



Loewen

Workplace Literacy Mini Case Study

Overview

Over the past century, Loewen has grown to become Canada's largest producer of premium wood windows and doors. Its manufacturing facility in Steinbach, Manitoba, employs nearly 1,700 employees.

To continue the company's growth, Loewen will focus over the next few years on developing people, growth, design and profitability. To support these requirements, the company's long-standing commitment has been to improve the basic skills and educational achievements of its employees. With help from the community, the company has developed employee literacy, English as a Second Language (ESL) and General Educational Development (GED) programs, starting in the 1980s.

Objectives

The goals of Loewen's Foundation Skills Program are to:

- ⇒ ensure that company employees have the literacy and language skills to fully understand company documents, especially those on safety;
- ⇒ ease the integration of immigrant families into the community; and
- ⇒ develop and retain qualified employees.

Activities

To achieve these goals, Loewen has partnered with the Southeast English Language and Literacy Services for Adults, a community group whose mandate is to address the language shortcomings of local community immigrants. The partnership with this organization has given Loewen access to government funding, covering half of the instructors' fees. Due to the success of the initial literacy program, a similarly funded GED stream for those wishing to pursue more advanced education was established. Further, with money from the Loewen family, a computer literacy lab was added to allow employees to turn basic skills into usable workplace skills.

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Although most program participants have been plant labourers, all employees of the company have access to the educational resources. Employees that participate in the program attend class half on company time and half on their own time.

The instructors are encouraged to personally experience the detailed workings at Loewen so that the company's context and terminology can be included in the program's curriculum.

Achievements

The Foundation Skills Program has:

- ⇒ developed partnerships to gain access to, and facilitate integration of, skilled labour from other countries;
- ⇒ forged key contacts in the community and with government;
- ⇒ tapped community funding and infrastructure alternatives; and
- ⇒ developed resources that can aid the greater community.

Benefits

As a result of its ongoing success, the program has:

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

Next Steps

To continuously improve, Loewen is now making changes to both its ESL and GED programming. The company is integrating ESL training into skills training so both are covered simultaneously and are more specific to workplace tasks. The GED program is being discontinued in favour of the Mature Student

Diploma and the introduction of pre-Diploma level instruction.

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