



Case Study September 2009

Hatching a Plan for Safety Literacy Skills Development at Lilydale Inc.

NAME OF THE PROGRAMS

New Employee Orientation Program and English as a Second Language Program

DATE ESTABLISHED

2008

SKILLS DEVELOPED

English verbal and written skills
Communication and teamwork skills
Transferable and job skills

CONTACT

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OVERVIEW

Established in 1940, Lilydale Inc. is one of Canada's largest poultry processors and employs over 2,300 workers across Canada. Lilydale operates six manufacturing facilities and three hatcheries in three provinces: British Columbia, Alberta, and Saskatchewan. The company is committed to providing Canadians with safe, wholesome, premium-quality products, and is always looking for new methods and technologies to further enhance food safety. To that end, Lilydale enforces strict food safety handling processes and product specifications at every stage of production. The company believes that the best way to ensure safe food production is to maintain high standards when it comes to raw materials, the process, the environment, and the skills of the people involved.

In recent years, with the job boom in the West, a high rate of worker turnover challenged Lilydale's success. The company was losing from 70 per cent to 85 per cent of its employees within the first 100 days of employment, resulting in a severe shortage of workers. It was discovered that new plant production workers were feeling overwhelmed with their new job responsibilities and were not being adequately supported. A lack of adequate orientation and training, coupled with language difficulties experienced by many new recruits, was creating knowledge gaps, production lags, and communication barriers that resulted in an unsafe working environment on the plant floor. Management took the initiative to create in-depth orientation and ESL (English as a Second Language) training programs to overcome turnover and health and safety issues.

OBJECTIVES

The core reason for creating orientation and language-skills training programs was to reduce the time it takes new plant employees to achieve full competency. Although the objectives of the orientation training did not initially focus on health and safety, management soon realized that this training also improved the health and safety of the workers—both at work and at home. The language training program was expected to improve the health and safety of the work environment by improving communications and task accuracy.

Committed to its employees and the community, Lilydale was also intent on making training relevant to both work and day-to-day life. Training was not limited to food preparation and food safety at work, but encouraged individuals to see the importance of exercising the same health and safety standards at home as well.

The core objectives for the training initiatives at Lilydale were to:

- ♦ Reduce turnover and improve worker retention.
- ♦ Engage and train new employees to be better prepared for job standards.
- ♦ Reduce challenges related to productivity and quality, appearance, and grade reduction (i.e., improve good manufacturing practices [GMP] compliance).

- ♦ Ensure food safety, as well as workplace health and safety.
- ♦ Increase efficiencies and throughput.

TARGET GROUPS

Although orientation was mandatory for all new plant employees, employed workers were also encouraged to participate, as the orientation program offered an excellent opportunity to refresh job skills. Participation in the training sessions also allowed job skills trainers and supervisors to better understand the information and messages being shared with the new employees who would soon be reporting to them. The ESL program was open to all employees.

Each orientation session at Lilydale was limited to a maximum of 15 employees.

ACTIVITIES

The Orientation initiative at Lilydale was delivered over a five-day period and consisted of three key components:

1. Day 1 (classroom)—orientation workshops delivered by trained presenters representing various departments (HR, payroll, health and safety, quality assurance) from Lilydale's Calgary facility. Customized "games" were developed to reinforce the information learned over the course of the day by participants and to help them retain their new knowledge.
2. Day 2 (classroom)—one half-day consisting of a transferable skills workshop.
3. Days 2–5 (production floor)—three-and-a-half days of job skills training with a job skills trainer. New employees learned about their job tasks through one-on-one training and mentoring from a job skills trainer.

Each orientation session at Lilydale was limited to a maximum of 15 employees. Experience showed that given the interactive format of the training sessions, it was easier to engage a smaller class while covering the materials within a reasonable time frame.

One-hundred employees expressed interest in participating in Lilydale's initial ESL training session. However, individuals were required to undergo a literacy assessment to identify their literacy skill levels prior to placement in the ESL program. Seventy employees voluntarily completed the assessment and enrolled in the program. ESL classes were offered on a basis of 50 per cent work time and 50 per cent personal time. Classroom work was based on the various workplace and safety manuals that employees regularly used in their jobs. Field trips were also part of the ESL program.

RESOURCES

Because the plant facilities at Lilydale were fully utilized for production purposes and for day-to-day business needs, the company opted to create a classroom environment at a neighbouring hotel. A hotel meeting room was converted into a classroom for Lilydale's exclusive use.

