

IDEAS

Improving International Project Success

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There are numerous elements necessary for developing nations to transition into the world economy and raise the standard of living of their citizenry. One element is a skilled workforce. Countries looking to develop a skilled workforce often look for assistance from other countries. International expertise and resources come through projects funded by world loans or through economic aid from developed countries. "Vocational and technical education play important economic and social development roles" (Herschbach & Campbell, 2000, p. 19) in the international development process, and opportunities are available for professionals in the field of vocational and technology education with attributes to assist the international development process. Taking advantage of these opportunities enables those in the profession to gain international recognition for themselves and for the discipline, to assist underdeveloped nations in technological development, and to reap the financial rewards of international consulting.

Various vocational training projects are employed throughout the world, each utilizing models with varying degrees of success. Factors that affect the success of projects within these countries include (a) a comprehensive model to meet the needs of the country and (b) international and domestic consultants with attributes to facilitate the model. How these factors are used to enhance the success of vocational training projects is illustrated in the following.

Comprehensive Model

For a project to be successful a comprehensive model must be utilized to meet the needs of the host country. When properly designed and orchestrated, the model can produce quality out-

comes and have a tremendous positive impact on the progress of a country.

With the fall of the Soviet Union, there has been a need for the development of economic and technical training programs in Central and Eastern Europe. The U.S. Department of Labor (USDOL), through the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), has implemented several development projects in this area.

Experience gained during the early 1990s by USDOL technical assistance experts working in Central and Eastern Europe to help workers and communities severely impacted by economic restructuring led to the development of a comprehensive adjustment model or strategy comprised of four components. This model has proven successful over the past few years. Figure 1 illustrates the model that is achieving success in the region. The objective of this strategy is to reduce the serious worker and community adjustment problems caused by the privatization and restructuring of state-owned enterprises. When governments adopt this model and use it in a systematic and integrated manner with other active labor market measures, it reduces the economic and social costs of adjustment, shortens the time required for training, and facilitates the transition to a market economy (USDOL, 1998).

The USDOL adjustment model is comprised of the following four components:

- **Rapid response worker adjustment component** to plan, organize, and facilitate the transition of workers to new jobs.
- **Community economic renewal component** to stimulate local economic development efforts and

generate new jobs in communities impacted by enterprise restructuring.

- **Enterprise competitiveness component** to strengthen surviving enterprises and preserve jobs.
- **Financial resources component** to provide funds to implement the worker, community, and enterprise adjustment components.

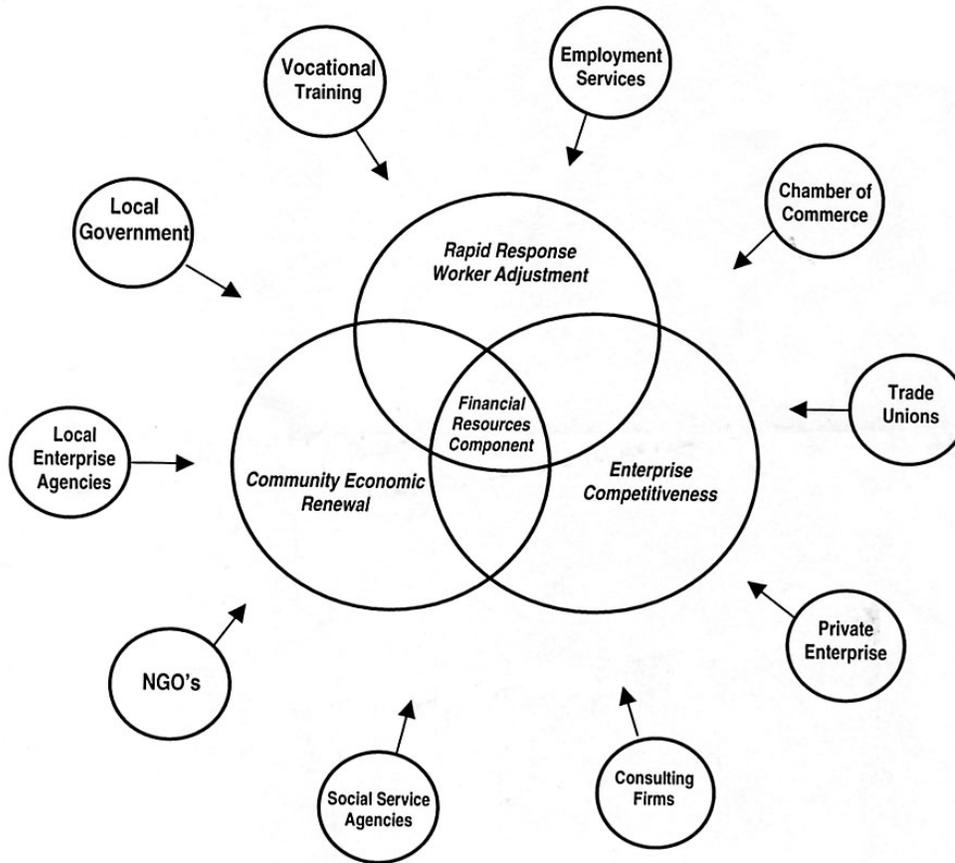
Rapid Response Worker Adjustment Component

