



Case Study December 2002

Awards for Excellence in Workplace Literacy Large Business Winner, 2002 Palliser Furniture

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

OVERVIEW

Palliser Furniture Ltd. manufactures wooden and upholstered furniture for home and office use. The Winnipeg-based company, which began in the basement of a Russian immigrant's home, now employs more than 5,200 people and is Canada's leading home furniture manufacturer. Palliser's workforce is ethnically and linguistically diverse.

The company's vision statement speaks of "building value with values." Key corporate values include "demonstrating integrity in all relationships, promoting the dignity and value of each other, and striving for excellence." These values are supported by a strong tradition of workplace education.

Palliser regards its employees' basic skills as fundamental to its business success. When it is hiring new employees, the company looks for people who have positive workplace attitudes, as demonstrated through a track record of good attendance, productivity, co-operation, and the ability to get along with co-workers. Palliser believes strong literacy and numeracy skills

Effective practices case study in providing training and supporting workplace literacy

Name of Program
Workplace Education

Date Established
1987

Skills Developed

- Literacy
- Leadership
- Communication
- Teamwork

Contacts

Valerie Unwin
Language Training Coordinator,
Corporate Human Resources
Palliser Furniture Ltd.
80 Furniture Park
Winnipeg, MB R2G 1B9
Tel. (204) 988-0827
Fax (204) 988-5657
vunwin@palliser.ca

greatly enhance employees' workplace performance, particularly as they relate to retaining and applying information consistently, taking instructions well, and carrying out assigned tasks accurately. Since 1987, Palliser has demonstrated a continuous commitment to developing employees' essential skills.

Through the aid of Manitoba Adult Literacy, Palliser began offering upgrading classes in literacy and language in 1994, after conducting a comprehensive needs assessment. Every year since, the company has conducted an annual assessment to identify employees' training needs. Over the years, Palliser has expanded its course offerings from *English as a Second Language (ESL)* to *Health and Safety*, *Preparing for Retirement*, *Leadership Training*, *Cultural Diversity*, and *Speechcraft*. The company now offers more than a dozen literacy classes from September through June.

In 2001–2002, Palliser developed and delivered three new courses: *Reading and Writing for Lead Hands*, *Manufacturing and Leadership*, and *Using the Computer to Read and Write*.

Palliser's rich education and learning program underscores the company's commitment to engaging employee potential through basic skills education.

At Palliser, workplace basic skills education serves as a springboard to a broad mix of training for managers, as well as for employees. Along with four other manufacturing companies, Palliser subscribes to the Management Development Institute, which offers supervisors and managers training in *Business Fundamentals*, *Quality Principles*, *Manufacturing Process*, *Verbal and Written Communication*, *Conflict Resolution*, *Cultural Diversity*, *Time Management*, *Leadership*, *Workplace Legislation and Health and Safety*, and *Human Rights Legislation*.

OBJECTIVES

- To ensure that employees have the right combination of generic employability (or soft) skills and job specific training to perform effectively in their jobs
- To identify and develop employees who demonstrate leadership potential
- To build base competencies and realize employees' full potentials over time

- To reduce turnover, error rates, and costs associated with wasted material
- To help employees meet the changing needs of their jobs (e.g., ISO 9001 Compliance—an internationally recognized quality management certification)
- Improve employee morale

TARGET GROUP

- All employees

ACTIVITIES

Palliser makes a wide range of workplace education programming available to its employees. All of its programs have a literacy application. Literacy-related courses include:

- *English as a Second Language courses*
- *Reading and Writing for Lead Hands*
- *Manufacturing and Leadership*
- *Using the Computer to Read and Write*
- *Math Modules*—six four-hour math modules, covering addition/subtraction, multiplication/division, imperial/metric conversion, percentages, fractions, and decimals

Palliser's essential skills strategy is to develop fundamental literacy, numeracy, and computer skills through workplace-related training activities. The idea is to enhance employees' literacy skills, as they progress in employment and take on additional responsibilities, which require more advanced basic skills.

RESOURCE REQUIREMENTS

Palliser pays for:

- 100 per cent of most programs. Pilot courses are often initially funded by Adult Language Training (ESL) and Industry Training Partnership (Literacy), which cover 50 per cent of the teachers' salaries
- 100 per cent (upon proof of completion) of the cost of job-related continuing education courses
- 75 per cent of the cost of work-related training courses (such as machining and computer literacy)
- 50 per cent of the cost of personal development courses (such as language courses)

INNOVATION

Palliser Furniture's real innovation lies in the company's commitment to its employees. Palliser's President, Art De Fehr, believes he has a moral responsibility to educate entry-level employees and to "uncap" their potential, by developing their literacy and numeracy skills, technical competencies related to the production of high quality pieces of furniture, and the people skills that are so important to developing leadership within the company. Some trainers and teaching assistants are developed and recruited from within the company; they are able to learn from one another through regularly scheduled visits to each other's classes.

BARRIERS

Before employees can begin to address their literacy and numeracy challenges, they may face many barriers, including:

- lack of time and transportation to literacy and numeracy training classes;
- the absence of a foundation in English, upon which to build a larger vocabulary;
- reluctance to pursue computer training because of a lack of essential literacy skills;
- a lack of experience using tools or working in a plant;
- inability to keep up with the pace of learning;
- feelings of loneliness or isolation, if they don't have any friends working with them or if no one on the production line speaks their language;
- inability to keep up with the pace of work or to perform several tasks at one time;
- inability to apply new ideas learned in training to the job; and
- trouble balancing personal or family problems.

