

Case Studies on Adult Learning

Nova Scotia Workplace Education Initiative

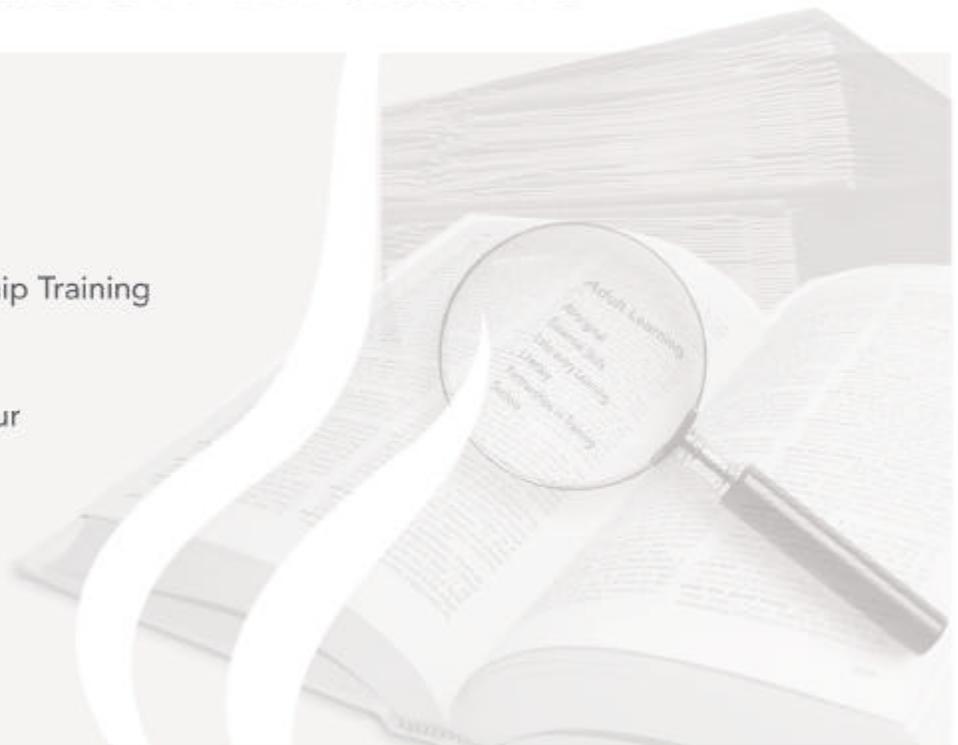
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ADULT LEARNING

Knowledge Centre



Overview

In the late 1980s and into the 1990s several provinces took advantage of generous financial support from the federal government to establish workplace education programs focussed on the delivery of essential skills upgrading to employed workers. Not all of these programs survived the funding cuts of the late 1990s. The Nova Scotia Workplace Education Initiative (WEI) has carried on as a substantial provincial government program, and has grown in scale and effectiveness over the past decade.¹

The WEI operates as “a partnership between business, labour, and government that provides learning programs for workers who need to upgrade or enhance their essential skills for work and community living”.² It is managed by the Apprenticeship Training and Skills Development division of the Nova Scotia Department of Labour and Workforce Development (DLWD). Program field staff work out of six regional offices across the province. In 2007/08 78 business firms and non-profit organizations participated in the WEI program and 223 workplace programs were delivered. The DLWD awarded nearly \$870,000 in program delivery grants and an additional \$940,000 was leveraged from partnering organizations and agencies. Following evaluation studies in 1999 and 2005 provincial government funding for the program was increased and stabilized on a long-term basis.³

¹ This case study report makes extensive use of a study carried out by the authors (PRAXIS Research & Consulting Inc.) for Human Resources and Social development Canada in 2008 entitled “Impacts of Workplace Supported Literacy and Essential Skills Enhancement in Small and Medium-sized Businesses in Canada”.

² www.ednet.ns.ca/index.php?t=sub_pages&cat=316

³ Nova Scotia Apprenticeship training and Skills Development Annual Report, 2007-2008, p. 45.

Program Focus and Type

The WEI program is widely advertised and promoted through business associations, community organizations, labour unions and the public media. When an employer or employee group expresses interest in having an essential skills training program in their workplace a WEI field coordinator comes in to facilitate a needs assessment and a program planning process. The resulting training plan must be endorsed by a joint employer-employee project team.

