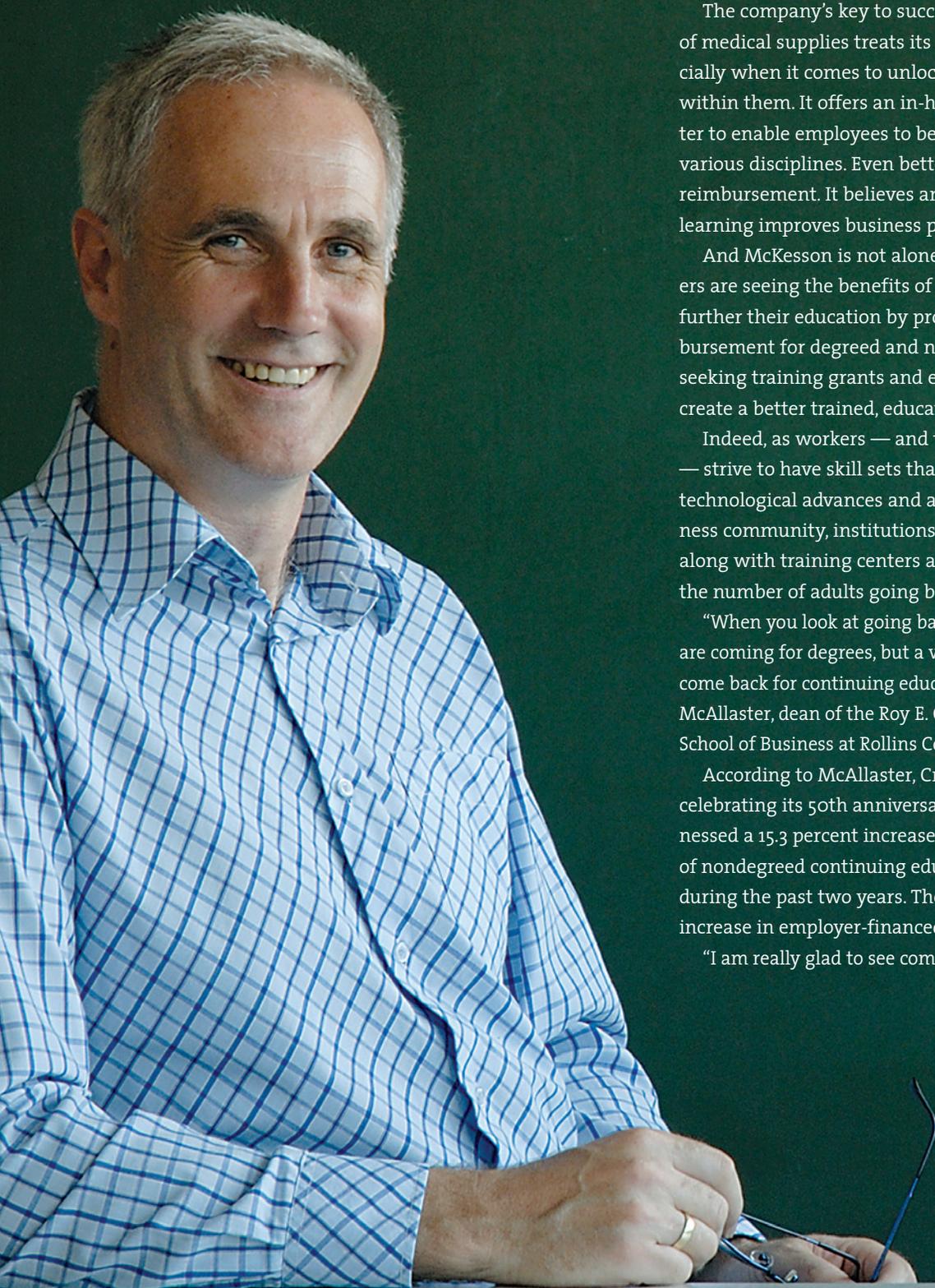


BACK TO SCHOOL

IN THIS CASE, THE STUDENTS ARE EMPLOYEES
LOOKING TO UPGRADE SKILLS, WITH THE HELP
OF THEIR EMPLOYERS.

by Kevin Fritz



WHEN MCKESSON MEDICAL Surgical won the Corporate Champion Award in this year's *Orlando Sentinel* annual salute to the Top 100 Companies for Working Families, company officials took it all in stride. McKesson had been in the Top 10 in 2005 and the Top 25 in 2004.

