Intermodal Education

I recently received a student resume book from an educational institution with which I am associated. I had met some of the students, who had impressive educational credentials and (for many) prior work experience. As I looked through the book, I wondered how many of them would actually enter the intermodal job market.

Although the transportation and logistics industries are gaining increased attention, there seems to be a clear priority of career goals. For students pursuing transportation careers, preferred job choice seems centered on airlines. Otherwise, students seem focused on career opportunities in logistics.

The logistics career path seems split between students being recruited by manufacturing companies seeking to develop supply-chain management and students being recruited by third-party logistics providers.

The intermodal industry does not seem to rank high in new graduates’ job searches. The few who migrate into the intermodal industry seem to do so for several reasons.

First, the company may make itself appear as a “logistics” provider rather than an intermodal transportation company.

Second, there may be some personal, or other connection.

Finally, the student may not have obtained a preferred job offer and may be resorting to a secondary position.

My own entry into the intermodal industry was the result of a series of unusual events. First, I joined Conrail because I happened to meet some employees who were taking classes at my university. When the intermodal department was being replaced.

Conrail in the early 1990s was an interesting case study of hiring recent graduates. The railroad industry was encountering the effects of deregulation and economic recession simultaneously. Clearly, there was a need for new ideas, which could only be filled by hiring recent graduates. (Ironically, most ideas have historical precedents and experience that can only be provided by existing personnel.)

The Conrail culture clash was severe. Most recruiting was limited to top-tier business schools. Existing personnel, many of whom had no formal higher education, had weathered the bankruptcy of Penn Central (or other roads) and were trying to survive the integration of Conrail. Many saw their longtime colleagues replaced by new hires.

Over time, and with the implementation of several austerity measures, many of the recruits left. However, those who remained were able to forge a company that is a model for corporate turnaround and deregulatory success.

The intermodal industry today needs to ensure that a steady stream of graduates is produced, hired and integrated into the market. Regardless of the underlying mode of the provider — rail, truck, marine or intermediary — education should be a responsibility embraced by all senior managers. Here several obstacles must be overcome.

First, the need exists for education programs that focus on intermodal specifics. Many schools may provide brief overviews of intermodal, but beyond that there are only two programs of which I am aware.

The U.S. Merchant Marine Academy has branched into intermodal transportation since the U.S. merchant fleet is declining. And the University of Denver’s Intermodal Transportation Institute will enroll students next year for its first graduate program in Intermodal Transportation Systems.

Companies also need to develop strategies designed to integrate new hires into their organization. If it is a management training program, it needs to be substantive. Otherwise, entry-level positions should be established with low expectations of requisite skills.

Regardless, mentoring and other means of support need to be established so that new hires can learn the corporate culture while they learn job responsibilities.

Finally, companies need to realistically assess their views about education, not only in hiring recent graduates, but also in seeking or evaluating opportunities available to existing employees.

These may range from formal degree programs to continuing education and technical training. Often there are mixed feelings about educating employees. Some companies feel that by doing so, they are only hastening the departure of their new, improved workers for better jobs.

Employee mobility is a reality today. Some companies may view continuing education and training as essential tools in today’s environment. They will have a better-motivated and better-trained work force.

Companies that spend very little in employee development will probably continue to experience the high costs of employee turnover — and complain themselves on saving money — yet remain unaware of continued erosion of their company’s service.

The successful companies, intermodal or otherwise, will be the ones that find a way to build on the organization’s knowledge base. Hopefully, the intermodal industry will realize this and, at the same time, support the educational institutions that are contributing the intellectual capital.

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