



Case Study March 2004

Awards for Excellence in Workplace Literacy, Medium Business Winner, 2003 Administrative Professionalism at J.D. Irving, Limited

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

OVERVIEW

Advancing technology is changing the way J.D. Irving, Limited conducts its business. Increasing customer demands for improved services based on the latest technology translate into greater performance expectations by management. Consequently, the level of excellence demanded of administrative personnel is also increasing. As a result, the role of the administrative professional at J.D. Irving, Limited has changed dramatically over the last few years. The new expectation of administrative professionals is that they will resolve emerging issues previously handled by middle management, anticipate and co-ordinate man-

agement activities, present ideas and implement initiatives, have confidence, and demonstrate superior leadership skills. In addition, administrative personnel must now also be able to integrate the latest information technology into their work.

Effective practices case study
in providing training and
supporting workplace literacy

Name of Program
Irving Administrative
Professionals

Date Established
1999

Skills Developed

- Communication
- Leadership
- Information management

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In recent years, the administrative personnel at J.D. Irving, Limited saw that their traditional secretarial skills no longer matched emerging business concepts and evolving technology. They were proactive, however, and took the initiative to resolve these issues by creating a professional development program for themselves. In the fall of 1999, a group of executive administrative assistants at the corporate offices formed a committee to research and develop a program with a variety of professional development, skills training and knowledge-sharing activities. Supported by senior management, the program is cost-effective, self-sufficient, and aligned with the corporate culture and vision.

J.D. Irving, Limited is a private, family-owned company, whose forest products operations include pulp, tissue, newsprint, and lumber mills. The J.D. Irving, Limited group of companies operates an integrated rail, sea and road transportation network and has interests in shipbuilding, construction, food processing, printing, publishing and modular home construction.

OBJECTIVES

The training and development program for administrative personnel at J.D. Irving, Limited had two chief objectives:

- to assist individuals in keeping up to speed with the evolving role of the administrative professional; and
- to promote contemporary business, leadership and technology literacy.

TARGET GROUPS

Because the new training program was developed to address the specific skills needs of administrative personnel, the target groups at J.D. Irving, Limited included:

- administrative assistants; and
- staff with primarily administrative duties.

ACTIVITIES

Several activities were initiated under the administrative professional learning program at J.D. Irving, Limited:

- Irving Administrative Professional Accreditation (IAP-A)—a program tailored for administrative professionals that promotes leadership skills, builds business awareness, teamwork and innovative attitudes;

- Irving Microsoft® Office Certification (IMOC)—serves as a standard of computer operation proficiency. Those applications most frequently used by administrative professionals include Word, Excel, PowerPoint and Outlook;
- Lunch and Learns—three times per year, administrative professionals gather to network, have lunch, and learn from each other on various topics;
- Web-based information portal—the Irving Administrative Professional (IAP) team created its own Web portal to keep administrative professionals informed about IAP activities, including general information, course outlines and registrations, a training evaluation survey, best practices, useful links, internal library listings, articles, and recognition photos of employees who successfully complete the IAP accreditation program; and
- celebration of accomplishments, certification and Administrative Professionals’ Day.

RESOURCES

In support of the learning program initiated by the administrative assistants, the company provided on-site facilities for training, at no cost. Senior management gave the program their support and co-operation. Other staff members acted as in-house experts and volunteered their time to facilitate the learning sessions. A local community college supplied coaching on adult education principles to ensure that the learning program was effective.

INNOVATIONS

Administrative assistants at J.D. Irving, Limited took the initiative to design, implement and manage a training program for themselves and others in similar positions. They presented their vision, action plan and benefits to senior management, from whom they received encouragement and support. As a team, the administrative assistants researched, developed, implemented and continue to manage the program. In March 2000, the IAP team launched the program throughout the various affiliated J.D. Irving, Limited companies. The team designed a customized series of activities and training programs specifically tailored to the administrative professional’s evolving role. Through ongoing collaborations with a local community college and “in-house experts” such as department managers, the team ensures that the curriculum stays fresh and that at the same time it reflects the corporate culture, vision and mission.

BARRIERS

The company was generally enthusiastic and encouraging about the administrative personnel's desire to upgrade their skills, although initially, the administrators had several challenges to overcome in starting and maintaining the training program:

- getting buy-in and support from senior management;
- motivating employees to take part; and
- designing targeted, relevant curriculum in-house.

SOLUTIONS/KEYS TO SUCCESS

By persevering towards its goals, the IAP team discovered the solutions to the challenges of beginning and operating a training program:

- enthusiastic, motivated employees who took the initiative to design and put forward a training program for themselves;
- buy-in of senior management gained through a presentation of "the business case" for training;
- collaboration among the employees, senior management, the Information Technology (IT) division and corporate human resources to see the training through to fruition; and
- direct alignment between the training initiative and corporate human resources' management strategy for retaining and motivating employees.

OUTCOMES

Direct results of the IAP training program are encouraging and overwhelmingly positive:

- IAP-A (Business Literacy) has had 54 participants, 29 facilitators and 19 sessions;
- IMOC (Computer Literacy) has had 81 participants, 51 certified "power users" and 36 in progress; and
- Lunch and Learns have had 10 sessions, with 13 guest speakers and an average of 70 attendees.

Participants have received promotions, commendations and salary increases. The need for outsourcing projects and printing has been reduced, saving time and money. All of the Irving administrative professionals benefit from a larger pool of knowledgeable resources, and mentoring within the administrative staff pool has increased.

Irving administrative professionals now project greater confidence and are more routinely consulted on issues, given leadership tasks and respected for their ability to get things done. The IT literacy program has been applied as a model for other employees. The administrative professionals are proud of their new professional image and of their contribution to raising the level of excellence for all IAPs.

"My efficiency and product knowledge has increased. As a result, my confidence in attempting new projects has grown."

—IAP-A Participant, J.D. Irving, Limited

IMPACTS AND BENEFITS

Employees acquire the people skills, the tools and the technological proficiency to add value to their teams. They take an active role in the overall success of the company and give the company a competitive edge. IAPs are consulted on complex tasks, and outsourcing costs have been reduced. The certified power users can now assist co-workers with problems that were once directed to the IT service centre.

Employees now have access to innovative and customized training. Those who have taken the training have successfully evolved into proactive technology experts and "full support" persons. Greater job satisfaction and increased contribution, financial reward for value-added services and new respect and recognition from management are some of the benefits they have enjoyed.

". . . the self-development team spirit that this program created and its immediate availability made everyone eager to participate. The result was a huge return on our training investment."

—Corporate Controller, J.D. Irving, Limited

USE AS A MODEL

This training program model makes use of motivated employees who can take the initiative to design and “own” a training and development program for co-workers in similar positions. Senior management’s favourable attitude towards employees supporting and mentoring each other is a key to the program’s success. Also, using internal

employees with specific talents to facilitate the training sessions and using the on-site facilities and equipment keep the program’s costs low. By partnering with a local educational provider such as a community college, the company and employees receive expert assistance with coaching on adult education principles, and can make sure the material is innovative and reflects future workplace expectations.

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 highlights an award winner from the Awards for Excellence in Workplace Literacy, funded by the National Literacy Secretariat, Human Resources Development Canada.

Awards for Excellence in Workplace Literacy, Medium Business Winner, 2003: Administrative Professionalism at J.D. Irving, Limited
by *Alison Campbell*

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