

RETRAINING FOR THE UNEMPLOYED — AN UP-HILL BATTLE THAT NEVER ENDS

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Index: Unemployment, Retraining, Re-employment, Life-long Learning

Abstract: The Employees Retraining Board (ERB) has a mission to provide quality retraining courses and services to enhance the employability of the unemployed and potentially unemployed. Its main target groups include people aged 30 or above with lower secondary education and low skills. Through an extensive network of Training Bodies, ERB provides free full-time retraining courses for the unemployed and heavily subsidized part-time courses on basic skills for the target groups. Full-time courses are placement-tied. The ERB has achieved a remarkable placement rate of over 70%, as a result of strong support from employers and trade associations, provision of quality multi-skilled training, and a comprehensive range of pre-training and post-training services. The ERB's long-term goal is to establish a competence-based Vocational Qualification Framework for Hong Kong.

BACKGROUND

Retraining of employees is extremely important both in times of economic downturn and prosperity, not only for the unemployed, but also for the potentially unemployed and those who need to up-keep their employability in the ever changing and competitive labour market.

The Hong Kong Government fully recognized the importance of retraining and established the Employees Retraining Board (ERB) as a statutory body in October 1992 under the Employees Retraining Ordinance. The ERB administers the Employees Retraining Scheme (ERS) and provide courses and services through a network of over 60 training bodies at 150 training centres throughout Hong Kong. Since its establishment, ERB has provided over 400,000 training places.

MISSION AND GOALS

In November 1998, ERB has reaffirmed its mission to provide quality retraining courses and services to enhance the employability of the unemployed and potentially unemployed to meet the needs of employers and the Hong Kong economy. It also has the goals of strengthening retrainees' learning ability and fostering a concept of life-long learning.

PRIMARY TARGETS AND TASKS

The ERB has the primary task of providing market-oriented and job specific training courses to equip the unemployed and potentially unemployed with the basic skills for re-employment. Its priority target groups are people aged 30 or above with no more than lower secondary education and low skill level. Such groups are most vulnerable in terms of employability and competitiveness in the labour market.

As many retrainees are the breadwinners in their families, ERB therefore offers short but highly focused full-time retraining courses for the unemployed to acquire the necessary skills for rejoining the labour force in the most cost-effective way. Full-time courses are free and for courses over one week or longer, retrainees will be paid a retraining allowance with no more than HK\$4,000 a month to subsidize their travelling and meal expenses. The amount of retraining allowance is subject to review in order to avoid hampering retrainees' incentives to work while ensuring that it is adequate for them to continue with their training. The ERB also offers heavily subsidized part-time courses to help employees to upkeep their generic job skills such as basic computer application and basic vocational language skills so as to remain competitive in the labour market.

STRATEGIC PLAN AND NEW INITIATIVES

The ERB is a dynamic and market-driven organization. It constantly reviews its strategies to cope with changing labour market. In November 1998, ERB formulated a comprehensive strategic plan with new initiatives in six major areas, including: (i) Enhancing the quantity and quality of courses and services, (ii) Extend scope of services, (iii) Upkeep market intelligence, (iv) Strengthen partnership with employers and stakeholders, (v) Enhance cost effectiveness, and (vi) Foster positive corporate image. These new initiatives are summed up in Annex I.

New initiatives in the strategic plan have been implemented with remarkable progress. The achievements have been made possible with the involvement of ERB's working partners, including training bodies and employer / trade associations. For example, ten Course Steering Groups with representatives from training bodies have restructured and standardized major retraining courses in modular form, so as to improve their quality, pave way for common assessment and gain recognition by employers, course providers and stakeholders. At the same time, over ten Trade Advisory Groups with representatives from employers have been set up to seek their advice and feedback on courses and the latest labour market information. Such strategic partnership has not only enabled ERB to offer market-driven courses and services to meet the needs of its customers, but has also provided ERB with the latest labour market information to plan ahead to tackle future challenges.

