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The Status of Training for Questioned Document Examiners in the United States

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ABSTRACT: Questioned document examination has traditionally used on-the-job training as its primary instructional method. There are several deficiencies inherent in this method of training, however. Some of these deficiencies are the lack of a standardized course of instruction, the inability to evaluate the quality of the training received by an individual, the absence of any criteria establishing minimum levels of competency, and the length of time required which results in a reluctance to hire trainees. These and other shortcomings in on-the-job training are discussed in view of a survey that was conducted of 249 document examiners associated with federal, state, county, local, and private laboratories. Some possible remedies to correct the weaknesses in the current approach to training are offered.

KEYWORDS: questioned documents, education, surveys, training

It is a truism that the future of any profession depends on the number and quality of individuals choosing that field of endeavor as their livelihood. That is to say, the ability of a profession to attract and retain qualified, competent, dedicated individuals to fill vacancies caused by attrition or expansion determines to a large extent that occupation's ability to maintain its status as a profession. This is particularly true of the field of questioned document examination because of its reliance upon the apprenticeship or internship method of training vis-a-vis academic instruction. Unless there is a continuous influx of highly trained, competent personnel, questioned documents as a field of study is in constant danger of moving from a respected profession to an art populated by practitioners with nebulous credentials.

In an effort to assess the current status of training for questioned document examiners in the United States, a survey was sent to 249 individuals, including both managers and examiners, who represented federal, state, county, local, and private organizations. After duplicate and incomplete returns were eliminated, 124 valid responses remained. The positions expressed in this paper are based upon the results of that survey; however, this treatise is in no way meant to be a comprehensive statistical examination of the returns. It should also be understood that the opinions expressed herein are the personal opinions of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position of the U.S. Postal Inspection Service.

The document examiner's heavy reliance upon experience to differentiate common versus uncommon characteristics has caused the profession to adopt a prolonged period of internship as the primary means of training new examiners. This reliance upon on-the-job training

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has several inherent deficiencies. First and foremost is the difficulty in evaluating the quality of training. The quality of instruction received by the trainee is dependent upon the competency of the examiner. A competent examiner is not necessarily a competent instructor, but an incompetent examiner who is an instructor removes all doubt about the future abilities of the trainee. Also, the fact that one has trained under an experienced examiner does not always ensure that one has trained under a competent examiner. Unfortunately, the quality of instruction received is difficult to assess from a description of the program on paper.

Training Programs

When queried about their training programs, 30 agencies indicated that they had a formal training program requiring an average of 2.5 years to complete. Nine other agencies indicated that they had no formal program per se, but required an average of 2.7 years of on-the-job training before considering an individual as qualified. It would thus seem that agencies compensate for the lack of a formal training program by lengthening the duration of the training process. This is not necessarily true, however, since it was found that respondents held widely disparate views of what constituted a formal training program. Definitions of a formal training program varied from the use of detailed manuals to a program of specified duration during which the individual would write research papers, attend seminars, and examine cases. Other respondents viewed the latter type of program as informal training.

The lack of agreement on what constitutes a formal versus an informal training program exemplifies a second deficiency in the apprenticeship method, that is, the lack of standardization in the various training programs. While it is generally agreed that a training program should be of two to three years' duration, the content of the program is a matter of individual discretion. It is notable that the American Academy of Forensic Sciences, the American Society of Questioned Document Examiners, and the American Board of Forensic Document Examiners have all set specific requirements as to the number of years of experience and training needed to apply for membership or certification, yet none have any specifications as to the content of the training other than it occur in a "recognized" laboratory or under a "recognized" individual. Thus the content of a training program often closely mirrors the type of casework handled by the agency. There is nothing inherently wrong with this situation, especially from the point of view of the employing agency, unless the examiner's duties require experience with only a limited type of casework, for example, signature verification. Under these circumstances it is possible for an individual to be certified as a document examiner yet have experience in only one area of questioned documents.

Almost as a corollary to the existence of nonstandardized training programs, there is a lack of universally accepted objective criteria to measure the trainee's progress or proficiency. Graduation from trainee to bench examiner often requires meeting two criteria: the tenacity to endure a specified duration of training and the ability to foster a belief in the instructor's mind that the trainee is ready.

