



The Conference Board  
of Canada

#### CASE STUDY 5

*A core product of the  
Employability Skills  
Forum, National  
Business and  
Education Centre*

**Program**  
*Partnership*

**Date Established**  
1992

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**Name of Program**  
*Dofasco Inc.'s Trade  
Assist Program*

**Skills Developed**

- *Academic*
- *Personal  
Management*
- *Teamwork*

Developing employees' employability skills

# DOFASCO INC.'S TRADE ASSIST PROGRAM

## *Multiskilling in the Modern Workplace*

BY MICHAEL R. BLOOM, PENNY BRADY & KURTIS KITAGAWA

August 1998

Dofasco is meeting the challenges of the new economy by enhancing employees' generic employability skills and by building technical training programs on the foundation of strong generic skills.

#### **Overview**

Dofasco created the Trade Assist Program to help employees learn the skills they need to maintain ever more technically sophisticated equipment. Given the pace of technological change, training support for employees is an ongoing concern with Dofasco. Dofasco's human resources philosophy is to help employees acquire the skills they need to succeed and, by helping employees to do their jobs well, to help Dofasco achieve performance targets. Dofasco regards employee training as a mutually beneficial exercise in which employee empowerment goes hand-in-hand with enhanced Dofasco productivity.

In setting up this program, Dofasco acknowledged the importance of (1) upgrading employees' technical skills to ensure Dofasco's continued success in a highly competitive global economy and (2) investing in the employability skills of employees, who must constantly adapt in a rapidly changing workplace. Employees

with strong generic skills find it easier to work with new technologies and are better equipped to accept new responsibilities within Dofasco.

In the early 1990s, facing mounting global competition, Dofasco identified its core products and services. By the mid-1990s, pushed by the reality of an aging workforce, customer needs, growth and technological change, Dofasco needed to help employees build generic and technical skills.

In building the skills of electrical and mechanical trade employees, Dofasco's Training Department faced new challenges, including the need to decrease its training costs while increasing the impact of its training programs—all this at a time when the company was restructuring and reducing its workforce from 12,000 to 7,000 employees.

To meet these challenges, Dofasco supported two key employee skill building programs: (1) the Trade Assist Program and (2) the Technology Apprenticeship Program (see Case Study 4).

#### **Objectives**

The Trade Assist Program has two main goals:

- help employees develop generic employability skills as well as technical skills in trade areas outside their

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own—employees are commonly called upon to utilize these skills in their everyday duties on the shop floor, and

- help employees become multiskilled and reward employees who enhance their skills.

**Groups Served**

- All trade employees.
- Some operations employees.

**Activities**

Through the Trade Assist Program, Dofasco helps employees become multiskilled in a variety of trade areas. Dofasco helps employees qualified in one trade to acquire the skills they need to perform routine tasks normally performed by employees qualified in another trade. This enables employees to assist each other and limits the need to call on a principal tradesperson at times when tasks involving more than one trade skill need to be performed. Employees learn new technical skills in related trades and also acquire generic employability skills, including personal management skills such as adaptability and responsibility.

Dofasco deployed a task force of experienced tradespeople, technical training advisors, senior supervisors and human resource professionals to develop its Trade Assist Program. The task force identified the skill levels and described the performance standards of tradespeople across a four-level scale ranging from C through B and A to AA. C is the lowest skill level, and AA is the highest and only multiskill level within a given trade. The task force produced more than 80 general and specific job profiles, defined in terms of performance standards for groups of tasks routinely performed in a given job.

To work toward achieving the AA rating, tradespeople and their supervisors agree on the core and optional skills that would enhance their versatility on the job and lead to a pay increase. The supervisor then arranges for training to practise skills under a mentor, who

works with tradespeople so that the latter can demonstrate competency in specific tasks that require these skills and qualify for a pay increase. This task-oriented approach to skills upgrading is not time-dependent in the way that traditional job promotion is. It allows people to qualify quickly for particular jobs and to receive pay raises.

