advancement you deserve.

Third, you may appear to the group you are working in as the same old person. They may give you the attitude of “No Big Deal.” This can be very discouraging, so you need to recognize it and deal with it appropriately. Finally, coworkers may be jealous as you finally complete the degree and management is giving you more attention. Diplomacy and tact is required on your part when this starts happening.

Returning to night school at a university for a credited degree has its advantages and disadvantages. Your first advantage is better career opportunities at your present position. If in the future you change jobs, the degree has the advantage of being recognized by other companies. The degree stays with you each time you change employment. The disadvantage is that you often have to travel great distances and attend classes at night. Returning for a degree or certificate from a university is also a multiyear commitment, which can be difficult. Most people lose interest or have other commitments (i.e., family and children) that interfere.

Remote or online courses offer you a chance to attend classes from various universities around the country that you might not normally get the chance to attend. In addition, webinars, remote, satellite, and Internet courses may have a limited selection and may not lead to a degree. However, they can still be of benefit to you. Again, evaluate your specific education goals.

Taking after-hours courses offered by the company allows you to meet the technical experts in the company on a one-on-one basis. In addition, you may meet other coworkers in the company who are probably working on problems similar to yours. This is a great way to network in the company. After-hours company-sponsored courses are not usually accredited or recognized by universities. Therefore, they do not lead to a degree and their value quickly diminishes once you leave the company.

For successful career development you will probably use all of the above-mentioned forms of further education at some time in your career. The key is to balance the type of education you choose with your career objectives. If you aspire to become CEO of the company, then attending night school at an accredited university for an advanced degree is what you must do. If you wish only to update your technical background, courses offered at symposiums are your best bet. Remember, further education doesn't hurt and it always serves to broaden a person's capability.

► **Career Tip.** The broader your background, and the more knowledgeable you are, the better the chance for career advancement and job security.

After exploring the opportunities for further education, you may find people who are still hesitant. People often use the excuse of “I just don’t know.” In response to this, I remind people of the days when they were attending college, struggling to make it through one class after another. In particular, I remind them of the high costs, no medical benefits, no vacation pay, little help from others, and the uncertainty about getting a job when they finish. I ask them if I could show them a way to go to college and, at the same time, receive a full salary, paid tuition, full medical benefits, and a paid vacation would they be interested? Not only that, but if they had difficulties with a class, resources exist in the company to help and fellow workers who have taken the class may be able to assist you. And when they completed the program they would have a greater chance of a raise or promotion, would they be interested? I also mention that I had supervisors pay for my books, mileage, and parking fees since the class directly related to my work at the time. These are all benefits a company tuition plan offers. Visit with your department manager and find out what is available at your present company.

LEVERAGING FURTHER EDUCATION FOR CAREER ADVANCEMENT

Many engineers return to school for an advanced degree in the hopes that when they receive the degree they will also get promoted by their company. The truth of the matter is, most often the engineer is not immediately promoted and it may take years before it happens. Engineers often become discouraged and leave the company in hopes of better opportunities.

I have participated in several committees that were assigned to study this problem and here is what we found. The engineers returned for an advanced degree but rarely showed any evidence of their growth at work. They continued to perform their work day after day, and the manager never saw any real improvement or benefit from the schooling. The people around the engineer never saw any changes, so everyone considered that it’s no big deal. The problem was basically, the engineers never took the time to show people all they were studying and the benefits to their group.

If you decide to return to school, you must be proactive in sharing what you are learning with your manager and others around you. You must market yourself as growing and acquiring knowledge. DO NOT wait until you complete the degree before you start this activity; then it is too late. Sharing what you have learned should be something you do after each course.

Since it takes almost a year to get promoted, you should start marketing yourself heavily about one year before you complete the degree. Also, you should be having career discussions with your supervisor about what

assignments you will be handling once you have completed your degree. Your rationale for this is that, with your advanced degree, you will be much more capable of taking on more challenging and leading assignments. Naturally all this is setting the stage for your eventual promotion. In my experience, engineers who have done this advance marketing of themselves usually ended up getting promoted before or at the time they completed their program and received the degree.

► **Career Tip.** Having career discussions with your manager while working toward an advanced degree is a good career move. This will ensure a promotion will follow your completion of the degree program.

SUMMARY

In summary, overcoming the educational barriers in your company is a must for career advancement. The best way to hurdle the educational barriers is to use your company's tuition reimbursement. Continuing education is a win situation for you and a win situation for your company. The starting place to return for further education is your supervisor or Human Resources department. You must map out an educational plan that best fits your career objectives. Further education can be obtained through night schools at your local university or community college, symposiums offered by engineering societies, or company-sponsored courses. Each type of continuing education has its advantages as well as its disadvantages.

Have you identified any career actions you want to take as a result of reading this chapter? If so, please make sure to capture these ideas before you forget by recording them in the notes section at the back of the book.

ASSIGNMENTS AND DISCUSSION TOPICS

- 1 What departments in your company have the funding for further education?
- 2 Identify others in the company who have returned for further education and meet with them.
- 3 What type of further education is best for you?
- 4 Which universities are located close by and what courses do they offer?
- 5 Are online courses a viable option to taking courses at your company?
- 6 Does your company offer any internal after-hours courses?