



Case Study December 2002

Skills for a Stable Workforce Workplace Education at Avon Foods

The Education and Learning case studies examine outstanding education and lifelong learning programs and initiatives. This case study addresses workplace literacy.

OVERVIEW

The rapid pace of industrial, technological change and the arrival of a new quality-control system at Avon Foods Inc. required a comprehensive employee skills development program. To address technological upgrades in the plant, management at Avon Foods began to place increasing emphasis on sound reading, writing, math, communication, and problem-solving skills. They also recently implemented a minimum prerequisite of Grade 12 completion for new job applicants. To stay competitive, Avon Foods wants more and more employees to develop new skills. Internal promotions now also require a minimum prerequisite of Grade 12 completion.

In support of its new promotion policy, Avon Foods instituted a workplace education program to give employees easy access to skills upgrading opportunities. The workplace education programs are based on individual and organizational needs and assessments, written/oral communications, and math upgrading, as well as General Education Development (GED) examination preparation. Since the first workplace education program began in 1991, almost 100 employees have participated. The skills that employees developed for work carried over into their family and community lives.

Effective practices case study in providing training and supporting workplace learning.

Name of Program
Workplace Education Program

Date Established
1991

Skills Developed

- Literacy and Numeracy
- Personal Management
- Teamwork

Contact

Allie Craswell
Plant Manager
Avon Foods Inc.
P.O. Box 1000
Berwick, NS B0P 1E0
Tel. (902) 538-4063
Fax (902) 538-8548
alliec@avonfoods.ns.ca

OBJECTIVES

In upgrading the skills of its employees, Avon Foods Inc. had several objectives:

- create a competitive edge, through a stable, flexible workforce;
- enable employees to document job tasks and record procedures, according to the company's new quality control system, Hazard Analysis Critical Control Points (HACCP); and
- raise employees' reading, writing, math, and communication skills to maximize the benefits of the new quality-control system.

“Your leading edge is achieved through efficiencies . . . efficiencies in the skills of your employees.”

—Allie Craswell, Plant Manager

A family-operated food processing and canning plant, Avon Foods Inc. is one of the largest employers in a small Nova Scotia farming community. The company operates 24 hours a day, to a capacity of 49 weeks per year, with 200 employees at peak harvest-time and 120 full-time employees during the off season.

TARGET GROUPS

Training was provided on-site, at no cost to employees. The learning environment was familiar, non-threatening, and easy for participants to access. This easy access to training left employees feeling that they had no excuse not to participate.

ACTIVITIES

The first year of the program concentrated on GED instruction and essential skills, and was primarily academic in nature. The make-up of the program was determined through interviews between the personal instructor and participants. In the second year, the program expanded to include training for special needs students and those with learning disabilities (such as

dyslexia) or with very low literacy levels. More job-specific materials were also added to the curriculum. Later years saw the introduction of basic computer literacy training and non-job-related content, such as the use of personal financial information and mortgage calculations in math class.

With low staff turnover, it was almost inevitable that continuous training would result in an improvement of the workforce's literacy level and basic skills. As more employees took an interest and enrolled in the program, spouses were also invited to participate, as a way of promoting a learning community.

RESOURCES

The Nova Scotia Department of Education provided a local field officer to complete a needs assessment. The field officer also acted as a member of both the project team and the internal training committee, and assisted with the selection of an instructor and curriculum development. The Nova Scotia Department of Education provided funding for the instructor.

The Bakery, Confectionary, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers' Union, Local 446 encouraged management to develop the program and then encouraged its members to participate. The union was an equal partner, demonstrating its willingness to be associated with an initiative that developed the skills of its members. The union also provided funding for course materials.

INNOVATIONS

The training model at Avon Foods successfully uses a partnership approach, involving management, employees, the union, and the Nova Scotia Department of Education. A project team, composed of employees, union, management, and a Department of Education field officer, was responsible for program development, including the selection of the instructor. Members of the project team are replaced every year, to involve more members of the workforce. The Avon Foods training model has been used to promote workplace education throughout Nova Scotia.

BARRIERS

Both management and the union needed some convincing before the employee training program could be put in place. Management questioned the expense of upgrading the skills of the existing experienced workforce. The union feared that management might be trying to push out older union members, who lacked paper qualifications, such as GED.

As the company operates in a rural area, most employees are long-time local residents, who provide a stable workforce with low turnover. While a stable workforce is a company strength, introducing change and encouraging long-time employees to adapt to new technologies and processes is, by nature, challenging.

The instructor initially had doubts about developing a rapport with the students. She was an “outsider” coming into a close-knit, small community, and worried about their acceptance of her. However, the students quickly showed themselves to be warm and accepting, once she gained their trust. Some employees were initially anxious about participating, as they had not been in school for many years. Once they had started the training, however, a sense of personal pride motivated them to see the process through to the end.

SOLUTIONS/KEYS TO SUCCESS

The general manager of the plant was a key driver of the workplace education program. He worked to ensure that his actions confirmed his message—that raising employee skills would benefit the company, as well as individual employees. Over time, both management and the union became convinced that the workplace education program was a success. Both are now highly supportive of the program and have taken considerable ownership.