**Resources Required**

Resources for developing the program, organizing meetings, participating in focus groups and defining jobs in terms of sets of functions include:

- four person years (approximately \$200,000 for human resource professionals), and
- 840 days (approximately \$30,000 for 3 days each from 280 trade employees).

**Achievements/Outcomes**

- Since 1992, 60 per cent of Dofasco's 900 tradespeople have achieved the AA (multiskilled) level as a result of participating in the Trade Assist Program.
- The project is so successful that non-trade personnel are now taking part to improve their employability skills—operating people are learning basic maintenance skills and assisting in repairs and are rewarded by having additional duties added to their job profiles and by pay increases commensurate with their new skill levels.
- The functional approach to job classifications in this program has had a positive impact on the way Dofasco employees do their work. Augmenting employees' employability skills in different trade areas has made them more versatile, increased their motivation and resulted in enhanced job performance. Employees have become much more integrated with each other: by learning new skills, tradespeople are able to assist each other, equipment operators can assist with maintenance, and maintenance people can operate equipment. Enhanced employee

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We are committed to improving the productivity and quality of life for individuals, organizations and society by enhancing the employability skills of the current and future workforce of Canada.

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integration has yielded cost savings and improved productivity for Dofasco.

### **Benefits**

#### **Employees**

- Achieve higher employability and technical skill levels and develop greater flexibility.
- Feel more self-confident in their jobs because they have learned new skills.

#### **Dofasco**

- Reaps the benefit of a culture of learning, in which employees see themselves as learners as well as workers and learn continuously at work.
- Achieves its production targets.

### **Innovation**

This program develops a multiskilled workforce that has a combination of enhanced technical and generic employability skills. The combination of more flexible employees and greater knowledge sharing has made work flow more smoothly and increased efficiencies on the shop floor.

By training people across the trades in both specific technical and generic employability skills, Dofasco ensures that its employees have the exact skills they need to get their jobs done. Moreover, by reviewing job profiles every two years to ensure that employee skills are developed on a just-in-time basis to keep pace with technological advances in production methods, Dofasco can maintain its competitiveness in a rapidly changing global economy.

Today, employee remuneration is increasingly based on skills, knowledge and competency. Dofasco is therefore changing the way employees are compensated for their work, rewarding them for developing their technical and generic skills.

### **Keys to Success**

- Establish a strong communications network between the program coordinator, management and the workforce.
- Involve shop floor personnel, including supervisors, in identifying and revising skill levels and optional criteria required for given jobs, detailing training requirements and conducting evaluations.
- Produce accurate projections of the company's need for employees at different skill levels.
- Ensure a natural flow of talent by providing effective incentives and having appropriate jobs and avenues for advancement ready for people who develop their technical and generic skills.

### **Greatest Challenge**

Perhaps the greatest challenge lies in balancing the dual objectives of (1) upgrading skill levels to accommodate changes in technology and corresponding job functions and (2) simply rewarding employees for doing a good job. Achieving a balance in this regard is crucial to maintaining good employee morale, for while the prospect of a pay increase may be sufficient to induce employees to upgrade their skill levels, corporate efficiency may not require every employee to achieve an AA (multiskilled) skill rating. Moreover, while managers need to encourage employees to improve their skills, employees must not be given unrealistic expectations. Skills enhancement initiatives must be introduced with a due sensitivity about how employees who have improved their skills will be perceived by their fellow workers.

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**NBEC Publications Relating to Employability Skills Development and Assessment**

*Employability Skills Profile*

*Science Literacy for the World of Work*

*Best Practices in Assessing and Developing  
Employability Skills—20 Case Studies (Sept. 98)*

*The Economic Benefits of Improving Literacy in  
the Workplace, 206-97 Report.*

*Enhancing Employability Skills: Innovative  
Partnerships, Projects and Programs, 118-94 Report.*

*Linking Teachers, Science, Technology and Research:  
Business and Education Collaborations That Work,  
144-95 Report.*

*1998 100-Best Partnerships IdeaBook*

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