

IMPROVING JOB PERFORMANCE OF NEIGHBORHOOD
YOUTH CORPS AIDES IN AN URBAN
RECREATION PROGRAM¹

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In most federal job training and employment programs, trainees' pay is not contingent on job performance, but upon physical presence. This study sought to increase the job performance of seven Neighborhood Youth Corps workers being paid an hourly wage for serving as aides in an urban recreation program. When thorough job descriptions and threatened termination of employment were insufficient to maintain adequate job performance, an attempt was made to make the hourly wage (required by the Neighborhood Youth Corps program) more contingent on job performance. When the number of hours credited the workers on their payroll sheets was proportional to their rating on a simple checklist of job performance, rather than to the number of hours they were present, their job performance was maintained at near-perfect levels. Although this simple semantic shift in emphasis—from "hours worked" to "hours *worked*"—was still interpreted as meeting the Neighborhood Youth Corps requirements for hourly pay, its behavioral effects were substantial. This simple procedure might be used in other training programs handicapped by hourly wage requirements.

The development of effective techniques for increasing job performance has been a major concern of most federal job training and employment programs. Training manuals have often stressed the effects of employer and employee attitudes on job performance. The need to improve the employee's self concept is considered a significant aspect of any successful job training program (e.g., Maclennan, 1969). In addition, the employer is told that he must be patient and understanding of cultural differences

(McDonald and Hood, 1970). Unfortunately these statements are rarely specified precisely enough to permit an objective evaluation of their influence on job performance.

Numerous studies have, however, investigated the effects of various training programs for the hard-core unemployed. Most have provided training in settings comparable to those in which the workers would eventually be employed (e.g., Beatty, 1973; Hodgson and Brenner, 1968; Janger, 1969; Mollenkopf, 1969; Patten and Clark, 1968). A common theme of these studies has been the desirability of explicit job descriptions, training in skills that will be required by a specific job, job instruction by demonstration, and frequent recognition for any improvement in work performance (Hodgson and Brenner, 1968; Phelps and Needham, 1973). Although most studies have been descriptive, a few experimental studies have generally indicated that workers completing the program outperformed nonenrollees or drop-outs and that training helped the workers obtain more full-time employment (e.g., Main, 1968; Solie, 1968). Un-

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fortunately, none of these studies has systematically examined the differential effects of these various components of a job training program on worker performance.

Several studies have indicated the importance of explicit job descriptions and frequent feedback on task performance for "on-the-job" training in such fields as mental health (Ayllon and Azrin, 1968; Gordon, 1969) and mental retardation (Panyon, Boozer, and Morris, 1970). However, these studies have generally been conducted with full-time staff members of an agency. The unique characteristics of part-time workers and the different demands of their tasks require development of training routines for this group of workers. Part-time workers, for example, generally receive intensive training in a setting comparable to, but distinct from, the setting(s) in which they will later be employed.

Most federal job training programs have included "on-the-job" training in a placement agency. One major placement agency for federal job training programs has been urban recreation programs (Montgomery, 1969; Villa, 1970). While academic programs are available to train professional workers in recreation, volunteers and part-time workers are usually given little training (Hawkins, 1968; Moore, 1970; Shivers, 1963), although they are often the ones who work most directly with program participants.

In the vast majority of these and other federal job training programs, trainees' pay is contingent simply on their physical presence, not on job performance. When trainees are not fulfilling their assigned tasks, often the only recourse a supervisor has is to fire them. By this time, however, the program will undoubtedly have suffered from the trainees' low level of job performance. Additionally, dismissal from one agency often means only transfer to another agency for the trainee, whose hourly pay most likely continues unchanged.

Statistical analyses of unemployment rates have indicated that teenagers have from two to four times higher unemployment rates than

other age groups, and that unemployment rates among the nonwhite labor force are about twice that of the white labor force (Mogull, 1973). The development of effective job training programs for nonwhite teenagers is thus especially critical.

In a study of Neighborhood Youth Corps members employed as paid students, Clark, Lachowicz, and Wolf (1968) suggested a procedure for increasing classroom performance that appears to have possibilities for use in other settings. In their study, pay was based on the number of academic assignments completed correctly, instead of on the number of hours the youths spent in a particular location allegedly working on the assignments.

The present study sought to use a similar method to increase job performance of seven Neighborhood Youth Corps workers being paid an hourly wage for serving as aides in an urban recreation program.

