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Education at IBM

Overview

Standing before a small brick building in Endicott, New York, in 1915, Thomas J. Watson Sr. delivered a speech to 235 employees of the Computing-Tabulating-Recording Company (C-T-R). With a piece of chalk and a blackboard, he outlined one of his theories of education. All employees, he said — whether in sales, service or management — were equals. Titles were irrelevant. Succeeding in any role, and in business in general, was contingent upon the desire to develop and to learn.

During his long tenure as the leader of the company that would become IBM, Watson grew ever more convinced of the importance of education. He harnessed it as an economic vehicle to improve the efficiency and engagement of his workforce, and more broadly to expand the cultural interest and awareness of his charges. Known for his tendency to liken meetings to classrooms, Watson was once described by a foreign education expert as "not so much a great executive as a great teacher, a great educator."

In 1916, C-T-R named its first manager of the Education Department and instituted a series of instructional sessions on the company's time-recording machines, on sales techniques, and for executive training. By 1917, these offerings had expanded to clients, with classes on installing and maintaining C-T-R equipment. Over the years, this emphasis on education would expand into sprawling customer training courses, a global education system for employees and their families, partnerships with universities, virtual classrooms and beyond.

Watson spearheaded a culture in which learning is not only supported and encouraged but also celebrated and prioritized. The company has steadfastly followed his lead ever since.

IBM's early education initiatives

'Be a teacher first'

As a self-taught entrepreneur, Watson's intrinsic drive to learn shaped his life and career. "Education is a subject that I am more interested in than anything else," he once said, "because I learned very early in my business career that it was necessary for me to gain more knowledge than I possessed. I did not have to speculate long before concluding that to gain that knowledge it would be necessary for me to study."

IBM followed with a series of training courses with more options for voluntary and continued education, including the Study Club in 1924, and the Owl Club a few years later. It began as a way to refresh employees on the applications of IBM machines but soon evolved into classes of general interest. Watson intended for the Owl Club to foster employee curiosity and social bonds. He believed that building a business required first building the aptitude of the workforce.

"In this day and age, education is the one master key we can depend on to open the door to future progress," Watson said in 1930. "The future of the International Business Machines Corporation, and of every person connected with the company, depends not upon the amount of time we spend in study; but upon what we learn and upon our ability to transfer our knowledge to

newcomers in the business so that they may keep step with the pace of IBM — a pace which is constantly increasing!”

Before long, Watson’s approach to education became rooted in all aspects of IBM operations and management. Henry W. Limper was appointed IBM’s first secretary of education in 1931. Two years later, the company opened its first full-time education center, known as the Endicott Schoolhouse. In 1935, Anne Van Vechten became IBM’s first secretary of education for women and the company founded THINK Magazine, a journal to bring stories on culture, politics, business and international affairs to IBMers and other interested readers across the nation.

By 1954, more than 26,000 men and women in management had passed through executive trainings in Endicott, and the IBM Department of Education was servicing more than 50,000 students per year. Watson Sr. died in 1956, but his focus on learning lived on among the company’s core values.