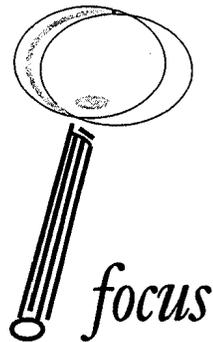# Why You Need to Be a Problem Solver

focus

Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, you should be able to:

- List at least three reasons why problem-solving skills are essential to the success of American businesses and workers.
- Define what problem means in the business setting.
- List the characteristics bosses seek in problem solvers.

FOR WHOM THIS COURSE IS DESIGNED

This course has been specially designed for people on the job who want to improve their problem-solving skills for their job and to improve their career advancement opportunities. This course will benefit people with the following job descriptions:

- Process transactions (e.g., payroll) or things (e.g., laboratory specimens).
- Interact with customers (e.g., handling the reception desk).
- Get special assignments (e.g., organizing the company's blood donor drive) from your boss.
- Supervise or manage people in one or more units in your organization.

Many jobs combine more than one of these activities. This course is also for people with jobs that involve various duties.

WHY PROBLEM SOLVING IS BECOMING A BUSINESS NECESSITY

If you have been listening to the news recently, you have heard terms such as global economy and world economy. Sometimes you hear these terms in a report about a U.S. company that is losing business, shutting plants, or downsizing. Usually, there's a common theme to these reports: Businesses in some country other than the United States are able to deliver the same product more efficiently and with higher quality than we can in the United States.

At other times, the news reports an American success, a company or an industry that is competing in the world economy and succeeding. The theme of each of these stories is the same: The business has learned how to deliver its products more efficiently and with higher quality than previously.

The reason for the success-whether in America or another country-is that the companies in question have learned how to work smarter. The terms work smart and work smarter have been coined by economic analysts to describe what they have learned when they study these successful companies.

The Changing Global Economy

In the global economy, consumers are no longer limited to using local products and services. Transportation and communication are so rapid that consumers can choose from a worldwide array of products and services that are quickly and inexpensively produced. Given that choice, consumers look for the highest quality and the lowest cost. They often stop buying the local products and services with which they and previous generations had been comfortable.

? **Think About It ...**

Have you ever, in your personal life, had to decide whether to continue to buy a local product that is more expensive and of lower quality or to switch to a foreign product that costs less and is of higher quality? What thoughts went through your mind?

The breakup of the former Soviet Union is a classic example. For 70 years, the Soviet Union had comprised a closed economy. Citizens had no choice but to purchase Soviet products and services, despite their frequent high cost and low quality. Soviet-made automobiles are an excellent example; they worked poorly, were very expensive, and were accessible only to the elite.

With the crumbling of economic barriers, however, Russians, Ukrainians, and other citizens of the new republics are hungry for foreign products, causing the failure of local businesses and throwing hundreds of

thousands of people into unemployment. In order to survive, businesses are going to have to learn to work smarter.

The globalization of the economy has brought about another change. It is increasingly easy for businesses to export low-skill tasks to countries with low wage rates. As long as the tasks don't require workers to be highly educated, businesses can now assemble products and services worked on in many different places.

Countries with high standards of living, such as the United States, are going to have to change the way they do things if they hope to compete in the global economy. Both businesses and employees are going to have to change. They are both going to have to work smarter.

For individuals, working smarter means upgrading skills to keep themselves competitive. One of the key skills that employees can develop is the ability to solve problems. When you complete this course, you will have learned the problem-solving skills that modern employers seek in employees in order to survive in today's global economy.

Businesses that work smarter will have to respond quickly to savvy global consumers. When competitors bring to market products that sell well, American businesses have to move quickly to make competing products available before there is a permanent loss of market share. To achieve these rapid responses, businesses will have to rely on smart workers in two ways. First, workers must be able to change the way they do things quickly as products and services are adjusted to meet competition. Second, employees must be able to help their employers produce better products and services.

Businesses are becoming increasingly aware that the people who do the actual work are best positioned to identify and solve production problems. They want their employees to become problem solvers.