The trainers for the orientation program were plant staff who had been trained to deliver customized programs to adult learners, through a "train-the-trainer" program. ESL teachers, on the other hand, were contracted ESL instructors from an external source. Support and training materials consisted of:

- ◆ participant manuals featuring detailed visuals (i.e., actual photos of work tasks depicting step-by-step instructions);
- ◆ a leader's guide (containing training manuals for instructors, presenters, and job skills trainers);
- ◆ PowerPoint presentations, exercises, activities, and videos;
- ◆ standardized work instructions; and
- ◆ WHMIS (Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System) training.

The development and delivery of both Lilydale's Orientation and ESL programs were fully funded by the company. An initial corporate investment of approximately \$250,000 showed Lilydale's dedication and commitment to the learning and development of its employees.

"Lilydale's Orientation Program is the 'full meal deal.' It's not just about orientation—it is also about job skills training, health and safety, and recognizing all employees who are being welcomed into the Lilydale family."

—Marg Barr, Manager of Training and Development,
Human Resources, Lilydale Inc.

INNOVATIONS

Innovative learning approaches used at Lilydale include:

- ◆ accommodation of employees with various literacy levels (i.e., training manuals were written in a clear language [Grade 5 level] with visuals for clarity);
- ◆ standardized work instructions (SWI) developed in collaboration with the job skills trainers, supervisors, and the plant management team;
- ◆ concise, clear, step-by-step training manual with photos depicting the various job tasks;
- ◆ a virtual video-based plant tour of the actual facilities, which helped new employees become familiar with the production floor before being placed on the job;
- ◆ interactive exercises and enjoyable activities to engage the adult learner;
- ◆ collaboration among plant management, corporate and site human resources, and an external consultant to ensure content accuracy;
- ◆ flexible teaching methods, activities, and evaluation tools; and
- ◆ program content linked to practical needs and objectives, such as introducing a safer and healthier work environment.

CHALLENGES

Attractive employment opportunities in other sectors of Alberta's labour market limited Lilydale's access to qualified candidates in recent years. This contributed to a high turnover rate, which compromised the efficiency of Lilydale's production output, and a sense of urgency to update employee training programs. However, its in-house resources for assessing skills needs and redesigning the company's orientation training efforts were constrained.

The high number of employees attending classes soon led to staff shortages on the production lines.

Lilydale was also faced with challenges pertaining to content material. Initially, the human resources (HR) team relied on the various internal production departments to provide expertise, input, and feedback on the content of the training manuals in a timely fashion. However, the internal experts tended to provide the content at a high literacy level. The literacy level of the information was far too high to be used in training content for individuals with low-level literacy or limited English language skills.

Employees were quickly engaged and enthusiastically enrolled in the ESL program. At first, the high participation rate was viewed as a great success given the diversity of the workforce—for most workers, English was a second or even a third language. However, the high number of employees attending language training classes soon led to staff shortages on the production lines.

SOLUTIONS

The design of Lilydale's Orientation Program had to take into consideration key issues such as:

- ♦ adapting the training to accommodate workers whose first language was not English; and
- ♦ incorporating learning methods appropriate for adult learners.

To expedite the development of a new orientation program, Lilydale hired a consultant with expertise in job skills training and relied on in-house staff for content expertise. The consultant had an excellent understanding of how to break down and present core information so as to maintain the interest of the adult learners. An expert training developer, he was able to analyze job content and tasks and then create the tools needed for new plant employees to become competent and ready to work. Over a 10-month period, the process was created and phased in at the Calgary facility.

Recognizing their previous corporate shortcomings (such as providing new employees with inadequate training and outdated, visually unappealing training manuals), Lilydale revamped its orientation program to make new employees feel welcomed and valued. Training was presented to new employees by experienced adult educators. Manuals and standardized work instructions were clearly presented and incorporated the use of real photos and footage of actual job tasks. Thanks to the orientation training, new employees had a solid understanding of what they were expected to do and the importance of the standardized work instructions before being sent out on the plant floor to start their job.

It was determined that Grade 5 was the base level at which all employees could comfortably read and understand the language of training materials.

In addition, training manuals were presented at a literacy level that any employee—regardless of skill or language level—could understand. It was determined that Grade 5 was the base level at which all employees could comfortably read and understand the language of training materials. The HR team adjusted the information given by the internal experts and re-presented the content and training manuals at a Grade 5 level.

