



Case Study *September 2002*

Excellence in Workplace Literacy, Medium Business Winner, 2002 Royal Star Foods Limited

OVERVIEW

Although Royal Star Foods may be located in a small village in Canada's smallest province and is a relatively small player in the large global food processing industry, it is a big contributor to the quality of life and learning of its employees, their families, and the community.

Applied skills training is not a new concept for Royal Star Foods, as "just-in-time" training on new equipment, health and safety issues, and quality control processes have always been the norm. However, a workplace literacy program—as a means to create a foundation upon which learning becomes a natural part of activities within the company and through which employees can become familiar and comfortable with new ways of learning—is a relatively new approach for the company and its employees.

Through a partnership with Workplace Education Prince Edward Island (PEI), Royal Star Foods Limited—a seafood processing plant in Tignish, P.E.I.—has been able to provide a range of workplace literacy programs to its seasonal employees and their families for the past four years. Successes include

Effective practices in providing training and supporting workplace learning.

A core product of the National Business and Education Centre

Name of Program

Royal Star Foods Workplace Education Program

Program

Workplace

Date Established

1999

Skills Developed

Basic workplace literacy skills
Teamwork and problem-solving skills

Computer literacy skills

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more confident, knowledgeable, and skilled employees and a more productive and efficient workplace.

Royal Star Foods, a subsidiary of Tignish Fisheries Cooperative Association Ltd., is the largest single plant processor of lobster in Prince Edward Island—averaging 40,000 pounds a day during the lobster season. The Royal Star plant is one of the largest and most modern state-of-the-art seafood processing plants in eastern Canada. In addition to processing lobster, Royal Star processes snow crab, rock crab, dogfish, scallops, mackerel, herring, mussels, and groundfish for international markets in Canada, Europe, Japan, and the United States. Today the Co-op has a membership of 215 people and a workforce of 350–400.

OBJECTIVES

Royal Star's workplace literacy programs are intended to raise the literacy levels of its employees—to help them reach their full potential in their work functions—and to help employees and their families achieve their personal education goals. In particular, the objectives of the company's training initiatives are to:

- support employees in their pursuit of academic and applied skills training opportunities;
- facilitate the development of workplace literacy programs for employees at Royal Star Foods and its parent company, Tignish Fisheries Cooperative Association Ltd.;
- create a basic foundation upon which learning becomes a natural part of one's daily activities within the organization; and
- familiarize employees with new ways of learning and doing things.

TARGET GROUPS

These are:

- Employees and managers of Royal Star Foods and its parent company Tignish Fisheries Cooperative Association Ltd.
- Family members
- Fishers

ACTIVITIES

Today's Royal Star Foods plant is a highly mechanized working environment—from weighing product on the dock to using the computerized time clock. Employees' reactions to some of these "high-tech" gadgets continue to range from complete fear to "show

me the button" to "teach me what I need to know." The new processing equipment, with its new safety requirements, and the introduction of more sophisticated quality control procedures motivated managers at Royal Star Foods to focus on their employees' literacy requirements. A voluntary project team was put together to determine a "learning route" for both the company and its employees to take. A company-wide survey of employees indicated that many were interested in taking computer courses. In the winter of 1999, the first workplace literacy program began—a basic computer literacy program that the project team felt would pave the way to a "learning comfort zone" for the company.

Since Royal Star Foods became involved in workplace literacy initiatives, over 17 programs have been offered, including: computer training, General Equivalency Degree (GED) programs, and customized communications programs. The company has also initiated and sponsored management productivity and control programs, standard first aid, forklift maintenance and safety, hazard analysis critical control points (HACCP), and formal orientation programs for returning and new workers.

As well, the company has provided financial assistance to individual employees who pursued learning initiatives off-site, including: a women in management program at the University of Prince Edward Island, a welding course at Holland College, and a process and instrument control course in Halifax, Nova Scotia.

COMPUTER LITERACY PROGRAMS

In 2001, employees were so interested in the computer literacy course that the company offered four classes to employees. These programs focus on such things as using e-mail, working with spreadsheets, using the Internet, and word-processing techniques.

COMMUNICATIONS PROGRAMS

Royal Star Foods' communications programs are designed to address oral and written communications techniques within the structure of the company. For example, skills in problem solving, conflict resolution, and teamwork are discussed and studied in the program.

Through the communications program, a forum was created to discuss company issues in a structured manner. Discussions include, for example, adapting to change and, more specifically, the need to enhance literacy and

numeracy skills in the plant on account of the new machinery, processing techniques, and organizational management structure.

GENERAL EQUIVALENCY DEGREE PROGRAMS

Royal Star Foods supports and encourages employees who study and write their GED examinations. The workplace literacy programs at the company are designed to enhance employees' reading and math skills using GED materials customized for the workplace. An instructor provided through Workplace Education PEI worked with Royal Star Foods to customize the curriculum so that it is relevant to the fish processing industry.

- All learning is recognized and valued. Participants are encouraged to progress at their own rate and are not pressured to write the formal GED examination.
- Reaching a level of academic success like the GED encourages employees to reach for new career goals. It also inspires others to learn and to participate in workplace literacy activities—a win-win situation for both employees and the company.

RESOURCES

Financial and emotional support is offered to all company employees pursuing individual academic and applied skills training opportunities at Royal Star Foods.

