

# Job Shadow

How Business Can Help Attack the Dropout Crisis in America

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## Introduction

America's economic fabric hinges on one primary resource—our youth. Our businesses need to be able to rely on them having new ideas, technical skills, and leadership attributes.

Yet, a crisis is threatening young people, and it is putting our businesses and economy at risk.

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Just as our economy is recovering, the rate of teens dropping out of high school hovers around 30 percent, even more troubling, that percentage rises to nearly 50 percent in some of America's largest cities.

Between 2006 and 2007, students from low-income families were about 10 times more likely to drop out of high school compared to high-income students. Sadly, the trend appears to be worsening.

There is overwhelming evidence on the cost of dropouts to society. Since schools receive federal dollars based upon school enrollment, each student who leaves the system means less revenue for school districts. Dropouts earn less on average than graduates, thus generate fewer tax dollars. Dropouts who are unemployed depend on costly government support services.

A study by Johns Hopkins University estimated the cost to society of lost wages and increased poverty at \$250,000 per dropout. That comes to more than \$300 billion of lost productivity over their lifetimes, as estimated by the Alliance for Excellent Education.

In addition, not finishing high school increases the likelihood of becoming involved in crime. Nationwide, 68 percent of inmates in state prisons did not graduate from high school.



## **Job Shadowing**

### **A Program that Helps Reverse the Trend**

Why do students – many with tremendous potential -- drop out? Many students with passing grades drop out of school because they are bored and unable to comprehend the connection between classroom success and getting a good job, according to the groundbreaking 2006 survey report, *The Silent Epidemic*, commissioned by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

Job shadowing helps students learn about work by taking them behind the scenes in a business.

Sixty-nine percent - or 7 in 10 - of the respondents, who included nearly 500 ethnically and racially diverse students from cities, suburbs and rural areas, reported they simply were not motivated. Four out of five (81 percent) of students who participated in the Gates Foundation survey said there should be a stronger connection between school and work and that there should be more opportunities for real-world, experiential learning. These survey results constitute a loud wake-up call for an innovative approach to education that demonstrates relevancy to contemporary life.

One program that forges the critical link between school and the workplace is job shadowing.

Job shadowing links schools and businesses by providing students with an opportunity to spend time in a real workplace. Students learn from professionals about the skills and competencies necessary to be successful. They need this kind of connection to businesses, because in today's service economy they often do not know exactly what adults do at work, as young people did in agrarian and industrial times. Job shadowing helps students learn about work by taking them behind the scenes in a business, often providing their first real look at jobs in the 21st Century.

Spending time at a work site can even help change students' attitudes about school and about their future. A recent report that surveyed students after a Junior Achievement Job Shadow Initiative found that

- 98 percent of students agreed that doing well in school helps them achieve career goals



“This was a good way of helping us have a more focused mind and envision all the career possibilities out there. I liked the first-hand experience interacting with real workers who were so helpful.”

—Student about an AT&T/JA job shadow experience

- 90 percent of students felt the Job Shadow experience made them more aware of career options
- 88 percent of students felt that participating in Job Shadow made them realize the importance of staying in school

Job shadow programs also strengthen the relationship between a school and its community. Teachers develop working partnerships with businesses; and businesses respond by engaging with educators, administrators, and students.

Most job shadowing programs for high school students are half-day experiences, so they do not necessarily require a large investment in either time or money by their business partners. Typically, a company’s biggest investments in a job shadow program are the time that volunteers spend with students and a cafeteria meal at lunchtime - yet these small investments can have a life-changing impact on a teen. It is possible that a job shadow connection between school and work could be the catalyst that motivates some students to pose for a yearbook photo instead of a mug shot.

Sandra Miranda, at age 17, saw many of her classmates dropping out of school. She was a good student and wanted to stay in school, maybe even go to college, but she seemed to lack the motivation to continue. Then she met her business mentor during a job shadow experience sponsored by Junior Achievement, an internationally recognized leader in providing work-readiness programs to young people.