CORE MODULES IN FULL-TIME COURSES

The ERB fully recognizes that in a rapidly changing economy, employees must be equipped with multi skills and knowledge in order to remain competitive and to meet the needs of employers. Multi-skills training has been included in all its full-time courses. Transferable skills such as soft skills, basic computer skill, vocational languages and occupational safety, health and environment have been incorporated as core modules besides essential modules on job-specific skills. To respond to employers' feedback, ERB courses pay special emphasis on soft skills such as work attitude, service culture, teamwork, communication skill, work commitment and job search skill. In addition, to keep in line with IT development, basic computer skill is also a must for full-time training to enhance retrainees' learning ability, access to information and application of computer skills in their jobs.

DIVERSIFICATION OF COURSES

The ERB has managed to modernize and professionalize traditional occupations such as domestic helpers, building attendants and hair stylists assistants, by introducing new elements of job specific skills and the four core modules. Such an approach opens up more job opportunities for the

unemployed, particularly for those less educated and older ones.

To meet the need of a robust service and IT economy, ERB has developed and successfully piloted for full-scale implementation diversified market-driven courses such as IT Technical Assistants, Real Estate Agents, Life Insurance Agents and Building Service Craftsmen. All these courses have received favourable responses from both employers and the unemployed.

TAILOR-MADE COURSES

While ERB's courses turn out retrainees to meet the general needs of employers, it has placed heavy emphasis on developing Tailor-made Courses (TMC) to satisfy the specific needs of individual employers, groups of employers in certain trades, especially small and medium enterprises.

Tailor-made courses represent tripartite efforts of ERB, employers and training bodies in providing special training to the unemployed and in placing them into gainful employment with career prospects. Employers or trade associations involved in a TMC have to commit employment opportunities for the retrainees upon their satisfactory completion of the courses. Employers are heavily involved in the design and delivery of TMC. They also take part in recruitment of retrainees. They have to arrange site visits to let those who wish to apply for enrolment to have a better idea of the job nature and working environment before they make up their mind to apply for the course. Such arrangement should minimize subsequent dropout rates. Tailor-made courses have proven to be a great success with placement rate of over 80%.

PLACEMENT / FOLLOW-UP SERVICES

The ERB believes that it should not only provide retraining, but also follow-up services such as counseling and placement assistance to help the retrainees. All training bodies that offer full-time retraining courses have counseling and placement teams to help retrainees locate job opportunities and apply for jobs. Efforts of these placement and counseling teams, coupled with high quality market driven courses, have accounted for the high placement rate of over 70% for all retraining courses. To ensure that both employers and retrainees are satisfied with its services, ERB piloted a retention study in August/September 1999. 84% of the retrainees completed TMCs in January & February 1999 were found to have still remained employed and nearly half were still with the same employers. In future, retention surveys will be conducted for all tailor-made courses and regularly for all other full-time placement-tied courses.

To better serve its customers, ERB has set up a One-Stop-Service providing two service hotlines, one for employers to register job vacancies and another for the unemployed to enquire about courses.

RETRAINING RESOURCE CENTRES

Training and retraining is a continuous and life-long process for all. The ERB is convinced that life-long learning is especially important for the more vulnerable group of elderly workers with low education attainment and low skills. As ERB courses are normally of short duration, retrainee graduates may be helpless after placed into employment. The ERB has therefore set up Retraining Resource Centres (RRC) in various strategic locations of the territory to provide a comprehensive range of services, including pre-training and post-training counseling and follow-up services, latest market information, self-learning facilities and one-stop services for ERB retrainees, the unemployed

and others in need of such services. The first two RRCs have been set up in December 1999 and March 2000 in Jordan and Lok Fu respectively. More RRCs will be set up in strategic locations throughout Hong Kong in the next few years.

THE WAY AHEAD

Retraining the unemployed, especially the more vulnerable group of elderly worker with low education and low skills to re-enter the labour market is an uphill battle. In times of economic downturn, the importance of retraining for re-employment is crystal clear. Yet even in times of prosperity, retraining is still indispensable for helping rectify the mismatch of the labour market and upkeep the employability and competitiveness of our labour force. This is particularly true in the era of rapid IT development in Hong Kong. As Hong Kong transforms into an IT and high-tech economy, the employment prospects for the more vulnerable groups appears gloomy. Without proper retraining, these workers will paradoxically be the victims of future economic prosperity. The ERB will therefore have a great challenge ahead to retrain these workers to acquire the necessary skills and knowledge to enhance their employability. These groups of workers who have been deprived of the opportunity to be benefited from the traditional education system should be provided with an alternative route for skill upgrading and career advancement.

