

## **ES Solutions @ Malach Ltd.**

*A WEM partnership case study*

*A partnership that began with WEM “pushing” the benefits of Essential Skills solutions eventually resulted in the company “pulling” from WEM the additional expertise needed to apply Essential Skills in areas they were able to identify themselves.*

Winnipeg-based Malach Ltd. began manufacturing sheet metal products for Manitoba’s HVAC / construction industry in 1962. Since a new owner/leader restructured Malach’s operations in 1997, company revenues have annually increased by 30% or more each year. Plant size and market expansion have kept pace, with the original ten thousand ft. plant giving way to its current 68,000 sq. feet and their move into U.S. markets marked by the purchase of a sister-facility in Valley City, North Dakota. The company has recently begun laying the groundwork to attract new customer types and products.

Back in 2010 the company was expanding again, hiring an additional 24 new employees in a time when finding skilled workers was no easy task. In addition to the uncertain skill levels of the newly-hired, both the HR director and the operations manager had begun noticing increasing examples of performance anomalies in their existing workforce. So when an awareness-raising call from Workplace Education Manitoba explained the impact of Essential Skills levels on workforce performance, the response was immediate. “We’d been subtly picking up on a number of things,” recalls HR Director Phillip Portelance. “But when we heard what Essential Skills were all about and were presented with the capabilities of WEM and we had a closer look at our workforce; that’s when we started thinking we had some potential issues *and* we had a means of addressing them.”

The partnership between Malach and WEM had begun. As the dialogue progressed, company officials began describing performance issues and work-around strategies that pointed to Essential Skills gaps. (In the workplace, work-arounds are non-standard techniques that often mask skills gaps and usually add to the time required to perform a task... and the cost.) Most of the work-around stories clustered around numeracy-related tasks, document use, and tasks involving reading. The clearest involved a highly-skilled and experienced tradesperson renowned for the quality of his work. Whenever he used a tape-measure to notch a series of intervals – such as every 3 inches – instead of penciling marks at 3”, 6”, 9” and so on; he would measure out 3 inches and make a mark. Then he would move the tape-measure forward 3 inches and make another mark, continuing on meticulously and laboriously until he’d completed his markings.

“We’d done training prior to WEM and it was important but I don’t think we’d ever thought of doing training that was quite so basic, such as reading and numeracy,” says Portelance. “I think you often take that for granted.” With their newly-acquired skills perspective, Portelance and the operations manager quickly convinced upper management that an Essential Skills-based training partnership with WEM could pay off handsomely in skills dividends.

Based on the results of WEM’s comprehensive, company-wide Essential Skills assessment, the partners developed specific goals to support Malach’s existing - and future - business

directions. Essential Skills refresher training for newly-hired employees would make it easier for them to take on the tasks of their new workplace, while existing employees would receive gap training targeting their specific work needs.

For the majority, on-site training took the form of individuals or small groups taking one or two sessions a week for four to six weeks. Carefully timed to fit Malach's production schedules, training progressed in fits and starts for almost a year. Then, says Portelance, management experienced a new and important clarity. The Lead Hands had been constantly balking at workers being scheduled for training, worried their absence would affect production. "Not because they didn't buy into it," he says, "they just viewed it very much as a sacrifice." Friction began rising as Lead Hands increasingly reported 'attitudinal' problems on their work teams and asked managers to become more and more involved. Perhaps, management reflected, Essential Skills gaps were also at the root of these stubbornly-persistent teamwork issues.

What they were able to identify was that there was little to no pro-active work being done by Lead Hands to prevent conflict: they weren't communicating their expectations to their workers. They also avoided constructive criticism like the plague, which meant a worker making an error had no way of knowing what to do to improve. "We began to understand that no matter what training others were getting, if they weren't getting proper direction and leadership from the Lead Hands then either upper-management was going to have to step in and provide that or they were just going to end up floundering and that's not what we wanted."

Again the call went out to WEM, and a fresh layer of Essential Skills-based training was developed to address the Lead Hands' specific need to be able to offer constructive criticism during training, use positive coaching techniques and manage conflict toward positive outcomes. As a result, the Lead Hands soon became more effective at defusing potential conflict or resolving it on their own without having to escalate issues to higher management. Even with an ever-increasing workload, communication between departments and the lead hands is said to be much improved.

Overall, management reports that the workforce has been successful in handling and maintaining their line productivity increases as a result of improvements in Lead Hand performance. Importantly, the improvements in Lead Hand ability to train new employees has also helped to reduce the average time-to-proficiency of new hires and, ultimately, helped to support the increases in new employee requirements to meet productivity demands.

Malach's future includes reaching out to new and different customer types and building the new types of sheet-metal products they'll require. New skills will be needed and, inevitably, new workers. Portelance anticipates the market for skilled labour will remain tight, but says his partnership with WEM has him upbeat on the subject. With WEM's help, he says, new and existing employers can be trained in the Essential Skills needed to adapt and succeed. "Before, if someone had a few gaps in their knowledge I had to tell them they weren't skilled enough and I couldn't give them a shot." With a smile, he says triumphantly: "Well, now I can!"