He talked to Sandra about his job as Chief Operating Officer—but more importantly he asked about her hopes and dreams, her goals and ambitions. He shared with her his own story of working many jobs to put himself through college. “I remember most vividly the hours we spent in his office talking about the road he had traveled in order to get where he was. He told me to use obstacles as an inspiration to prove to the world that I can realize my goals if I have determination . . . Sharing a day with a dedicated career mentor was one of the most rewarding experiences I had in high school,” she says. (Szot Gallaher, 2009).

## Job Shadowing

### Benefits for Students

While spending a day at a business site, students are exposed to real-world learning and the latest technology, but they also observe life skills that are as important as the traditional “three Rs” of basic education (reading, writing and arithmetic):

“A lot of the kids shadowed STEM-specific jobs . . . our vision for involving our local businesses in our schools is happening. We need this partnering to continue.”

—Tom Vermillion,  
chair of the Lenoir  
County (N.C.) STEM  
Initiative (Science,  
Technology,  
Engineering and  
Math)

- Dressing and speaking professionally
- Being on time and prepared to work
- Solving problems
- Working as part of a team

A job shadowing experience also demonstrates how students should:

- Use phone calls and email in a work environment
- Talk to fellow workers both above and below their own rank
- Provide effective, positive customer service

One of the key benefits of a job shadow program is that it helps students recognize the link between academic subjects and actual workplace skills. One student shadowed the owner of a stone company in suburban Chicago. The owner emphasized the importance of accurate measurement and math skills when estimating an order for a granite kitchen countertop. “Being off by just an eighth of an inch can mean the entire counter has to be scrapped—and that translates to a loss of hundreds or even thousands of dollars for my company.”

When Sandra Miranda spent the day with a manager, she saw him interact with fellow workers and learned what “a good leader can accomplish.” He used negotiating skills in his job and explained to her the importance of being bilingual when marketing to different cultures. She was so moved by his conversations with her that she became even more determined to reach her goal of going to college. Now, three years later, Sandra is about to graduate with a bachelor’s degree in Business Management (Szot Gallaher, 2009).

When students are presented with real reasons for learning math or grammar or science, they begin to make a connection between school and work. While shadowing a worker at an investment firm, a student explained that he saw first-hand how writing skills are important on the job, from composing brief memos to creating lengthy reports. Experiences such as these help students recognize the importance of what they are learning in class each day. They can start to answer that age-old question, “Why do I have to learn this?”

88 percent of students felt that participating in Job Shadow made them realize the importance of staying in school.

Beyond observing academic and work skills, students also benefit by talking about career goals with their hosts. Workers at all levels, from entry level to CEO, have probably had the same questions that students have about a job. The experience and knowledge adults share about their work can provide insights not available in a textbook. Sandra remembers most vividly how her JA Job Shadow mentor shared experiences about his background, and how he asked about her goals. She says, “To have the opportunity to look into your own future is not something that you get to do every day.”

Teachers concur about the benefits of job shadowing. In a study conducted by Junior Achievement, 92 percent of those surveyed said experiential learning helped to motivate students, and 85 percent felt job shadowing increased student interest in careers and post-secondary education. In fact, 79 percent believed programs such as job shadowing “helped curtail dropout rates.”



## Job Shadowing Benefits for Businesses

Job shadowing also provides benefits for business hosts. Employers can promote the quality of their products and services to a student who has already expressed curiosity about them. Although a job shadow experience is not a recruiting tool, workers are free to point out the advantages of their jobs, the strong commitment of their companies, and the satisfaction they derive from their work.

63 percent of employees reported an improved perception of their company as a better place to work compared to other companies.

When employers host students, they also are helping to ensure the quality of the future workforce. They have a unique opportunity to instill in students a sense of what it takes to be successful: the necessity for hard work and persistence, the importance of good communication, and a positive attitude.

