CONTINUING EDUCATION can give employees an edge in the workplace

Brandpoint

A volatile economy and tough job market have revived American workers' interest in continuing education. Now more than ever, adults are returning to educational environments to advance their skills, training and knowledge.

"Continuing education generally refers to any type of post-secondary education for the purpose of keeping current with changes in a particular field of study or for preparation to obtain a certification," says Dr. Marianne Greenfield, a program chair at Argosy University in Atlanta. "Some professions require that you earn continuing education credits in order to maintain a license. The goal of continuing education is to offer adults who already possess a college or university degree further opportunity for learning without having to enroll in a degree program."

"Now more than ever, it's important for employees and professionals to keep up with all the latest skills and relevant knowledge necessary to compete in today's workforce," says Dr. George Spagnola, chair of the College of Education at Argosy University in Sarasota. "While a traditional education is necessary in today's workforce, it is also a cornerstone upon which one can build a better future through continuing education."

Greenfield agrees. "As more and more people are obtaining academic degrees, the advantage lies with the candidate whose skills and knowledge are current and relevant in the workplace," she says. "Continuing education is especially important in areas such as human resources, engineering, technology, finance and health care, where rapid advances occur, leading to constantly evolving practices."

For many professions, certifications and licenses are requirements for employment opportunities, so continuing education is important for job seekers and professionals in those fields.

And obtaining continuing education is more convenient for learners. "Advances in technology have made continuing education more accessible," says Spagnola. "Options are available to pursue continuing education online, at a physical location or in a combination of both. These technology breakthroughs help so many to continue their education and advance their professional knowledge while working and raising a family."

Given the number of people raising families and working, that flexibility of education can be key to continuing education's success. Look for an institution or provider that can meet your educational needs while still allowing you to meet your personal and professional obligations.

"Seek out a student-centered institution that meets your needs both academically and non-academically," says Spagnola.

"Although there are many course providers who cater to those seeking continuing education, it is important to find an accredited institution to ensure your efforts yield results," says Greenfield. "Look for programs that offer you access to and learning from quality instructors with real-life experience in the specific field of study."

Make sure that the program you are considering is compatible with any requirements you will face for licensure.

And while there are costs associated with continuing education, many people can find financial assistance in the form of tuition assistance programs offered through their employers.

"Tuition assistance programs are of huge benefit to employees and the company," says Spagnola. "As an employee, you receive financial assistance for your education and your employer, in turn, gets an employee advancing their knowledge and skills and applying them to the organizations."
“The benefits far outweigh the expense, and many private sector employers will pay for or reimburse the expense if a compelling case is made for the added competitive advantage for the organization,” agrees Greenfield. “If your employer isn’t able to assist you with the costs, the Internal Revenue Service allows you to deduct a portion of qualifying continuing education expenses on your federal tax return.”