The rapid response worker adjustment component is implemented by a small group of highly skilled industrial adjustment (IA) specialists who function as a rapid response team. IA specialists facilitate the timely organization and implementation of a systematic worker adjustment process in enterprises and communities undergoing economic restructuring. They work with restructuring state-owned enterprise managers and worker representatives to develop and implement plans to provide adjustment services and programs in order to transition large groups of workers to new employment as quickly as possible. In addition, they provide technical assistance to help develop and implement effective community economic renewal and enterprise competitiveness strategies.

Whenever possible, IA specialists work with state-owned enterprise managers and function as the primary mechanism to:

- Conduct surveys to determine worker needs.
- Plan and organize "in-plant" pre-layoff services.
- Establish an outplacement or resource center in the plant if one is needed.
- Arrange for the delivery of pre- and post-layoff employment and training services to workers being

Figure 1. USDOL model.



displaced, including job search training, job development, job placement, self-employment help, vocational counseling, retraining, financial planning, remedial education, entrepreneurial training, and other forms of employment assistance.

Community Economic Renewal Component

The community economic renewal component of the USDOL adjustment model helps communities and regions experiencing restructuring, downsizing, or enterprise closures to develop and use a systematic business growth, job retention, and job creation strategy to begin or expand local economic development efforts.

IA specialists work with government, business, and labor leaders in communities experiencing economic restruc-

turing and privatization to help them better understand the essential local economic development principles and processes required to revitalize their economies. Implementing the community economic renewal process creates a new sense of “community” and direction in the face of serious economic threats.

Enterprise Competitiveness Component

The enterprise competitiveness component helps state-owned enterprises undergoing restructuring and downsizing, as well as other business enterprises in the impacted communities or region, to become more productive and competitive in the global economy. Healthy enterprises provide more secure jobs for their managers and workers and generate additional jobs in the community.

IA specialists help communities and enterprises accomplish these objectives

by providing information to enterprise management and worker representatives about innovative techniques and programs that can be made available to help them strengthen their enterprises, by helping them to assess their situation, and by arranging for or delivering specific enterprise competitiveness training and technical assistance services. The enterprise competitiveness component is an integrated approach that includes five essential elements:

1. **Upgrading workers’ skills** by aiding restructuring state-owned enterprises and other enterprises to help increase their competitiveness or expand their operations by using Quick Start training to upgrade their existing workers’ skills or to train new workers.
2. **Improving labor-management relations** by providing Training for Partnership and Interest-Based

Problem-Solving workshops that teach managers, workers, and union officials in affected enterprises and communities the techniques that can be used to solve problems, build cooperative partnerships, and generate high-performance workplaces.

3. **Increasing productivity and reducing costs** by helping restructuring enterprise managers and their unions to establish plant-level productivity improvement and cost-saving projects to reduce costs and increase productivity.
4. **Improving human resource utilization** by helping restructuring enterprises to develop and implement strategies that improve human resource utilization to preserve jobs.
5. **Maximizing joint competitive advantage of small enterprises** by assessing the need and opportunity for interfirm cooperation and collaborative networks of small companies in communities or regions to help them maximize their joint competitive advantage in the global marketplace.