Once a plan is in place the WEI program covers instructors' fees while employers and employees are expected to contribute to other delivery costs. WEI courses typically involve 40 to 80 hours of contact time with groups of 8 to 12 employee-learners, and normally take place at or very near the workplace sites.

The WEI instructors are independent, community-based contractors. They undertake specialized training and are certified by the DLWD. The training program is developed and delivered by the Association of Workplace Educators in Nova Scotia (AWENS). AWENS also provides ongoing support and professional development services for instructors, and helps to promote the WEI at the community level.⁴

Target Audiences

The following table shows the sectoral breakdown for WEI program delivered in 2007-08.

⁴www.awens.caRdetail/programs.html

<i>Sector</i>	<i>Number of Programs</i>	<i>Percent of Total</i>
Healthcare	29	13%
Trucking	3	1%
Manufacturing	20	9%
Construction	4	2%
IT	17	8%
Tourism/Hospitality	6	3%
Non-Profit	104	47%
Private Sector	9	4%
Public Sector	19	9%
Small Business	12	5%
Total	223	100%

Efforts to grow the program in recent years have focused on the small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) category that provides over 90% of jobs in the province's private sector. It is evident from the table above that these employers generate less than half the program take-up for the WEI, and that key sub-sectors that employ large numbers of people – notably construction, tourism and hospitality, and truck transportation – do not receive the a proportionate of program services.

In addition to the standard program the Nova Scotia WEI operates five specialized services to address the differing situations and needs of businesses, public sector and non-profit sector employers, and unemployed citizens:

- The Workforce Adjustment Program provides adjustment support for workers displaced by plant closures, downsizing, etc.;
- The Apprenticeship Essential Skills Initiative provides essential skills upgrading to small groups of apprentices in their communities;
- The Small Business Essential Skills Initiative facilitates the development of clusters of firms to bring together enough participants for WEI courses;
- The One Journey Work and Learn program supports transitions to employment for social assistance clients; and
- The Sector Engagement Initiative assists sector councils and industry associations to access WEI program services and resources in their sectors.

Evidence of effectiveness

Substantial evaluation studies⁵ reveal that the Nova Scotia WEI program provides the leadership and sophisticated human resource development services that many small and medium-sized businesses and non-profit organizations need to access if they are to be successful in workplace based essential skills training. The program contributes to the development of a more progressive management culture in which investment in ongoing human resources development is integral to the overall business plan. The research confirms that the Nova Scotia WEI program gives participating employers advanced yet affordable HRD capacities in terms of:

- Internal team building and labour management collaboration for HRD;
- Needs assessments and strategic planning;
- Curriculum development, tailoring of course content and delivery to specific business locations, and integration of on-site materials and instructional tools; and
- Excellent classroom instruction by certified workplace practitioners, most of them trained professional adult educators.

More specific findings from surveys and interviews included the following points:

- 73% of learner-respondents stated that they would not have enrolled in essential skills or academic upgrading programs had they not been offered and delivered through their workplaces.
- 92% of employer-respondents indicated that they observed improvements in the participants' essential skills at work and that workplace communications had improved because of the program.
- Approximately two-thirds of employers identified improvements in productivity, worker-management communication and labour relations stemming from the program.
- Among employee-respondents, 90% stated that they were better equipped to participate in further training and 86% indicated that the WEI encouraged them to seek out further educational and training opportunities.

⁵See:

- Workplace Education Works: The results of an Outcome Study of the Nova Scotia Workplace Education Initiative, completed in 2000 by Shannon Kelly. Available at www.nald.ca/library/research/worked/cover.htm
- Matching Need & Response: Evaluation of the Workplace Education Initiative, Final Report, by Chaytor Consulting Services Ltd. in 2005.

Innovations and Success Drivers

The evaluation studies for the Nova Scotia WEI program identify a number of critical factors that account for the evident success and the very positive feedback from participating employers and employees.

