



Case Study September 2009

Omega 2000 Cribbing Inc. Forming the Foundation of Safety

NAME OF PROGRAM

Foundation Skills

DATE ESTABLISHED

1996

SKILLS DEVELOPED

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

CONTACT

Dell Lloyd
Owner
Omega 2000 Cribbing Inc.
55 Sierra Madre Crescent SW
Calgary, AB T3H 3M4
Tel: 403-217-4888
Fax: 403-217-7645

OVERVIEW

Omega 2000 Cribbing builds foundations for single- and multi-family homes and is a leader in the local construction industry in Calgary, Alberta. Established in 1986 as a small firm employing just three workers, it has grown into a company that today employs almost 40 full-time workers during peak periods. (With housing starts in 2009 at their lowest levels since the early 1990s, the construction industry in Calgary has slowed considerably—and in July 2009, Omega 2000 was operating with a core staff of 12.)

Cribbing is a vital step in the construction of new homes. Once site excavation is completed for a new home, “cribbers” assemble wooden forms and pour concrete into them to create the home’s foundation. This work

literally provides the base for other tradespersons to build upon as the new home is raised. Sturdy craftsmanship is therefore vital to the success of any cribbing company.

Basic skills training is crucial in the cribbing industry, as all workers must be able to read, understand, and act upon standardized health and safety procedures. On the construction site, cribbers are required to perform tasks in specific sequences according to precise sets of drawings and written instructions. If an individual has low-level literacy skills, he or she must rely on verbal instructions to complete assigned tasks. However, allowing individuals to work from memory on a construction site while operating dangerous machinery and using potentially hazardous materials is clearly a risky practice. Moreover, in any business, a lack of reading and writing skills can negatively affect the workmanship of the product and ultimately damage the reputation of the company.

In the early years at Omega 2000 Cribbing, owner Dell Lloyd witnessed specific incidents where workers' low-level literacy skills caused problems. When managers sent directives out to workers in the field, the instructions were not completely understood, and pre-op safety procedures were not followed as a result. Mandatory paperwork, including safety forms, was filled out incorrectly. Form errors required managers to then follow up frequently to ensure that operations on the worksites were running smoothly and safely. Management determined that training was needed to reduce skills gaps and improve health and safety practices.

OBJECTIVES

The company's emphasis on training and skills development springs from two driving forces. The first is management's firm belief in the importance of developing a capable workforce now to ensure a strong workforce in the future. In the next few years, many of the most capable workers in the construction industry will be retiring, leaving a huge human capacity gap. However, if enough emphasis is placed on training and knowledge transfer to the next generation, then "the industry will be rich with talented, professional, skilled workers ready to

become the next generation of home builders."¹ The second driving force behind training and skills development is to improve workplace health and safety practices. To make the connection between healthy and safe job performance and literacy, workplace training efforts at Omega 2000 focus on bringing workers' literacy and basic skills up to speed. The goal is to enable all workers to meet the minimum health and safety standards in every aspect of their work.

TARGET GROUPS

Mr. Lloyd is a staunch believer in the value of workplace education, and has been since the day he started working for himself. "If you don't invest in your employees," he says, "you have nothing." Training at Omega 2000 focuses on three distinct areas: apprenticeship training for journeymen carpenters; health and safety specialization for company officers; and basic skills, such as literacy and numeracy, for those without a solid foundation in those areas.

Management strongly encourages low-literacy workers to upgrade to improve their advancement opportunities, their workplace performance, and their quality of life.

Omega 2000 trains apprentice workers to become journeymen carpenters—a qualification that demands at least a high school-level education. However, some of the apprentice workers hired by Omega 2000 have not completed a secondary-level education. In addition, some new hires do not possess sufficient literacy or basic skill levels to be able to confidently perform all job tasks in a safe manner. Management strongly encourages these workers to upgrade their education in order to improve their advancement opportunities, their workplace performance, and their quality of life. Mr. Lloyd, who himself returned to finish high school as a mature student, admits to having first-hand knowledge of the trials and tribulations of having low literacy skills. The

1 Centre for Excellence in Home Building and Land Development, *Newsletter*, July 2006.

company owner's dedication to literacy skills development ensures that Omega 2000 commits resources sufficient to help workers avoid such difficulties and take advantage of literacy and basic skills development opportunities.

ACTIVITIES

Workers are able to participate in training by taking classes at a number of local adult education centres. These centres, operated by the Calgary Board of Education, are popular with workers because they are conveniently located in workers' home neighbourhoods. They can then easily access classes on their own time, and often do so on their way home from their work shift. Programs vary from centre to centre, but instruction generally takes place in formal classroom settings. There are also a number of distance education options available to workers through the adult education centres.

As workers successfully complete their training programs, they are reimbursed for lost work time, textbooks, and any fees associated with the programs attended.

Successful completion of training programs is recognized at Omega 2000 Cribbing, with participants' achievements recorded in workers' personnel files and detailed in their annual performance reviews. Skills upgrading also improves workers' prospects for promotion, as training program graduates are more likely to be considered for advancement opportunities within the organization.

RESOURCES

Through their many years of experience in the construction industry, managers at Omega 2000 have come to understand the importance—to the organization and to individuals—of upgrading skills. In light of this, the company is committed at all levels to assisting workers who make the effort to improve their literacy and basic skills.

Omega 2000 has established a longstanding relationship with the Calgary Board of Education and is thus able to relieve interested workers of the burden of finding a training program to suit their needs. While the onus is on the worker to attend classes and complete the necessary requirements, the company is there to provide financial assistance and support the workers. No fees or costs are paid up front, but as workers achieve their educational goals and successfully complete their training programs, they are reimbursed for lost work time, textbooks, and any fees associated with the programs attended.