The union was an equal partner in the workplace education program, and this ensured that everything went smoothly. The union supported any efforts toward the development of its members and saw the workplace education program as a beneficial initiative.

The chart below summarizes how Avon Foods matched solutions to its workplace education challenges.

Challenge	Solution
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficult for a long-time employee base to adapt to new technology 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer technical skills upgrading opportunities to all employees to bring everyone up to speed
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction of a new quality-control system placed greater demands on employees' writing and reading skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer literacy and basic skills upgrading opportunities to all employees
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Management was reluctant to invest in training for an experienced workforce 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Over time, training showed a positive impact and benefits
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Union was concerned that increased paper qualifications for recruitment and promotion could hurt members 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All employees were offered opportunities to upgrade GED and other skills, leading to formal credentials

OUTCOMES

“The people who do this are proud—really, really proud.”

—Russell Bent, Chief Steward, Union Local 446

The workplace education program resulted in a number of positive learning outcomes for Avon Foods Inc. and its employees:

- Employees are now more adaptable.
- Employees are better able to use new technology and equipment, giving the company a competitive edge.
- Employees and management gained respect and appreciation for each other.
- Employees take more initiative now and are more resourceful in solving problems.
- The company workplace education program was featured in a Nova Scotia Department of Education video for national distribution called “Making It Work.”

IMPACTS AND BENEFITS

Labour and management relations, individual employees, the company itself, and the larger community benefited from the workplace education program at Avon Foods Inc. Employees increased their skills, employability, and self-esteem. The company saw an improved relationship with the union, as well as an increased sense of morale in the workforce. Outside the workplace, employees were able to take their new knowledge home to help their children with homework and to play more active roles in local community committees.

Specific impacts of the workplace education program include:

Labour/Management Relations

- Management and the union both invested in the program, showing employees that they were worth investing in.
- Employees realized that management was not against them but, instead, valued them for their contribution to the company.
- Problem-solving abilities gained through the program allowed employees to work out some union-related problems by themselves. This ability resulted in fewer employee grievances going to arbitration, which, in turn, helped cut time and union costs.
- Employee participation in union meetings increased.
- More than ever before, union and management work as a team. This change is attributed to the employee training program.
- Both the company and the union received awards for adding value to workplace education.

Community Relations

- Increased self-confidence resulted in greater employee involvement in community activities and volunteer work, such as administering local sports teams.

- Employees participated more in their children's education's by helping them with homework and attending school council meetings.
- Avon Foods holds "Family Appreciation Day" and "Employee Appreciation Days"—barbecue-type holidays in the local community.
- The company, one of the largest employers in the area, is seen as a pioneer in workplace education. Its efforts are commended by local residents, and the company is seen as a positive contributor and supporter of the well-being of the community.

Impact on the Company

- According to the general manager, Allie Craswell, "the plant is now predictable" in terms of its operations. As a result of the program, he can predict results more confidently when talking to upper management, and management, in turn, has more faith in his predictions.
- Work standards and product quality have improved.
- The number of repeat customers has increased.
- The volume of customer complaints has decreased.
- Waste and down time in the plant have also decreased.

USE AS A MODEL

Avon Foods Inc.'s workplace education program has been used as a model throughout Nova Scotia. The project team approach, with participation from management, the union, employees, and the Nova Scotia Department of Education, allows the issues of all stakeholders to be voiced as the program is being developed, and as it continues to operate. The small class design helps build teamwork, both in the classroom and on the shop floor. The end result of a flexible, adaptive workforce benefited all concerned.

Our thanks to interviewees and others who provided comment, including:

Albert (Allie) Craswell, Avon Foods Inc.
Anne McKenna, Avon Foods Inc.
Russell Bent, Bakery, Confectionary, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers' Union, Local 446
Virginia Schultz, Workplace Education Instructor

The Education and Learning case studies examine outstanding education and lifelong learning programs and initiatives. The case studies provide in-depth analysis of the methods used to develop, assess, implement, and deliver education and lifelong learning in schools, colleges, universities, workplaces, and communities. They focus on goals, activities, resource requirements, achievements and outcomes, benefits, innovations, and keys to success and challenges.

This case study is one of a series addressing workplace literacy and basic skills development. The series is part of the *Overcoming Barriers* research project on Workplace Literacy being undertaken by The Conference Board of Canada and funded by the National Literacy Secretariat, Human Resources Development Canada.

Skills for a Stable Workforce: Workplace Education at Avon Foods

by *Alison Campbell*

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255 Smyth Road, Ottawa, ON K1H 8M7 Canada
Tel. (613) 526-3280 • Fax (613) 526-4857 • Inquiries 1-866-711-2262

The Conference Board Inc. 845 Third Avenue, New York, N.Y., 10022-6679 U.S.A. Tel. (212) 759-0900 • Fax (212) 980-7014 • www.conference-board.org
The Conference Board Europe Chaussée de La Hulpe 130, Box 11, B-1000 Brussels, Belgium Tel. (32) 2.675 54 05 • Fax (32) 2.675 03 95

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