METHOD

Subjects

During the summer of 1970, seven black adolescents were placed by the Neighborhood Youth Corps as recreation aides at Turner House, a neighborhood recreation center in Kansas City, Kansas. Six were 14-yr-old enrollees in the In-School Youth division of the program. Three were boys and three were girls. The seventh youth was a 16-yr-old male enrolled in the Out-of-School Youth division. All were living in the area served by the recreation center and were paid \$1.65 per hour by the Neighborhood Youth Corps. During the first part of this study, one of the six In-School youths was supervising children in a day camp, and became a recreation aide on Day 9.

The Neighborhood Youth Corps staff appointed the Recreation Center Director, a 28-yr-old white male, as placement supervisor of the adolescents, responsible for supervising the work of the adolescents, evaluating their work performance, and turning in their number of

hours worked to the Neighborhood Youth Corps staff.

Setting

Turner House, a community center supported by the Episcopal Diocese of Kansas, is located in the most economically deprived area of the city. All adolescent residents of the area could participate in the game room drop-in program as often as they desired. An average of 35 persons attended the program each day, with a range from 18 to 67 persons present.

The game room, approximately 25 by 80 ft (7.5 by 24 m), contained the following equipment: two pool tables, a bumper pool table, a ping pong table, kik-it, three jump ropes, two jacks, four puzzles, one deck of cards, two checker games, one set of dominoes, and one chess set.

This room was open five days a week, 4 hr a day, from 1:00 to 3:00 p.m. and from 3:30 to 5:30 p.m. In addition, special recreation periods were offered from 3:00 to 3:30 and from 5:30 to 6:00 p.m. to all youths who earned them by completing simple tasks that helped maintain and beautify the building and grounds of the community center. The trainees were present during all recreation periods.

Procedures

Initially, the trainees were told by the Director that their job was "to help the kids, to teach the kids to play different games, and to supervise their play". When given these instructions, the workers spent most of their working hours playing games. This situation led to dissension among the staff paid by the Recreation Center and prevented the youth served by the Center from participating fully in the available activities.

In an effort to increase the level of work performed by the trainees, first, specific and objective job descriptions were drawn up for each worker, a daily checklist was developed from these job descriptions, and workers were observed to determine if they performed their as-

signed tasks; second, after the Director threatened to fire any workers who did not perform satisfactorily, the trainees' pay was made dependent on the percentage of tasks they completed each day.

Job Descriptions

When the general statement of the workers' job proved unsuccessful, the Director and the experimenters developed specific and objective job descriptions for each of the Youth Corps workers. In conjunction with the Director, each trainee chose the job that he or she most wanted to do. This study began the day after they were given their job descriptions.

Each job description outlined in detail where each worker should be during working hours, the tasks for which each was responsible, and the time by which these tasks should be completed. Table 1 presents a brief statement of each of the jobs.

The job description was used to develop a Daily Checklist. To determine whether trainees had completed their assigned tasks, observers used this checklist and recorded whether or not each trainee was in his designated area, and whether he had completely and correctly performed his assigned task at the appropriate time. Throughout all phases of the study, the observer immediately informed each trainee whenever he or she had not correctly completed a specific task. Table 2 presents a half-hour example of the Daily Checklist.

Observational Procedures

The observer used the Daily Checklist throughout the time the game room was open (from 1:00 to 6:00 p.m.) to assess each worker's performance. At each check, the observer informed the trainee of incomplete tasks. Times of observations were varied slightly each day so that observations were not entirely predictable by the trainees. Most of the checklist items were readily observable, such as whether the game equipment was prepared, the snack bar opened on time, or the trash cans emptied. For com-

Table 1
Brief Job Descriptions for Neighborhood Youth Corps Recreation Trainees

<i>Recreation Supervisor:</i>	For each time listed, record the number of persons in each activity area, and number playing, and the number of rule violations. Enforce immediately rule violations by writing the rule violated and the new program closing time on the blackboard.
<i>Facility Supervisor:</i>	Supervise program participants cleaning the center grounds and preparing the game room for recreation periods. Distribute passes for special recreation periods to those youths who correctly completed an assigned task.
<i>Snack Bar Supervisor:</i>	Operate a snack bar in the game room, inventory supplies, maintain a record of receipts for all purchases, and supervise cleanup periods in the snack area.
<i>Tournament Supervisor:</i>	Design and supervise daily tournaments for the younger program participants. Give a special recreation period pass to the winner of each period's tournament.
<i>Participant And Rule Monitor:</i>	Record names of participants in each activity area and minor rule violations not recorded by the Recreation Supervisor.
<i>Hall Monitor:</i>	Prevent participants from disrupting other on-going community center activities and graph data recorded by the other supervisors.

plete descriptions of each job, see Pierce (*unpublished*).

