

## Aquila Tours: Ensuring That Work And Learning Are Fun

<b>Language</b>	English
<b>Provider</b>	Aquila Tours
<b>Location</b>	<a href="#">Atlantic Canada</a>
<b>Highlights</b>	After recognizing that its business growth is strongly correlated with the growth and development of its employees, Aquila Tours strengthened its learning opportunities for employees. The company now offers its internal employee learning programs to other tour companies as a new revenue-generating line of business.
<b>Overview</b>	<p>Aquila Tours is a tour operator based in Saint John, New Brunswick with nearly 30 years experience in the tourism industry. The company offers city tours to visitors—primarily passengers from docked cruise ships—and has grown to become one of the largest and most-respected tour operators in Atlantic Canada. Nearly 100,000 travelers from around the globe experience an Aquila tour every year and the company continues to grow and impress.</p> <p>The company has not always enjoyed such success, however. The recession of the early 1990s lead to difficult times for the company and a recommendation by accountants and bankers in 1993 that the company should close its doors. Reflecting on the first decade of Aquila’s operation, President, Beth Kelly Hatt, recognized that there was a direct correlation between the personal growth of her team members and the business growth of the company. By focusing on her employees’ development, she believed that she could rescue the company and make it thrive. Since then, Kelly Hatt has made learning and teambuilding core elements of Aquila’s operations. Aquila’s President has infused the company with a spirit of learning, mentoring, and teamwork that has served it well ever since.</p> <p>As a result, the company has not only witnessed strong business performance and high employee satisfaction and retention, it has also won a number of Awards, including the National Award for Small Business Skills Development (2006), the Tourism Industry Association of Canada’s National Award for Excellence in Human Resource Development (2005), and was one of three finalists for the Air Canada Business of the Year Award (2007). Moreover, based on the success of its internal skills and knowledge development initiatives and at the request of several clients and other tour operators, Aquila Tours has opened a Centre for Cruise Excellence and offers a fee-based Tour Guide Excellence certification program, thereby turning its internal learning success into a profitable line of business.</p>

<p><b>Issues Targeted</b></p>	<p>For many years, Kelly Hatt has had a commitment to the personal and professional development of her 9 full-time and 50 part-time, seasonal employees and a belief that a satisfied, highly-skilled team is a key to business success. That belief was confirmed in the early 1990s when Kelly Hatt recognized a direct link between the personal growth of her team and the growth of the company. With that knowledge, she took additional steps to provide her employees with opportunities to develop their skills and knowledge, as well to better understand and play key roles in the overall success of the company.</p> <p>The core objectives in developing employees are to find, keep, and develop “the right people for Aquila’s team” in order to improve their contribution “to the success of both the team and the company.” The company aims to ensure that “the fun and energized Aquila Team continues to grow and be recognized as leaders in our industry by creating moving experiences with integrity while supporting professional and personal dreams.” Indeed, a critical piece of business success, according to the company, is recognizing that “not just the professional goals or team members, but the personal ones as well” matter.</p>
<p><b>Key Features</b></p>	<p>Learning activities at Aquila Tours are a mixture of formal and informal learning opportunities for employees, all motivated by the goal of improving professional skills and knowledge, and personal development and satisfaction.</p> <p>More formally, the company’s “significant training budget” - which totals about 10 per cent of overall expenses - enables employees to participate in industry learning tours, to enroll in applicable university courses, to attend workshops and seminars, or to participate in other learning opportunities offered by recognized external institutions. Additionally, the company holds regular teambuilding events and workshops that contribute to the development of employees’ industry knowledge and enhance team spirit.</p> <p>Less formally, the company supports a variety of mentoring activities, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• assigning each new employee a mentor who is responsible for not only on-the-job learning, but also for ensuring that the new employee successfully integrates into the Aquila team;</li> <li>• assigning more experienced mentors to Aquila employees who are taking on new roles to ensure that they grow into these roles and to lead them through the tasks that will be important in their new roles (for instance, listening in on sales calls or accompanying them to trade shows and networking events); and</li> <li>• ongoing, informal mentoring of all employees by the company President whenever appropriate needs and opportunities emerge. In the last two years, this has involved</li> </ul>

mentoring two key team members as part of a succession planning process designed to ensure the health and growth of the company.

The company also takes the opportunity to teach and inform employees about the company and engage them as a team. Every business action or decision is seen as an opportunity to engage employees and to teach them about the business beyond their individual roles and responsibilities. Consistent with Aquila's philosophy of team building and team empowerment, the company takes special efforts not only to share all company information with all employees, but also to include them in the development of budgets, business and marketing plans, annual reports, and other strategic documents. While regular opportunities to review and contribute are provided, the company also convenes Annual Planning Meetings during which the entire Aquila team "enjoys an off-site corporate retreat for 2-3 days each year to discuss marketing initiatives, as well as budgets, growth, human resource issues, and fun team building exercises."

In general, the company hopes to improve employee engagement, to instill an understanding of how specific jobs and responsibilities affect overall company planning and performance, and to prepare employees for future leadership and managerial roles that they may eventually take on by continuously engaging all team members in planning and exposing them to all areas of the company.

#### Performance Evaluations and Appreciation

To make sure that employees are developing and growing as required for personal and business success, Aquila has instituted a performance management process that includes one-on-one meetings with employees each quarter and an "appreciation tool". Use of its "appreciation tool" in meetings with staff, "ensures that each team member is growing, learning new skills, and essentially 'appreciating in value'." The tool also allows the company and its employees to "help team members identify which areas of the company they would like to grow into, as well as personal or professional goals and skills they would like to acquire." From the evaluation and appreciation exercises, a plan for each employees' growth is developed and progress is discussed at each of the quarterly meetings.