Financial Resources Component

The financial resources component provides the money to pay for adjustment components. The financial component can be organized and implemented in several ways:

- USAID funds that are allocated for adjustment projects in countries are normally placed under the control of the USDOL Worker Adjustment Project.
- Salaries of IA specialists and operating costs of IA teams are normally provided by the government from funds budgeted to the ministry of labor, employment service or national labor office, or through other appropriate agencies.

- Some resources may also come from the proceeds of grants or loans provided by international agencies and donors (USDOL, 1998).

The USDOL model has proven to be successful because it utilizes components that focus on a structured involvement from communities, worker adjustment to prepare for market changes, enterprise competitiveness to stimulate the workforce, and strategic funding. All of these are necessary to produce gains to the host country.

The enterprise competitiveness component of the USDOL model addresses vocational training and uses IA or “Quick Start” specialists. These specialists or consultants work with employers and training organizations to design Quick Start training programs that provide specific upgrade or skill training for existing workers or unemployed workers who will be hired to meet the needs of business. Quick Start is a short-term training or retraining program that is specifically designed for new, expanding, or restructuring companies that must retrain their workforce because of changing products, technology, or production processes (Hansen, 2001). Short training schedules mean that an enterprise receives a quicker return for its investment, as do employees and the agency providing the financial resources.

The seven steps involved in developing a Quick Start program consist of:

- Establishing a labor office/business/training linkage.
- Implementing a systematic training development process.
- Developing training curriculum and materials.
- Selecting and training instructors.
- Recruiting, screening, and selecting trainees.
- Conducting skill-training program(s).
- Evaluating the results.

Following this procedure produces an

effective result for vocational training. Professionals of vocational and technology education are well suited to engage in a component such as this because of a strong background in vocational curriculum development and a well-rounded technical expertise in various trades.

To date, several countries in Central and Eastern Europe have successfully implemented Quick Start including Poland, Bulgaria, Hungary, and Macedonia. In Poland Quick Start has been successfully used in the coal mining industry. As the mining industry started closing facilities because of the reduced demand for coal, displaced workers needed training in other fields and miners who were not being displaced needed cross training in other areas of mining. The Quick Start system was used effectively to cross-train mining workers in a reduced timeframe giving the industry the flexibility to better utilize the existing workforce. In Bulgaria it has been used in the textiles, machining, and automotive industries. In Hungary it has been used in the printing industry, and in Macedonia it has been used in the computer design, textiles, and publishing industries.

Consultant Attributes

In addition to having a model that proves to be successful, another factor that affects the success of international projects is using international and domestic consultants who possess the attributes necessary to implement the model. Consultants play a vital role in determining if project goals are met. International and domestic consultants work together to facilitate the model within a country, each having specific jobs related to the project.

Consultant Barriers

The international consultants have many challenges because the transfer of successful vocational training systems from one culture to another is not a simple task. There are a variety of barriers that exist when facilitating international projects; in fact, barriers exist within

every culture, some obvious and others not so obvious. Making matters more difficult, the barriers change with each country and sometimes within regions of the same country. It is important that an international consultant be aware of barriers that include (a) language, (b) resistance to change, (c) sustainability, and (d) culture.

Language is an obvious barrier if you do not speak the language of the host country. Language as a barrier is the case in many situations. Translators/interpreters assist with the language barrier. Professional translators/interpreters not only make the international consultant understood, but assist with organization and dissemination of information. Additionally, they assist the international consultants with the flow of the training and facilitate activities during the training. International consultants should establish a good working relationship with the translator/interpreter.

Resistance to change is another barrier that is obvious, but often ignored. It is human nature: People tend to resist change. Wilson (1992) stated that nobody changes unless the pain is intolerable or the gain is overwhelmingly attractive. Consultants working on international projects must communicate the benefits of change to the host country and play an important role in promoting the change necessary to make the project successful and sustainable.

Sustainability is the mark of a successful project. Sustainability requires the local people to embrace change and the practice of new techniques. The international consultant from the first day on the job must continuously review the methods used for sustainability for any given country. Sustainability tends to be one of the most difficult obstacles or barriers for an international consultant. The international consultant must map out a clear plan to the domestic personnel.

