



The Conference Board
of Canada

CASE STUDY 17

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

*Business-education
partnership*

Date Established

1988

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Name of Program

*Syncrude Canada
Ltd.'s Effective Reading
in Context (ERIC)
Program*

Skills Developed

- Academic
- Personal Management
- Teamwork
- Science Literacy

Developing and assessing employees' employability
skills organization-wide

SYNCRUDE CANADA LTD.'S (ERIC) PROGRAM

Teaching the Skills That Enable Employees to Manage Change

BY KURTIS KITAGAWA

August 1998

Syncrude is enhancing the generic employability skills of its employees to prepare them to meet the challenges of a rapidly changing workplace.

Overview

Syncrude, in partnership with Keyano College in Fort McMurray, developed and launched ERIC (Effective Reading in Context), Canada's first workplace literacy program. The program was initially designed to enhance supervisors' key employability skills such as reading comprehension, writing, numeracy and the confidence and ability to deal with organizational change (including the involvement of work teams in projecting and managing budgets), technological advances, issues relating to multiskilling and all of the skill- and knowledge-related challenges of the information age.

ERIC was so successfully used with supervisory personnel that Syncrude offered it to all of its employees and now makes it available to business, industry, unions, high schools and communities throughout Alberta. Syncrude owns the copyright for ERIC and does not charge a licensing fee. However, Keyano College

adapts ERIC for different contexts on a cost-recovery basis with individual clients.

ERIC is now being used in Zimbabwe as part of an entrepreneurial skills development project and in Mozambique to develop offenders' employability skills.

Alberta has the world's largest oilsands deposits. The oilsands deposits are located 45 kilometres north of Fort McMurray in a physically challenging environment.

Syncrude must use cutting-edge technology to mine the oilsands. It therefore requires a highly skilled, literate and numerate workforce capable of lifelong learning and possessing other key employability skills. By 1987, Syncrude realized that its competitive position in the global economy absolutely depended on developing the employability skills of its employees.

Syncrude recognized that meeting the challenges of technological change and the information age imposed certain conditions, most notably that to be a successful training organization it had to become a premier learning organization. Syncrude allocates 5 to 7 per cent of its salary budget to employee development and has become a leader in developing employability skills, earning the respect of education, industry, government and labour.

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NBEC Mission

We help business and education leaders work collaboratively to promote the development of a learning society that will prepare Canada's young people for a changing world.

Participatory management practices, which involve empowering semi-autonomous work teams to plan and carry out work and take responsibility for resource allocation and end products, are defining features of Syncrude's organizational style. The company has found that these operational practices are enhanced when they are built on the foundation of sound employee employability skills.

Syncrude has also become aware of an impending shortage of skilled workers. In response, it has partnered with educational institutions to meet the growing need for industry-specific preparation for its future employees.

Keyano College was a natural partner for Syncrude in its employability skills development initiatives. Keyano delivers many programs designed specifically for business and industry, including customized industry-specific workshops and seminars and heavy industry and trades credit programs. Syncrude's workplace literacy initiative neatly dovetailed with Keyano's excellent record of preparing students for employment and the College's mission to equip learners for the challenges of the modern workplace and promote individual and community growth.

Objectives

- To improve Syncrude employees' workplace-related reading comprehension skills and thereby enhance their leadership potential.
- To prepare all Syncrude employees to meet the challenges of technology, new organizational structures and multiskilling.
- To underline the operational benefits of lifelong learning.
- To continuously develop employability skills to ensure employees have the appropriate skills when those skills are called upon, whether in training contexts or in situations requiring leadership, flexibility and innovation.
- To challenge other companies to recognize employability skills

development as a critical factor in improving workplace training, safety and productivity.

Groups Served

- Employees, industry and educators.

Activities

Syncrude enhances its employees' reading comprehension skills through participatory, relevant, adaptable and flexible reading programs.

ERIC is customized for different groups based on an appreciation of the organizational structure of the group, a commitment to ensuring relevance and an assessment of the needs and abilities of the assessees.

Early on in the process, Keyano College meets with employees to determine the make-up of a pilot team. ERIC is delivered in two principal phases: a curriculum adaptation phase and a pilot workshop phase.

In the curriculum adaptation phase, input is solicited from all stakeholders relating to printed workplace materials with which they are very familiar. In the pilot workshop phase, the skills of all participants are assessed individually in a process that involves determining why individual adult learners are participating in the program and ensuring that ERIC programming helps them to achieve their goals. Those who already have good reading comprehension skills are screened out, while those whose skills could use improvement are invited to take part in 12-, 28- or 40-hour workshops consisting of several groups of up to eight participants.

Workshop participants are given samples of printed materials they regularly encounter in their jobs. They are assessed on how well they can generalize, synthesize, and analyse—in other words, select the main ideas from these materials and develop study strategies they can use for other work-related training or in other areas of their life.

Afterwards, program evaluations are reviewed to ensure that skills learned are transferred into new areas.

