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Peer Tutoring Employees Helping Employees at Canadian Forest Products Ltd.

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

OVERVIEW

Canadian Forest Products Ltd. (Canfor) is Canada's largest producer of softwood lumber and one of the country's biggest suppliers of bleached kraft pulp to major paper-makers around the world. Based in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canfor employs 6,580 people in its woodlands operations and manufacturing facilities, mainly in Alberta and British Columbia.

Like other North American employers, Canfor recognizes the pressure experienced by employees who are expected to maintain performance targets while technical systems are upgraded at an increasingly rapid pace. Canfor works collaboratively with unions in three of its

mills to train employees to become peer tutors who lead learning activities in the workplace. They choose individuals who have the reputation for being "trusted resource people" for the role. The company uses peer tutoring to enhance employees' basic literacy and

Effective practices case study
in providing training and supporting workplace literacy

Name of Program

Learning and Education
Assisted by Peers (LEAP)

Date Established

1998

Skills Developed

- Literacy, including computer literacy
- Numeracy
- Leadership
- Communication
- Teamwork

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numeracy skills and to help them prepare for educational goals, such as receiving the General Education Diploma (GED) or passing certification exams in the steam engineering trades.

Statistics Canada's 1994 International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) showed that 43 per cent of Canadian adults have only marginal literacy levels, and 30 per cent of Canadian workers lack the literacy skills they need to perform their jobs effectively. A skills profile of a B.C. pulp mill found that 41 per cent of employees could not read well enough to understand materials connected with their jobs or to take advantage of training that was offered.

Canfor employees have been active in workplace education programs since 1997, when they participated in the Joint Union-Management employee skills development Program (JUMP). JUMP was financed by stumpage fees paid by forestry companies. The money was used to establish a training fund to help forestry industry employees develop skills and put themselves on a better footing, in case they lost their jobs. On their own time, over 70 per cent of employees at the Northwood/Canfor mill took advantage of the free skills development opportunities provided by JUMP. In the process, they gained an appetite for skills development, over and above their job duties.

This was a good start, but program organizers estimated that an additional 20 per cent of the Canfor workforce would benefit greatly from participating in basic skills development programs. The company realized that these employees needed to be served on an individual basis, and the right conditions would have to be established to encourage them to participate.

For many adults who have been in the workforce for an extended period of time, the prospect of "returning to school" at a local community college can be very intimidating. Other barriers can stand in the way as well, including family commitments: it can be difficult to attend night courses after putting in a full day at work and feeding a family. Offering education in the workplace can be a good incentive for busy employees and remove some of the intimidation they may feel about the process.

Learning and Education Assisted by Peers (LEAP) presented an attractive option for employees pressed for time, who could benefit from basic skills development. LEAP was originally developed by Capilano College, based on its experiences with Basic Education for Skills and Training (BEST), a program for members of a B.C. hospital employees' union who work at Surrey Memorial Hospital. LEAP has proved very adaptable.

Initially, the program was piloted at one Canfor site. By 2002, it was available at three of Canfor's B.C. facilities: Taylor division (300 miles north of Prince George), Northwood Pulp Mill, and P.G. Pulp and Paper/Intercon in Prince George. LEAP has also been used at Prince George's Husky Oil Refinery and is currently being introduced to workplaces throughout B.C. by the British Columbia Federation of Labour and its affiliates. A specially prepared guide, *Implementing a Worker-Focused Learning Program in the Workplace*, helps different organizations customize LEAP to their own needs.

LEAP engages stakeholders at all levels of Canfor, from senior management champions to union activists, to foremen and rank and file employees. With support from Capilano College, program champions from Canfor recruit employees who are offered tutor training by the college. These trained peer tutors then help their co-workers develop skills and achieve their learning goals.

OBJECTIVES

- To facilitate access to basic education and skills development for employees and to ease them into lifelong learning
- To provide workplace education tailored to employees' individual needs and goals, including:
 - Literacy and numeracy
 - Basic computer skills
 - English as a Second Language (ESL)
 - General Education Diploma (GED)
 - High school credits (English 12, Math 12)
 - Preparation for trades certification (especially steam engineering)
- To train employees as tutors to help peers set and achieve learning goals
- To provide a framework for a joint union-management approach to workplace literacy

TARGET GROUPS

- Employees interested in developing their skills or achieving other educational and learning goals
- “Reluctant” learners, who would benefit from participating in workplace education but need to be encouraged to get involved

ACTIVITIES

LEAP classes operate for four hours per week in twenty-week cycles. Each class consists of eight to 15 learners and two trained peer tutors. The LEAP coordinator talks to LEAP participants’ supervisors to ensure that they arrange work schedules around employees’ participation in LEAP classes. LEAP classes are conducted in the workplace and start during company time, but may finish on employees’ personal time. Occasionally, classes are put on at other hours, entirely on tutors’ and participants’ personal time.

