

Canadian CEO

SHOWCASING LEADERSHIP
IN WORKPLACE LITERACY

The Cavendish way

How one Prince Edward Island firm's on-site learning program turned the company into a preferred employer

Opening opportunities

Ontario's Workplace Safety and Insurance Board has a policy on education that helps employees reach their full potential

Union drive

Canada's union movement has a long history as a pioneering champion of skills training and workplace education

Shop talk

Listen in as corporate and union heads define and debate key training issues to make Canada more competitive

The fabric of success

Firestone Textiles' John McQuade draws a direct line between workplace education and his industry's ability to compete



A pattern for success

Management and unions work together in the textiles industry to weave a competitive edge through literacy and training programs

BY STUART FOXMAN

JOHN MCQUADE KNOWS THE IMPORTANCE of learning from his own experience. While working his way up at Firestone Textiles, he studied at night school, earning first a BA in Economics, then an MBA. "I know what it did in my career," says McQuade, now General Manager of Firestone's plant in Woodstock, ON. "The value of education is something that stays with you."

McQuade's appreciation of that value, both for an individual and for a company, is everywhere in evidence at the plant. He points to Firestone's Education and Development Centre, where courses are geared to cover everything from boosting productivity to improving safety. And he's particularly proud to discuss the General Educational Development (GED) program held in the plant last winter and spring, when 16 employees worked towards their high-school diploma. Such programs, McQuade knows, are key to success in the workplace. Firestone's machine operators simply couldn't pursue their requisite job training, let alone consider other forms of education, without the foundation of literacy training. "If you're struggling with reading, writing or problem solving," says Tammy Crane, a Process Engineering Technician at Firestone and formerly Assistant Chief Steward of Local 175 of the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW), "any improvement is worth its weight in gold."

The Woodstock learning centre is a shared commitment between Firestone's management and the UFCW. While all of the programs are important, a needs assessment undertaken by the company determined that the highest educational priority was the foundational GED.

With teaching help from Fanshawe College in nearby London, ON, participants in the 20-week, on-site program attended two morning sessions per week, with the flexibility to juggle work schedules if the sessions conflicted with their work shifts. On completion of the program, students could write the Ministry of Education's GED exam and obtain their high-school diploma.

It's a challenge to run educational programs in a 24/7 operating environment, so having an education facility on-site is a huge benefit. It would be difficult for personnel to take the GED program at Fanshawe College itself, but the centre gives them a quiet spot to learn at work, away from the shop floor. With the union-management initiative in place, employees jumped at the opportunity with a determination that impressed McQuade. "Some are immigrants, who left their country in their teens, and didn't know English. Others had to go to work early, maybe because of a death in the family, to be the breadwinner. There are a lot of stories here. And still hanging over them is the fact that they never fin-

ished high school. This validates them."

Through its learning centre and the GED program, Firestone, which produces nylon tire cords for its parent company as well as industrial yarn and nylon resins, is planting the seeds of a learning culture. Far from being an isolated initiative, it's one of a burgeoning roster of similar programs in the textiles sector that are crucial to overcome numerous challenges, including increasingly stiff competition from low-wage countries.

Urgent training needs

Textiles is a key manufacturing sector, employing tens of thousands and contributing almost \$5.5 billion to Canada's gross domestic product.

The industry uses an increasingly sophisticated suite of production equipment to maintain a competitive edge, which means there's a pressing need for a skilled workforce and a premium placed on skills upgrades. Simply put, worker training and the industry's prosperity go hand-in-hand.

This current attention to skills upgrading redresses another urgent need. In 1996, Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) released the report, *Investing in People*, which found that just over 40 per cent of textiles companies surveyed said their employees lacked the essential skills to do their current jobs, and about 40 per cent



PHOTOGRAPHY: BRIAN HILLIER

GENERAL MANAGER JOHN McQUADE (STANDING) AND JOHN HUNT OF THE HR DEPARTMENT IN FIRESTONE TEXTILES' TRAINING CENTRE IN WOODSTOCK, ON

of production personnel did not have a high-school diploma. At the same time, HRDC also revealed that only 40 per cent of Canadian textiles firms had any formal human-resources plans in place, and only about 20 per cent had a full-time HR

person – or a joint employer-employee committee – to address training needs. “Low levels of literacy and numeracy skills,” the Price Waterhouse report for HRDC concluded, “have an impact on the capacity of the industry to fill the gap between employee

skills and company requirements.”

In 1994, the industry formed the Textiles Human Resources Council (THRC), an Ottawa-based, non-profit partnership, led by a board of six industry executives (Firestone’s McQuade is one) and six senior union



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FRANÇOIS BÉDARD
BEAULIEU CANADA

representatives. THRC gets funding from the federal government's Sector Council Program, and from the industry through membership fees, sponsorships, conference registrations and shared-cost projects. With 12 staff and two standing committees made up of representatives from business, unions, industry groups, educational institutions and government, THRC works to build a training and education infrastructure for textiles manufacturers. Firestone's learning centre, facilitated by the THRC, is one example. THRC also conducts needs assessments, develops training programs and evaluates their impact.

THRC's board came to the conclusion that its top priority should be to make sure that workers have "essential skills" – in literacy, numeracy, computer operating, communicating, problem solving and team building.

Without these, says THRC Executive Director John Saliba, employees would never be able to adapt to new technologies, to the speed of change in the industry, or even to new forms of education such as computer-based training. "Literacy is the essential building block."