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The Employability Skills Forum Mission

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.

This study was made possible through funding by members of the Employability Skills Forum.

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Resources Required

The ERIC program sustains itself without any direct government support: Keyano College delivers the program on a cost-recovery basis. To adapt ERIC for a specific workplace costs from \$6,000 to \$12,000 (a one-time only charge covering four days of on-site work and 10 days at Keyano College to adapt printed materials for inclusion in ERIC, pilot assessments, pilot workshop and costs of all materials for the pilot workshop). Other costs to business include travel.

One-on-one assessments take two to three hours and cost in the range of \$150 to \$225 each. The College charges approximately \$100 per instructional hour to deliver its workshops (so a 12-hour workshop costs \$1,200).

Achievements/Outcomes

- When it was launched in 1988, ERIC was the first program of its kind. Since that time, the project has expanded greatly both in content and reach.
- At its inception, ERIC offered only one workshop relating to reading comprehension. ERIC now offers six different workshops relating not only to reading comprehension but also to numeracy and writing.
- Initially ERIC was delivered by one instructor/program manager; now there are five instructors in addition to the program manager.
- Over the past 10 years, six large industry partners and nine educational partners have been involved in the delivery of ERIC, which has been successfully adapted to a variety of settings: industry, construction, union and high school. ERIC is integrated into the English 33 (Grade 12 Business English) curriculum, for example. Since its inception, over 1,100 people have participated in ERIC.
- In 1994, Syncrude won its Canada Post Flight For Freedom Corporate Award for ERIC.
- Syncrude is now piloting a workplace numeracy program to enhance the business literacy of its employees.

- Syncrude is also working with the Construction Owners' Association of Alberta (120,000 members) to develop and deliver a workplace literacy program to construction workers in their construction camps and to allow for progressively more advanced literacy training as they move from job site to job site.

Benefits

Employees

- Perform more competently, confidently and safely on the job—safety, for example, is typically related to employees' ability to follow to the letter written procedures governing the operation and maintenance of equipment.
- Experience personal growth and enhanced self-esteem as a result of developing their employability skills and carry these over into improving family communications and enhancing their community involvement.
- Take ownership of change management by actively keeping up with the changes wrought by new technologies.
- Become interested in furthering their own education and take a more active role in their children's education and learning.
- Find, select, organize and transmit information more effectively.
- Improve their decision making abilities.
- Execute instructions more efficiently.
- Are more willing to take on new tasks.
- Improve their writing skills.

Industry

- Benefits from employees' enhanced capability and capacity, which make them more flexible, better able to transfer their skills from situation to situation and better able to adapt to a continuously changing workplace.
- Gains a more effective workforce, who are more efficient and make better decisions more quickly as a result of improving their employability skills.
- Profits from a more motivated and generically skilled workforce, who are willing and able to take on new tasks more readily.

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Our grateful thanks to our interviewees and to others who provided comment, including:

*Lloyd Campbell
Tamara Topolnisky*

- Gains a safer workforce, who are able to assess and interpret information accurately and quickly.

Educators

- Gain a foothold in business as a result of ERIC partnerships and are able to enhance employability skills in the family as well as in the workplace by heightening employee awareness of the importance of developing employability skills at home, school or work.

Innovation

ERIC operates with an adult learning philosophy that recognizes the experience that adult learners bring to the table, tailoring reading or numeracy programs to their workplace experience and to the written materials they encounter in the workplace. Instruction is delivered in a college setting, and employees participate in an orientation session to make them feel at home in what for some is an uncomfortable or unfamiliar environment. Participation in ERIC workshops is both voluntary and confidential, which partly accounts for ERIC's success in imparting employability skills since its inception a decade ago.

ERIC engages with specific workplace contexts, because instructors are at the worksite and adapt curricula and learning resources from the written materials that employees encounter every day in their jobs. This allows participants to feel immediately comfortable with what they are learning and to apply what they learn directly in the workplace.

ERIC uses participatory teaching methods, for example, having participants make presentations during workshops.

Keys to Success

- Having a thorough understanding of each workplace and the needs of its employees.
- Sensitively adapting audience-specific materials and resources into a curriculum.
- Delivering customized workshops based on stakeholder input.
- Ensuring business is prepared to accommodate workshop schedules.

Greatest Challenge

Challenges specific to encouraging the use of ERIC outside Syncrude include a reluctance to see value in developing employees' workplace literacy skills: "If employees can already read, why stigmatize them and our organization by buying into a literacy program?"

As business begins to see ERIC as offering upper level reading training and providing employees with opportunities to refine their reading skills, improve their workplace safety records and enhance their personal confidence, buy-in to ERIC increases. Employers need to select a champion within their organizations to promote workplace literacy and the employability skills development it entails. Employees not only need to have these skills but to maintain them as well. Only by enhancing their skills can employees be expected to take more ownership of and responsibility for inputs and outputs of the business. ERIC is a strategic investment in the long-term development and developability of its employees.

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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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