LEAP participants set their own learning goals and work toward them at their own pace. College instructors and peer tutors work with learners to establish learning plans, in response to employees’ learning goals. LEAP participants track their own progress toward their learning goals and make regular reports. College instructors and peer tutors carry out interim evaluations to help learners reflect on their progress and, if necessary, adjust their learning plans.

LEAP classes typically begin and end with a 15- to 20-minute group activity that focuses on learning how to learn, group dynamics, or writing skills (such as putting on a spelling bee, conducting a mini-debate, or doing a crossword puzzle). The class then moves into more self-directed activities, with tutors circulating in the classroom, to provide support when called upon.

RESOURCES

- From the outset, Canfor has absorbed the costs of:
- Replacement workers, since LEAP classes are held in the workplace, partly on company time (50 per cent on company time for day workers and 25 per cent on company time for shift workers)
 - In some cases, overtime wages for LEAP learners, tutors, and coordinators
 - Classroom space

- Computers and other equipment
- Ongoing support from Capilano College, including tutor training
- Wages, accommodation, and airfare for tutors to attend tutor training
- Learning materials

INNOVATION

The real innovation of the LEAP program is the way it engages peer tutors, who open learning doors that would otherwise remain closed for workers. When employees walk through these doors to personal development, their capacities as employees, parents, inquiring minds, and community members is greatly enhanced. They become much more alert, open to new ideas in their environments, and originators of positive change for themselves and those around them.

Learning tends to bring with it an attitudinal shift among workers—a shift that not only changes what they do, but how they do it. Having a positive experience with workplace education can also produce a change in managers’ attitudes toward training. Rather than assuming that when employees do not do something properly it is because they do not care, or have not given the proper effort, managers need to consider the possibility that they may have a different learning style or that they may require support at a more basic level to understand a new process or implement a new procedure.

The secret to producing this attitudinal shift among employees and their managers is to let learners drive their own workplace education and allow them to have a positive learning experience on their own terms, before expecting a big return on investment. Workplace education pays off, but there are some intermediate steps between investment and return on investment. Key among them is ensuring that workers have a positive learning experience. The next step is to make incremental investments in leveraging learners’ initial positive experiences in workplace situations. The real payoff comes when learners reach for opportunities in the workplace that show they have truly unleashed their potential and are adding capacity in their jobs.

BARRIERS

For Employers

- The Company had to come up with the financial resources to support workplace education in the face of tough economic times.
- Management saw the value of committing to a long-term venture, such as enhancing the basic skills of employees and encouraging them to achieve educational goals.
- The company had to manage employee expectations about how much workplace education the company would provide—workplace education is not an “enshrined right” of employment.
- The company created a working atmosphere that is truly supportive of lifelong learning.

For Tutors

- Tutors were in danger of burning out because they spend a lot of personal time in preparing for, and putting on, classes—company records show that tutors committed 638 hours of their own time to LEAP, in contrast to the 176 hours of company time invested by them.

For Unions

- Unions regarded training as a management function and resisted peer training on principle, because it was viewed as the responsibility of management.
- They needed to work to overcome a history of adversarial labour-management dealings.
- Unions had to get used to asking for workplace education, which is not something covered by the collective agreement.

For Employee-learners

- Employees had to overcome having been away from school for a long time.
- They were not comfortable with computers.
- They had had negative experiences at school.
- They were reluctant to take on yet another new challenge at a time when the workplace was changing so dramatically.
- They had to learn to reach out for help with literacy and numeracy skills, even though high school graduation was a basic requirement of their jobs. People are promoted on the basis of seniority and competence (an issue that arises when the pace of change in the workplace and the literacy and

numeracy skills required to master change exceed a given employee’s comfort level).

- It was difficult for some to face the stigma that is often associated with returning to learning. That is why it was important to keep LEAP learners’ personal goals confidential. It was also critical to bill LEAP as a program for workers with ambition.

SOLUTIONS/KEYS TO SUCCESS

Management Support

- Management worked in genuine collaboration with the union to create a supportive environment for workplace education.
- Management support took several forms, including senior management champions and the cooperation of supervisors, who needed to allow participating employees to leave the shop floor early.
- Management gave line managers recognition for allowing their direct reports to consistently participate in LEAP classes.
- Management respected the need for confidentiality, in terms of the LEAP learners’ personal learning goals and achievements. They supported the program, while staying out of the classroom.

Union Support

- The union worked in genuine collaboration with management, to open up workplace education opportunities for employees.
- Union members coordinated workplace education and recruited other union members to serve as tutors and participate as learners; this gave the program legitimacy in the eyes of unionized employees. It is easier to learn where trust exists.
- Like management, unions preserved the confidentiality of learners’ goals and records of achievement, sharing only attendance records with supervisors, so that they could be assured that employees released from work early were actually attending LEAP programming.

