



Workplace Learning Bridging Employer and Employee Needs in BC's Capital Region

In Victoria's tight labour market, it's tough to recruit and retain qualified employees. One proven solution is to strengthen workplace learning programs. Employers who invest in their workers' education find they are able to recruit, retain and promote the best employees – invaluable in a region challenged by one of the lowest unemployment rates in the country. Victoria READ Society's *Workplace Learning Project* is exploring affordable ways to help employers provide training for workers at all levels. In today's rapidly changing economy, creating a climate of continuous learning is important for developing a competitive workforce and sustaining a healthy bottom line.

Industry sectors struggling with the greatest labour shortages are being addressed first – construction, retail sales, accommodation, food service, and healthcare. A steering group has been formed, with the intention of having local representatives from each sector is guiding the work.

The initial phase of the project involves confidential interviews with employers and employees to understand the particular challenges employers and workers face. We're gathering advice, insights, success stories and concerns around workplace learning. Simultaneously, an international literature review is being conducted to uncover best practices in workplace education. The result will be options for sustainable, affordable workplace education programs, tailored specifically to Greater Victoria's labour market and small business climate. Project findings will be published in early 2009.

Why Workplace Learning?

The Canadian economy has shifted from reliance on manufacturing and natural resources to a knowledge-based economy. Global competition and rapid changes in technology require continuous learning and adaptation.

There is an especially critical need to help workers with low literacy. The skill levels of 42 per cent of working-age Canadians (16-65) are below what's needed for jobs being created by our current economy. Most employees can read and write, but they may struggle to complete forms, comprehend written instructions, accurately calculate numbers or use computers.

Skill gaps hurt business and create hidden barriers to successful employment. Companies get hit with lower productivity, high staff turnover and increased costs due to health and safety violations. For employees, low skill levels translate into lower earnings, fewer work days and longer periods of unemployment over the course of their career.

Promising Practices

Basic skills are indispensable in order for Canadians to keep pace with the continuous change of today's world of work. Basic skills include reading text, document use, numeracy, writing, oral communication, and problem solving. These skills can be developed at increasing levels of complexity throughout life. They provide the foundation for all other learning and enable people to adapt as their jobs change.

Basic skills education takes place informally in most workplaces, with people helping each other as needed. Workplace learning programs make this process more systematic and effective. Some of the most successful programs blend basic skills education with job training. In those programs, workplace learning specialists create lessons, using real workplace documents such as forms, safety manuals, charts and other materials specific to each job.

Many employers are understandably concerned about the time and expense of implementing a workplace learning program. And employees usually find it intimidating to admit they need help on basic skills. When they do, it's rare that they can manage to attend extra classes while holding down a job. This project is uncovering options that address those concerns.

Benefits for Employers

Canadian businesses that have addressed the need for workplace learning report:

- Increased productivity
- Improved health and safety (fewer injuries and Worker's Compensation claims)
- Reduced product defects
- Becoming an "employer of choice," able to recruit the most valuable employees
- Greater employee loyalty and retention
- Ability to promote from within
- Improved morale and labour-management relations
- Employees who:
 - Are confident, willing to adapt to changes and participate in ongoing training
 - Have better team-building and problem-solving skills

Benefits for Employees

Employees who have participated in workplace learning report:

- More opportunities for advancement
- Higher earnings over the course of their career
- Increased confidence and ability to adapt to workplace changes
- An increase in transferable skills
- Better relationships on the job and better problem-solving skills
- Improved job satisfaction and overall quality of life

How You Can Participate in This Project

- Confidential Interviews
 - If you are an employer or worker in construction, retail sales, accommodation, food service, or healthcare, **call us to schedule a confidential interview.**
- Community Presentations
 - Contact us for free information, resources and presentations on workplace learning.

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