Transfer to Practice:
Business Solutions Professional Certification Training Program

Julie Brockman, John Dirks, Kang Li, and Michael Polzin

Abstract: A qualitative method was used to evaluate the effectiveness of the Business Solutions Professional Certification Training Program. Evidence indicates that “deep learning” has commonly occurred among participants who applied learned knowledge and skills to their practice with noticeable effects on individual, organizational, and inter-organizational levels. The curriculum and pedagogy of the program tailored to participants as adult learners has contributed to its effectiveness.

Introduction

The Business Solutions Professional (BSP) Certification Training Program was developed and is being delivered through a partnership between South Central Michigan Works! and Michigan State University’s School of Human Resources and Labor Relations. The program is funded by Michigan’s Department of Energy, Labor and Economic Growth as part of Michigan’s 21st Century Initiative created in 2006 under the leadership of Michigan’s Governor, Jennifer Granholm. The overarching purpose of this initiative was to build a strong regional workforce development strategy. The 21st Century Initiative has three goals which are to 1) prevent Michigan’s manufacturing industries and jobs from leaving the state by adopting a lay-off aversion strategy, 2) support community-led efforts to address plant closings and lay-offs through the development of strategies that link workforce and economic development, and 3) create regional workforce development teams to implement these strategies and make a successful transition to new markets, new jobs, and new work skills.

The BSP approach is an innovative response to the changing needs of Michigan’s businesses and economy that requires a fundamental shift in the ways in which workforce development practitioners perceive and organize their work. BSP training fosters acquisition of new knowledge and skills among workforce practitioners to help them make the paradigm shift in their work and practice. In addition to workforce development professionals, the BSP Program also enrolls professionals from economic development, post-secondary education, non-profit organizations, and other community partners to meet the demands of the 21st Century Initiative.

The BSP approach emphasizes applying a business-focused, demand-driven collaborative process to help Michigan businesses retain current workers, create jobs, and operate competitively in a global market and to attract new business. Participants learn the importance of networking to develop strong relationships with businesses as well as with those who have access to resources or assets that businesses need to survive and thrive. Participants learn how to create ad hoc as well as on-going partnerships with those from other domains in order to provide comprehensive assistance to businesses. The Program consists of classroom training and fieldwork. The classroom training, which includes four two-day class sessions that are spaced over a four-month period, provides the opportunity to acquire the knowledge and skills required to apply a demand-driven, business-focused approach. Fieldwork allows the participants to apply their knowledge of the BSP Process to businesses in their region and to demonstrate their ability.
to form productive employer relationships and to collaborate with partners to increase the value of assets to the business.

The BSP Certification Training Program Evaluation

Due to the large investment the State of Michigan is bestowing upon this Program, evaluation of its effectiveness is important to assess. Accordingly, a systematic evaluation design has been adopted that incorporates five levels of evaluation: participation, satisfaction, learning, application, and impact (Colbeck in Connelly & Millar, 2006). “Each level of impact is related to the preceding one, and the effort needed to gather convincing evidence increases with each level.” (p. 53).

One of the five evaluation components assessed how BSP Program participants transfer the knowledge and skills from the formal environment of the training to their everyday practice in workforce development. Transfer of learning to practice signifies what is referred to as “deep learning”, a kind of learning that “depends upon the combination of both knowing and doing” (Delahaye, 2005.) Even though this “deep learning” is highly desirable, its realization is oftentimes not guaranteed in professional training programs. Therefore, we need to collect research data to see if “deep learning” has taken place in the BSP Training Program through a specific curriculum and training pedagogy designed to foster such learning and transfer, and to foster fundamental shifts in the practitioners’ perspective on workforce development.

Research Method

This study employed a qualitative, interpretive design using the critical incident technique as the central research method. 15 BSP Program attendees participated in one-hour semi-structured interviews approximately six months following participants’ completion of the BSP Program. The semi-structured interview style allows the space for spontaneity while staying focused on addressing research questions (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). Interviews were audio-taped, transcribed, and analyzed thematically. Two members of the research team engaged in gathering interview data in the field, exchanged insights, and provided feedback for each other in order to adapt and refine research to accommodate the evolving nature of this qualitative study (Creswell, 2007). By end of year 2010, fifteen more participants will be interviewed.

Three layers of coding were utilized in the process of data analysis, including open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). They were used to develop categories of information, interconnecting the categories and identifying themes pertaining to “deep learning”, and situating and re-contextualizing themes within participants’ stories to understand participants “deep learning” experiences. The researchers used constant comparison method in developing categorization and analyzing data (Creswell, 2007), meeting regularly to draw upon our collective knowledge and research expertise. This is an effective way of triangulating data for the purpose of reducing the effects of individual subjectivity and to increase research creditability and trustworthiness (Arminio & Hultgren, 2002; Creswell).