For many employees, however, that is going to mean a change. Consider, for example, Jason, who has worked at Suburban Electronics for the past 15 years, the last 5 of them as a final inspector in the assembly division. At lunchtime, he would talk to his friends about all the ways Suburban's system inhibited quality production. When his friend John urged him to speak up at their annual employee meetings, Jason answered, "No, no one will ever listen." How do you think Jason would respond if he were assigned a new supervisor who invited him to identify the major problems in the assembly area that inhibited higher quality? Identifying and solving problems requires new skills and attitudes. The purpose of this course is to teach these skills to the people who work in American businesses.

Why American Employers Are Looking for Problem Solvers

Automation is one of the reasons that many American employers are getting serious about helping their employees become better problem solvers. In their drive to reduce costs and increase profitability, businesses all across the United States have automated. Some have brought computers into their businesses for the first time. Others have upgraded their computer systems so they can perform a higher volume of more sophisticated work.

Increasingly, computers are taking over routine work that used to be performed by people. West Coast Financial Services is a good example. It was an old business that grew rapidly in the early eighties. West Coast hired hundreds of people for their skillful attention to detail to perform tasks, such as comparing financial transaction documents to identify erroneous entries. This year, West Coast has installed a new computer system that will perform all the comparison work. The computer will "just spit out the exceptions," as the department manager put it. "From now on, the computer will do all the detail work, and all our people will have to become problem solvers."

In all kinds of businesses across the nation, computers are taking over tedious, routine work, leaving the more interesting and challenging work to people. However, many of these companies, like West Coast, are staffed by people who were hired for skills in areas such, as attention to detail, not problem solving. Until their employees develop problem-solving skills, these firms' investment in automation won't help increase productivity and profitability.

In addition to computerizing, many companies are organizing some or all of their organizations into teams. There are many potential benefits to the team structure. One of them is improved problem solving. Teams can bring together people from company departments that normally don't communicate with each other, and focus their energies on solving many kinds of problems.

When businesses implement a team restructuring, they look for their employees with the best problem-solving skills. People with problem-solving training improve their chances of being recommended to these high profile positions. In this course, you will learn the skills you need to succeed in challenging environments that place a premium on problem solving.

THE MEANING OF PROBLEM IN A BUSINESS SETTING

The word problem is frequently used. Often people refer to the problem of world hunger or the problem of crime in our neighborhoods. Can you think of other examples in which problem is used to designate complex international and social issues? Many of us also use problem to designate short-term glitches in our lives: "I have a problem. I won't be able to pick up Krista at day care this afternoon. Will you fill in for me?" No doubt you can think of other ways that we use this word.

For this course's purpose, problem will be used to refer to troubling interruptions for which the solution is not immediately evident. (Identifying particular problems is discussed in Chapter 3.)

Problems May Be Big or Small

Businesses also use the word problem to designate minor glitches and complex issues. For example, "Becky, can you help us with a problem? Jane didn't

show up today, and we need a courier to deliver a proposal we're submitting." Or, "The board of directors recognizes that this company will face a serious problem if costs are not brought down in the near future."

This course focuses on problems that are in a middle range between the day-to-day glitches of doing business and the global challenges facing business leaders. These middle-range problems are the kind that can be effectively tackled by most of us in our work lives.

Middle-Range Problems

Middle-range business problems commonly have the following characteristics:

1. Persistent problems threaten an organization's delivery of high-quality, cost-effective products or services. In the preceding example, the fact that Jane didn't report for work I day was not a problem. If her absenteeism persisted, it would become a problem.
2. They require creative thinking in order to be solved. They can't be solved by handing an employee a procedures manual and saying, "Here, do this."
3. People in the organization have the potential of being able to solve middle-range business problems. As an example, traffic congestion on the city's freeways may threaten West Coast's ability to do business, but it cannot be solved easily by West Coast's staff.

This course provides the information you will need to solve these middle-range problems.