Culture is a barrier that may be less obvious to the international consultant, but is still important and must be identified. Having knowledge of cultural differences is important for an international consultant. An example of a simple cultural barrier that cannot be ignored is one that surfaces during training. The consultant should be aware that in some cultures there is a need for extended breaks. Training in Western culture acknowledges short breaks (10 to 15 minutes) while in other cultures longer breaks are preferred (30 minutes). In our Western culture we usually take lunch at 12:00 noon and other cultures take a large meal at 1:30 p.m. This slight change in the training format can assist in keeping the trainees comfortable and happy during the training and allow the message of the consultant to be accepted.

Overcoming Barriers

Understanding that barriers exist is critical for international consultants to be successful. To overcome barriers that exist when facilitating international projects, consultants should exhibit certain traits and skills. These include:

- Being able to customize a model.
- Understanding the culture.
- Implementing a data collection system.
- Being able to establish articulation between consultants.

One of the most important traits that an international consultant should exhibit is the ability to customize a model to meet the needs of the host country. Consultants many times overlook this process as they assume that the model used in one country will work in other countries or locations. This is simply not the case. Many times the existing model needs to be modified. Subtle changes in the way the model is orchestrated can mean the difference between success and failure. Customizing a model to a specific country's needs may involve working closely with a domestic consultant. A domestic consultant can assist to

determine what changes will and will not work. The domestic consultant may assist in identifying local personnel who can effectively contribute in leadership positions and give perspective and understanding to the current economic conditions of the country. Domestic consultants should work closely with international consultants to identify critical infrastructure needs and jointly facilitate the process. The international consultant needs to have a strong tie to the domestic consultant. When a host country provides a domestic consultant, there needs to be constant articulation between the domestic and international consultants.

Another trait that successful international consultants exhibit is the ability to learn about the culture of the host country. The translator/interpreter can assist with learning some basic language of the country. This can include simple greetings and words related to the project or training within the project. Learning about a country's history, customs, food, etc., is useful because it will not only give information that will aid in understanding the culture, but also will stimulate further dialog and build trust. Consultants are more likely to have success with an increased understanding of the culture.

The ability to implement a comprehensive data collection system is another important trait that international consultants should exhibit. When a quality system is in place and administered properly, the aid country and host country can both see tangible outcomes. The data collection system should have a clear design that can be effective, be able to collect comprehensive data, and have an evaluation component to monitor the results. This requires collecting data at the outset of the project and continuing throughout the entire project. With a system in place, monitoring successes and/or failures can be done. The system can determine if the project is performing as it is supposed to, when it is getting off

track, and what corrective measure should be implemented to get it back on track. It is extremely important that the data collection system involve the international consultant working directly with domestic consultants at the national, regional, and local levels. Each party should have a clear vision as to how the results of the data are used and the benefits to the host country.

Another trait that international consultants should exhibit is the need to articulate with domestic consultants at the national, regional, and local levels. Project success is magnified with articulation between the groups. There are several reasons why articulation is important. As stated earlier, cultural change is slow. Without a direct hands-on relationship, the domestic consultants may not fully recognize the value-added benefits of the project. It is important that the domestic consultants understand the benefits and are motivated to continue the work in progress once the international consultants withdraw from the project. The domestic consultant is a link to enhance project success and sustainability.

Vocational and technology education professionals are in a unique situation when it comes to international development since there is the need for technical training in underdeveloped countries throughout the world. As vocational and technology education professionals become involved in international projects, it is important that certain traits are utilized. Perhaps the key to being a successful international consultant is to be sensitive to possible barriers and be flexible and willing to modify the process as needed. In addition, using an effective model with consultants that have the necessary attributes to assist in project success is required. Each project brings with it a unique set of circumstances and it is important to realize the following:

- International consultants play an important role in the overall facilitation of a project.
- International consultants give direction to the project and oversee modifications to the proposed model; their leadership is imperative.
- Domestic consultants should be involved to increase articulation at

various levels of project organization.

- Project sustainability requires articulation with domestic consultants.
- The Quick Start model has proven successful in many countries.
- Using a model with the components of the USDOL model can promote success within the project.

International consulting is an exciting part of the vocational and technology education discipline and can prove very rewarding for those who participate. As professionals in the field get involved, this will assist in promoting the discipline in a positive light and open new doors to other cultures.

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