Research Findings

The findings in this paper are based on 15 critical incident interviews. Evidence from the interview data suggests that “deep learning” has commonly occurred among participants who
completed the BSP Training Program. Most participants had cognitive, affective, and personal gains as result of the BSP Training. They also applied learned knowledge and skills in their workplace with noticeable effects that are manifested on individual, organizational, and inter-organizational levels. For the purpose of clarity, we have organized our findings into three main categories: 1) transfer to individual practice, 2) organizational effects and 3) inter-organizational effects.

**Transfer to Individual Practice**

The evidence from participant interviews suggests that the impacts on workforce development individuals and their practice are significant and multifaceted. The effects resulting from the BSP Training Program include participants’ expanded awareness, increased skills and confidence, positive change in work practices, change in perception in many aspects, and heightened job satisfaction.

First, the BSP training has increased participants’ awareness of services they could provide and resources they could use. This new awareness has excited and empowered them, as indicated by one participant who commented, “Now, we're talking about solutions. We're talking about win-win situation. We're talking about this isn't the only thing that we can offer.” In addition, increased awareness of available resources and services has also enabled participants to act with more assurance and confidence when they serve their clients.

Second, participants not only learned technical skills such as fact finding, the ability to ask critical questions, asset mapping, and ability to deal with conflicts, but also learned analytical problem-solving skills and abilities such as thinking systematically and creatively in identifying business needs and finding win-win solutions. One participant commented, So again, the whole asset mapping thing that we did in the class came into play. Like oh, well, this is, you know, contact this person and that person. That kind of thing. And that was just right there on the spot. So just demonstrating that yeah, maybe it's not in your particular lane but you can reach out and help the business accomplish what they need to accomplish.

Third, BSP training provided a streamlined approach for participants to follow, enabling them to alter their work procedures and process, shift the focus of their work and services, and transform their work through using network and referral system that has been established through the training. As a result, participants have started to operate in a much higher level to increase effectiveness and efficiency in their work.

Fourth, BSP training has influenced participants’ perceptions about self-efficacy, perceptions on the roles they assume, the duties they perform, their organization, and the relationship between their organization and their partners’. For example, some participants began to see their roles as a liaison between workforce development and business community, or as information conduit that gathers and disseminates information among various partners, or as a consultant helping business to solve the problems they face. One participant commented: “my job isn't just job postings and resume searches. I need to help these employers in whatever I can.” Another participant indicated on how different it is when she assumes the role of a consultant instead of service provider: “as a consultant of BSP, you can only do what your customer or client allows you to do.” Yet another participant feels she is relieved from the burden of trying to be expert of everything, “I don't need to be an expert in their field. I just need to know where to direct.”
Finally, BSP training has triggered positive feelings and increased job satisfaction for participants. They feel that they are an important part of something that is meaningful and has great potential to increase the quality of life for their community. One participant described it as an excitement, “I think [people] are excited to be a part of something that has great intentions and great possibility [i.e., BSP approach]”. Another participant derived meaning and inspiration from work that goes beyond the work itself and spoke with a sense of pride,

This training has given us a different perspective of our work, that we really are major players in the quality of life, and that employment really is critical to quality of life; and that is our specialty. We really are at the center of any economic development growth plan for any community.

Organizational effects

BSP training has influenced changes within participants’ organizations, strengthening the workforce development system. As one participant pointed out, “we are a stronger team. Our workforce development system is better prepared, better able to work with the companies.” In addition, the BSP training has provided business service teams with helpful guides and useful tools, changed the focus of work to more employer-focused and service-oriented, developed new frameworks and formalized processes, formed new guiding principles and organizational norms, resulted in close in-team collaboration and increased overall work capacity of service teams.

For example, in some locations, BSP training triggered the formation of BSP teams in order to be more employer-focused and service-oriented. As one participant testified, “We probably wouldn't have formed a business services team if we didn't have the training.” In some other locations, differences have also been made in how work is done within existing teams through the streamlined BSP five-step approach. One participant commented, “From the class, we had teams of people going out to companies, operating under the five-step approach and preparing for outreach in a completely different way.” Another participant commented on the usefulness of BSP training for business services team,

Business solutions training really helped out, in helping us and guiding us in what we're doing… Overall, I think we’ve learned as our team has how we can better offer services and what we can add to our services…and the business services team is using the curriculum that was taught in class. We're trying to pull different pieces from it.

