



Case Study December 2005

Cavendish Farms Learning Centre: Rising to the Challenge of Meeting Employees' Unique Needs

OVERVIEW

Cavendish Farms is a quality producer of frozen potato products for retail, restaurant and quick-service markets throughout Canada, the United States, the Caribbean, Europe and Asia. Since its founding in 1980, the company has grown to become the fourth-largest frozen potato processor in North America. There are two production facilities in New Annan, P.E.I., and one in Jamestown, North Dakota.

The New Annan production facilities employ approximately 850 people. With a large contingent of labourers, skilled tradespersons, technicians, and administrative and managerial staff, Cavendish Farms is contributing to the development of an educated and competent workforce by providing employees with learning opportunities through its Learning Centre.

THE CAVENDISH FARMS LEARNING CENTRE

A cornerstone of Cavendish Farms' employee development efforts has been its on-site Learning Centre. The Learning Centre was initially conceived

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

Name of Program
The Learning Centre

Date Established
2003

Skills Developed

Literacy
Numeracy
Computer
Communication
Trades

Contact

Ellyn Lyle
Instructor / Coordinator
Cavendish Farms
PO Box 3500
Summerside, PEI C1N 5J5
Tel : (902) 836-7365
Fax: (902) 836-7197
E-mail: lyle.ellyn@cavendishfarms.com

in 2002 and became operational on a full-time basis in January 2003. This centre provides employees with individualized instruction in basic literacy, General Educational Development (GED), secondary school–level English and mathematics, post-secondary refreshers, post-secondary tutoring and facilitation, computer literacy, professional and creative writing, communications, and assistance with Red Seal—an interprovincial standard that enables skilled tradespeople to work anywhere in Canada where their trade is designated.

OBJECTIVES

The objectives of Cavendish Farms’ Learning Centre are to:

- improve basic literacy, numeracy and academic skills of employees at all levels;
- improve employees’ understanding of their contribution to the organization;
- provide employees with the skills and competencies necessary to improve their workplace performance and to increase their opportunities for advancement;
- assist apprentices with skilled trades training; and
- increase employees’ morale and confidence.

Courses offered at the Learning Centre address everything from basic literacy to skilled trades training.

TARGET GROUPS

The Learning Centre is accessible to all employees of Cavendish Farms, New Annan. This includes full-time, part-time and returning contract workers, as well as associated employees: farm, warehouse, security, storage and trucking. The family members of all employees are also welcome to attend the Learning Centre.

ACTIVITIES

The Learning Centre provides flexible training schedules and targeted courses to meet the needs of employees’ learning objectives. This individualized instruction is the central core that directs the design and development of evolving programs. Initially, the Centre focused on helping employees attain their GED. It now offers a range of programs from essential literacy and numeracy skills to university preparation and facilitation.

Shortly after the centre was conceived in 2002, an awareness campaign was launched to inform employees about this new learning opportunity. This was followed by a needs assessment; Workplace Education P.E.I. conducted personal interviews with interested employees to determine their training needs. Equipped with this information, the company designed a program with employees’ needs in mind.

Workplace Education P.E.I. conducted personal interviews with interested employees to determine their training needs.

Each learner initially meets with the instructor to share his/her learning goals. Based on this meeting, the instructor develops an individualized study program. For instance, if the learner is interested in applying for a different or more senior position, the instructor can assist the individual by helping him/her acquire the skills necessary for the job and improve his/her chances of being hired.

After completing a preliminary assessment and juxtaposing that starting point with the desired outcomes, each learner begins an individual path to attain his/her personal goals. The instructor facilitates this journey by providing appropriate learning materials and guidance. By listening to its employees’ learning needs, Cavendish Farms helps develop skills and competencies that serve the interests of both its workers and the company.

RESOURCES

In response to the wishes of its employees, Cavendish Farms has provided a well-equipped classroom, which includes 12 computer stations, and is staffed full time by a licenced teacher. The classroom is open Monday to Friday from 8:00 a.m. until 4:00 p.m. The Centre partners with the P.E.I. Department of Education and local literacy groups to serve as a resource and to learn from the experiences of others. Cavendish Farms also promotes professional development by sponsoring its instructor for conferences and workshops at both the regional and national levels.

Cavendish Farms not only covers the cost of staffing, classroom resources and day-to-day operational expenses, it also reimburses employees for 50 per cent of their time spent studying. Although family members are not a part of this cost-sharing initiative, they are able to attend classes at no cost to them. Even their learning materials are supplied by the company.

INNOVATIONS

The Learning Centre was conceived by employees and designed with their needs as paramount. It provides a safe, confidential learning environment that is flexible enough to coexist with shift work and accommodate each learner's needs.

“I think the best environment for learning is one in which the student can learn at his own pace. People learn in different ways and at different speeds...even in different courses.”

—Employee Participant

A licenced instructor provides both general and job-specific skills training. The instructor is familiar with the occupations in the plant and the skills necessary to perform these jobs. Learners can open doors to new job opportunities within the company by requesting a learning program that is tailored to match the skills requirements of various occupations.

