



Suzanne Kaminski, AFSMI's editor-in-chief, discusses with workforce development and education authority Janet McAllister the many and varied professional and personal rewards that can be reaped from sowing your professional education seeds. Expanding the educational horizons of both management and staff of all levels can ensure that you and your staff continually possess the required skills and knowledge to perform in today's ever-changing marketplace.



Janet McAllister
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Learning...It's the Way We Win in the Marketplace

As 2007 approaches, there is no better time to reflect on the all-important topic of continuing education and the incredible value that it adds to one's profession and self-worth. Looking ahead to a new year, there are many exciting, new opportunities that await us in the form of education. I was very thankful to have this opportunity to glean some of the knowledge of one of the industry's foremost authorities on the topic of education, Janet McAllister. Janet is an associate partner with The INSIGHT Group. She is a management consultant working primarily on learning strategies and workforce development. She has spent over 25 years in the technology industry, with both large and small companies, including 15 years with IBM. Janet was formerly IBM vice president of global learning. Prior to this, she served as director, IBM Global Services Institute, where she had responsibility for IT professional development, skills management processes, and professional certification processes. Read on as Janet shares with us her in-depth, keen, and logical insights into the value of the right kinds of professional education.

Suzanne Kaminski: As an organization dedicated to the professional and educational development of its membership base, AFSMI is intently focused on providing value to our members in the form of continual educational growth, as can be witnessed by the numerous and varied programs that we offer. Some individuals who have been working within their pro-

fessions for some time misguidedly view education as a means of teaching them things they know already, or they may be averted to the idea of "teaching old dogs new tricks." However, in today's ever-changing business landscape, education is not just about *learning*, it is about *building*. As an authority on professional education, I'm interested in learning your overall viewpoint on education and how it can be, in many ways, a leading driver of career building.

Janet McAllister: In today's environment, one doesn't just have a "job" that can last throughout one's working life. As companies are facing and must overcome continual change in order to survive, so must employees. This means thinking about your career in a different way and making sure that you continually possess the required skills and knowledge to perform in a changing marketplace. You must think more professionally about yourself and building your own career vs. just being an employee doing a job at a company.

S.K.: By participating in education programs focused on one's industry, in what ways can he or she gain value for his or her organization?

J.M.: From a technology perspective, one's industry is where skills are applied. The value of industry experience, then, is that it provides an individual with a better understanding of the customer. From a company perspective, this can translate into higher employee productivity and enhanced customer

satisfaction, which then can translate into a more highly valued employee.

S.K.: Individual enhancement through education is another primary focus of AFSMI's education forums and programs. How can such programs evolve the careers of our members on an ongoing basis?

J.M.: Again, in today's environment, staying abreast of industry and marketplace changes is key to a successful career, but this is difficult to do while working every day. So it is important to stay professionally affiliated with organizations that will help you to understand the impact of those changes on your career. Educational programs, like those offered by AFSMI, provide this opportunity for those who are interested in career growth and continual improvement.

S.K.: Obsolescence is something that we try to avoid everywhere and at all costs in business—on the technical side as well as on any aspects that might hinder the achievement of organizational goals. If a company doesn't invest in the education and training of its personnel on a regular basis, it is rendering itself obsolete, in essence, reducing its value in the market. Can you elaborate on your thoughts in this area for us?

J.M.: Companies that don't invest in training employees eventually fall victim to the adage, "Pay me now, or pay me later." For their own success, companies must have employees with customer-valued skills. If companies don't build those skills continually from within, they will need to acquire them in the marketplace. Those highly valued skills not only come at a premium

in the marketplace, they come at a very high acquisition cost.

On the other hand, providing employees with an opportunity to maintain customer-valued skills is a win-win for employees and the customer: more satisfied employees, more satisfied customers, and talent acquisition cost avoidance.

S.K.: The services and support arena is made up mainly of individuals who are fairly empathetic in nature—with a focus on fixing customer problems and empathizing with their situations in order to be able to do so. As such, is there a sort of "vertical avenue" of education that services and support personnel specifically might benefit from, aside from the ongoing technical and organizational training that they would require?

J.M.: If by "vertical avenue" you mean a professional roadmap for growth, then yes. Being empathetic in nature means being able to put oneself in someone else's shoes, which means having the capacity to understand the customer experience. Having an opportunity to expand those natural abilities through education can be a huge contributor to career growth opportunities, such as managing services and support people successfully.

S.K.: In your opinion, what value do the various AFSMI education venues and certification programs bring to its members?

J.M.: Certification should be a validation of a capability to perform; it is a credential that helps assure employers that an employee has the skills and experience needed to perform a job. For some jobs, certification is a requirement to compete. But more broadly, certifi-

cation is a demonstration of an individual's commitment to professionalism and the value that an individual places on his or her own career.

S.K.: What first steps would you offer as advice to those organizations that are looking to invest in training and education but that have not set forth a formal plan for attaining their education goals?

J.M.: Organizations looking to invest in training and education should begin by thinking of learning as the way we win in the marketplace. Here is my view on how to start.

First, identify a common set of key, core, and strategic capabilities that make your organization competitive now and in the future. That is, understand the customer-valued skills that are aligned with your organization's business strategy. Second, determine what skills you have, what skills you need, and when you need them. And third, develop a common career framework for professional development that includes skills assessment, planning, development, and deployment (placement) processes that are linked with business operational processes. A critical point here is the integration of processes for professional development that become an integral part of business operations. Processes for managing the "inventory of capabilities" of an organization's workforce should be regarded with such critical importance as any other major business process.

S.K.: Thank you, Janet. You have shown us valuable steps and given us solid advice on winning in the marketplace through investing in the right kinds of education. Expanding our knowledge horizons can only lead us toward a brighter professional future. ▼