WHAT EMPLOYERS SAY ABOUT PROBLEM-SOLVING EMPLOYEES

When typical bosses are asked about problem solving in their departments, their responses sound something like this: "Why do all the petty problems end up on my desk for me to solve, while I never hear about the big ones until it's too late?" The implications are that first, bosses want employees to take responsibility for solving small problems on their own, and second, they want to be involved in large problems as early as possible. Let's look at these principles.

Assume Responsibility for Solving Small Problems Yourself

A boss does not appreciate being handed work that is full of errors. The boss may think he or she is being given the responsibility of identifying and correcting the errors and is likely to wonder why employees are being paid when the work is being done by him or her.

Many employees don't realize that this is what their boss is thinking. Employees report that they often hand work in, even when it has errors, because it's their way of showing the boss they have their work under

control. Sometimes employees just want the boss to look the work over and give direction before they proceed with the work.

Usually these tactics are self-defeating. Unless you have arranged for your boss to review your work in draft form, fix all the errors before handing it in. Otherwise, you are asking your boss to review your work twice. Not many bosses would be pleased with that.

Jay knew that his boss was getting frustrated with his work. Everything Jay handed in came back with red marks all over it, pointing out math and spelling errors. Jay tried correcting his work beforehand, but somehow he just couldn't catch his own errors. He didn't know what to do and worried that his job might be in jeopardy. If you were Jay's friend, what would you suggest?

Here are some ideas. Jay could ask you or another friend to review his work for him. He could find out whether his company offers courses in proofreading, or in spelling and math. He could try enrolling in a course in a local continuing education program. He should also make sure his boss knows that he is taking steps to improve his job performance.

If you are unsure which errors are your responsibility to catch, arrange a meeting with your boss to straighten it out. Make sure you are asking your boss's advice, not telling your boss how to run the department.

Involve the Boss Early
When the Problem Exceeds Your Responsibility

It's equally upsetting for bosses to find out that one of their employees is out solving a problem that the boss didn't even know existed. That happened to Rosemary one morning when she was drinking coffee with several of her fellow department heads. One of them said to her, "You must really be proud of Jack and the way he's been correcting all those erroneous personnel postings your department sent out." Rosemary gulped and then tried to smile. She hadn't even been aware that there were errors in the personnel postings. She wondered how Jack could be so disloyal.

Most bosses are like Rosemary; they expect to be told about problems first-before anyone else. And they expect to be consulted before employees take action outside the department, as in: "I don't want my staff pursuing reconciliation issues outside of this department without checking with me first." It is true that some bosses give their employees more leeway, as in: "Staff in this department are authorized to track down all routine customer inquiries wherever that may take you in the company. I'll take the heat if someone gets upset." They, however, are the exception. A sound course is to assume that your boss is like Rosemary, unless you've received instructions to the contrary.

It is your responsibility to find out what the policy is for the place where you work. If you are uncertain, ask the next time a problematic situation arises. "Would you like me to check in with you each time this kind of problem comes up, or should I try to straighten it out on my own?"

This course was designed for people who want to improve their general problem-solving skills and for people who have a specific problem in mind

that they want to solve. Each chapter includes a section that addresses people who have already identified a problem and helps them clarify their next step.

What Boss Means in This Book

The term boss has been used in a generic sense in this book to include both managers and supervisors. The book assumes that everyone (except maybe the chief executive officer [CEO] of the company) has a boss who assigns and reviews work and is responsible for evaluating job performance.

Many of the employees who take this course are also bosses. By taking this course, they will improve their problem-solving skills not only vis-a-vis their bosses, but also with regard to their employees.

We hope you enjoy this course and learn a lot at the same time.

recap

This course in problem solving has been specially designed for people on the job who want to improve their problem-solving skills while improving their career advancement opportunities. Problem solving is becoming a business necessity in our global economy. Rapid communication and transportation systems enable consumers to choose from a wide array of international products and services, placing a premium on quality and cost-effectiveness.