#### Tour Guide Excellence Program

A notable development in Aquila's work-related learning practices is the creation of its Tour Guide Excellence program. The key to Aquila's business model are the tour guide services that it offers to visitors, and the success of these services depends critically on the skills, knowledge, and professionalism of the tour guides themselves. Consequently, the company has spent a great deal of time, effort, and resources to developing learning initiatives to ensure that its tour guides meet expected levels of excellence.

	<p>Recently, Aquila Tours has transformed its internal tour guide learning program into a fee-based training and certification product available to other tour companies, which it offers through its Centre for Cruise Excellence established in 2007 to help tour operators achieve high standards in their services. Together, the Centre for Cruise Excellence and the Tour Guide Excellence program provide “a way for the seasonal tour operator to sustain its business through the off-season” and offer current employees additional opportunities for growth and development.</p>
<b>Key Results</b>	<p>Kelly Hatt believes that the experience of the last 15 years has confirmed her theory that business growth depends on employees’ personal and professional growth. Every year since 1994, the company has increased profits, even during tough times for the tourism industry as a whole. Kelly Hatt attributes much of this success to the company’s approach to learning and development.</p> <p>Moreover, the firm has maintained what it regards as very good employee retention rates—something that is particularly challenging in an industry that relies to a large extent on part-time, seasonal labour. Turnover among both the 9 full-time staff and the 50 part-time seasonal staff is “very small” according to Kelly Hatt.</p> <p>Finally, the company has received very positive comments from clients, employees, and industry peers which it regards as evidence that its approach to training and development is achieving positive results. And the transformation of part of its work-related learning initiatives into a revenue-generating line of business is a significant, if unconventional, benefit of a well-functioning workplace education program.</p>
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<b>Sectors</b>	<a href="#">Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation</a>
<b>Projects</b>	<a href="#">Effective Work-related Learning in SMEs</a>
<b>Sponsors</b>	<a href="#">Business: small sized (between 20 and 99 employees)</a> <a href="#">Private Training Organization</a>
<b>Target</b>	<a href="#">Workers</a>

<b>Audiences</b>	<a href="#">Workers in non-standard employment</a>
<b>Initiative Types</b>	<a href="#">Practice</a>
<b>Initiative Type Details</b>	<p>Two features of Aquila’s approach to learning and development appear to be unique:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•The company’s decision to treat every business activity and decision as an opportunity for learning and exchange has provided it with a rather interesting way to ensure that learning is directly relevant to real business objectives. Employees learn what they need to know and apply it in the face of real business challenges and decisions rather than trying to apply lessons and techniques learned elsewhere to business problems and activities.</li> <li>•Additionally, the move to transform internal learning activities and expertise into a fee-based revenue-generating service is especially innovative. Indeed, the fact that the company has been able to do this successfully is a testament to the success of its approach to learning more generally. That is, the company has done so well developing its employees that many of those same employees are now recognized as expert industry trainers.</li> </ul>
<b>Partnerships</b>	Aquila Tours also frequently turns to external expertise and resources such as those provided by industry associations, university and educators.
<b>Stakeholder Involvement</b>	Aquila Tours notes that it has “a significant training budget each year” for its more formal education and professional development activities, though precise figures were not available. Additionally, because the company sees learning opportunities in all business activities, and encourages mentoring and sharing among employees, the total amount invested in learning at the company, including employee time, is certainly greater than what might appear in a formal budget figure. In terms of materials and expertise, the company relies to a great degree on internal sources—especially the knowledge and skills of more experienced employees and leaders to mentor and coach more junior staff members.
<b>Challenges</b>	One of the key challenges for Aquila Tours in sustaining both its learning activities and also its core business is the seasonal and fluctuating nature of the tourism industry. While the company retains 9 full-time employees, the vast majority of its nearly 60 employees are part-time, seasonal workers. Consequently, continuously engaging employees and building the skills and expertise of the workforce can be difficult. However, with the development of its Centre for Cruise Excellence and Tour Guide Excellence Program as revenue-generating activities, Aquila Tours appears to have found a way to leverage learning experience and expertise in order to “sustain ourselves” and

	<p>give employees “the opportunity to use their knowledge and expertise” year-round.</p>
<p><b>Sources</b></p>	<p>This summary was prepared for the Centre for Workplace Skills by the Conference Board of Canada. While the Centre for Workplace Skills, project advisory committee, and reviewers provided input, The Conference Board of Canada is solely responsible for the contents of this document, including any errors or omissions. Neither the authors nor The Conference Board of Canada accept liability resulting from the use or misuse of the information found within this report.</p> <p>Aquila Tours, “2006 National Award for Small Business Skills Development: Entry.” On file at The Conference Board of Canada.</p> <p>Aquila Tours, “Aquila Tours unveils international training and certification program.” News release. June 9, 2010. <a href="http://www.aquilatours.com/pages/presroompressrel.htm">www.aquilatours.com/pages/presroompressrel.htm</a> (accessed May 2, 2011).</p> <p>Aquila Tours, “Local Tour Operator is a Model for Excellence for Cruise Tour Operators.” News release. May 9, 2007. <a href="http://www.auilatours.com/pages/presroompressrel.htm">www.auilatours.com/pages/presroompressrel.htm</a> (accessed May 2, 2011).</p>
<p><b>Conclusion</b></p>	<p>The Aquila Tours approach to workplace training and development may be especially relevant to very small firms that are able to open up business planning and decision-making to all staff. If a core business objective is to prepare future leaders and managers, there may be few ways to do so as effective as Aquila’s engaging and empowering approach to learning. Moreover, although Aquila Tours does make significant investments in training, its approach to learning—which includes regular engagement, mentoring, and ongoing sharing—may be suitable for adoption and adaption by companies with very limited resources.</p>