Moreover, BSP training has also led to changes in organizational image, structure, work flow, information sharing, and collaboration within workforce development system. Due to the emphasis put on business service, some agencies change their organizational structure accordingly. Some organizations re-structured and re-arranged resources to form business service team. One participant commented, “So what I did … I’ve got two people at each center that are the client contact people. The ones that really are head of the business service team. Then there's maybe three or four at each center that are on the team.” According to participants, BSP training has gradually changed the image of Michigan Works that employers and other partners held in some places. One participant described the change, “they thought Michigan Works just dealt with homeless, welfare, you know, people that didn't wanta work.” “and now, we have companies who are looking at us as, you know, they're looking at us differently.” And “our image is starting to change now. I really feel that. You know, that it is. So we're getting calls from economic development people and we're learning more about what they do.”
Inter-organizational effects

Due to the strong emphasis on partnering with other service organizations in BSP training, participants have a new understanding of partnership and its significance, becoming more willing and proactive to work with other service providers, agencies, and organizations to build partnerships. Partnerships have been used in many ways to increase service capacity for BSPs to serve the business community, which includes sharing information among partners, making referrals for each other, seeking input from other partners, and formalizing working relationship among partners to push inter-organizational collaboration to a higher level.

One participant commented on the increased service capacity through working collaboratively with partner organizations. It is quicker and more effective to identify employer’s needs and respond to these needs when information is collected through the “antennas” of all partners and shared across board.

We (are) also in partnership with some of our other departments like the planning and development department and our Detroit Economic Growth Corporation, those guys, we have bolstered our partnerships up with those guys, as well as the MEDC (Michigan Economic Development Corporation) and even Wayne County Community College. In which if they run into a situation with a business where a business may be in a little trouble or they may have some needs, you know, that we might be able to help them with, they immediately alert us on that.

Implications and Discussions

The findings in this evaluation research indicate that the BSP Training Program has effectively helped participants engage in “deep learning” and transfer their learned knowledge and skills from the formal environment of the training to workplace practice. Identifying and discussing the strengths of the BSP Program have important implications for other professional training programs and those involved in the community of adult training and learning.

The BSP Program adopted an effective curriculum and pedagogy with the understanding that, as adult learners, participants are autonomous, practical, goal-oriented, and self-directed, with rich life and work experience. The strength of the program is in its ability to deliver a curriculum that is relevant, practical and directly tied to the participants’ daily work. In addition, participants were very engaged in the process because active learning was used as the main pedagogical strategy in the training. Moreover, the BSP Training has operated under a paradigm that values constructing knowledge within a learning community. It not only emphasized active participation of each person, but treasured the background knowledge each person has brought to the table. Participants testified that the knowledge, diverse work experiences, and expertise that they brought to the training were valuable, and effective use of these resources did facilitate their learning.

The BSP Program has combined classroom teaching with experiential learning. Participants felt the fieldwork experience was highly worthwhile. Conducting projects in the field has provided them the opportunity to engage in real work situations, to apply what they learned in class, and to receive feedback on their performance. Mentoring provided during the fieldwork experience is an important piece, with one participant describing it as “holding your hands”, to help them get through the process and learn. Many participants agreed that experiential learning experience of completing a project is very effective when combined with
classroom teaching, ensuring participants the readiness to apply BSP approach in their workplace after the training.

Finally, the BSP program has used the training to create favorable conditions for participants to transfer knowledge and skills to practice. Participants confirmed the importance of involving many stakeholders, not only for the purpose of learning itself, but also for the effective execution of the BSP approach after the training. It helped participants learn more about their potential partners and save time in promoting and executing BSP approach in workplace. It also helped participants form a statewide inter-organizational network that provides continual support for their effort and practice. Furthermore, the BSP program has included some of managers and directors in the training for one-day or half-day events. Participants pointed out its importance to the application of the BSP approach after the training, because support from the top of an organization is crucial for effective implementation of the BSP approach in workplace.

References


Dr. Julie Brockman, Assistant Professor, School of Human Resources and Labor Relations, Michigan State University, brockma4@msu.edu
Dr. John Dirkx, Professor, Educational Administration, College of Education, Michigan State University, dirkx@msu.edu
Mr. Kang Li, PhD Candidate, Educational Administration, College of Education, Michigan State University, likang1@msu.com
Dr. Michael Polzin, Associate Professor, School of Human Resources and Labor Relations, Michigan State University, polzinm@msu.edu

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