The number of possible checks for each trainee per day ranged from 10 for the hall monitors to 25 for the recreation supervisor and snack bar supervisor. The number of pos-

sible checks was variable because each worker had differing numbers of tasks to perform. If a worker was not scheduled to be present for a portion of the day, the per cent of tasks completed was calculated on the basis of checks made only when the worker was present. The

Table 2
Checklist of Staff Performance for 3:00 to 3:30 p.m. Time Period

<i>Time</i>	<i>Staff</i>	<i>In Assigned Area?</i>			<i>Job Completely Done?</i>		
			<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>		<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>
3:10	Rec. Supervisor	Recreation Room	—	—	Rec. room swept? Rec. room trash cans empty?	—	—
3:10	Par. & Rule Monitor	Recreation Room	—	—	Hallway, restrooms swept? Wastebaskets empty? Washbasins & mirrors washed?	—	—
3-3:30	Hall Monitor 1	In Hallway	—	—			
3:15	Rec. Supervisor	Recreation Room	—	—			
3:10	Snack Bar Super.	Behind Snack Bar	—	—	Kitchen swept? Wastebaskets empty? Counters & tables clean? Inventory done?	—	—
3:25	Tournament Super.	Small Games Area	—	—	Tournament set up?	—	—
3:30	Rec. Supervisor	Recreation Room	—	—	Closing time on blackboard? Rec. room doors open?	—	—

per cent of tasks completed on each of the previous days was posted beside the worker's daily sign-in sheet.

Reliability

The first author and a community resident served as the observers. Agreement between these observers was checked six times throughout the study, and at least once per condition. These reliability assessments were typically of a randomly selected portion of the Daily Checklist. For the first assessment, the observers independently used the Daily Checklist for the entire time. On the subsequent five assessments, the observations were of approximately one half-hour duration with a minimum of 20 different items. The percentage of agreement was calculated on a point-to-point basis for each item within the Daily Checklist. The first day that the second observer was in the game room, and the first time that he ever used the checklist, his agreement with the first author was 93%. The second time, they agreed 100% of the time. On the third reliability check, their agreement was 93%. On three subsequent checks, their agreement was always 100%. The mean agreement for all six checks was 98%.

Experimental Phases

Threat to fire. One week after the specific job descriptions were distributed, the Director met with the workers and told them he was still not satisfied with their performance. He threatened to fire (*i.e.*, terminate their placement at the Recreation Center) any or all of them if they did not improve. A seventh youth was added to the staff during this condition, was given his job description as Hall Monitor, and was told of the threat.

Pay for tasks completed. At the close of the eleventh recreation day, a second staff meeting was held. The Director explained that he did not want to fire anyone, but that the work was still not being satisfactorily completed and that he wanted them to learn to complete all their work. He told them that instead of pay being

based on the amount of time they were in the community center, pay would instead be based on the proportion of their job they completed each day. They would now be paid for their work time instead of clock time. For example, if they were present at their assigned location only half the time and completed only 50% of their tasks, they would be credited for a half-day's work, even though they were in the recreation center all day. As before, the per cent of tasks completed by each worker was posted each day and they were immediately told when they had not completed a task.

Even though the Neighborhood Youth Corps regulations stipulated that the youths were to be paid an hourly wage, the manner of calculating the number of hours was not described. The NYC staff was contacted before this phase of the study began and agreed to the above method of calculating hours worked.

Full pay. After the eighteenth recreation day, the staff was told that the observer had been given a job in the adjacent preschool and would no longer be able to check on their work. They were also told that they were doing a fine job and were urged by the Director to continue completing all their tasks. He stressed how much their work was helping the youths and what a tremendous help they were to him now that they were completing all of their tasks. He explained that since the observer would no longer be checking their work, they would now receive full pay. The observer now checked on their performance by taking frequent breaks from his preschool "work". During these breaks he observed the trainees' job performance. He returned to the preschool and recorded the workers' performance on the checklist making the same number of checks during this condition as in the previous conditions.

