



City of Vancouver

Workplace Literacy Mini Case Study

Overview

The City of Vancouver employs over 9,000 workers from very diverse backgrounds, with one in five municipal workers speaking English as a second language. In September 1989, several incidents surfaced that highlighted the barriers many employees were facing in understanding and communicating effectively in English on the job. These incidents led the City to look at upgrading employees' skills through language and communication training.

The City of Vancouver's Equal Opportunity Program involved the affiliated Hastings Institute in developing the Vancouver Municipal Workplace Language Program (VMWLP).

Objectives

The goals of the VMWLP are to:

- ⇒ create a workforce that is able to communicate effectively;
- ⇒ create an inclusive workplace that values and welcomes diversity;
- ⇒ provide all employees with an equal chance to develop their personal and professional potential; and
- ⇒ become a leader in supporting diversity and change in the community.

Activities

The VMWLP was created in 1990, with the aid of the unions and the local school board. It is a writing-based program, which is participant-centred and participant-controlled as far as possible. Participants join the program on a volunteer basis following a self-assessment of their needs. They then decide on the pace of the classes, on a flexible schedule.

Classes have between five and 15 participants, who attend classes for six hours a week, for 12 weeks. Half of class time takes place during work time, while the other half is on personal time. Should participants consider it necessary,

they may join another 12-week program, where a quarter of the class time is during working hours and the remainder is on their personal time. Any further instruction is done wholly on their own time, but remains free to the participants.

Achievements

The VMWLP has allowed employees to be:

- ⇒ promoted to jobs that previously seemed out of reach;
- ⇒ successful at achieving further education goals, such as high school equivalency, post-secondary education and various technical accreditations; and
- ⇒ better able to communicate both on the job and in their personal lives.

Benefits

The language training program has benefited the City of Vancouver by:

- ⇒ increasing productivity and service delivery in some cases (though that was never part of the original mandate);
- ⇒ allowing the City to be a leader at inclusion in a diverse environment; and
- ⇒ developing employees' self-confidence and productivity at work, home and in the community.

CONTACT

Gary Pharness
Hastings Institute
Consultant, Trainer & Manager
Workplace Language Program
City of Vancouver
453 West 12th Avenue
Vancouver, BC V5Y 1V4
Tel. (604) 873-7036
Fax (604) 871-6251
E-mail [gary.pharness @ vancouver.ca](mailto:gary.pharness@vancouver.ca)