



Case Study *December 2005*

Awards for Excellence in Workplace Literacy,
Large Business Winner, 2005

Diavik's Workplace Learning Centre: A Literacy Gem That Is Creating Opportunities and Enhancing Workers' Lives

OVERVIEW

Diavik Diamond Mine is located on an island on Lac de Gras, Northwest Territories, approximately 300 kilometres northeast of Yellowknife by air. It is one of the most remote and isolated work-sites in Canada. Major freight must be trucked in on an ice road from February to April, and worker access is by aircraft only, landing at a private airstrip. Diavik Diamond Mine began diamond production in January 2003 after years of feasibility studies, environmental assessments, earthworks and construction. Over the 16- to 22-year mine life, Diavik is expected to produce approximately 107 million carats of diamonds.

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 Diavik Workplace Learning Centre

Date Established
2002

Skills Developed

Literacy
Numeracy
Computer
Communication

Contact

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Very early in the development of the mine site, Diavik committed to providing significant training, employment and business opportunities to residents of the Northwest Territories and the West Kitikmeot region of Nunavut. In 1999, Diavik formalized these commitments with local Aboriginal groups and the Government of the Northwest Territories under the Diavik Socio-Economic Monitoring Agreement (SEMA)—committing to 66 per cent northern employment and 40 per cent Aboriginal employment for operations. Today, with the mine in full operation for just under two years, Diavik and its major contractors employ more than 700 people—70 per cent are northerners, and nearly 40 per cent are Aboriginal persons. With a large contingent of labourers, plant and heavy equipment operators, skilled tradespersons, technicians, engineers, and administrative and managerial staff, Diavik is contributing to the development of a skilled and competent northern workforce and a vibrant and sustainable northern economy.

Diavik has already been recognized for its efforts as a leader in Aboriginal relations, employment and capacity building.

Many of the full-time and contract workers come to Diavik with minimal literacy and numeracy skills. The company has therefore implemented a number of skills and competency development programs to ensure that it has a highly productive, knowledgeable, skilled and safety-conscious workforce. Diavik has already been recognized for its efforts as a leader in Aboriginal relations, employment and capacity building.

THE DIAVIK WORKPLACE LEARNING CENTRE

A cornerstone of Diavik's human capital development efforts has been its on-site Workplace Learning Centre (WLC). The WLC provides Diavik employees and contract staff with a wide range of literacy, numeracy, academic and computer programs. Staffed by two qualified adult educators trained in the development and delivery of a variety of learning pedagogies and approaches, the WLC tailors its programs to meet the specific needs of individual learners while focusing on the essential job skills and workplace safety and

productivity needs of Diavik Diamond Mines. The WLC consists of a large open-concept room that includes computer stations, a research area, and areas for individual and facilitated learning.

OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the Diavik WLC are to:

- enhance and improve the literacy, numeracy and academic skills of employees at all levels;
- provide employees with the tools and competencies necessary to improve their workplace performance as they relate to workplace safety and operations;
- provide academic assistance to apprentices and others involved in training and educational opportunities;
- provide training in computers and computer programs and access to computer-based training programs; and
- encourage workers to become lifelong learners.

TARGET GROUPS

The WLC is accessible to all Diavik Diamond Mine employees and contract staff.

ACTIVITIES

The WLC provides flexible and targeted training schedules, programs and courses to address the ongoing needs of the mine site and employees' learning objectives. What the WLC does best is provide employees with real opportunities to develop essential literacy and numeracy skills and engage in effective and meaningful academic upgrading.

The WLC staff develops Individual Education Plans (IEPs) for each learner.

The Centre uses the Test of Workplace Essential Skills (TOWES) assessments to measure three essential skills needed for safe and productive employment: reading text, document use and numeracy. Based on the results of TOWES and other skills assessments, the WLC staff develops Individual Education Plans (IEPs) for each learner. Employees may be given paid release time to work on their studies during their shifts. Examples of

an IEP include: basic literacy and numeracy skills development; workplace literacy and access to online courses; upgrading in math, science and computer skills; preparing for and writing the General Education Diploma (GED); and preparing for trade apprenticeship exams and college or university exams.

According to the Manager of Workforce Development at Diavik Diamond Mines, the benefits of the WLC will increase over the long term as workers are able to participate in more advanced training and development programs. By never losing sight of the learning needs and objectives of its workers, the Diavik WLC has positioned itself well to serve the ongoing skills and competency interests of both its employees and the company.

Lifelong learning at work, home, school and in the community is a real possibility for keen Diavak workers.

In addition to providing on-site learning to all workers, the adult educators at Diavik also maintain regular and confidential contact with community adult educators and other community learning personnel (including those at local community colleges) to provide updates, programs and materials that can be used by employees to continue their learning in their home communities. Lifelong learning at work, home, school and in the community is a real possibility for those workers at Diavik Diamond Mines interested in creating opportunities for themselves.