SOLUTIONS/KEYS TO SUCCESS

- Regarding literacy as a process, not an event
 - Treating ESL, literacy and numeracy as a continuous process, not a one-time-only "vaccination"
 - Marketing the benefits of literacy to supervisors on an ongoing basis
 - Writing workplace documents (everything from assembly instructions to job evaluations) in plain language

- Commitment to employee education from senior management
 - Regarding workplace education as part of the business
 - Actively removing barriers to employee advancement through workplace education
- Assessing the impact of workplace education programs
 - Having supervisors assess the impact of workplace education programs annually
 - Setting new priorities for training on the basis of regular needs assessments
 - Having plant floor employees meet with basic skills teachers to give them insight into employee needs

OUTCOMES

- Since 1995, more than 500 employees have enrolled in Palliser's basic skills programs—literacy, English as a Second Language (ESL), and math.
- More than 50 per cent of employees in one division have taken one or more math modules.
- Employees who participate in ESL are significantly less likely to leave Palliser.
- Employees who participate in ESL have become ESL instructors.
- One lead hand who took a 60-hour literacy course, was promoted to supervisor.
- Many employees who have taken literacy classes are now enrolled in supervisor or lead hand training, where more reading and writing are required.
- As a result of literacy, numeracy, and computer training, one employee moved from being a sewer and pattern cutter to becoming a prototype builder, adapting designers' ideas into furniture models to be mass produced in the factory.
- Newly-promoted employees attended *Reading and Writing for Lead Hands* from January to June 2001; they have displayed an improved ability to use a dictionary, write memos, place orders, make presentations, prepare written instructions, and write accident reports.
- Twelve employees who participated in a Manufacturing and Leadership course from January to June 2001 subsequently applied their knowledge, communication, and leadership skills as trainers in pre-employment training; six became permanent

part-time trainers. With the assistance of Workforce Manitoba, the curriculum for the Manufacturing and Leadership course is being published, and will be used as a model for other manufacturing industries.

- Employees who did not take advantage of 50 to 100 per cent company-sponsored, off-site computer training, because of a lack of basic literacy skills, took Palliser's *Using the Computer to Read and Write* course, from October 2001 to March 2002; they are now developing reading and writing skills on-line in Palliser's on-site computer lab.
- More advanced employee-learners helped to develop a plain language job evaluation/performance review process, which involved thinking through what their direct reports did in their jobs and developing performance criteria by which to measure their performance.

IMPACTS AND BENEFITS

For Employees

Participating in literacy, numeracy, and computer courses gives them the capacity to:

- become ESL teaching assistants at Palliser;
- increase self-confidence;
- move into new jobs or get promotions;
- learn strategies for interacting across cultural barriers;
- speak during meetings;
- learn how to write notes to supervisors; and
- progress in other workplace training (e.g., supervisor or lead hand training, which require more reading and writing).

For Palliser

Training improves the possibility of:

- recruiting ESL teaching assistants from among its employees;
- developing leadership and management potential;
- hiring people with job skills or aptitudes, but who have English language challenges;
- developing the teamwork skills of employees, which leads to fewer interpersonal problems on the production lines, better communication on the shop floor, and improved safety awareness;
- finding employees who are more likely to read company documents; and
- reducing waste in manufacturing process.

USE AS A MODEL

Other industries could benefit from Palliser Furniture's approach to releasing employee potential through basic skills training, complimented by technical and interpersonal skills training. As Palliser has demonstrated, it starts with a commitment from senior management. This model could also be used by companies that want to engage supervisors in the training equation and that are interested in developing trainers and teaching assistants from among their own ranks.

Our thanks to the people we interviewed, and others who provided comment, including:

Danilo Asuncion
Maria Cerrato Hiebert
Louise Giesbrecht
Lyva Do
Tracy MacPhee
Chris Trory
Valerie Unwin

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 workplace education and highlights one of the award winners from the Awards for Excellence in Workplace Literacy, funded by National Literacy Secretariat, Human Resources Development Canada.

Awards for Excellence in Workplace Literacy Large Business Winner, 2002: Palliser Furniture
by *Kurtis Kitagawa*

About The Conference Board of Canada

The Conference Board of Canada is the foremost independent, not-for-profit applied research organization in Canada. We help build leadership capacity for a better Canada by creating and sharing insights on economic trends, public policy issues, and organizational performance. We forge relationships and deliver knowledge through our learning events, networks, research products, and customized information services. Our members include a broad range of Canadian organizations from the public and private sectors. The Conference Board of Canada was formed in 1954, and is affiliated with The Conference Board, Inc. that serves some 3,000 companies in 67 nations.

The Conference Board of Canada
Insights You Can Count On



255 Smyth Road, Ottawa, ON K1H 8M7 Canada

Tel. (613) 526-3280 • Fax (613) 526-4857 • Inquiries 1-866-711-2262

The Conference Board Inc. 845 Third Avenue, New York, N.Y., 10022-6679 U.S.A. Tel. (212) 759-0900 • Fax (212) 980-7014 • www.conference-board.org
The Conference Board Europe Chaussée de La Hulpe 130, Box 11, B-1000 Brussels, Belgium Tel. (32) 2.675 54 05 • Fax (32) 2.675 03 95

©2002 The Conference Board of Canada*

Printed in Canada • All rights reserved • ISSN 0827-1070

ISBN 0-8873-572-5 • Agreement No. 40063028

*Incorporated as AERIC Inc.

For more information about this Case Study,
please contact us at the numbers listed above.

Case Studies summarize the key findings of Conference Board
research and outline the implications for member organizations.

