

Corporate
right-sizing
and techno-fear
have all of us
rethinking
how much
we know.
Does it really
pay to learn
a few new
tricks of
the trade?



Gigi Lane became the person she thought she was supposed to be.

Her collegiate work was devoted to accounting, leading directly into work as an accounting analyst for a Farmland Industries Inc. facility. Perfect.

But something happened. That “lifelong learning” thing you’ve heard so much about.

Farmland, as a part of its benefits package, was offering tuition reimbursement, so Gigi signed up. Six years and two degrees later, Gigi is now in human resources as manager of training and development at Farmland’s Kansas City headquarters.

“With the tuition reimbursement, I found out I loved human resources,” she says. “If I had stayed in accounting, who knows? I might have had burnout.”

Gigi’s story is an example of what lifelong learning proponents have always said: Employees devoted to learning beyond their initial training or knowledge base usually end up a more valuable employee. But in a society where family and work time already are difficult to balance, this is most often easier to say than to do.

No doubt the phrase “lifelong learning” will forever be linked to the 1990s, but it’s a concept that’s rooted in economic reality — the world has become increasingly interdisciplinary, dramatically more global and decidedly more fast paced.

“Lifelong education is no longer an option exercised by some, but has become a necessary aspect of survival as we move throughout the last quarter of the 20th century,” writes Southeastern University educator P. Anthony Giorgio in his essay “Continuing Education to Liven Your Life.”

That may already be happening.

This fall, 45 million adults over age 25 — nearly one in three — will hit the books somewhere, somehow. Some will be enhancing current skills or adding new ones in a non-degree-seeking endeavor. Others will be seeking a way to get that first college degree.

At UMKC, one of the most visible signs of the trend toward — and acceptance of — lifelong learning may be the Program for Adult College Education. PACE is a bachelor’s degree program that accommodates the non-traditional student by arranging weeknight, weekend and independent study coursework.

In 1994, for example, the program enrolled 80-some students. In 1997, says PACE Director Reginald Bassa, enrollment topped 380.

PACE covers the spectrum: mid-level managers who need a bachelor’s degree to progress, people who own businesses, those with special economic circumstances or who can’t fit daytime classes into their schedule.

Recently, UMKC’s PACE added several new concentrations and minors because businesses wanted their employees to have more than a general degree. Bassa tells of a Sprint telemarketing employee who decided to apply for tuition reimbursement for UMKC coursework. Sprint wanted to see a direct

relationship between that person’s job and the desired degree. PACE helped arrange for the resulting bachelor of liberal arts degree to include a certificate of specialization from the College’s Communications Studies Department.

brain
“Research truly shows that maintaining activities like reading and studying helps in maintaining mental acuity.”
UMKC’s Burton Halpert
exercise

Overall, UMKC’s Division for Continuing Education attracts a crowd. In fiscal year 1995-96, the division accumulated more than 34,000 enrollments, a term that counts the number of continuing education learning opportunities people tapped into, both credit and noncredit.

Of course, it’s easy to see the benefits from the worker’s perspective. Studies show that someone with a college degree earns an average of 43 percent more throughout a career than someone who doesn’t have one.

For employers, actively supporting lifelong education offers risks and rewards. The reward is that employees have more to offer their companies than when they started. The risk is that employees will take the new knowledge and jump ranks to the competition.

Increasingly, employers are willing to take that risk, especially in the era of the “value added” worker, which presupposes that someone should

Learning,

by Michael Johnson • design by Lisa Hastings

not only have a repertoire of specific skills, but also an ability to apply those skills in a team-based environment.

At least that's the way companies like Farmland Inc. and Hallmark Inc. are thinking of employees these days.

Farmland's Gigi Lane says it's important for someone to come in with a set of skills, but in today's ultracompetitive market, in six months, such skills can become outdated.

Lynn Mailer, performance and development consultant with Hallmark Inc. says that "building competencies" among employees actually has two benefits: it increases a company's ability to promote from within (a less expensive alternative to hiring from outside) and helps build loyalty.