The company's key to success? This distributor of medical supplies treats its people well, especially when it comes to unlocking the potential within them. It offers an in-house learning center to enable employees to become certified in various disciplines. Even better, it offers tuition reimbursement. It believes an investment in learning improves business performance.

And McKesson is not alone. Many employers are seeing the benefits of helping employees further their education by providing tuition reimbursement for degreed and nondegreed courses, seeking training grants and exploring paths to create a better trained, educated workforce.

Indeed, as workers — and their companies — strive to have skill sets that keep pace with technological advances and a burgeoning business community, institutions of higher learning along with training centers are seeing a rise in the number of adults going back to school.

"When you look at going back to school, some are coming for degrees, but a very large number come back for continuing education," says Craig McAllaster, dean of the Roy E. Crummer Graduate School of Business at Rollins College in Winter Park.

According to McAllaster, Crummer, which is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year, has witnessed a 15.3 percent increase in the enrollment of nondegreed continuing education students during the past two years. There also has been an increase in employer-financed tuition.

"I am really glad to see companies are beginning

to invest in their people," McAllaster continues. "More and more companies are seeing the value of education.

"It makes the workplace a better place. With better leaders comes a better environment."

Similarly, nontraditional students find the Hamilton Holt School at Rollins College an ideal place to complete the education and degrees that their employers often demand. Holt School Dean Sharon M. Carrier says nearly all 1,200 students enrolled each year at Holt are considered continuing education students, since they go to school nights and weekends. Approximately 900 are undergraduate students seeking a bachelor's degree; roughly 300 are at the graduate level, pursuing a master's degree.

The same is true for area residents who attend Valencia Enterprises. "Many businesses are understanding the need to offer professional development and training to their employees, and these businesses are entering into agreements with Valencia Enterprises to provide for employee development," says Joe Battista, COO of Valencia Enterprises. A division of Valencia Community College, Valencia Enterprises serves individuals, corporations, community colleges and government agencies by offering open enrollment courses, corporate training, professional development and consulting with scheduling flexibility and location choices.

TIGHT MARKET FOR EMPLOYERS

With the majority of Central Florida's workforce at the high school graduate level, as tabulated by Workforce Central Florida (WCF), the need for training in Central Florida has become even more important. Obviously, a strong workforce creates a strong economy, and metro Orlando



The jobless level in metro Orlando is lower than the state and national averages.

is projected to be among the nation's fastest-growing population and employment centers. At the same time, Orlando's unemployment levels remain low.

The pressing issue is the need for more skilled workers, not just more workers. Thus, employers are focused on training their people.

"The point here is really the unemployment rate," explains Kimberly Cornett, WCF's vice president of communications and business development. She says the jobless level in the Orlando Metropolitan Statistical Area — consisting of Orange, Seminole, Lake, and Osceola counties — is lower than the state and national averages. There are approximately 1.5 million people employed in the MSA, while 39,420 are unemployed, of which "half are not employable because of hard backgrounds."

"We have an effective unemployment rate of 1.6 percent," Cornett cites. "When there is such a low unemployment rate, it is hard to fill jobs with qualified applicants."

WCF, a federally funded nonprofit placement and training agency, recently released data from

its State of the Workforce Central Florida 2006 study that show many employers are in dire need of more skilled workers. WCF surveyed nearly 500 employers in a five-county area (includes Sumter County in addition to the metro counties) to get their input on the most important issues facing local workforce development.

Among its findings, more than half (52 percent) of area employers said that lack of available skilled workers is the greatest challenge to local industry. In addition, 40 percent of those same employers said they have employees that currently need specialized training.

"Two of the big issues are increasing training for jobs and increasing retention of current workers," says Cornett.

WHO PAYS FOR WHAT?

What if your company just doesn't have the coffers to offer tuition reimbursement programs like McKesson? You can turn to WCF, which helps more than 4,700 employers connect with more than 54,000 job seekers each year. There are training scholarships for job seekers and training awards programs, to which employers

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can send their employees, with reimbursement through WCF.

