



Case Study December 2005

Contextualizing Learning: Insights from The Prince George Hotel

OVERVIEW

The Prince George Hotel, a medium-sized luxury hotel in Halifax, first opened its doors in 1986. This Nova Scotia-owned and -operated hotel employs 140 staff in management, administration, housekeeping, laundry, maintenance and food and beverage services.

The Prince George has a policy of hiring immigrants; as a result, many of its employees originate from countries like Zimbabwe, China, Lebanon, Yugoslavia and Spain. For many in this culturally diverse workforce, English is a second language. Training in English was identified early on as a key area for improving workplace skills and boosting business performance.

Building on the hotel's well-established training culture, hotel management recognized an opportunity to partner with the Nova Scotia Department of Education to provide cost-effective essential skills training to employees. The Workplace Education

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

Name of Program
Workplace Education

Date Established
1995

Skills Developed
Literacy
Communication

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initiative began in 1995 to provide customized learning programs to employees in the workplace, based on needs identified in an organizational needs assessment. Areas of focus, in addition to English as a Second Language (ESL), include academic upgrading, business writing and communication. Several Workplace Education participants have passed their General Educational Development (GED) tests and obtained the High School Equivalency certificate of Grade 12.

OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the Workplace Education initiative are to:

- invest in employee development; and
- improve the communication skills of employees.

Ultimately, these objectives will lead to high-quality customer service and the overall success of the hotel.

TARGET GROUPS

The Workplace Education initiative is accessible to all full-time and part-time employees of The Prince George Hotel.

ACTIVITIES

An organizational needs assessment was administered to identify employees' learning needs. This information was then used to develop customized learning programs. A Project Team, comprised of representatives from various departments, was formed to help implement and monitor the program.

Areas of focus, in addition to English as a second language, include academic upgrading, business writing and communication.

The courses capitalize on learning opportunities in the workplace. This contextual learning provides relevant, hands-on training for employees. The curriculum draws upon everyday workplace situations and uses actual workplace printed materials. For example, to improve

employees' language skills, instructors deliver Room Attendant training in a hotel room, where learners have access to all the items, vocabulary and procedures they would encounter on the job. Participating in these courses has encouraged employees to identify additional learning needs such as academic upgrading and GED preparation. These courses were subsequently offered to interested employees.

The curriculum draws upon everyday workplace situations and uses actual workplace printed materials.

Courses are provided in the three areas of focus as identified by the needs assessment. Because employees take courses during their shifts, the courses are divided into a number of shorter sessions. The ESL courses are delivered over several two-hour sessions, for example.

RESOURCES

Financial support for The Prince George's training programs comes from federal and provincial departments. For example, English in the Workplace (EWP)—an ESL training program—was co-funded by Citizenship and Immigration Canada and the Nova Scotia Department of Education. These partnerships are essential to support both the number of employees taking courses and the number of training programs offered.

Employees and management are also key contributors to this initiative. Employees contribute their commitment and some personal time to participate in training. Management contributes paid time-off for employees to attend classes and covers the expense for facilities and materials.

INNOVATIONS

The strength and innovative quality of the workplace-based training offered at The Prince George is that it contextualizes the learning to the individual learner and the workplace. As well, the courses designed for Prince George employees go beyond traditional classroom training to include situational and role-playing learning. For example,

because guest service is of primary concern in the hotel business, course content includes oral and written communication with guests. Participants act out guest conversations regarding hotel services, local entertainment and recommendations on restaurants. Participants also practise memo and letter writing for hotel purposes.

Another unique learning component is coaching the employee to become a lifelong learner. Employees participating in EWP are taken to the local public library and shown the various resources available to them to learn language independently from an instructor. Learners are shown how to use videos, modified readers, newspapers, closed-captioning TV, audio tapes, novels and recorded books to develop and improve their reading, writing, speaking and listening skills.

“Fostering lifelong learning strategies in employees has a ripple effect. The learner, their families, the workplace and the community all benefit.”

—Program Manager, English in the Workplace

CHALLENGES

Implementing workplace learning initiatives can be costly and time-consuming, particularly for small and medium-sized companies. Other challenges reflect the nature of The Prince George’s business: a hotel that operates 24/7 with a policy of hiring immigrants. Therefore, a training model that was flexible and accessible to all employees was required. As well, the language training needed to focus on relevant, everyday practical experiences that would not only improve employees’ English language skills but also their knowledge of the workplace.

SOLUTIONS

Partnering with federal and provincial departments to secure funding was an important factor in the success of this initiative. Carol Logan, Director of Human Resources at The Prince George, states that “the funding from our partners allows these courses to happen.” This partnership had the added benefit of saving The Prince George time in finding a suitable instructor, as the Nova Scotia

Department of Education provided a list of potential instructors who could address the hotel’s various training needs.

Training delivered at the workplace provides a more flexible learning arrangement for the employees. Courses are designed to be delivered in several short training sessions, each ranging from two to four hours. In addition, on-site learning supports a contextualized learning environment whereby employees can develop their communication skills and apply them immediately in their workplace.

OUTCOMES

The Prince George’s commitment to the Workplace Education initiative has significantly improved employees’ reading, writing and language skills. Other outcomes include the following:

- Employees who have participated in workplace skills training are better able to work independently;
- Learners have increased their self-confidence at work; and
- Participants have gained a greater appreciation of and commitment to lifelong learning.

IMPACTS AND BENEFITS

The Workplace Education initiative has resulted in numerous benefits to both employees and the hotel.

Benefits to employees include:

- improved skills and qualifications that can further their employment opportunities;
- a greater sense that their opinions are valued and acted upon by management;
- increased appreciation of the hotel’s investment in them as employees; and
- heightened interest in enhancing their skills and qualifications such as obtaining their High School Equivalency diploma.

“They [management] are very caring about their contribution to the development of employees.”

—Employee, The Prince George Hotel

Benefits to the hotel include:

- direct applicability of training to the workplace;
- improved customer service;
- increased productivity due to employees' improved communication skills;
- improved morale;
- a better educated workforce; and
- increased employee loyalty.

“We found that after taking the class, they [employees] were able to understand instructions better and that increased productivity.”

—Brenda Ross, Parkade Supervisor

The Prince George has facilitated learning by making it available on-site and contextualizing the curriculum to the work environment.

USE AS A MODEL

The Workplace Education initiative at The Prince George Hotel would be a useful model for other organizations in the hospitality industry or organizations trying to improve the language skills of their workforce. Recognizing the need to ensure that training is accessible and relevant to all employees, The Prince George has facilitated learning by making it available on-site and contextualizing the curriculum to the work environment.

Acknowledgements

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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 the theme of workplace literacy and is part of the Securing Literacy's Potential research project on workplace literacy being undertaken by The Conference Board of Canada and supported by the National Literacy Secretariat, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada.

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