

Workplace learning catches on big at manufacturing company

by Patricia Roy

Education/Training



Crystal Matheson, Human Resources Manager at Trout River Industries, with employees Brent Champion, seated, and Jeff Wilson. The two employees took advantage of workplace learning opportunities and received their GED diplomas last June.

Troutr River Industries located in Coleman manufactures uniquely designed live bottom trailers. They are called ‘live’ because of the conveyor belt in the bottom of the trailers. This innovation allows products to be unloaded safer and faster.

“Providing our 45 employees with opportunities to keep on learning in the workplace has had a tremendous impact,” says **Crystal Matheson**, Human Resources Manager.

Last year, **Workplace Learning PEI Inc.** did an assessment of what workers felt they needed in their day-to-day work on the shop floor. They focused on the nine essential skills deemed necessary for people to successfully do their jobs. Staff suggested they would like computer, communications and leadership training, as well as some language courses.

“The idea for learning in the workplace got its start when welders at the company wanted to brush up on their skills before writing exams for certification,” says Crystal. “Training was provided through a Trade Essentials pilot project. After this training, workers wanted an opportunity to take GED preparation classes.

“After seeing the need and hearing the workers’ suggestions, the **Hub to Success** pilot project, through Workplace Learning Inc., was started at the work site. Eight employees participated in the program last year and four people have now received their GED diplomas.” The program ended in June and started again this past September. Classes are offered two nights a week.

Crystal says they have seen a tremendous increase in the employees’s self confidence. “We have a happier workforce. There are also spinoffs for the employer. Employees are showing more initiative and participating more fully in the workplace.”

Employee Learning opportunities

Brent Champion and **Jeff Wilson** are two employees who took GED training last year. They also took keyboarding and began basic computer training in March.

Both say they would not have taken GED training or any other classes outside the workplace. “It was convenient,” says Jeff. “It made for long days but it was worth it.” Brent says it was great to be able to earn his GED before his oldest daughter graduates.

Project welcomes other businesses

Opening the program to other businesses in the area is also part of the Hub to Success project. Candidates must be working for another company or related to an employee to attend.

Two people from other businesses are now taking courses. This year’s class will write the GED exams in April.

“We also offered a keyboarding class. So many people were interested that it had to be offered twice a week. Even though not all workers presently use a computer at work, they know they will eventually need those skills. Therefore, basic computer training and a course on using Excel spreadsheets will now be offered.”

Other in-house learning options

The company has its own training program called **Trout River 101**. This is an optional program which provides opportunities for employees to grow with the company. Each stage is associated with a progressive level of training, showing positive attitude, attendance, and assigned projects.

“As a result of Trout River 101, we have seen dramatic changes throughout the shop,” she says. “The Metal Fabricating department is now able to produce almost a trailer a day, compared to the three or four days it took previously. Employees now have the confidence to make changes and know their voices are being heard.”

The company closed down production last August for one week. “We brought in outside facilitators and focused on five or six areas that we felt were important to stay ahead of the competition and remain successful, such as attitude and respect, waste and flow, communication, role models and leadership, team work, and dealing with change,” says Crystal.

“The transformation we witnessed from Monday to Friday that week was unbelievable. We plan to hold the same type of event every year.”

Crystal says other companies inside and outside the province have shown a great deal of interest in this evolving learning approach. “Our company is part of an organization called Excellence in Manufacturing. We have been invited to make presentations about workplace learning at Trout River Industries.”

For more information, contact **Crystal Matheson** at 859-1200 or visit www.troutriverindustries.ca

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