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## ***Reasons For Participation In Continuing Professional Education: Perspectives On A Professionalizing Occupation***

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Abstract

This study investigated a professionalizing occupation (employment and training specialists) by exploring the components of the professional model as they applied to this occupation. This study sought to understand the relationship among (1) the participants' reasons for participation in continuing professional education, (2) the participants' attitudes toward their profession, and (3) the demographic characteristics of the members of the employment and training field—an occupation that is professionalizing.

### **Introduction**

The systems of continuing education and continuing professional education (CPE) are changing with the professionalization of the workforce. Effective CPE program design is based on the needs of the learner which require an understanding of the professionals' reasons for participation and their attitudes toward their profession. These data are particularly important for members of professionalizing occupations. If one assumes that occupations evolve and, hence, can be characterized as professionalizing, program planners can use CPE theory in their work with these occupations (Cervero, 1988).

The employment and training field is an emerging profession serving the needs of economically, educationally, and otherwise disadvantaged persons seeking employment. The employment and training field is a national system which includes public and private sector agencies and

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human resource organizations delivering educational and employment services.

### Related Literature

This study involves a review of issues related to reasons for participation in continuing professional education, research on professionals and the professionalization process, and the employment and training field. The nature of participation in continuing education is quite different for professionals than it is for adults in general. These differences among professionals and the general adult population imply that different approaches are required to research the participation of professionals. Grotelueschen, Harnisch, and Kenny (1979) developed an instrument, the Participation Reasons Scale, that links research in participation to elements of program design.

In an effort to study the development of professions, a variety of approaches have been used to define the professions and the professionalization process. This study utilized a process approach which evolved starting in the 1960s with the work of Vollmer and Mills (1966), Wilensky (1964), and Hall (1968). This approach focuses on the analysis of how professionalized an occupation has become rather than the "all-or-nothing-at-all style favored by the static approach" (Cervero, 1988, p. 7). This approach also allows for analysis of the dynamics of an emerging profession like the employment and training field.

The trend toward professionalization of occupations within the United States has accelerated with the broad changes in social structure as seen by the impact of the increases in knowledge, technology, and specialization within occupations. Occupational groups have been motivated toward professionalization to improve services or performance as well as to improve status within the occupational groups.

The process of professionalization of an occupation can be studied by comparing the structural and attitudinal components of an emerging profession with the attributes of the professional model. The professional model can be used as a template to distinguish professionals from less or non-professional occupations. Moving toward congruence with the professional model is the professionalization process (Wilensky, 1964). The assumptions of the professional model and this study were that the structural and attitudinal characteristics exist in high degree in highly professionalized occupations. Occupations with members ranking high on these dimensions are more congruent with the professional model.

One of the most important components of the professionalization process is the attitudinal components of an emerging profession. The attitudinal components related to professionalism are measured by Hall's (1968) Professionalization Scale with factors that include (1) use of professional organizations as reference groups, (2) belief in service to the public, (3) belief in self-regulation, (4) sense of calling, and (5) autonomy.

As a professionalizing occupation the employment and training field exhibits both the structural and attitudinal components characterized in the professionalization model. Over a period of years Technical Assistance Training (TAT) systems have been established and developed in each state. A few states have built strong TAT systems by establishing training institutes including some located on university campuses. Professional development training in the employment and training field is delivered to professionals through in-house activities and through training units in large and small organizations, some of which are proprietary in nature. Typical of many emerging professions, the employment and training field can be characterized by diverse job titles, role expectations, and subject specifications that range from program administration, program planning, and fiscal administration to client services (assessment, counseling, job development, placement, etc.), facilitating on-the-job training, work experience, vocation, or other training. Required competencies are changing as the professional identity of this field is clarified, as federal legislation changes, or as employers of members of this occupation are repositioned to meet the changing needs of the clients being served.

Understanding the reasons for participation in CPE and their relationship to the work place and the profession can provide useful information for program planning for professionals. Research on participation is extensive, although a comprehensive framework for understanding the interaction of related factors has not been developed. Less attention has been directed toward participation in CPE for occupations emerging as professions. Still fewer studies have examined participation within the employment and training field. No study has quantified the relationship between reasons for participation and attitudes in an emerging profession.

### **Methodology**

The data collection instruments used were Grotelueschen's (1985) Participation Reasons Scale (PRS), Hall's (1968) Professionalization Scale, and a demographic data form developed by the researcher. The study was administered to a sample of 300 employment and training specialists in Missouri in January, 1993 (with an 80% response rate).

Statistical analysis included canonical correlation, multivariate analysis of variance, and analysis of variance. Each instrument was subjected to item analysis and principal component factor analysis.

### Findings

This study resulted in a number of findings that have implications for planners of CPE. The description of each research finding will be followed by recommendations for instructional design.

#### ***Reasons for Participation: Competency***

Employment and training professionals place the highest importance on the reasons for participation that are associated with competence, proficiencies, leadership, and productivity.