Pay for tasks completed. After the twenty-first day, the observer again openly checked the workers' performance and they were paid in proportion to the tasks they completed. This study ended when the Neighborhood Youth Corps summer program ended.

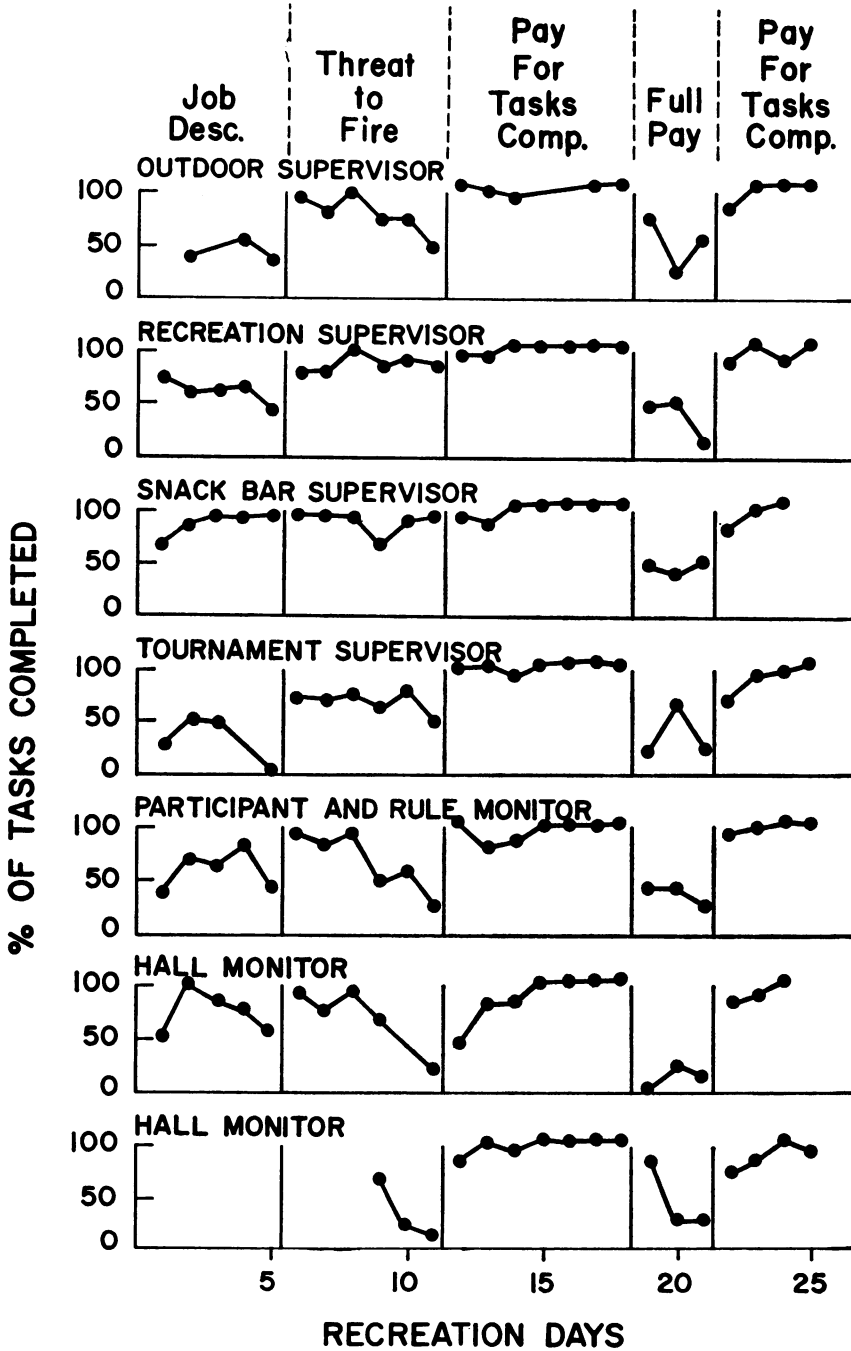


Fig. 1. The per cent of tasks completed each day by each recreation aide. Job descriptions were given each aide the day before Day 1 of this study. After the fifth day, the recreation director threatened to fire any or all of the aides unless they improved. From the twelfth to the eighteenth recreation day and from the twenty-second to the twenty-fifth recreation day, each aide's pay was based on the per cent of tasks completed each day. From the nineteenth to the twenty-first recreation day, each aide received full pay. With the exception of the full-pay condition, each aide was immediately informed when a task was not completed. The second hall monitor was added to the staff on the ninth recreation day.