“We have seen a rise in the number of employers seeking training awards,” Cornett says, pointing out that in 2006 there were more requests than funds available. “In the past, we did not have that demand. And this year, applications are coming in just as quickly.”

From his perspective, Tom Janke, Webster University’s regional director for Central and South Florida, has noticed employers stepping up to assist. “I think there is a rise in employer support,” he says. Of his enrolled students, 60 percent are now receiving tuition reimbursement from their employers. “The amount of reimbursement is up and the number of reimbursements is up,” he adds.

McAllaster contends that more companies are paying for the noncredit courses, like the mini-MBA and executive management education at Rollins.

CHANCE FOR A BRIGHTER FUTURE

Crystal Gross did it. Jacqueline Tremblay is doing it. Rayford Johnson did it and is doing it again. Loukeisha (Keisha) Benjamin-Akins is almost

EDUCATION ALLIANCE

A good initial place to begin your homework in identifying the best place to return to the classroom is the Central Florida Higher Education Alliance. Established in 2000, the alliance serves as an educational resource to the community and is comprised only of regionally accredited colleges and universities. Currently, there are 29 such members.

Ana G. Mendez University System

Barry University, School of Adult & Continuing Education

Belhaven College

Columbia College

DeVry University

Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University

Florida Christian College

Florida Hospital College of Health Sciences

Florida Institute of Technology

Florida Southern College – Orlando Program

Herzing College

Keiser University

Keller Graduate School of Management of DeVry University

Mountain State University Orlando

National-Louis University

Nova Southeastern University

Palm Beach Atlantic University

PolyTechnic University of the Americas

Rollins College, Crummer Graduate School of Business

Rollins College, Hamilton Holt School

Seminole Community College

Stetson University Graduate School

Troy University

University of Central Florida, Division of Graduate Studies

University of Florida College of Engineering

University of Phoenix

University of St. Francis

Warner Southern College

Webster University

“I entered the Crummer School with little prior work experience. In the five years since my graduation from the Early Advantage MBA program my career has quickly progressed, and I am now a finance director in a Fortune 500 company.”

Mykl Cheeseman '02MBA
 Director of Planning and Reporting
 Marriott Vacation Club International

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Mykl is a graduate of the Class of 2002 and was surveyed for the *Forbes* ranking. He, like many of our accomplished alumni, is a testament to what you can do with the essential business skills delivered by a Rollins MBA.

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INFORMATION SESSION

Saturday, October 27 at 10:00 am
 Thursday, November 29 at 6:00 pm
 Rollins College, Crummer Hall/Bush Executive Center
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done doing it. Each saw a chance to grab the proverbial brass ring and run with it.

Gross just earned a master's degree in accounting at Florida Metropolitan University's south Orlando campus,

with the help of the tuition reimbursement program offered by the Orlando Regional Chamber of Commerce. She took advantage of the program when she arrived at the chamber three years

ago. Now, she holds an advanced degree and a new job. Gross says a direct result of going back to school was her promotion from staff accountant to accounting manager.

Tremblay, marketing projects manager for InCharge, a nonprofit, credit-counseling organization, is working on her bachelor's degree in organizational communication at Rollins' Hamilton Holt School. InCharge pays 100 percent of tuition for a B average or better, and 50 percent for the cost of books.

Ray Johnson, who works for the Carrier Corp. in Orlando as its regional customer insurance manager, utilized Carrier's tuition reimbursement program, twice. First, he earned an associate's degree at Valencia Community College; now, he's studying for a bachelor's in organizational communication at Hamilton Holt. Carrier pays 100 percent of all costs.

Benjamin-Akins has been an employee at McKesson for more than eight years and is in her third year at the University of Phoenix, pursuing a dual major in business management and marketing. A truck driver, she always had the ambition and only needed assistance.

"I was taking out a lot of student loans before, and I couldn't keep up," Benjamin-Akins says. McKesson now pays three-quarters of her educational expenses.

"Our One McKesson Educational Assistance Program is for furthering their education or carrying them forward as a professional," says Karen Martin, McKesson's human resources coordinator. McKesson pays for eligible classes and expenses. And it's not just one of those tenure perks. Notably, anyone who has worked there for 90 days or more is eligible.

So, come next year, look for Benjamin-Akins in the marketing or business department. Her last class is in November 2008. Thanks to going back to school, a new career will await. ■

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