In addition, job shadowing is a chance for an entire company to become involved in its community. While other programs may provide opportunities for only top-level executives to attend functions with stakeholders, job shadowing is a program that reaches employees at all levels. For example, previous job shadow mentors have included President George Bush, *The Today Show*'s Matt Lauer and Ann Curry, a former Miss America, and AT&T CEO Randall Stephenson. But other hosts have been security guards, custodians, and secretaries. Students learn from their experiences that every job in a company is important and that all employees depend on their peers to do their jobs well and to satisfy their customers.

Moreover, employees who volunteer view job shadowing as an important component of their corporate responsibility. In a study of workplace attitudes, workers at Deloitte were asked about their career objectives. Many said they were proud to work for a company that encouraged volunteerism, because being a volunteer actually enhanced other on-the-job competencies. Of those responding, 76 percent said that they were able to “hone their leadership skills . . . and develop skills they can use at work” through volunteering.



In addition, these other positive effects were noted:

- 63 percent of employees reported an improved perception of their company as a better place to work compared to other companies.
- 67 percent had increased job satisfaction levels.
- 54 percent were likely to make positive comments about their employer.
- Employees who participated in volunteer programs had higher retention rates, thus reducing the costly need to seek and train new employees.

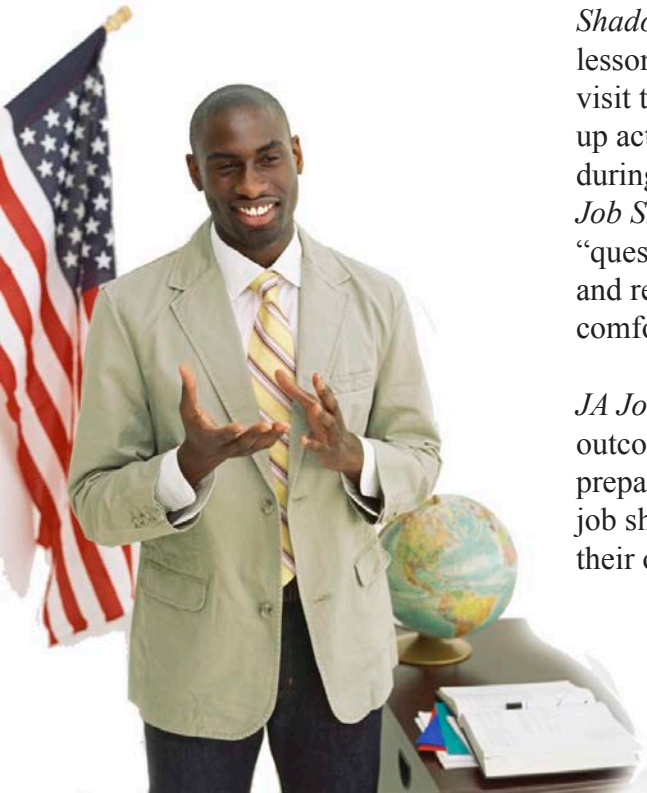
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Clearly, the value of volunteering works in both directions: Employees seek work environments with outreach potentials that enhance their leadership and communication skills. Companies seek employees whose attitudes and dedication enhance a corporation’s image and coincide with its mission. Results of the Educational Quality of the Workforce National Employer Survey confirm that the skills employers find most important are related to attitude and communication. It is precisely these kinds of skills that are promoted, demonstrated, and enhanced in a job shadow experience.

## **Job Shadowing** **A Working Partnership**

Schools play a critical role in the job shadow experience. In class, teachers who use Junior Achievement’s *JA Job Shadow* curriculum are provided with teacher-tested lessons that they can implement prior to the students’ visit to a work site. The curriculum also includes follow-up activities that reinforce what students have learned during their day at a business. Sandra’s teacher used the *JA Job Shadow* curriculum, and it helped Sandra formulate “questions to ask the job-site mentor about his position and responsibilities. The lessons made me feel more comfortable talking with a professional in the field.”