In a manufacturing/food-processing company, production output is always a high priority. Therefore, in order not to compromise the integrity of the ESL program, HR

worked closely with plant managers and supervisors on scheduling to ensure proper representation on the production lines during employee training periods.

Given its popularity and initial success, the ESL program delivery schedule was reassessed. It was decided to offer future ESL classes entirely on employees' own time. However, as an additional incentive for workers to continue their ESL training, individuals who passed the course with a final grade of 80 per cent or better and attended 80 per cent of the classes would be reimbursed for 25 per cent of their time. Lilydale also rewarded students who successfully completed their program level (i.e., Level 1, 2, 3, and/or 4), with a \$25 HBC gift certificate. Lilydale saw this as a win-win situation: employees continued to be interested in the popular ESL program, and the company saw a definite improvement in the skill level and confidence of these training participants.

OUTCOMES

Lilydale is very proud of its training efforts and has deemed the new orientation and language training program successful. Before the program was initiated, approximately 25 per cent of new employees were retained beyond the first three months of their employment. In the first eight months following the launch of the program at the Calgary plant, Lilydale saw a 69 per cent increase in the retention rate of new employees. The new average for employee retention is 60 per cent of employees for at least six months. Lilydale was also pleased with the results of its language-training program, as all initial participants completed the first level of the ESL program.

Other positive outcomes from the orientation and ESL programs offered by Lilydale included:

- ◆ reduced staff turnover;
- ◆ improved employee morale and a sense of inclusiveness;
- ◆ more employees positioned to receive promotions (e.g., job skills trainer/supervisor) as a result of improved literacy and better ability to learn more advanced skills;

- ◆ improved routine workplace operations (e.g., better understanding of the content and meaning of safety documents and work manuals, filling out accident forms, and performing other workplace tasks); and
- ◆ enhanced leadership development skills for trainers via the “train-the-trainer” model.

IMPACTS AND BENEFITS

Management at Lilydale decided not to adopt complex training and productivity tracking systems. Impacts and benefits of its orientation and training initiatives are evidenced through the observances and anecdotes of supervisors, co-workers, and customers.

Employees who improved their literacy skills gained a better understanding of the objectives and needs of running a poultry processing company.

Now that employees receive proper training and adequate time to learn the job, Lilydale has recorded increased productivity on the plant floor, with less down time and fewer quality infractions. At the same time, improved quality has been found to result in fewer errors in completing customer orders. Customer satisfaction and loyalty have been boosted accordingly. Enhanced communication among co-workers and between co-workers and supervisors has helped contribute to a smoother operation.

In addition, employees who improved their literacy skills gained a better understanding of the objectives and needs of running a poultry processing company. They became better prepared to meet food preparation standards and regulations, a factor that contributes positively to public health and safety. Supervisors observed reduced infractions of health and safety standards and tracked improved good manufacturing practices. Employees' own safety on the job was improved through increased self-confidence and ability to follow procedural directions on the shop floor following literacy skills upgrading.

USE AS A MODEL

For a company operating in the manufacturing industry where time and training are critical to consistent production outputs, quality, and workplace health and safety, taking the time to train employees is critical to overall corporate success.

Lilydale's swift development and implementation of its training program benefited from collaboration and commitment of all levels within the organization. By welcoming new employees into the "corporate family," and by providing guidance on how to improve skills and be the best at their job, Lilydale achieved reduced

employee turnover, improved employee performance, and growth. An engaged and trained workforce was found to improve efficiencies and increase production.

Following the success of its pilot program in Calgary, Lilydale introduced the orientation program at two Edmonton plants in May 2009 and at another of its facilities in late 2009. The corporate goal is to continue to build on this success and eventually deliver the orientation and ESL programs at all its locations. Lilydale sees itself as a model company. It is committed to its employees and strongly believes that training is the "right thing to do." It intends to invest in its employees regardless of the economic highs and lows.

About the Organization Effectiveness and Learning Case Studies

The Organizational Effectiveness and Learning case studies examine outstanding education and lifelong learning programs and initiatives. This case study addresses the impact of workplace literacy and essential skills on workplace health and safety.

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Hatching a Plan for Safety: Literacy Skills Development at Lilydale Inc.

by *Linda Scott*

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