■ Gaining confidence

François Bédard, President and CEO of Quebec-based Beaulieu Canada, the country's largest manufacturer of broadloom carpet, would agree. His company would

like to offer e-learning with THRC's help, but Bédard knows that such an effort will be for naught if employees aren't comfortable around a computer – or, more fundamentally, are challenged in reading and writing. As is true of the whole industry, a large proportion of Beaulieu employees never finished high school. As a result, in one instance, many were not able to complete a health-and-safety quiz, not because they didn't know the answers necessarily, but because of low literacy skills. "As we move to e-learning, the first step is to help employees at that basic level," says Bédard, who is also a THRC board member. "They need the confidence to participate."

To address the need, Beaulieu has offered a voluntary, 150-hour program at two of its four plants over the past 15 months. With funding from Emploi Québec and training provided by local school boards, the program attracted 45 participants. François Lallier, formerly Director of Training at Beaulieu, says the company will conduct a formal analysis of the value of this training, but believes the benefits of the investment are indisputable. With a more literate workforce, one that can move more easily and effectively through further job-related education, Lallier expects increased productivity, better quality of work and a greater "sense of belonging and satisfaction."

At Firestone, McQuade and Crane look

for similar results. All participants completed their company's GED program and were expected to take the exam to get their high-school diploma by the end of 2006. These students, says McQuade, are now better able to use other business English and basic math materials offered through THRC or UFCW, and the participants' success in the program has effectively boosted morale. The company's training focus has also yielded some demonstrable results in improved process and production efficiencies. In 2006, for example, Firestone has seen markedly fewer instances of defective fabric generated and a significant improvement in employee response when production anomalies occur.

■ Strong partnership

For successes like Firestone's and Beaulieu's, unions and employers have to work together. "If we don't," says Bédard, "there's not even a slight chance of success."

Jules Lague, Executive Officer with the Centrale des syndicats démocratiques, a Beaulieu mechanic and a member of the company's training committee, says the relationship between the union and management is characterized by trust and transparency. Both partners recognize they must work together to get through challenging times, and the literacy program underscores the value they both place on training overall. In fact, each employee at Beaulieu will have an individual training plan, with both management and the union having input.

THRC promotes a structured approach to training, for which the skills and learning sites established at Beaulieu and Firestone are models. Each site is developed according to individual company needs and resources, including the available physical space. In the case of Firestone, for example, the company renovated a storage area at a cost of about \$140,000, while THRC provided the computers, furnishings and learning materials.



“Literacy is key to ensuring that employees have the skills to meet the demands of today’s workplace”

ROB KELLOCK
STEDFAST INC.

While THRC provides advice and guidance, a joint union-management committee is intimately involved in every phase of the development and operation of the site.

Such collaboration on training isn’t a matter of a collective agreement, says Saliba, or of negotiating participation from both partners. THRC simply insists upon the equal involvement of the union and management. “Organizations with a negative, adversarial culture will not be comfortable in the THRC framework,” says McQuade, who can boast that Firestone Textiles, unionized since 1942, has never lost a day due to a work stoppage. The overall atmosphere is congenial and open, with, for example, the union given access to Firestone’s draft five-year plans every year prior to finalization. The long and productive relationship between Local 175 and Firestone management, says Crane, has paved the way for cooperation on learning projects.

The UFCW has also clearly demonstrated its commitment to learning for its members, operating two permanent training centres in Mississauga and Hamilton, ON, as well as mobile classrooms that cover the rest of that province. Union and management realize they have the same interests. Better-trained employees have the ability to improve their performance and safety, increase their job security and enhance their job satisfaction. The company, mean-

while, improves its ability to compete, which is good for the bottom line and for everyone who works there.

Constant learning

The pace of change in the textiles industry demands an adaptable workforce. Few companies know this better than Stedfast Inc. of Granby, QC, another firm that has established a skills and learning centre with the help of THRC. In business since 1930, when Stedfast was owned by a Boston supplier to the shoe, bookbinding and travel-bag sectors, the now Canadian-owned plant has evolved into North America’s leading manufacturer of high-tech “barrier fabrics” – from firefighting suits to medical gowns.

Rob Kellock, Stedfast’s President and a THRC board member, knows that evolution is a constant challenge for his workforce, too. “You have to be multi-skilled,” he says. “Things are happening so fast in the industry. It’s a constant learning process.”

As one of the first textiles companies to commit formally to a skills and learning site, as well as a dedicated web-based learning portal, Stedfast won an *Award for Excellence in Workplace Literacy* from the Conference Board of Canada in 2005. “Our objective is to implement more advanced training of all types, and this will rely on a solid foundation of literacy skills,” says Kellock. “Literacy plays an important part in ensuring that all

workers have a full toolbox of skills to meet the demands of today’s workplace.”

The success of the learning programs can be measured in several ways. Beyond the improvements in process and production efficiencies, another clear benefit is strengthened union-management ties as a result of the collaboration required to establish these programs. “The fact that we’re working on a project that’s not tied to our agreement, or our day-to-day work, has taken our relationship to another level,” says Kellock. Beyond the specific improvements – from helping individual employees follow process maps better to making them comfortable navigating a computer – companies are seeking a learning culture in which employees continually explore ways to solve problems, and work better, faster and smarter. This is what will boost the textiles industry’s overall ability to compete.

The learning sites at companies like Firestone Textiles, Beaulieu and Stedfast are designed to upgrade literacy and other basic skills, but they also help employees become more literate in a broader sense – by becoming better informed about a greater range of issues. Managers often talk about such issues as off-prime production, machine set-up time, fixed and variable costs or the benefits of productivity, says Kellock, but they too often don’t ask if employees appreciate the significance of such messages. “Everyone deserves and needs to understand the context in which they operate and the importance of the key performance criteria we strive for,” he says. “It’s great for our people to broaden their horizons, expand their knowledge base and understand where we are in the world and the competitive landscape. Employees at every level need to be as fully engaged and knowledgeable as possible – about everything from workplace safety to making new technologies work better for us than they do for our competitors.” **CEO**