Curriculum should focus on skill building, skills practice, and best practices. Role clarification, task analysis, and competency identification should be given priority and be translated into curriculum design. This emphasis on competencies may indicate that the members are ready for certification programs in the primary functional areas. Opportunities for self-assessment and benchmarking may be important elements of future program design.

#### ***Reasons for Participation: Professional Development***

The reasons for participation among this group are complex. These reasons in rank order, based on mean scores, were (1) professional improvement and interaction, (2) collegial learning and interaction, (3) personal benefits and job security, and (4) professional service.

Employment and training professionals who participate in educational programs to learn from peers can be accommodated informally by including participants in advisory committees and in program design and program delivery planning groups. Professionals value exchanging techniques and information and may participate more readily in more informal designs, e.g., networks, task forces, specialized practice areas (particularly in professional associations), round table discussions, and retreats. That employment and training professionals participate for personal benefits and job security may indicate that career development models and approaches linking individual, group, and organizational goals with education and training models are important.

#### ***Reasons for Participation: Demographics***

Employment and training professionals' reasons for participation

were based on selected demographic characteristics, i.e., their role in the organization and gender; education level was not a factor. These members participate in CPE for reasons beyond content. Administrators and managers, when compared to line staff (professional/technical staff), placed significantly more importance on selected reasons for participation. Females placed significantly more importance than did males on reasons related to competence, collegiality, and service.

It will be necessary to narrow the program design to accommodate the needs of the various participants. Instructional designs should be congruent with the needs and motivations of the largest niches of participants. Marketing strategies should be customized based on demographic profiles. Since administrators can be key decision makers in the purchase of CPE for their professional staff, reasons for participation should be key in the development of targeted marketing messages.

### ***Attitudes Toward the Profession***

Five main factors represent the underlying attitudes of employment and training professionals toward their profession and provide evidence of the level or stage of their professionalization. The attitudes, based on mean scores and listed in rank order were (1) use of referent identity, (3) calling to the field, (4) belief in self-regulation, and (5) belief in autonomy. More interesting were the divergent views related to professional roles and customer service. The evidence of divergence or ambiguity of role definition and standard approaches indicates that this occupation is struggling with issues that are typical during early stages of the professionalization process. CPE practitioners can have an impact on the professionalization process through instructional designs and programming that clarifies these issues.

Clarification of professional roles, cross training, and providing orientation to the field are examples of methods for developing professional identities as well as clarifying service orientations that would be beneficial to the field. The lack of consensus of definition of service indicates that there are ambiguities related to the knowledge base and problems of practice which should determine curriculum priorities.

### **Conclusions and Their Impact on CPE Practitioners**

The findings suggest changes in instructional design and the role of planners of CPE. These data indicate that CPE practitioners will be challenged to:

- Facilitate the clarification of the professional roles, the knowledge base, and the problems of practice of the professionals for which they are programming;
- Customize activities based on the needs (reasons) of the professionals being served; and
- Examine the variables affecting participation in educational activities in order to support the development of holistic approaches to educational program design for professionals.

This line of research is particularly important to such emerging professions as the employment and training field in which the model for delivering education and training to members is still evolving. Holistic approaches to CPE program design call for new roles for continuing education practitioners. These roles include:

- Viewing the professional within the context of the profession and throughout the career of the professional;
- Understanding the factors influencing the professional, i.e., society, the profession, and the organizational setting;
- Understanding the interaction of the structural aspects of the work setting of the professionals;
- Understanding the relationship among attitudes toward the profession (factors which have impact for the program design and the training model used by the profession) as they relate to the reasons for participation in CPE; and
- Acknowledging that the reasons for participation, attitudes of professionals, and demographic characteristics of the profession have policy and planning implications for administrators of continuing professional education programs, units of governments, and the agencies that are responsible for funding and evaluating CPE activities.

Having a more complete understanding of the contextual variables influencing the learners in the professions enhances the potential for innovative instructional designs that create change and impact on systems, organizations, and the individual learners. Clearly researchers and practitioners have an opportunity to shape the directions in the field. By working together, practice and research are strengthened.

### **Recommendations for Future Study**

Further research is recommended. Areas of focus should include research in the areas of reasons for participation, stages of

professionalization of emerging professions, and identification of competencies required among CE practitioners in their changing roles serving occupations in various stages of professionalization. Specifically recommended are:

- Examination of the stability of reasons for participation among the professionals in various professions to determine if and when various factors emerge or recede during the professionalization process. Are variations based on (1) personal characteristics or (2) significant changes in the profession, i.e., related to certification, licensure, mandatory CPE, or other reasons?
- Examination of the impact of career stage and the reasons for participation, i.e., including (1) age entering the profession, (2) changes in life roles, (3) organizational roles, (4) structure of the organization, and (5) practice setting. For example, what are the typical reasons for participation for each career stage? Do professionals in isolated practice settings or in flat organizations (with less room for advancement) have different reasons for participation?

Increased knowledge of the reasons for participation and the components of the professional model related to a particular occupation or emerging profession allows for instructional designs to be linked more closely to the needs of the participants. With these data CPE practitioners can develop meaningful programming that will have an increased impact on the emerging profession and the public.

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