RESULTS

Figure 1 shows the per cent of tasks completed by each trainee under each condition during the study. After the workers were given specific job descriptions, from 50% to 75% of the assigned tasks were generally completed. The snack bar supervisor was the one exception; he generally completed 90% of his assigned tasks.

When the Director threatened to fire the workers unless they immediately improved, five of the six workers increased the percentage of tasks completed on the first day after this threat. The sixth worker, the snack bar supervisor, continued to complete 90% of his tasks each day. The tournament supervisor changed more than the other workers, from doing none of her work on the fifth day, to completing 75% of her work on the day after the director had threatened to fire the staff.

After three days of improved performance, two of the five workers decreased to their former task completion level (see Participant and Rule Monitor, and Hall Monitor, Figure 1). One youth who was added to the staff during the threat-to-fire condition also decreased to a low level of performance after one day (see bottom graph, Figure 1).

When pay was made contingent on the performance of specific tasks, the percentage of completed tasks rose. As Figure 1 shows, all seven youths immediately completed and continued to complete nearly 100% of their work. When full pay was restored, the percentage of tasks completed decreased to the lowest levels of the study, averaging 35% over three days. However, completion of tasks increased immediately when pay was again made contingent on job performance.

DISCUSSION

Job training manuals for employers typically emphasize the need for explicit instructions and frequent feedback on task performance (Gor-

don, 1969). The present study demonstrated that these procedures were not sufficient. After receiving explicit job descriptions and immediately being told whenever they had not correctly completed a task, the Neighborhood Youth Corps workers generally completed only about 50% of their work.

The only recourse typically available to an agency supervisor whose trainees show a low level of job performance is to fire them. This is often undesirable because the agency probably needs manpower, lacks funds to hire well-trained staff, and may jeopardize its role as a placement agency. As far as the worker is concerned, "firing" simply means that his placement at that particular agency is terminated. The job training program staff then counsels the worker and places him in another agency. Thus, the effect of firing cannot be expected to be great. This study, in fact, demonstrated that threats to fire had only a temporary effect on most workers' performance.

Many federal training programs, such as the Neighborhood Youth Corps program, stipulate that workers are to be paid an hourly wage. Since the workers placed in an agency are not paid by that agency, the agency has little influence over the relationship between what the trainees are doing and the amount of pay they receive.

With the agreement of the Neighborhood Youth Corps staff, the manner of calculating work time was changed for the purpose of this study. The change in emphasis—from "*hours worked*" to "*hours worked*"—immediately and effectively increased the task performance of all workers. With this change in emphasis, all seven Neighborhood Youth Corps workers completed 100% of their work.

This relatively simple change in emphasis from clock time to work time might readily be implemented in most training programs. Many programs have a high drop-out rate, a high absenteeism rate, or have little effect on permanently changing the working patterns of the hard-core unemployed (Main, 1968; Patten

and Clark, 1968). Rather than firing workers who do not attain certain minimal standards, this performance-based requirement effectively increased the work performance of all trainees. The disruption of the program and the stigma on the employee of being fired were avoided. Thus, the employee was better served by this performance-based procedure. The employer may provide job opportunities for those individuals who would normally not be hired. His efforts of developing explicit job descriptions and formalizing the role of the worker's supervisor have the benefits of increasing the available manpower without sacrificing performance. Such a procedure would directly follow the recommendations of the American Psychological Association's Task Force on Employment Testing of Minority Groups (1969). The criteria of adequate job performance could be prepared jointly by the employer and the various labor representatives. Such was the case in this study in which the trainees examined and commented on each job description and agreed that the assigned tasks were appropriate before the study began.

This study demonstrated that calculating work time on the basis of being in the assigned place and completing the assigned tasks is an effective procedure for increasing the level of job performance by federal job trainees who were paid an hourly wage. Such a procedure is recommended for use by other training programs handicapped by hourly wage requirements.

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