



Case Study April 2010

A Clear View of Safety at Loewen Windows

PROGRAM NAME

Foundation Skills Program

DATE ESTABLISHED

1987

SKILLS DEVELOPED

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

CONTACT

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OVERVIEW

From its humble roots as a family-owned sawmill started at the beginning of the 20th century, Loewen Windows (“Loewen”) has grown into one of Canada’s largest premium wood window and door manufacturers. Operating in Steinbach, Manitoba, the company now employs almost 1,700 people. In 2001, Loewen prioritized its plans for growth in five key focus areas: people, performance, growth, design, and profitability.

In keeping with its strategic plan, Loewen broadened its commitment to develop the skills of its workforce and those of the local community. The company’s Foundation Skills Program was designed to promote opportunities for workers to upgrade their “English as an additional language” skills as well as to improve

literacy skills. Following the successful implementation of the Foundation Skills Program, the company added a General Educational Development (GED) program for workers who were interested in pursuing higher education.

OBJECTIVES

Loewen's Foundation Skills Program objectives are aimed at helping individuals, families, the community, and the organization. The objectives are as follows:

- ◆ maintain workplace safety by ensuring all workers understand safety instructions and procedures;
- ◆ improve workers' ability to read workplace documents, accurately complete forms, and communicate effectively with others;
- ◆ give workers the basic skills they require to be successful members of the Loewen Windows team;
- ◆ assist workers in reaching their career goals by providing them with a learning foundation so that they can continue to build on it;
- ◆ facilitate the integration of immigrant families into the community;
- ◆ broaden the Loewen Windows labour pool by accessing and developing human resources untapped by others in the community; and
- ◆ develop and retain qualified workers.

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TARGET GROUPS

While the majority of participants in the program work on the shop floor, all employees are encouraged to take part in the educational opportunities available. Since the inception of the program, 93 per cent of participants have been plant labourers, 4 per cent administrative staff, and 3 per cent leaders.

ACTIVITIES

To achieve its goals, Loewen partnered with Southeast English Language and Literacy Services for Adults (SALLSA),¹ a community group whose activities address the language shortcomings of local immigrants. Employees enrolled in the Foundation Skills and GED programs attend four hours of class per week for 20 weeks.

Program instructors are given access to corporate resources to aid them in developing job-relevant curricula. Further, "instructors are encouraged to attend company events and to personally experience the detailed workings of Loewen's operations so that the company's context and job terminology can be incorporated into the program's curriculum."² Instructors make use of the company newsletter, internal job-posting notices, plant layout drawings, and company charts and statistics to improve workers' literacy skills and comprehension. Each year, instructors meet with Loewen management and supervisors to determine and update the curriculum framework. The instructors are then able to maintain a program that meets the organization's needs as well as those of the workers.

RESOURCES

The partnership with SALLSA allowed Loewen to access government funding, which covers 50 per cent of the instructors' fees. Loewen pays the other half of these fees, in addition to paying the full cost of the books,

1 Now called SEELS (South Eastman English and Literacy Services), SALLSA was a community-based working group that coordinated access to basic education, English as a second language, and literacy learning opportunities for adults in Southeastern Manitoba. Classes were located in public schools and churches in Steinbach, Niverville, Kleefeld, and Grunthal. SALLSA offered part-time community-based English classes for adults, including: 1. Reading and Writing Skills—for personal reasons, employment, or to prepare for further training; and 2. English as an Additional Language—to improve speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills. For more information, e-mail SEELS@mts.net.

2 The Conference Board of Canada, *Loewen Mini Case Study* [online]. (Ottawa: Author, 2005), [cited Nov. 10, 2009]. www.conferenceboard.ca/Libraries/EDUC_PUBLIC/Loewen_cs.sflb.

materials, and supplies needed by program participants. Loewen has a similar financial arrangement with Workplace Education Manitoba for its GED program regarding instructors' fees.

Further, funding from the Loewen Family Foundation was used to create a computer literacy lab that allowed employees to practice their literacy skills while developing their computer literacy.

Participants attend class half on company time and half on their own time.

INNOVATIONS

Loewen Windows was one of the first organizations in the Southeast Manitoba area to host English as a second language (ESL)/literacy and GED classes. Initially, the company covered all of the instructor and material fees, as no funding was available at that time from the government for these types of workplace training programs. In later years, the organization developed relationships with SALLSA and Workplace Education Manitoba to build the programs into what they are today.

Loewen Windows employs a diverse workforce with varying English-language skills needs.

SALLSA provided on-site assessments for Loewen workers interested in participating. Once workers were placed into classes according to their skill levels, SALLSA provided Loewen with instructors for classes and one-on-one tutoring. Loewen Windows maintained a seat on SALLSA's board of directors to help guide the organization and support its growth and success in the community. The Loewen Family Foundation's donation of \$10,000 to SALLSA for the development of a mobile computer lab continues to help promote computer literacy in community learning programs. Families of Loewen workers are able to use and benefit from this facility.

CHALLENGES

Loewen Windows employs a diverse workforce with varying English language skills needs. Prior to the development of the Foundation Skills Program, employees took longer than necessary to complete work tasks due to communication issues. Cross-training efforts within the company were also impeded by communication challenges. Moreover, cultural differences among employees compounded the communication difficulties, which created internal misunderstandings and conflict. As a result, the productivity and effectiveness of the workforce was much lower than it could have been.

Loewen Windows strives to create a safe, positive environment that will encourage innovation, growth, and teamwork.