- The company has a room—the fishers' café—dedicated to skills training. In the winter of 1999, a part of the café was transformed into a 10-unit computer lab.
- A volunteer workplace literacy project team surveys employees each year to determine what learning they want and how to go about implementing it.
- In partnership with Workplace Education PEI, Royal Star Foods seeks out and applies for program funding from national and provincial bodies, including, for example, Human Resources Development Canada's Skills, Loans and Grants program or the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency's Manufacturing Fund.
- To meet the enthusiastic learning demands of Royal Star Foods' employees, the company, along with Tignish Fisheries and Workplace Education PEI, partnered with a local junior high school—Callaghan JHS—to use its computer lab after school hours.

INNOVATIONS

- Royal Star Foods implemented an operational project team—made up of employees, managers, and a Workplace Education PEI representative—to conduct an assessment of what learning programs were needed, who was interested in what, and how to go about implementing the learning initiatives.
- Because the majority of workers are employed for eight to ten months of the year, the company decided to introduce its workplace literacy programs during the off-season.
- All of the workplace literacy programs are available to fishers who are members of the parent company, Tignish Fisheries Cooperative Association.

BARRIERS

As is the case in most workplaces, time and money are the two biggest barriers that restrict Royal Star Foods from offering more literacy programs to its employees. The very nature of the fish processing industry—characterized by seasonal employment and demanding production quotas—and the costs of hiring instructors, finding qualified instructors in rural areas, purchasing manuals and technology, designing curriculum, and paying for employees' time off place limits on a company like Royal Star Foods.

As well, it is at times difficult to motivate and encourage plant workers and other employees to consider taking workplace literacy courses. By focusing on how the individual can benefit from the courses, by making them as accessible, open, and available as possible, and by ensuring that there is a connection between the learning from the courses and the employees' job functions, the company has been able to attract a substantial number of employees to its learning programs.

SOLUTIONS/KEYS TO SUCCESS

A number of factors contribute to the success of workplace literacy initiatives at Royal Star Foods:

- Turning the fishers' café—an area located next to the company cafeteria, which overlooks the wharf where fishers are coming into or exiting the port—into a learning centre was an inspired act. Employees are constantly wandering in and out, sharing learning successes, and feeding off each others' initiatives and achievements.

- The company seeks input from all employees regarding the design and development of the learning initiatives—including where and when the programs take place, suggestions for curriculum, and the choice of the instructor. Involving employees from the design stage straight through to the evaluation of the training initiatives empowers them and encourages them to take pride and ownership in the learning initiatives offered.
- The courses are offered through the workplace literacy project team in conjunction with the Workplace Education PEI coordinator. Together, they map out a strategy that best meets the needs of individuals and the organization in a timely, cost-effective, and learner-friendly fashion.
- Employees set their own personal academic and workplace literacy goals and objectives.
- Most training at Royal Star Foods is customized to suit the company's learning needs.
- Royal Star Foods celebrates the learning successes of its employees. The employees who obtain their GEDs receive a great deal of recognition at a company-sponsored event where their GED certificates are proudly handed out.

There are other keys to success.

- The company implemented a workplace literacy project team made up of volunteers from all levels of the organization. The team helps to keep the literacy programs on track, meaningful, and relevant.
- As a concrete symbol of its commitment to its employees, Royal Star Foods ensures that all of its learning programs—whether they are held on- or off-site—are offered at no cost to employees. This commitment is often reciprocated in the form of employees caring for the company and taking pride in their work and the quality of their products.
- Royal Star Foods is committed to the greater community within which it operates. This is evident in the fact that it offers its courses to the families of employees and to fishers of the Tignish Fisheries Cooperative Association Ltd.

OUTCOMES

- Workplace literacy programs have increased the confidence level of individual employees as well as that of the entire company—resulting in a more productive and skilled workforce. An employee said it best: “One person's achievements are everyone's

success.” As a result of this boost in confidence, workers are more willing to express their views and offer suggestions for improving the production process—ultimately helping the company's bottom line.

- Employees are pursuing further educational and career advancement opportunities.
- Royal Star Foods now considers itself a learning organization.
- In 2000, 16 Royal Star Foods employees chose to write the GED examination, and all of them passed. In 2001, of the eight employees who participated in the GED Preparation program, five chose to write the examination and four received their GED certificate.

IMPACTS AND BENEFITS

- Interest and participation in the workplace literacy programs have continued to climb steadily over the years. In 1999, 24 workers participated in learning initiatives; 43 participated in 2000, and over 70 employees took part in workplace literacy programs in 2001.
- Royal Star Foods is recognized as a learning organization that cares about the well-being of its employees and the community within which it operates.
- There is improved communication and teamwork among employees and between employees and their managers.
- The company has experienced lower error rates, increased safety, increased efficiencies and productivity, and more effective job training, and the general self-confidence of the workers has increased.
- Participants have new options to move ahead in their careers.
- There is increased employee loyalty and respect for the company.

USE AS A MODEL

Other companies, whether they are fish processing companies or seasonally based industries, could emulate Royal Star Foods' workplace literacy model. Its winning combination of engaging employees, managers, and program developers in a collaborative process that clearly articulates and defines the learning goals and objectives of both individual employees and the company benefits everybody involved.

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Royal Star Foods Limited
by *Douglas Watt*

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