These are not new nor are they divine revelations. In 1975, the Forensic Science Foundation [1] and the Federal Bureau of Investigation [2] conducted surveys to ascertain training requirements and needs. At that time, many of the deficiencies associated with on-the-job training were noted. Several attempts have been made in subsequent years to formalize the training process through the establishment of college-level curricula and, in one instance, a graduate-level course of study which resulted in a master's degree with a major in questioned documents. These efforts have had limited success as a result of their inability to provide the requisite practical experience.

On-the-Job Training

So what is the point of the previous discussion? To castigate and denigrate questioned document examination as a profession? Certainly not. The point is to illustrate the fact that

no matter how flawed on-the-job training may be, it is currently the only viable instructional method. To paraphrase Winston Churchill, on-the-job training is the worst form of training, but it beats all the others. Thus, questioned document examination, more than most other forensic sciences, is forced to rely on itself to replenish its ranks as opposed to delegating training responsibilities to colleges or other schools of instruction. The question then is whether or not the field of questioned document examination is preparing an adequate number of well-trained examiners to meet its future needs. The answer to this question is a resounding no.

Of the 124 responses to this author's survey, 44 respondents indicated that they currently have, or anticipate having, available positions for document examiners. Of the 44 positions, 27 are restricted to experienced examiners. Of the 17 current or anticipated training positions, 7 are restricted to police officers in the respective agencies and one additional position will be filled from current employees of the offering agency. Thus, only 8 of the 44 (18%) indicated that current or anticipated additional positions in the field would be open to outside individuals wishing to enter the profession, in spite of the fact that 16 of the 27 openings for qualified examiners are in agencies that already employ experienced examiners. Even on the basis of these admittedly limited figures, we can hardly be assured that we are availing ourselves of the best candidates through such restrictive recruiting practices.

Discussion

Why the reluctance to train? The answer to this question is complex. In addition to the shortcomings in the training process itself, there are additional difficulties to be overcome from the manager's perspective. Many agencies restrict laboratory positions to the ranks of sworn police officers. There are merits and demerits to this position, but this argument deserves a discussion in and of itself. Suffice it to say here that the situation exists. Most other laboratories operate under a reactive rather than a preventive method of management. This statement is not meant to cast aspersions on laboratory directors. Instead, it is an observation that because of budgetary constraints, complicated and convoluted personnel procedures, or any number of other reasons, laboratory management is unable to easily acquire additional personnel. A laboratory is normally able to justify hiring an additional examiner only when a section becomes critically overloaded with casework. Training a new person often impairs the productivity of the section by causing each case to be examined twice, thereby compounding the problem while offering no assurances that the trainee will progress to become a qualified examiner. When additional openings do become available, personnel policies usually make it easier to hire experienced examiners. Thus, expediency becomes a major factor in the decision not to hire trainees if at all possible.

If the decision is made to hire a trainee, the population of available candidates is often curtailed. When a director is not restricted to a particular type of person, that is, sworn personnel, they are often limited to candidate lists compiled for what the agency considers to be related jobs (chemists, laboratory technicians, and so forth) or the trainee position is used as a promotional opportunity for current agency employees.

These then are the problems with the current system. What are the ramifications? As the number of available positions for examiners increases and the supply of examiners decreases, salaries tend to rise. A shortage of trained examiners also provides opportunities for private practitioners to contract their services to government agencies. Everyone seems to come out a winner.

The long-range consequences of a chronic shortage of examiners, however, are disastrous. As the number of retiring examiners increases, the shortage of experienced replacements will become more critical. Agencies that cannot find experienced examiners or cannot afford their salaries will turn to less qualified or unqualified applicants. This situation already exists to some extent: How often has the document profession decried the hiring of a grapholo-

gist as a document examiner by a government agency? Ironically, some of the same individuals that were initially considered to be unqualified will, after a period of time, go on to become respected members of the various professional associations, including the Academy, as if their affiliation with a government agency automatically compensates for deficiencies in training. We as a profession are as culpable as the employing agency when this situation arises because of our failure to provide an adequate number of trained examiners.