*JA Job Shadow* lessons help students understand the outcomes they should achieve. In addition, classroom preparation helps students to make connections during the job shadow visit—to see links between the work site and their own lives.



“ . . . students need to have opportunities through hands-on activities such as internships and job shadowing to experience and understand the connections between what they are learning in the classroom and what skills they will need in the working world.”

—Richard Burr,  
U.S. Senator, North  
Carolina

Volunteers form the second part of a job shadow partnership. Larger businesses may be able to provide many volunteers to host a dozen or more students, shadowing workers at varying levels of corporate responsibility. Smaller enterprises may have the resources to host only a few students. Regardless of size, however, each business provides meaningful, real-world experiences to its job shadow students. The JA training video explains that job shadow hosts should not try to teach students everything about their jobs during the short visit. Rather, a job shadow volunteer acts as a guide, demonstrating appropriate business behaviors. The volunteer’s major objective is to talk to students about workplace readiness and point out the link between school and work.

The third link in the job shadow chain is the business. JA has long been a leader in forging relationships between schools and businesses, so it is a valuable partner in a job shadow program. When JA links a business to potential job shadow classrooms, that business can influence others to get involved. Companies such as AT&T, Best Buy, and Cisco have recognized the benefits of job shadowing for their employees and for the students they host. They have pledged to expand their participation, and this year volunteers will help tens of thousands of students learn about the world of work.

Businesses that reach out to schools and students enjoy further benefit - clients and customers view them positively. The result, as described in a 2009 Summary Report by JA, is that “being a good corporate citizen can also be good for a company’s bottom line.”

## Conclusion

The partnership of schools, volunteers, businesses, and the community provides benefits to all: Students’ job shadow memories will remain with them as they examine and evaluate their career options, business volunteers will have made an impact on the lives of young people, and the entire community will enjoy a positive return on its investment in human capital.



Students represent the human capital that will grease the wheels of business in the future. The 2008 Junior Achievement/Harris Interactive survey cited above found that 54 percent of teens expected to have their “ideal job” someday (Junior Achievement Kids and Careers Poll, 2008). As teens seek to learn more about what they want to do in life, job shadowing presents a unique preview.

“JA Job Shadow opened my eyes to see what is out there when I graduate”

—Student about an AT&T/JA job shadow experience

Given the benefits that job shadowing provides to students, volunteers, businesses, and communities, getting involved makes good economic sense—and Junior Achievement helps make the involvement easy. JA volunteers connect schools with businesses, and they visit classrooms to introduce the *JA Job Shadow* curriculum. Teachers use the JA lessons both before and after the work-site visit so that students derive the full benefit of their experience.

The hours that businesses devote to students represent a small investment that can result in impressive returns for their businesses, their employees, their customers and their community. Sharing on-the-job time with a young person may help that teen focus on the link between education and a career; it might even deter a teen’s decision to drop out of school.

### Survey question

“When you consider hiring a new non-supervisory worker, how important are the following in your decision to hire?”  
(1 = not important; 5 = very important.)

Applicant Characteristics	Rank
Applicant’s attitude	4.6
Applicant’s communication skills	4.2
Previous work experience	4.0
Recommendations from current employees	3.4
Previous employer recommendation	3.4
Industry-based credentials	3.2
Years of completed schooling	2.9
Score on test as part of job interview	2.5
Academic performance/grades in school	2.5
Reputation of applicant’s school	2.4
Teacher recommendations	2.1

Source: Zemsky, Robert and Maria Iannozzi, “A Reality Check: First Findings from the EQW National Employer Survey” from [www.thelearningalliance.info/Docs/Jun2003/DOC-2003Jun25.1056539184.pdf](http://www.thelearningalliance.info/Docs/Jun2003/DOC-2003Jun25.1056539184.pdf), Dec. 9, 2009.

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