VOCATIONAL QUALIFICATION FRAMEWORK

The long-term goal of ERB therefore is to establish a continuous and preventive training system to minimize unemployment and a competence-based Vocational Qualifications Framework for Hong Kong. The aim is to offer an alternative route to enhance the skills and life-long learning opportunities for employees who may not have the chance to benefit from the traditional education system. The ERB has been working with the Education and Manpower Bureau and the Vocational Training Council in formulating such a framework.

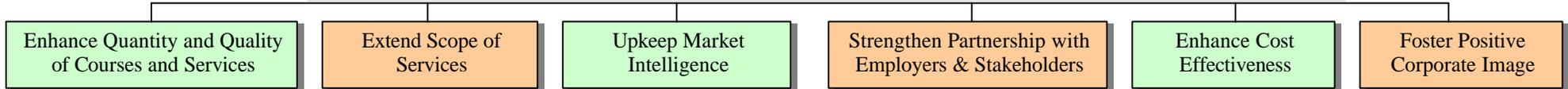
The ERB is not complacent with its achievements. It will strive for doing more and better to meet the needs of its customers and stakeholders – in particular employers and the unemployed. The ERB welcomes the opportunities to collaborate with employers, course providers, professional bodies, Government and all stakeholders to work for the betterment of our workforce and the Hong Kong economy in the new millenium.

EMPLOYEES RETRAINING BOARD

MISSION
To provide quality retraining courses and services to the unemployed and potentially unemployed in order to enhance their employability and meet the needs of employers and the Hong Kong economy.

MAIN GOAL
To achieve total customer satisfaction of the unemployed, potentially unemployed, employers and stakeholders.

Strategies (Key elements: Market-driven, Value-added, Proactive, Flexible, TQM)



Initiatives and Workplan for 1998/2001 (those with * will require policy decision, the rest have been approved for implementation)

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase training capacity of TBs • Buy training places from training providers * Review selection criteria of TBs and training centres • Review evaluation system and performance indicators for TBs • Seek recognition of ERB courses • Include 'soft skills' training, IT and vocational language for each course • Diversify types of courses and skills levels • Provide more tailor-made courses • Establish course steering groups and sectoral advisory committees • Standardize similar courses of TBs and upgrade their quality • Repackage training courses in modular forms • Provide intensive follow-up and placement services to retrainees • Enhance training of TB trainers and counter staff | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * • Extend courses services to all unemployed, irrespective of age, education level etc. * • Relax 70% placement target for all courses except tailor-made courses • Strengthen pre-training counseling services • Establish Resource Centres • Extend opening hours of ERB enquiry counter • Strengthen One-Stop Service • Offer proactively ERB services to newly or potentially retrenched employees | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthen labour market analysis • Collate and analyze existing labour market statistics and information • Study manpower needs in specific industries • Conduct researches to evaluate courses and services • Network and obtain feedback from employers, TBs and all possible sources • Share analyzed labour market information with other users | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain close liaison with employer/professional associations by being their corporate members • Include employer associations as TBs • Set up sectoral advisory committees • Establish regular forums with major employer associations • Enhance communication and strategic partnership with TBs • Maintain close co-operation with trade unions, community and welfare agencies • Strengthen co-operation with government departments e.g. Labour, Social Welfare. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthen financial and auditing process of TBs • Re-design budgeting cycle and unit costs • Issue and update course administration and accounting manuals for TBs • Computerize the provisions of courses and services • Strengthen Executive Office's secretariat services • Strengthen Executive Office's internal administration and financial management • Strengthen staff training and development to enhance efficiency and productivity | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhance corporate image • Reposition ERB's role • Increase ERB's transparency • Set performance pledge • Set guidelines for designing, equipping and packaging TBs' training centres with better image • Liaise closely with mass media and interested parties • Promote courses and services through publications, the press, electronic media, exhibitions and seminars |
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Long-term Objectives: Establish a continuous and preventive training system to minimize unemployment and a Vocational Qualification Framework for Hong Kong