So, while the risk of employee development is real, the result may also be increased loyalty and productivity.

"We may lose them," Lane says, "but I'd put money on research that says they'll stay."

From these standpoints, it seems the antidote to obsolescence is lifelong learning, but the route to be taken is getting less obvious.

The traditional Monday-Wednesday-Friday college class has its place for some, but other educational opportunities are presenting themselves in ever-widening forms. Beefed-up in-house training sessions, Internet-based delivery and cooperative partnerships are springing up all over.

Farmland's Lane noted the company used a Chamber of

Commerce-sponsored seminar as an avenue for Farmland employees to learn more about issues related to international business.

Interactive courses, ones that allow on-line feedback and incorporate video, simulations or access to on-line source materials, also show great potential, bringing the benefits of classroom straight to a home, business or school.

In fact, UMKC debuted its foray into a planned "virtual university" concept when its first fully remote course appeared on the computer monitors of high schoolers in Nevada, Mo., last January. In addition, KC-EDNET, a consortium of area universities, has offered coursework at selected sites since 1995.

For colleges and universities, taking the time to explore the boundaries of new technologies is simple economics. The market for employees and employers who believe in the value of lifelong learning is huge and growing yearly.

According to The College Board, 45 percent of all college students in 1997 are 25 or older and these adults are the fastest growing segment of the population. Educational consultant Jane Rouche estimates that up to 75 percent of all current workers will require retraining or reschooling over the next 10 years.

One reason is the pace at which technology is making old ways inefficient. Another is the growth of service companies; U.S. Department of Education projections show service-producing

industries accounting for nearly all the job growth through 2005. In contrast, manufacturing jobs will decrease by 1.3 million.

technology change
The leverage
forcing the pace
of change is
technology.
Today's
workers have to
keep up with
new ways —
if they want
to keep on
working.

Accepting learning as a cradle-to-grave process is one thing; considering all workers as capable learners has proven to be another.

Caught in a quagmire of myths and low expectations for learning abilities is the older adult — too young to retire, too old, some say, to learn new skills fast enough to remain a productive part of an increasingly high-tech work force.

That stereotype just doesn't hold up to research, according to Burton Halpert, associate professor at UMKC's Center for Aging Studies.

The notion that older people can't learn new ways and that they "somehow have lower IQs" than younger adults, he says, is a carry-over from flawed 1960s sociology research. According to Halpert, this thinking, combined with 1930s mentality that put "retirement age" at 65, painted a bleak picture of what older Americans could do.

"As gerontology studies became more sophisticated, increasingly these fallacies became apparent," Halpert says. "Research truly shows that maintaining activities like reading and studying helps in maintaining mental acuity."

Dee Dickinson, addressing a conference on lifelong learning at Oxford University in 1992 put that thinking in a physiological context.

"Intelligence is not a static structure than can be measured and given a number predicting the future of that individual," she said. "Intelligence now has been proved to be an open, dynamic system that can continue to develop throughout life."

It's clear that the benefits of lifelong learning have moved from the halls of academia and are now accepted by the general public.

Linda L. Edwards, interim dean of the School of Education, has noticed this change.

At a school district meeting in a relatively small-town area, patrons were discussing important terms that should help define the district's emphasis. Ranking up there with accepted terms like "courage" and "self control" was the phrase "lifelong learning."

"It wasn't just lip service or they wouldn't have fought for it so passionately," Edwards says.

Jeanne Guillot, president of LifeStream Inc., and a former Sprint Inc. training and development executive, agrees. She earned a bachelor's degree in sociology at UMKC in 1969 and later earned double master's degrees in human resources development and management from Webster University.

"Take a look at all the organizations in our city offering courses" Guillot says. "And there's an absolute abundance of self-help books. Why? Because we're more interested than ever in learning about our own humanity."

In the final analysis, it seems there are no barriers to expanding one's capabilities. Well, maybe one.

"There are people who think they can't learn," Guillot says, "and so they don't."

History shows that businesses that don't grow or adapt often reach a plateau and fall out of competition. Is it too surprising to expect the same fate can happen to us?

for Life

