



Case Study *December 2005*

Awards for Excellence in Workplace Literacy,
Small Business Winner, 2005

Textiles Human Resources Council and Stedfast Inc.: Bringing Skills Development and Knowledge Management to the Workplace

OVERVIEW

Today's Canadian textile industry is innovative, technology-driven and capital-intensive. Yet, it also faces many pressures, including competition from low-wage countries where manufacturers are subject to fewer regulatory controls, finding trained and skilled workers, and accessing relevant and cost-effective textile education and training programs. Since the industry employs tens of thousands of people and contributes over \$5.3 billion to the gross domestic product (GDP) of Canada, it is important to address its human resources challenges.

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

Name of Program
Skills and Learning Site

Date Established
2005

Skills Developed

Literacy
Numeracy
Problem Solving
Communication

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This task is the responsibility of the Textiles Human Resources Council (THRC)—a non-profit partnership of textile companies and organizations established in 1994 that brings together textile producers, unions, suppliers, government departments and educational institutions. Through its numerous programs and services, the THRC works to ensure that Canadian textile workers have the world-class skills and competencies that organizations need and the textile industry demands in order to compete on a global level.

SKILLS AND LEARNING SITES

One THRC program that is having an impact on a growing number of textile workplaces is its Skills and Learning Site initiative. This project addresses the numerous challenges small textile companies face when seeking to capitalize on their workforce strengths. Such companies tend to be located outside large metropolitan areas and have a difficult time attracting and recruiting skilled workers. In addition, they often do not have the resources to develop their own learning culture or internal training programs. To overcome these challenges, textile companies have worked with the THRC and developed innovative on-site learning facilities available to staff 24 hours a day, seven days a week in order to accommodate the company's shift work and its often hectic production schedules. To date, 30 Canadian textile workplaces have decided to implement Skills and Learning Sites in their manufacturing plants.

Textile companies have worked with the THRC and developed innovative on-site learning facilities available to staff.

One of these companies is Stedfast Inc., a specialized manufacturer of high-tech barrier fabrics using multiple coating and laminating technologies (e.g., operating room gowns, fire-fighting suits, and waterproof gloves) that employs approximately 100 workers in Granby, Quebec. In recognition of the demands of a changing marketplace and the need for continued innovation, flexibility and problem-solving skills among employees, Stedfast's Skills and Learning Site will become a focal point of the company's on-the-job skills development initiatives. The Site is designed to provide workers with access to the industry's leading textile manufacturing

skills, technical skills, essential skills and business and personal development programs. The Site will also support employees as they develop their communication skills through coaching and mentoring activities, workshops and other collaborative learning opportunities.

Stedfast's Skills and Learning Site will become a focal point of the company's on-the-job skills development initiatives.

OBJECTIVES

The objectives of Stedfast's Skills and Learning Site are to:

- provide workers with technical, managerial and essential skills training;
- encourage all employees, including mature workers, to update and enhance their literacy, numeracy, and academic skills;
- provide employees with the tools, resources and opportunities to improve their workplace performance;
- encourage group and individual learning, mentoring, personal development and information sharing; and
- encourage workers to become lifelong learners.

TARGET GROUPS

All Stedfast Inc. employees can participate.

ACTIVITIES

Through a partnership with the THRC, Stedfast is developing a fully equipped Skills and Learning Site, complete with office furniture, computer hardware and a range of timely, relevant and recognized skills and training programs. Without this partnership in place, it is unlikely that a project of this magnitude would have been undertaken at Stedfast due to resource constraints. However, by leveraging the resources of THRC, Stedfast has been able to offer its current and future employees with an industry-recognized and valued learning program. The Stedfast Skills and Learning Site is designed to give workers a place to share and transfer knowledge, ensuring continuity as the company faces a significant number of future retirements.

In addition to the Site itself, Stedfast has developed a Skills and Learning Portal in cooperation with the THRC. The Portal is a dedicated website designed to give employees access to a number of online skills development programs. It also provides the company with a focal point for company-wide communications. The Portal provides learners with a one-stop shop for skills development, including access to the THRC's award-winning Textile Training Through Technology® platform of programs. This e-platform consists of a comprehensive workforce development system that provides employees with learning and skills development programs that focus exclusively on textile manufacturing skills, technical and essential skills, and personal and business performance skills. The Textile Training Through Technology® programs are industry-recognized and developed in collaboration with leading textile schools and educational institutions. This means that Stedfast knows that the material being presented on the Skills and Learning Portal is up-to-date and relevant and reflects the ever-changing skills needs found within the textile industry. The Textile Training Through Technology® programs comprise a significant portion of the online skills development tools available on the Stedfast Portal.

Stedfast has made a significant commitment of time and money to its Skills and Learning Site.

Finally, the Skills and Learning Site also makes use of the THRC's Training Needs Assessment tool, which is used to identify company-wide skills and knowledge gaps. By using this tool, Stedfast is better able to align and target its skills development resources. The Assessment tool collects and reports on three levels of data: individual, company-wide and industry-wide. All three levels contribute to the design and implementation of appropriate and relevant training and skills development activities, including, for example, the use of THRC's Textile Training Through Technology® programs.

RESOURCES

Stedfast has made a significant commitment of time and money to its Skills and Learning Site, which will provide both on-site and online services and programs. By partnering with the THRC, Stedfast will offer its employees much more in the way of learning and skills development resources than it would have otherwise.

