

United Steelworkers Toronto Area Council: Battling For The Hearts And Minds To Make That Adjustment

Language	English
Provider	United Steelworkers Toronto Area Council
Location	Ontario
Highlights	In the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), many manufacturing plants closed between 2002 and 2004, resulting in a large number of layoffs. Typically in Ontario, the provincial government's Adjustment Advisory Program will work with one plant or company/union, assisting them for six months to a year. Once most workers have been adjusted, the adjustment centre closes. As a result, the expertise the centre staff has built up may be lost, along with the necessary supplies and equipment for a centre.
Overview	The United Steel Workers have continuously operated an Adjustment Centre to service the needs of laid-off Toronto area Steel Workers since 2003. Staffed by peer helpers who have been through adjustment, the Centre offers a familiar, safe environment, skills upgrading courses and access to re-training.
Issues Targeted	<p>Toronto is a large city with numerous unionized plants closing. So, in 2003 the United Steelworkers Toronto Area Council and the Ontario government decided to set up a permanent centre to deal with Steel Workers from across the GTA.</p> <p>The need for a permanent Adjustment Centre became evident over the ensuing years, as shut-downs and layoffs continued. At the height of the recession of 2008-2009, plants closed at the rate of two-three per month. In 2010-2011, plant closures slowed, but still average one every three months.</p>
Key Features	<p>In the Centre's adjustment model, staff begin to take action before the workers are unemployed. Six to eight months before a plant closes, the Centre begins to coordinate peer helpers who begin to assist the workers.</p> <p>As a first step, the peer helpers assess each worker's skills. The Centre develops a schedule and then the workers sign up. Helpers are available at nights, on the weekends or during the day. They carry out these assessments with the worker on the employer's time, generally requiring about one hour per person. The helpers enter all of the information into a database, then return to the plant to work with individuals to develop a resume. The worker has two weeks to review the resume and discuss it with their spouse and fellow workers prior to meeting again with the peer helper. If a plant</p>

	<p>has 200 people, this assessment and resume development process can take approximately two months.</p> <p>Workers can visit the Centre to learn job search and interview techniques and review the job listings available. Peer helpers also provide advice on retraining and educational options and help with program applications.</p> <p>The Centre regularly offers courses and workshops. Within the Centre, workers can take basic and advanced computer awareness for job search, English as a Second Language and math and English courses. In addition, the Centre arranges seminars on pension planning, financial management of severance packages and debt management.</p> <p>Through its partners, the Centre also helps individuals dealing with issues related to credit and debt, court problems, substance abuse and violence in the home.</p> <p>When funds have been available from the provincial government, the Centre has offered courses for rapid reemployment. These three-month classes have included upgrading of driver's licenses, upgrading of welding skills, basic forklift skills, marine training, janitorial training and pre-apprenticeship training. Participants were able to take these courses while receiving Employment Insurance benefits.</p>
<p>Key Results</p>	<p>The goal of the Centre is to help workers move on to other jobs/careers or retirement. Staff speaks to individuals after training, to find out what worked. The Centre reports to the Steel Workers Area Council once a month and provides a quarterly report to the government and also submits a longer report at the end of each funding period. In the spring of 2011, the Centre will be conducting a study that will examine outcomes for the workers who have used its services.</p> <p>Anecdotally, the Centre staff has found that most people stay in their former job after retraining for another occupation. According to the Centre Coordinator, "It's a comfortability factor. Even after a person does re-employment training for truck driving, he'll want to come back for forklift training. He misses driving a forklift."</p> <p>Some of the benefits of the Centre are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cost-efficiencies: Because it is ongoing, the Centre saves the government and union the costs of continually setting up and dismantling individual company centres. • Credibility: The Centre staff is made up of union leaders who have gone through adjustment themselves; their advice and suggestions have credibility with laid-off workers. • Personalized service: From the start when they provide needs assessments on

	<p>weekends and evenings, peer helpers are working with laid-off workers at times that are convenient for them. They also consult extensively one on one once workers are at the Centre.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A sense of familiarity: The Centre tries to refer people to local community agencies and schools from ESL and math courses etc. They found that many failed to attend. By offering the same classes at the Centre, people were able to learn with their workmates, in a safe union environment and so were more willing to participate with community based agencies when referred. Similarly, by coming to the Centre and seeing workmates, individuals feel less isolated in their challenge of finding another job, going back to school or transitioning to retirement. • Ongoing support: Because the Centre has been open since 2003, workers have been able to come back after three years or more, when they again face job loss.
Contact Details	<p>Toronto Steel Workers Area Council Adjustment Centre, Ontario Dave Parker, Coordinator Telephone: 416-597-1660 E-mail: uswajbcentre@bellnet.ca</p>
Sectors	Manufacturing
Projects	Worker Adjustment
Sponsors	Business: large (500+)
Target Audiences	<p>Immigrants and foreign-trained workers Members of visible minority groups Workers Workers in low-wage or low-skilled jobs</p>
Target Audience Details	<p>Members of the United Steelworkers Union in an area bounded by Lake Ontario to Highway 7, Highway 27 to Oshawa.</p>
Initiative Types	Practice
Funding Mechanisms	<p>Most of the Centre's funding comes from the Ontario government and the United Steel Workers Area Council. The government has varied in the length of its funding commitment, sometimes providing moneys for two years at a time, on other occasions one year. As well, about 20 to 25 percent of employers will contribute between \$150 and \$300 per head to offset costs of the adjustment service. These funds go into the</p>

	<p>general fund in the Action Centre.</p>
<p>Challenges</p>	<p>The Centre often must battle for the hearts and minds of those it is trying to help. In certain plants, workers get a false sense of security; production increases and some think that the announced closure is really just a means of trying to get rid of the union. Rumours abound and it can sometimes be difficult to move individuals beyond a state of shock or denial and into activities to move them forward from what they had. It may be challenging to get people to go to interviews or focus on actively job searching.</p> <p>Another challenge is related to the cultural diversity of the Toronto region. Some laid off workers may face language or cultural issues when they move on from their previous place of employment. Others are highly qualified in their home countries, yet have been doing low-skilled assembly work as a means of making ends meet.</p>
<p>Conclusion</p>	<p>In the view of staff at the Centre, the keys to a successful adjustment program are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • support from experienced, credible peer helpers who have been through the process themselves • access to services that address personal issues as well as job search and retraining help • sustained support over months and years as workers find jobs and then laid off again and need the services the Centre provides.