

# GROWERTALKS

## Columns

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### Apprenticeships

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*"Education is not preparation for work; work itself is education."*

I've taken the liberty to adapt a popular John Dewey quote because it explains why young growers have such a hard time building lasting and meaningful careers in horticulture. The greenhouse industry is desperate for highly skilled growers and I'm certainly not alone in calling the current qualification gap a crisis of education. Simply looking to the colleges and universities for improved "qualification" of growers is illusory, and consequently, a growing number of industry experts are exploring alternative solutions. Among the more attractive models are German-style apprenticeships, presumably because they seem to yield real-world outcomes.

I'm the result of an apprenticeship and I'm quite certain that the success of the model has little to do with the quality or delivery of technical education. A typical German apprentice receives far less technical or academic training than a college graduate in North America. The difference lies not in the method, but in the expected outcome.

Traditional apprenticeships don't end with graduates that are filled with cookbook knowledge; instead, the process is designed to kick-start continuous learning and make it a priority for life. Apprenticeships define work-life goals and work ethics for a future tradesman. Such clarity of expectations appears to be more beneficial for a budding career than any abundance of instantly applicable information.

In North America, we typically go to school so that we can get a good job, good income and a prestigious title that yields authority. Higher education has become somewhat synonymous with entitlement to prestige and money. Success is measured by the pace at which high income can be accomplished and by the authority an individual is able to wield in the workplace.

Very much in contrast, a traditional German apprenticeship has the primary goal of forming individuals who completely identify with their trade before offering income or authority. Technical knowledge and workmanship aren't instilled in a relatively short period of training, but are expected to develop during a

lifetime of pursuing the trade. Income and stature are expected to keep pace with professional development, but aren't primary goals. Success is measured by the degree of competency and skill, and by the knowledge that an individual is able to acquire over time.

How can you train someone to adopt improved work ethics and how do you get someone to identify with a profession? It can be done, but it inevitably requires very hard forms of learning, which are no longer popular. This is the crux that makes it practically impossible to model apprenticeships here in North America after the traditional German paradigm.

When I entered into my apprenticeship, I had to accept a binding contract. I wasn't able to quit before graduation and my employer wasn't allowed to fire me—at least not without serious consequences for both parties. I was “stuck” for three years, and the benefits were dramatic, albeit not immediately obvious. My training was old-fashioned and rough, and it started by being tasked with eight hours a day of the hardest physical labor that could be found in the greenhouse. My boss just wanted me to develop some muscle. Three days into my greenhouse career, my hands were full of blisters, my legs were burning and I was ready to quit. My boss just smiled and kept me going at the same pace for another four weeks. No college graduate today would put up with such treatment.

Being “stuck” allowed my boss to pressure me into embracing the challenges and rewards that can be found in a very difficult task. Eventually, I discovered that the exultation that comes from succeeding against the odds was worth every drop of sweat, but first I had to develop a lot of physical and mental stamina and overcome the frustrations and self-pity, which were the result of being asked more than what I was willing to give. I would have never learned these lessons voluntarily. The first few months of the experience were sheer torture for this young man, who came straight from high school and had never done any physical work.

In an apprenticeship, the student doesn't get information in appealing, easy-to-digest packages. Apprentices first experience WHAT to do, then they practice HOW to do it and then they learn WHY things work the way they do. When relevant questions arise from repeated daily practice, the answers are no longer dry theory and the knowledge sticks.

College education gets this backwards and inundates students with answers to questions that nobody has learned to ask ... yet. Once the students have been adequately stuffed with information, they enter a workplace where they expect a chance to apply their wisdom to the “management” of tasks for which the purpose and method still eludes them. Education alone cannot prepare someone to work, but work can prepare someone for better education. **GT**

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