Communication issues within the company also affected workers' safety. Work instructions were written for a native English-speaking audience (i.e., those who could read and write fluently in English). Company safety training was also geared towards an English-only audience. It was therefore difficult to explain safety policies and procedures—such as the safe handling or operation of machinery or equipment—to employees with low-level English language skills. It was also tough for managers to gauge the level of employees' comprehension of safety procedures on the shop floor.

SOLUTIONS

Loewen Windows strives to create a safe, positive environment that will encourage innovation, growth, and teamwork. The company aims to maintain a workplace culture where diversity and multiculturalism are valued. To that end, it provides all workers with tools, education, and development opportunities to help them succeed. Loewen also outlines its values and expectations to all new personnel to ensure that a safe and respectful environment is maintained.

An Employee Development team has been given responsibility for assisting workers in developing the skills needed for effective performance at Loewen Windows. The team offers guidance to workers about continuous education and career advancement opportunities. This support is offered through on-site training programs, sponsorship of off-site courses/programs, and career counselling. The company offers communication and literacy skills upgrading opportunities to promote workplace health and safety. Mastering these foundation skills allows workers to participate in more advanced, industry-related courses such as Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System (WHMIS) Refresher, first aid, and a variety of machine operator courses.

*After trying to move up the ladder
(as they say), I found out that without
my Grade 12, I wasn't going anywhere.
. . . I decided to take the GED courses.
. . . Now, about two years later, I've
moved way up that ladder and have
become a 5th class Power Engineer.*

—Maintenance worker and GED program graduate

Improving literacy skills in the workplace facilitates Loewen's promise that "Safety—Is Our Shared Responsibility." Each worker, manager, and contractor is responsible and accountable for working in a safe and healthy manner and for reporting all substandard conditions and workplace hazards. Supported by the Health and Safety Department and various health and safety advisory groups, Loewen provides many avenues for workers to contribute ideas and participate on safety-focused committees. Workers are encouraged to share safety tips, to create "Crew Talks" (weekly safety memos), and to submit their thoughts on ways to improve health and safety at Loewen to the "Ideas Program." Enhanced literacy and

communication skills complement the safety initiatives at Loewen Windows by giving workers the confidence to participate in the safety programs.

OUTCOMES

As a company, Loewen Windows is proud of the results generated by its programs. It has established a partnership with the provincial Department of Immigration that allows the company to bring in skilled labour from other countries. This partnership is a direct result of Loewen's literacy programs, which help immigrant workers integrate into the community.

Enrolment in Loewen's literacy programs has gradually increased over the years: from 19 workers in 1987–88 to 30 workers in 2007–08. One-quarter (25 per cent) of workers who have taken either the ESL/literacy or GED programs have received promotions within the organization. More than three-quarters (77 per cent) of program participants are still employed by Loewen Windows. In addition, some workers who took part in the ESL/literacy and GED programs have gone on to enrol in college or university courses to further their development.

*The course has really helped me in
my job as a Drafting Supervisor. I feel
more confident that I can read, write,
spell, and understand mathematics a
lot better. The GED program has also
helped me go on with a new interest
in law enforcement, and I have just
graduated with the highest honours
with a Police Sciences Diploma.*

—GED program graduate

Overall, the turnover rate for employees who participate in these programs is substantially lower than the corporate turnover rate. As an organization, Loewen benefits from high retention rates, which translate to greater efficiencies and lower hiring costs. Literacy skills development enhances worker participation in training programs relating to safety and production. Foundation Skills Program participants learn new jobs faster and contribute to improved flexibility of the organization as a whole. The company is then better able to reassign workers to busy departments and provide coverage for vacations and illness. Literate workers are empowered to assist other workers struggling with large workloads.

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The Foundation Skills Program has also resulted in:

- ◆ the development of new partnerships to gain access to, and facilitate the integration of, skilled labour from other countries;
- ◆ key contacts forged in the community and with government; and
- ◆ new resources that can aid the greater community.³

IMPACTS AND BENEFITS

Since implementing the Foundation Skills Program at Loewen Windows, positive changes have occurred in the business and the community. As a result of its ongoing success, the program has:

- ◆ strengthened Loewen's access to qualified labour;
- ◆ decreased turnover rates and increased morale; and
- ◆ helped establish Loewen as a community leader.⁴

Managers recognize that allowing workers to be away from their job tasks for two hours per week is an investment. They understand the safety implications and see the value in helping workers improve their ability to communicate effectively. Involvement with SALLSA has allowed the company to stay connected to the community at large and to support literacy programs that are accessible to the extended families of Loewen workers. It also provides Loewen with an opportunity to develop stronger partnerships with government departments and agencies. In the future, Loewen expects that these literacy development efforts will help develop the leaders that will be required for the sustainable growth of the organization. As individuals move into leadership roles, it will open more entry-level positions for new workers from the community.

USE AS A MODEL

The model at Loewen Windows is one of partnership, inclusion, and progression. Using its partnership with a community organization, Loewen was able to share its model with other large local organizations. All employees have access to literacy programs, either through the ESL/literacy program or through the GED stream. Many program participants develop a love of learning and subsequently continue their studies at local education institutions, such as Red River College.

Two lesson plans from Loewen Windows' GED program—one dealing with reading and the other with numeracy—were included in the provincial Workplace Education Development Practitioners' Guide. This document was created to provide innovative sample lesson plans that could be shared and adopted by organizations.

3 The Conference Board of Canada, *Loewen Mini Case Study*.

4 *Ibid.*

About the Organizational 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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by *Alison Campbell*

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