CHALLENGES

Developing individualized training for a workforce with rotating 12-hour shifts posed some challenges for the company. In addition to scheduling challenges, other barriers, from the employees' perspective, included concerns about the time commitment and associated costs to participate in training.

SOLUTIONS

The challenges of time, in terms of both scheduling and participating, were addressed by locating the Learning Centre on-site with a full-time instructor. With the classroom door open five days a week from 8:00 a.m. until 4:00 p.m., employees can attend at their

convenience. As well, the “open-door” environment allows learners to progress at their own pace—whether it is for a half-hour per week or 10 hours per week.

Meanwhile, Cavendish Farms removed the barrier of training costs to employees by supplying the teacher, resources and space for the Learning Centre. The company also alleviated the cost for employee time spent studying by implementing a cost-sharing policy. As noted above, employees are reimbursed for half the time they spend studying.

OUTCOMES

The Learning Centre's achievements in the past two years include the following:

- More than 75 employees have been assessed for academic upgrading.
- More than 95 employees are currently enrolled in various programs such as literacy and numeracy skills, computer skills and academics.
- Thirteen people have passed their GED exams.
- Four have completed academic math.
- Six have completed academic English.
- One has completed Red Seal certification, and three are working toward it.
- Thirty-four have completed computer training, and 42 more are scheduled for it.
- Three employees are completing professional writing.
- Four are working toward professional licencing/university diplomas.

In addition to receiving a provincial literacy award, the Learning Centre has received wide recognition as a progressive approach to education. It has been the subject of a graduate thesis in academic engagement/best practices, and it has hosted university and federal delegations/tours that wished to experience the model first hand.

IMPACTS AND BENEFITS

In addition to developing skills, the Learning Centre develops positive employee attitudes and behaviours such as self-confidence and mutual respect. This learning experience results in many positive impacts and benefits for both the employees and the company, including:

- increased opportunities for employees to advance within the organization;

- increased enrolment and completion of high school equivalencies and Red Seal certification;
- improved relationships between employees and management;
- improved employee morale;
- greater employee self-confidence, enabling them to work more independently;
- greater employee commitment to the company;
- improved employee satisfaction; and
- increased employee retention.

“I’ve always had a bad view of myself. I thought I couldn’t learn. I’m finding out different. I always wanted to go for my GED but didn’t think I had the smarts for it. My thinking has changed. I’m coming to realize I can do it if I really want it bad enough. It’s the first time in a long time I don’t feel stupid and dumb. There is always something new to learn when I go. When I get my GED, I know I’ll miss going to class.”

—Employee Participant

USE AS A MODEL

The Learning Centre is an effective model for organizations interested in improving employee education. The Learning Centre model is designed to educate employees in personally meaningful areas with the intent of boosting self-confidence and self-worth. This focus, although not specifically directed at business objectives, provides ancillary benefits to the company such as improved employee satisfaction and retention.

By making the program as flexible as possible, Cavendish Farms is able to meet the diversified learning objectives of its employees as well as accommodate their various schedules due to the shift-work environment. Furthermore, the cost-sharing policy encourages employees to study on their own time, without disrupting company operations.

Although the Learning Centre works well for Cavendish Farms, small and medium-sized companies would likely require external funding to support this model.

Acknowledgements

Our thanks to Ellyn Lyle and others from Cavendish Farms who provided comments and information.

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, resources requirements, achievements and outcomes, benefits, innovations, and keys to success and challenges.

This case study addresses the theme of workplace literacy and is part of the Securing Literacy's Potential research project on workplace literacy being undertaken by The Conference Board of Canada and supported by the National Literacy Secretariat, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada.

Cavendish Farms Learning Centre—Rising to the Challenge of Meeting Employees' Unique Needs
by *Natalie Gagnon*

About The Conference Board of Canada

We are:

- A not-for-profit Canadian organization that takes a business-like approach to its operations.
- Objective and non-partisan. We do not lobby for specific interests.
- Funded exclusively through the fees we charge for services to the private and public sectors.
- Experts in running conferences but also at conducting, publishing and disseminating research, helping people network, developing individual leadership skills and building organizational capacity.
- Specialists in economic trends, as well as organizational performance and public policy issues.
- Not a government department or agency, although we are often hired to provide services for all levels of government.
- Independent from, but affiliated with, The Conference Board, Inc. of New York, which serves nearly 2,000 companies in 60 nations and has offices in Brussels and Hong Kong.

The Conference Board of Canada
Insights You Can Count On



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
The Conference Board Asia-Pacific 2802 Admiralty Centre, Tower 1, 18 Harcourt Road, Admiralty Hong Kong SAR Tel. +852 2511 1630 • Fax +852 2869 1403

©2005 The Conference Board of Canada*
Printed in Canada • All rights reserved
ISSN 1492-501X • Agreement No. 40063028
*Incorporated as AERIC Inc.



For more information about this case study, please contact us at the numbers listed above.
Case studies summarize the key findings of Conference Board research and outline the implications for member organizations.

Forecasts and research often involve numerous assumptions and data sources, and are subject to inherent risks and uncertainties. This information is not intended as specific investment, accounting, legal or tax advice.