- The high level of professional facilitation, planning and administrative capacity provided to participating organizations/firms by the WEI program staff. These field workers serve as de facto human resources managers for numerous employers who would not otherwise have such capacities.
- The use of a partnership model requiring joint employer/employee participation and buy-in throughout the needs assessment and program development and delivery processes within participating firms.
- The effectiveness and credibility of the needs assessment process employed during the initial planning phase in each organization/firm.
- The flexibility built into the program, allowing participating organizations/firms to develop tailor-made training courses making use of on-site materials and addressing specific learner needs and priorities.
- The provision by the WEI program of significant and ongoing financial support to sustain program development and delivery within SMEs.
- The development of a province-wide network of professionally trained and experienced workplace educators. Participating employers are able to select course instructors from this network and often work with individual instructors over extended periods of time.
- The increasing use of sector councils, industry associations, Chambers of Commerce, etc. to recruit enough trainees from among a number of small enterprises to be able to deliver training locally and on a sustainable basis.

Challenges

The major challenge facing the WEI program is that, despite its proven effectiveness, only a limited proportion of the workplaces in the province have participated thus far. Considerable effort has been expended to inform employers, employees and the wider community about the program, but the response has been limited in key sectors. The major constraint appears to be that SME managers are often indifferent or negative generally about training due to concerns about costs, the potential loss of workers

once they are trained, and uncertainty about impacts on performance and productivity.

Specific challenges for the program include:

- There is a need for more Skills Development Coordinators in the field with the resources, the work time, and the clear mandate to market and support the program more extensively in their regions.
- There may be a need for greater effort, and new approaches, to transfer human resources development expertise to managers in participating organizations/firms so that over time they become less reliant on WEI program resources.
- There is a need for further research on the critical factors affecting the willingness of employers to participate in WEI programs, including the return on investment issue. Such research will support more effective marketing of the program.

Although it is widely seen in the province as a major success story, the WEI program now faces new funding constraints in the context of a tightening fiscal environment generally for the provincial government.

Partnerships

Overall guidance and direction for the Nova Scotia Workplace Education Initiative program is provided by the Nova Scotia Partners for Workplace Education Committee made up of representatives of employers, employee participants, unions, the Association of Workplace Educators of Nova Scotia and the Department of Labour and Workforce Development.

Other important partners in program delivery include the Nova Scotia Department of Community Services, local Chambers of Commerce and other business groups, and the network of industry sector councils in the province.

Funding for research and development and program design and piloting has been received from time to time from the essential skills training support programs of Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC).

Overall impact

The research and policy literature indicates that the most pressing challenge facing many organizations, and the biggest threat to business viability for many SMEs, is the growing scarcity of skilled and motivated workers. Looking beyond the current recession many employers have concerns about human resource constraints reflecting:

- Demographic trends including the accelerating retirement of older workers, falling numbers of new entrants to the labour force, and a resulting scarcity of skilled employees;
- Intensifying recruitment and retention problems in a demand-driven labour market;
- Rising skills standards related to new technologies, regulatory requirements, etc.; and
- Under-educated new recruits with “trainability” constraints, and inadequate “soft skills” or “employability skills”.

While expansion of worksite-based training offers a meaningful response to all these challenges, many smaller firms and non-profit organizations lack capacity to do effective human resource development. Many employers – even in larger, more sophisticated firms – report that while they understand the importance of workplace training, they simply do not have the resources (money and management capacity) to do enough on their own.

The evidence suggests that the Nova Scotia WEI program provides leadership and support, together with sophisticated human resource development services, that these organizations cannot support internally. Like the human resources departments in many larger organizations, the WEI program does much more than provide training courses: it actually leads the organization in new directions and contributes to the development of a more progressive management culture in which investment in ongoing human resources development is integral to the overall business plan.

There are many examples across Canada of excellent workplace education programs at the level of the individual firm, the community or the extended corporate organization. The Nova Scotia WEI represents an exemplary program operated by a

provincial government. It provides a model for innovation in service delivery -- in particular the developed network of professional WEI instructors in every community across the province – and for focussing supports on vulnerable sectors such as small businesses and non-profit organizations. Through its integrated programming it links very effectively with other services for employment of social welfare recipients, transitions for displaced workers and older workers, enhancement of apprenticeship training, and partnerships employer groups, unions and community organizations.

Despite challenges, the Nova Scotia Apprenticeship Training and Skills Development division is committed to the continued provision of essential skills training through the Workplace Education Initiative, and to the continued development and enrichment of the program as a highly effective outreach service.