Businesses are responding to this challenge by restructuring in several ways. They are computerizing to eliminate time-consuming, routine jobs and establishing team systems to tackle workplace problems. They are also exporting low-skill jobs to areas with low wage levels.

These restructured businesses need people with problem-solving skills. Employees in these companies will find that improving their skills at problem solving will help their careers advance during this uncertain time in our economic history. This course will teach the problem-solving skills employers are seeking in their workers.

? Review Questions

1. Economists who use the term work smart are referring to which of the following?

   (a) A new type of robot that is replacing people on many assembly lines

   (b) Businesses that have learned how to respond quickly to the changing demands of sophisticated consumers

   (c) The way the American economy is structured, which is why American businesses can outperform their international competitors

   (d) Businesses that hire only college graduates

   1. (b)

2. Transportation and communication are so rapid that consumers are no longer limited to buying local products and services but may choose from a wide array of international products and services.

   (a) True

   (b) False

   2. True

3. Which of the following is not true of the breakup of the Soviet Union?

    (a) Prior to the breakup, the economy of the Soviet Union was closed.

    (b) Consumers in the Soviet Union had no choice but to purchase local products and services, even though they were expensive and of poor quality.

    (c) With the introduction of the free market system to the countries of the former Soviet Union, employment opportunities have greatly expanded.

    (d) Consumers in the republics of the former Soviet Union are increasingly free to purchase goods and services produced in other countries.

        3. (c)

4. Which of the following is not a consequence of the globalization of the economy?

    (a) There has been an expansion of jobs requiring low education and skill levels in the United States.

    (b) Many companies have exported low-skill jobs to countries with low wage rates.

    (c) Businesses can now assemble products and services worked on in many different places around the globe.

    (d) In order to survive, businesses must learn to work smart.

        4. (a)

5. Which of the following is a valid generalization about people who live in countries with a high standard of living?

    (a) People with low skill levels will benefit the most because there will be plentiful jobs that pay well.

    (b) People in these countries are going to have to work smarter.

    (c) People in these countries all have high educational levels, enabling employers to introduce very sophisticated management systems.

    (d) Employers will decrease the value they place on more sophisticated skills such as problem solving.

        5. (b)

6. Employers are going to have to rely on smart workers to compete in the global economy because:

    (a) workers must be able to change the way they do things quickly, as products and services are adjusted to meet competition.

    (b) television interviewers and talk show hosts want to be able to talk to intelligent people when their programs focus on the business sector.

    (c) employees must be able to help their employers produce better goods and services.

    (d) both (a) and (c).

        6. (d)

7. Why is computerization causing employers to look for employees with problem-solving skills?

   (a) Computers break down frequently, and employers need staff capable of solving breakdown problems quickly.

   (b) Many employers installed computer systems without planning how they would use these systems, so they are looking for employees who can solve the problem of what to do with excess computer capacity.

   (c) Computers are taking over many of the routine jobs that people have been performing; staff people will be used increasingly to solve business problems identified by computers.

   (d) Many computer analysts are being lured to Germany and Japan, so employers are looking among the general employee pool for replacement workers with problem-solving abilities.

7. (c)

8. Which of the following is not a valid generalization about the trend toward restructuring American workplaces around teams?

   (a) Many companies are organizing all or some of their parts into teams.

   (b) Employers hope that teams composed of people from different departments will improve communication and problem solving.

   (c) Employers try to staff these teams with people who have problem-solving skills.

   (d) Employers plan to export many of these teams to foreign countries to manage production facilities.

8. (d)

9. Which of the following accurately describes the way businesspeople use the term problem

   (a) As in the rest of life, businesspeople use problem to designate everything from minor glitches to complex issues.

   (b) Because businesspeople are very technical in their training and orientation, they use the term problem only to designate specific types of threats to quality or cost-effectiveness.

   (c) Businesspeople use the term problem to designate a stage in strategic planning.

   (d) Public opinion research has convinced businesspeople not to use the term problem because it is too negative.

9. (a)

10. Employees should assume responsibility for finding and correcting major problems.

   (a) True

   (b) False

10. False