



## Case Study October 2005

# Finding Common Ground Through Workplace Education Department of National Defence: Atlantic Region

### OVERVIEW

The main goal of the Department of National Defence (DND) and the Canadian Forces (CF) is to protect Canadian interests and values while contributing to international peace and security. Employees must have the workplace skills necessary to meet this important goal. The regular duties of CF employees serving in Canada range from administration, health care, construction and maintenance to search-and-rescue operations, patrolling of Canadian airspace and territorial waters, and maintenance of readiness for combat duties.

In Atlantic Canada, DND employs more than 24,000 men and women as members of the Regular and Reserve Forces and civilian personnel, making it the largest employer in the region. In recent years, rapid technological advancement and changes in organizational structure

have affected the job and skill requirements of DND employees. Downsizing and restructuring in the department have changed the job descriptions of many employees and raised the expectations for workplace performance. More employees are now expected to

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

**Name of Program**  
Workplace Education Program

**Date Established**  
1996

**Skills Developed**  
Literacy  
Computer  
Communication

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write reports, chair meetings and communicate electronically, while keeping other workplace skills up-to-date.

In recognition of the changing work environment, the Base Commander of CFB Halifax organized a “town hall” meeting with 250 employees to identify their training needs. Employees expressed needs for training in basic skills, personal development, academic upgrading topics and stress management techniques. To meet these needs, CFB Halifax’s Learning and Career Centre worked in conjunction with Nova Scotia’s Department of Education, the Joint Career and Transition Centre, and DND managers and employees to establish the Workplace Education Program (WEP). The WEP has since been going strong for nine years, and has completed 12 successful programs in Halifax and Greenwood, N.S. Participants have gained skills they needed to succeed in their jobs and refreshed skills that had been dormant for many years. Many WEP graduates have gone on to complete their General Education Diploma (GED) or enroll in college and university courses.

## OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the WEP are to:

- Offer skills upgrading to DND employees who are unable to take courses off-site;
- Provide employees with the tools necessary to improve their workplace performance;
- Increase the transferability of employees through promotion; and
- Encourage participants to become lifelong learners.

## TARGET GROUPS

The WEP is accessible to DND’s military and civilian employees in Atlantic Canada.

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**Many WEP graduates have gone on to complete their General Education Diploma.**

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## ACTIVITIES

Initially, Nova Scotia’s Department of Education funded two coordinators and an instructor for the WEP at DND. The coordinators were hired from the Job

Experience Training (JET) inventory—a DND training program that places employees on special assignments. Instructors from the JET inventory share the same corporate culture as their co-workers and understand their training needs. Having DND employees develop the program for their peers has contributed to the overall success of the WEP. The Learning and Career Centre now employs a full-time qualified instructor who draws on the participants’ interests and workplace experiences to develop learner-centred courses.

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### **Having DND employees develop the program for their peers has contributed to the success of the WEP.**

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The first step in the development of the WEP was the use of prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR), which enables employees to identify, assess and recognize skills, knowledge or competencies that have been acquired through work experience, unrecognized training, independent study, volunteer activities and hobbies. For some military personnel, PLAR may be applied toward academic credit, requirements of a training program or occupational certification. The information gathered from PLAR assessments was used to develop personal training portfolios that documented employees’ strengths and development needs.

Employees are the driving force behind the WEP curriculum—it is customized to meet the needs of every learner. The first courses were geared to employees wanting to complete their GED and included courses in basic, intermediate, and advanced math and writing. More recently, the program has evolved to include computer literacy, comprehension and communication skills. The instructional materials for the courses come straight from the field. Using actual workplace forms, writing real letters and analyzing existing DND reports has motivated learners to use their newly acquired skills in their jobs.

The course runs for a 10-week period, with participants meeting for two-hour sessions twice a week. Courses are divided into three components: reading and writing, math, and computer skills.

## RESOURCES

Financial support for the program and the Learning and Career Centre comes from the Defence Learning Network in Ottawa—a joint military/civilian program that provides training, education and professional development opportunities for military members and civilian employees of DND. In addition to this funding, the Nova Scotia Joint Career Transition Committee (NS JC/TC), a federal government organization made up of management and labour, absorbs the cost of the instructor for CFB Greenwood.

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### **DND's program enables two different cultures—civilian and military—to come together.**

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Courses are delivered at the Learning Resource Centre in classrooms that are specially designated for the WEP. The WEP is offered half on the employer's time and half on the employees' time at no cost to the participants. Because employees can spend several months deployed outside of the bases, some supervisors permit employees to attend courses entirely on the employer's time.

## INNOVATIONS

It is important to recognize that DND's program enables two different cultures—civilian and military—to come together and get to know each other over an extended period of time. Course participation offers the opportunity for military and civilian employees to become acquainted on a new level and to gain a better understanding of each other's jobs. The interaction between these two different groups has had very positive effects for the entire workforce and has resulted in increased cooperation, improved communication and shared activities outside of the workplace.

## CHALLENGES

Developing individualized courses for a workforce that is often travelling with little notice posed some challenges for the Learning and Career Centre. In addition to scheduling challenges, CFB Halifax and

CFB Greenwood encountered other barriers, including:

- Employees were sometimes reluctant to admit their educational level and literacy needs.
- It was difficult to find funding for a 60- to 80-hour GED preparation course at CFB Greenwood.

## SOLUTIONS

The Learning and Career Centre needed to ensure that employees would be able to successfully complete the courses while observing their deployment schedules. Employees attend only the components of the courses that are most relevant to their learning needs. Giving employees this flexibility has contributed greatly to the 100-per-cent completion rate for the courses. Moreover, to better accommodate scheduling differences, courses are delivered between 7 and 9 a.m., at the request of employees.

Another key to the success of the program is the intensive pre-testing used to determine individual strengths and areas for improvement. Pre-testing allowed participants to focus on individual areas of need and not spend time on subjects they had already mastered. In addition, this method allowed CFB Greenwood to shorten the normal 60- to 80-hour GED preparation course, to a 40-hour course, which decreased funding requirements.

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### **Learning has increased the self-confidence of employees at work and at home.**

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## OUTCOMES

Basic skills training is an integral part of the learning culture at CFB Halifax and CFB Greenwood. Specific outcomes include:

- Nearly 100 employees have completed courses through the WEP.
- Employees who have attained higher levels of workplace skills are better able to work independently.
- Participants have gained skills enabling them to continue their post-secondary education.
- Learning has increased the self-confidence of employees at work and at home.

## IMPACTS AND BENEFITS

The WEP has made many positive contributions to the corporate culture of CFB Halifax and CFB Greenwood, including:

- The meshing of military and civilian cultures in a neutral learning environment, resulting in a more cohesive workforce;
- Enhanced understanding of the importance of basic skills in the workplace on the part of military and civilian managers and supervisors;
- The creation of partnerships between management, unions, employees, the N.S. Department of Education and the Joint Career and Transition Centre; and
- The transfer of a learning culture to the employees' personal lives—employees are more active in their children's education.

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## USE AS A MODEL

DND recognizes the varying responsibilities of its workforce and has therefore facilitated learning by making the program as flexible as possible. Participants are able to take the most relevant parts of a course without having to attend all the components.

### Acknowledgements

Our thanks to Sara Somers and others at CFB Halifax who provided comments and resources.

### 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.

Finding Common Ground Through Workplace Education—Department of National Defence: Atlantic Region  
by *Maryester Gonzalez*

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ISSN 1492-501X • Agreement No. 40063028

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