RESOURCES

Diavik has made a significant commitment to fully staffing and resourcing the Workplace Learning Centre. It is a fully functional and self-contained learning facility located at the mine site, and is open to all employees either on a scheduled or drop-in basis, 12 hours a day, seven days a week. The two full-time adult educators at the mine offer learners all of the workplace learning resources and services needed, including access to computer stations, research and reading materials, and facilities to hold classes, workshops and seminars with small and large groups.

INNOVATIONS

The Diavik WLC was specifically designed to address and accommodate the learning and skills development needs of workers at a remote and isolated worksite where access to outside resources is limited and restricted. The programs offered through the WLC are tailored to meet the specific needs of individual learners while focusing on essential job skills and workplace safety and productivity. The WLC's programming also features Aboriginal-specific content to ensure that Diavik's Aboriginal workers are comfortable with the learning materials and resources.

Another key to success is the fact that the WLC is staffed by fully trained and qualified personnel who have experience in both literacy and industrial settings. Because WLC staff are familiar with the occupations at the mine and know the challenges of developing basic literacy skills, they can adapt and implement the most meaningful and effective learning programs for individual learners, while tailoring programs to match the skills requirements of various occupations.

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Finally, a key innovation of the WLC program is the fact that there is real support and buy-in for the WLC and its learning programs by Diavik Diamond Mines managers and supervisors. Their ongoing commitment to workplace learning and their feedback to the WLC on the types of training and learning programs required go a long way to matching the needs of the company with the literacy needs of individuals.

CHALLENGES

The challenges of developing and maintaining a workplace literacy program at a remote and isolated mine site are significant. One of the biggest hurdles is that access to immediate learning resources such as schools, colleges, libraries and literacy agencies and organizations is severely restricted. The use of the Internet is a practical

and viable solution—and one that Diavik has implemented—but it also presents its own challenges, as many workers need some assistance and training to become acquainted and comfortable with computers and their networking capabilities.

Another challenge that Diavik has had to overcome is the wide range of skills needs of its employees. Some employees require ongoing technical and professional development programs specific to a particular trade and occupation, whereas others need basic literacy and numeracy skills training. The WLC has worked hard to overcome this challenge by accommodating the many different learning and literacy needs of its employees at the same time as addressing their often unique cultural needs. Today, the WLC makes sure its staff are fully qualified to help learners address everything from the most basic literacy issues and concerns to the most sophisticated and technical training challenges.

SOLUTIONS

The WLC programs are tailored to meet the specific needs of individual learners while always keeping in mind the company's objectives of acquiring essential job skills and achieving workplace safety and productivity goals. The programs offered through the WLC include one-on-one, group and facilitated learning models. Learners can visit the WLC site during their regular work shifts and on their own time. (Most employees work at the mine on a two-week-in/two-week-out rotation, which results in interrupted work and learning schedules.) As well, workers can access computers for individualized and facilitated learning sessions—using either one-on-one or group learning approaches. Giving the employees this flexibility has contributed greatly to the uptake and effectiveness of the WLC and its learning programs.

The WLC programs are tailored to meet the needs of individual learners while keeping in mind the company's objectives.

The WLC allows learners to progress at an individualized pace. By encouraging workers to take responsibility for their own ongoing education, the program has been able to obtain the confidence and support of learners and supervisors alike.

OUTCOMES

The WLC has had a significant impact on the performance and confidence of many workers. To date, the Centre has been used by hundreds of workers and has:

- helped some former non-readers develop basic literacy skills which have, in turn, led to a safer and more productive workplace; and
- helped workers enjoy a more productive life outside of the work environment as they use their basic literacy and numeracy skills in day-to-day activities.

IMPACTS AND BENEFITS

The Diavik WLC has had many positive impacts and benefits for both the workers and the company, including:

- increased workplace safety and operational effectiveness;
- improved literacy and numeracy skills needed to work effectively and efficiently;
- improved productivity and performance of the workers;
- increased opportunities for workers to progress from entry-level to more senior positions;
- increased enrolment in and completion of high school equivalencies, pre-trades programs and apprenticeship programs;
- increased pride and confidence in the work and decisions made by workers;
- improved lifestyles of workers outside of work because they can apply and use their literacy and numeracy skills within their communities and homes; and
- the transfer of a learning culture to the employees' personal lives—employees are more active in their children's education.

USE AS A MODEL

The WLC is an effective skills development model for all worksites, but of particular relevance and value for remote sites where the education levels and literacy rates of the local population may be below Canadian averages. Recognizing the success of the WLC program, many other companies working in remote and isolated areas have sought Diavik's advice on establishing or improving their own culturally sensitive workplace learning programs.

Acknowledgements

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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 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.

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by *Douglas Watt*

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