College Support

Capilano College provided different kinds of support, including:

- Interviewing learners
- Interviewing and training peer tutors
- Helping learners set goals
- Assisting with program evaluations

- Providing ongoing support for peer tutors and basic instructional materials for adult learners (this added credibility to LEAP, as Capilano College personnel were seen as an independent third party)

Employee Engagement

- Employees had the courage to admit to developmental needs and be open to workplace education.
- They were responsible to themselves and their learning goals (setting realistic personal learning goals, developing learning plans, self-assessing progress towards those goals, and asking for support from a peer tutor).
- Employees showed respect. They were punctual, attended LEAP classes regularly (when workers were available, they attended 87 to 94 per cent of LEAP classes offered).
- They participated in group activities and helped each other.
- They demonstrated a positive attitude towards learning.

Adhering to Key Principles of Adult Learning

- LEAP was marketed as an opportunity for ambitious employees to achieve their goals.
- The program focused on developing potential, not testing competencies.
- LEAP built on learners' knowledge, skills, and experience, regardless of whether they developed those foundations at school or in the workplace.
- The program started from employees' actual learning needs.
- It engaged learners in setting their own goals and working toward them at their own pace.
- Learners were encouraged to self-assess and to provide feedback to tutors on how they were feeling about their progress toward their goals.

Learning was made accessible to those who most needed it and were usually least able to take advantage of it, by making learning opportunities available in the workplace, on company time, and at no cost to participants.

Recruiting and Training Peer Tutors

- Employees who were "known quantities" in the workplace and who were trusted by their co-workers were selected.
- Candidates' interpersonal skills (being "smooth," approachable, good listeners, perceptive, good facilitators, and committed) were a key qualification.

- Tutor training focused on key principles of participatory, worker-centred adult education.

OUTCOMES

- 108 Canfor employees have participated in LEAP since the 1998 pilot.
- 22 peer tutors have been trained.
- LEAP programming expanded from one class at one site in one industry to four classes at three sites (and now available in the oil and gas sector) over four years.
- Employees have demonstrably enhanced their literacy skills.
- Several employees have earned high school credits or passed GED exams (three LEAP graduates have shown off their diplomas to their co-workers).
- At Northwood, six out of 20 employees (two of whom were graduates of LEAP) passed a set of difficult apprenticeship exams.
- One LEAP graduate ran for a position on his Band Council.
- Another LEAP graduate credits his experience in LEAP with helping to improve family dynamics.

IMPACTS AND BENEFITS

For the Company

- Builds a more flexible workforce, by helping employees engage in learning and bring a learning focus to their jobs.
- Experiences brought about more collaborative labour relations (union-management and supervisor-direct reports).
- Experiences of:
 - Better health and safety practices
 - Few errors
 - Reduced absenteeism
 - Lower turnover rates
- There is a return on investment in training tutors and workplace learning when:
 - Tutors help their peers achieve their learning goals
 - LEAP participants demonstrate an increased capacity to apply the skills they have learned through on-the-job training
 - LEAP learners become LEAP tutors
 - LEAP tutors share information and classroom techniques with each other

- LEAP tutors and coordinators assume further responsibilities for workplace training within Canfor (helping the company to design training on a new, computerized, maintenance management system and to deliver it to peers and managers)
- LEAP participants enhance their teamwork, problem-solving, and communications skills (they make more confident decisions, perform written tasks, process information more quickly, and speak out about better ways to get a job done), take on leadership roles (e.g., leadership positions in the union), and develop more positive attitudes towards the workplace (when they perceive that the company has invested in their personal development)
- LEAP tutors and participants volunteer their time to enhance learning (e.g., coming in on their own time between graveyard shifts)
- Their reading, writing, and numeracy skills are enhanced.
- They gain self-confidence, feel better about themselves, and become more willing to give themselves a gift of learning.
- They become lifelong learners and more engaged employees.
- They become more involved in key roles in the workplace (such as participating on the local workplace safety committee and providing counselling through the Employee and Family Assistance Program), in voluntary activities in the community and at home.

USE AS A MODEL

The LEAP program is eminently well suited to be used as a model for other workplace education programs. Implementing a LEAP program requires close cooperation between labour and management, buy-in from senior management and supervisors, and active ownership on the part of peer tutors and employee-learners. A good connection with a local community college that understands the non-traditional, worker-focused, peer tutor model is also critical. LEAP can be adapted to focus attention on the needs of learners and the strategies that will help them to achieve their personal learning goals.

For Employees

- They are able to advance in the workplace and gain access to more training opportunities, by moving into apprenticeships as millwrights, pipe-fitters, electricians, instrument mechanics, or machinists.
- They are better able to read and understand instruction manuals.
- They can grasp safety principles more easily and work more safely.
- Learning increases their chances of maintaining full-time employment, in the mill or outside it, because they are more engaged in their own career development.
- They lead more personally fulfilling lives.
- They earn high school credits and complete requirements for their GED.
- They are prepared for apprenticeship exams.

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About the Education and Learning Case Studies

The Education and Learning case studies examine outstanding education and 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.

Peer Tutoring: Employees Helping Employees at Canadian Forest Products Ltd.
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