INNOVATIONS

The true innovation of this workplace education program is that a small business is making the effort to help workers improve their literacy and basic skills—and is doing so without financial assistance from government or other outside sources. Omega 2000 took the initiative to partner with a local school board and to develop its workforce capacity from within, with a view to improving the overall quality of the construction sector labour force. Its progressive attitude toward workplace education has made Omega 2000 an employer of choice in Calgary, and its workers often cite the emphasis on training and development as an important reason why they applied for jobs there, rather than with competitors. Mr. Lloyd is proud to say that more than a few of his current competitors are former employees, and that their positive experiences at Omega 2000 led them to develop training programs within their own organizations. This commitment to education sets an impressive example for the construction industry as a whole, and challenges the view that the costs of training outweigh the benefits.

BARRIERS

In a small business such as Omega 2000, the number of employees studying to improve their literacy and basic skills at any one time is usually very low. Since construction worksites for this company are located in residential areas and are temporary, it is not practical to maintain an on-site facility to accommodate training. Likewise, hiring a teacher to provide on-site instruction would be impractical.

The company does not receive funding from government or other sources to offset the costs of training. Tough choices must be made and the decision to invest significant resources in workplace education must be weighed against other business priorities.

As a small organization, Omega 2000 also assumes some risk for staff shortages that occur when workers are off-site during working hours to study and attend examinations. Extra salaries and training for temporary replacement workers are costly but essential measures for meeting project deadlines and covering work shifts.

SOLUTIONS

Instead of providing on-site training, management at Omega 2000 helps individual workers choose an educational path and setting that suits their needs. This may involve attending classes in a local adult education centre, studying online, or a combination of the two. Through a well-established relationship with Calgary's public school board, flexible solutions are found to address each worker's needs on a case-by-case basis.

Over the last 10 years, Omega 2000 has consistently made the strategic decision to invest in worker training, to the tune of approximately \$100,000 in various workplace education initiatives. The company assumes all costs for literacy and basic skills upgrading as well as health and safety training. This has allowed for employees to upgrade skills in areas such as health and safety, high school equivalency, pre-apprenticeship training courses, and basic skills.

Management makes a point of accommodating individual workers as they are trying to better themselves. Staff shortages caused by worker absenteeism as they take part in training are accepted by management and considered a necessary part of doing business. The Omega 2000 team understands that training is an organizational priority—when scheduling difficulties arise, managers and workers alike do their part to make it work.

OUTCOMES

The corporate philosophy at Omega 2000 is that building long-term relationships with customers and workers is the key to success. Mr. Lloyd sees the value in upgrading the skills of workers in general, and believes that the company benefits from a healthier and safer workplace. Omega 2000 strives to provide workers with opportunities to develop transferable skills that they can take with them to future, more advanced, positions. Management does not spend much time worrying about potentially losing workers whose training has been paid for by the company. This attitude stems from a philanthropic corporate philosophy that says the construction industry as a whole benefits from company-sponsored workplace education through the resulting increase in the skills capacity of the labour force.

IMPACTS AND BENEFITS

Improving literacy and numeracy, alongside high school-level education programming, with a view to improving quality and safety, is a priority for Omega 2000 Cribbing. The company's efforts have paid off. When asked if there is a clear link between an increase in literacy and basic skills training and a decrease in accidents on the job, Mr. Lloyd's answer is a resounding "Absolutely!"

Workers gain transferable skills that they can potentially take to new positions in the company or elsewhere.

At Omega 2000, accidents have significantly decreased since literacy and basic skills training has been offered. Health and safety regulations and practices are being followed with greater precision and consistency. As a small business, Omega 2000 does not have the resources to employ sophisticated tracking systems to record the direct links between training and production. Instead, the changes that occur as a result of training are noted by supervisors and co-workers through observation, discussion, and the regular monitoring of cash flow and finances.

Furthermore, worker satisfaction has increased with management's commitment to skills development and workplace health and safety. Workers gain transferable skills that they can potentially take to new positions within the company or elsewhere. They gain a deeper sense of commitment and understanding of their workplace, and say they feel more "connected" to an organization that believes strongly in investing in its people, their capacity, and their futures.

USE AS A MODEL

Omega 2000 Cribbing is an example of a small business that is helping the construction industry improve the quality of the workers on the job through its commitment to training and skills development. By drawing on its own resources and partnering with a local school board, the company is able to improve the literacy and basic skills of its workforce. As a result, health and safety practices have improved and workplace accidents are reduced. Company-wide recognition of the importance of safe working practices permits challenges, such as scheduling difficulties, to be addressed with flexibility and understanding.

About the Education 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.

Acknowledgements

The Conference Board of Canada wishes to acknowledge the efforts of Frontier College and the National Adult Literacy Database (NALD), whose staff acted as external reviewers for this case study. All errors and omissions are solely the responsibility of The Conference Board of Canada.

Omega 2000 Cribbing Inc.: Forming the Foundation of Safety

by Joanne Ness

About The Conference Board of Canada

We are:

- The foremost independent, not-for-profit, applied research organization in Canada.
- Objective and non-partisan. We do not lobby for specific interests.
- Funded exclusively through the fees we charge for services to the private and public sectors.
- Experts in running conferences but also at conducting, publishing, and disseminating research; helping people network; developing individual leadership skills; and building organizational capacity.
- Specialists in economic trends, as well as organizational performance and public policy issues.
- Not a government department or agency, although we are often hired to provide services for all levels of government.
- Independent from, but affiliated with, The Conference Board, Inc. of New York, which serves nearly 2,000 companies in 60 nations and has offices in Brussels and Hong Kong.