The private practitioner must also stand under indictment. Although it is true that most private examiners do not have a substantial enough practice to support a trainee, there are several practices which choose or have chosen to hire experienced examiners for the same reason of expediency. Because of their resources, government agencies have supplanted private practitioners as the main source of training, but the responsibility for the profession as a whole extends to all examiners, both private and public.

Recommendations

What then are the answers to these problems? There are several measures that can be taken to promote training. First, it is incumbent upon the professional organizations, namely the American Academy of Forensic Sciences, the American Society of Questioned Document Examiners, and the American Board of Forensic Document Examiners, to re-evaluate their criteria for determining what constitutes a "recognized" laboratory or individual. All too often recognition is granted solely on the basis of the agency's or examiner's name recognition, thus contributing to the charges of elitism that have so often been leveled against our associations and certifying body. Efforts must be made by the Academy, Society, and the American Board of Forensic Document Examiners to establish and adopt specific, demonstrative criteria that define a recognized laboratory or individual. A good place to start would be the criteria set forth in the American Society of Crime Laboratory Directors Laboratory Accreditation Manual. As has been stated, the mere requirement that the trainer be a member of one organization or another is not an assurance of a quality training program.

Second, the American Academy of Forensic Sciences, the American Society of Questioned Document Examiners, and the American Board of Forensic Examiners should develop and adopt a mutually agreeable, recommended model training program. While such a program cannot be made mandatory, it does serve several useful functions: it provides a basis for evaluating applicants for admission to membership or certification or both; provides clear guidelines to examiners who are training new people; and gives the courts another means to evaluate the competency of witnesses purporting to be document examiners. The existence of such a model training program would also go a long way towards defining a "recognized" laboratory or individual by examining their adherence to the model training program.

To develop such a program, however, the definition of what constitutes a document examiner needs to be established. Is a handwriting examiner or an ink chemist or a printer necessarily a document examiner? Conversely, should a document examiner be considered an ink specialist? A model training program would help to establish the parameters of the profession. The efficacy of the model training program, however, would greatly depend on the adoption and the adherence to its standards by all of the professional organizations.

Third, the American Board of Forensic Document Examiners should require that the certification examination be taken at the completion of the training program. If the function of the certification program is to attest to an individual's competency, the required two-year waiting period makes little sense. It is analogous to requiring a law school graduate to wait two years to take the law boards, yet allowing the individual to practice law in the meantime. If individuals are competent enough to conduct routine casework at the completion of their training, then they should also be competent enough to pass the certification test. Adopting certification as a requirement for the completion of the model training program would also

encourage the Board to spend less time devising trick questions and put more emphasis on defining the basic skills required of a document examiner.

Fourth, the American Academy of Forensic Sciences and the American Society of Questioned Document Examiners should adopt certification by the American Board of Forensic Document Examiners as either a requirement for admittance into membership or a requirement for promotion to the level of member. If in fact certification is a means of establishing a person's competency and if in fact the organizations do hold that certification is necessary for the advancement of the profession, then requiring certification for membership should be an obvious step. Before such importance is attached to certification, however, the American Board of Forensic Document Examiners should be made more accountable to the diplomats in order to ensure that the requirements and practices of the Board accurately reflect the views of the profession.

Fifth, efforts must be made to promote training as a means of acquiring or replacing personnel. Currently, the decision to train almost carries the stigma that one is forced to hire a trainee because of salary deficiencies or because the lab is a "cop shop." Examiners need to change their perception of training as a chore to that of a preferred choice. We must also convince our superiors of the need for planned rather than panicked replacement of document examiners because of the long lead time required for training. Trainees should be encouraged to join the professional organizations as a criterion for promotion. Inducements to join, such as the reduced membership rate offered trainee affiliates by the Academy, should be offered.

Finally, we as individual members of our profession need to remind ourselves of our responsibilities to our field. If we claim professional status, we must accept professional responsibility. In application, this means that we must also consider the needs of the field when making decisions on whether to hire a trainee or a qualified examiner. This may sound like pie-in-the-sky idealism, but it is preferable to head-in-the-sand myopia. It is true that these measures are only a start and not a final solution. Quite often we are forced to make decisions based on circumstances beyond our control. But expediency, apathy, and self-interest must not replace professional commitment, lest we allow our standards to deteriorate. For if this occurs, we have no one but ourselves to blame.

References

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