In addition to the Skills and Learning Site, Stedfast also offers its employees a range of training programs, including on-the-job training for new employees.

By partnering with the THRC, Stedfast will offer its employees much more in the way of learning and skills development resources than it would have otherwise.

INNOVATIONS

Stedfast's labour-management relationship continues to be a top priority of the organization. As such, a concerted emphasis has been placed on staff participation in overcoming production challenges and on the need to provide training resources that address the needs of all employees—from the shop floor to the head office. This commitment to empower employees through skills development and training has gone a long way towards developing a learning culture at Stedfast, and contributes to finding innovative ways to maintain a competitive advantage.

By tapping into the services and programs offered by the THRC, Stedfast—a relatively small textile company with limited resources for training and skills development—has been able to bring to bear the resources and contributions of larger companies, unions, educators and subject matter experts for the benefit of its own workforce. The Skills and

Learning Site enables Stedfast to implement a cost-shared learning infrastructure and capitalize on shared solutions. By collaborating with the THRC, Stedfast has been afforded the opportunity to pursue both its own training goals and needs while participating in a larger, sector-wide collaborative skills and training partnership. The textile industry's cooperative approach to sector skills development has opened opportunities that extend far beyond the scope of Stedfast's individual expertise or resources.

Other innovative approaches used at Stedfast through its Skills and Learning Site include the following:

- Skilled technical workers (e.g., key technical employees) contribute their expertise during the development stages of the program. They act as on-site mentors, providing peer support and guidance during program delivery by passing on their knowledge, skills and competencies to new workers.
- Administrative and sales staff are able to learn more about the manufacturing processes, which helps them understand the company's production procedures better and become more knowledgeable about the company's products.
- Stedfast's Skills and Learning Site uses job-specific content and, wherever possible, incorporates colour, graphics, diagrams and illustrations into the learning programs in order to engage users with little or no formal education. By using relevant and hands-on learning techniques and tools, employees are able to better understand and retain important technical subject matter required on the job.

CHALLENGES

The operational and technical challenges that Stedfast faced when implementing its workplace skills strategy are typical of any small business. They include: having to appropriately address the numerous and diverse literacy needs of its employees; overcoming the logistical challenges of offering skills and literacy training programs to employees who work shifts and on varying production cycles; and the ongoing challenge of properly resourcing the development and maintenance of any literacy skills solution.

SOLUTIONS

The THRC's Skills and Learning Site initiative at Stedfast addresses the company's major training challenges by being adaptable to the financial and training resources available. The Site can be as large or as small as space and resources allow. As well, training is readily accessible, either online or in the on-site learning space, and is designed to address both individual and company-wide learning needs. In principle, skills development resources can reach an unlimited number of workers simultaneously in an environment where business imperatives and the skills needed to overcome them change regularly—which is of critical importance in the highly competitive textile industry. Finally, by using a modular learning objective framework, where content is presented in manageable increments, Stedfast employees are able to digest and absorb far more than they would through the use of traditional learning techniques.

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IMPACTS AND BENEFITS

The Skills and Learning Site initiative at Stedfast addresses the company's strategic business needs, as well as those of the Canadian textile industry as a whole, by responding to industry-identified workforce development needs and the challenges inherent in today's competitive market environment. Stedfast is currently measuring the results of the initiative using the THRC's unique business impact/return on investment methodology.

Some general benefits of the Skills and Learning Site are as follows:

- The input of management and union partners ensures its relevance and application to the company's work.
- The Site captures the critical technical knowledge of retiring employees so that it can be passed on through training.

- A greater variety of resources are offered to both new and existing staff at all levels of the organization—including technical training programs, literacy programs, textile math programs, and other basic skills relevant to the workplace and other advanced learning initiatives.
- The Site gives employees a consistent reference resource for learning about technical procedures (everyone receives the same information and it is presented in the same way every time), and new employees have a starting point to gauge their technical skills development.
- Around-the-clock e-learning allows employees to learn and develop skills at their convenience and as their schedules allow.

USE AS A MODEL

The Skills and Learning Site model implemented at Stedfast can be followed by other small businesses, inside and outside the textile sector. The textile industry itself has identified a number of keys to success based

on studies undertaken prior to project development and from experiences gained during the project life cycle, including the needs to:

1. Create a company-wide skills development strategy that is aligned with the company's business goals and objectives.
2. Identify company champions for the development of a learning culture.
3. Establish a management/union committee to discuss skills development needs, develop Site objectives and obtain buy-in at all levels of the organization.
4. Identify training and Site development challenges and propose solutions.
5. Establish a funding model for the Site and its ongoing operation.
6. Identify individuals who will be responsible for the Site's ongoing operation.
7. Establish partnerships with external providers and groups that can support implementation efforts (e.g., post-secondary institutions, Sector Councils, unions, government).
8. Identify and implement business impact/return on investment parameters.
9. Communicate programs and services available at the Site and encourage learners throughout the organization to use it.

Acknowledgements

Our thanks to Stedfast Inc., and the Textiles Human Resources Council for providing background information and comments.

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, resources 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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Textiles Human Resources Council and Stedfast Inc.—Bringing Skills Development and Knowledge Management to the Workplace
by *Douglas Watt*

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