



Case Study October 2005

Awards for Excellence in Workplace Literacy, 2004 Winner Essential Skills: “The Dofasco Way”

OVERVIEW

Dofasco Inc. is one of North America’s most progressive and profitable manufacturers of high-quality flat-rolled and tubular steel, and is Canada’s only producer of tinplate. To meet changing customer demands, Dofasco instituted its breakthrough “Solutions in Steel” strategy. This strategy transformed Dofasco into a producer of innovative, value-added steel products designed to solve the immediate and future needs of its customers.

Located in Hamilton, Ontario’s industrial heartland, Dofasco employs 7,400 permanent employees. Each of Dofasco’s employees is part of a proactive team that is empowered to suggest better ways of working, maximize the performance of new technologies, discover ways of improving quality, fine-tune or completely rebuild systems, enhance customer support, and find

ways to save money for both customers and shareholders. Dofasco recognizes that its employees need to have the essential skills to meet the challenges of a changing workplace. “Our Product is Steel, Our Strength is People” is more than just the company motto—it is the guiding force behind all business decisions.

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

Skills Developed

Literacy
Computer
Project management
Business writing

Contact

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Name of Program

Essential Skills Program

Date Established

January 1997

The skills gap may have been masked by the sheer number of employees.

In the early 1990s, economic pressures prompted significant restructuring at Dofasco. Early retirement packages, voluntary severance packages and layoffs cut Dofasco's workforce nearly in half. After the cuts, a gap in the required workplace literacy skills was identified through feedback from employees and in-house instructors. In the past, the skills gap may have been masked by the sheer number of employees and the low technical demands of many jobs. With a reduced workforce and the introduction of highly technical equipment, this was no longer the case, and action was taken to address the employees' literacy skills gaps. Working with several community partners, Dofasco launched its Essential Skills Program. Since 1997, hundreds of employees have developed skills that have made marked contributions not only to their work, but also to their personal lives and communities.

OBJECTIVES

The overarching objective of the Essential Skills Program is to provide Dofasco's employees with the literacy and essential skills they need to excel in their jobs.

This objective is achieved by:

- Developing core competencies throughout Dofasco's workforce, beginning with basic skills, including literacy;
- Helping trainers adapt programs to meet the needs of employees;
- Empowering employees to develop marketable skills;
- Ensuring accessibility, confidentiality and respect for employees; and
- Fostering a lifelong learning environment throughout the organization.

TARGET GROUPS

Dofasco recognizes that a highly skilled workforce is its competitive advantage and therefore invests in training for all permanent employees.

ACTIVITIES

The initial design of the Essential Skills Program at Dofasco featured five community partners: two local school boards, Mohawk College, the Hamilton Literacy Council and a government-funded project coordinator. As the program evolved and government funding ceased, Dofasco decided to outsource its training to the Adult Basic Education Association (ABEA) in Hamilton, and various community partners now deliver the training sessions.

The Essential Skills Program is coordinated and guided by an internal workplace team composed of three human resources staff members, two supervisors, two mid-level supervisors, one administrative assistant and five other employees. Dofasco works closely with the ABEA to coordinate the use of instructors from the community. The ABEA and instructors meet frequently with the internal workplace team to discuss the progress of the participants, program improvements, and class goals and achievements. Each year, the new instructors and Dofasco's workplace team develop participant profiles to facilitate the progress of employees through the program.

Dofasco recognizes that a highly skilled workforce is its competitive advantage.

Individual goal-setting with the aid of the instructor is one key activity that helps ensure employee success. Once all the students identify their goals for the semester, the curriculum is then tailored to the realistic achievement targets for each participant. The essential skills targeted at Dofasco include reading, writing, math and computer literacy. To meet the needs of some employees for one-to-one literacy instruction, Dofasco partners with the local literacy agency to provide a Peer Tutoring Training Program. Because the number of volunteers outnumbered the student needs, the volunteers became teachers' assistants in the regular program.

The different classes are encouraged to interact with each other, promoting unity and cooperation among the students. This interaction has led to class field trips and collaboration on a class newsletter. In addition, participants, management and community instructors

celebrate participation in the program on an ongoing basis with end-of-term graduations, special lunches and other activities. Employees are encouraged to bring their families to the celebrations to share their success.

Dofasco's partnership with a broad group of community organizations is a key innovation.

RESOURCES

Time is the most valuable resource of the Essential Skills Program at Dofasco, and stakeholders' commitment to providing their time has ensured the continued success of the program. In the planning stages, the workplace team met regularly with the local school boards, the Literacy Council and Mohawk College to design the course curriculum. The workplace team is involved at various stages of training, from the recruitment and interviewing of instructors to course evaluation and program improvement.

Currently, Dofasco invests over \$15 million annually in employee training and development. The company buys computers for its computer literacy courses and provides space on-site for all other essential skills classes. Lastly, Dofasco pays for one hour of employee class time, and employees in turn volunteer one hour of their own time.

INNOVATIONS

Dofasco's partnership with a broad group of community organizations is a key innovation of the program. Using a variety of training providers for the Essential Skills Program has strengthened relationships between the business and its community and employees. The providers help open doors into the community for employees who have not been enrolled in formal schooling for many years or who were not educated in Canada. With their newly acquired skills, these employees can get access to learning programs that they did not previously qualify for. In addition to helping individual participants, the local literacy network conducts confidential individual assessments to help place the employee in the correct class, recruits instructors each semester, and meets with the workplace team to discuss class progress and program improvements.

Dofasco's commitment to innovation is exemplified by the adaptation of the regular computer course to include literacy training as well. This course is designed for employees who want to participate in a computer class but do not have the necessary literacy skills for a regular computer class. The course is taught by a literacy instructor, and is standard for any employee who is assessed at a low literacy level but who is interested in enhancing his or her computer skills.

CHALLENGES

Although the company and employees recognized the need for basic skills training, there were some challenges in implementing the program.

“What consistently differentiates Dofasco from our competitors are our people, all of our people. It is in Dofasco's best interest and we believe it is our responsibility as an employer to provide opportunities for our people to gain the necessary skills to be the best contributors they can be at work, at home and in the community. The Dofasco Essential Skills Program is a prime example of Dofasco's commitment to this philosophy.”

—R. Brian Mullen, Director, Human Resources,
Dofasco Inc.

For the employees:

- Employees were sometimes reluctant to self-identify and to participate in literacy skills training.
- Some employees lacked the basic literacy skills needed to participate in other workplace training.
- It could be difficult for employees to attend courses scheduled around a 10- or 12-hour shift.

For Dofasco:

- The time commitment required by the workplace team in the initial stages and in the maintenance of the program was extensive.
- There were challenges in coordinating the different partners involved in the delivery of the program.

- It was necessary to condense a three-hour course into two hours to avoid breaching contracts with unions.
- Scheduling courses for business units that operate on different schedules was problematic.

SOLUTIONS

One of the keys to the program's success is senior management's continued recognition and support of the uniqueness and importance of the program to the employees, the organization and the community. The greatest reasons for the continued success and exceptional dynamics of the program are the people supporting and implementing it and, above all, the participants who voluntarily step forward to learn. Because Dofasco guarantees the privacy of individuals and conducts internal marketing, more and more employees are volunteering to participate in the Essential Skills Program.

Dofasco's many business units operate on different schedules and shift lengths. To solve scheduling conflicts, Dofasco allows each business unit to schedule the courses at the convenience of its employees. Providing independent scheduling results in more flexible programming and higher accessibility for participants.

OUTCOMES

Participants at Dofasco have embraced the program because it builds their confidence and enhances their sense of independence. Employee enthusiasm and the support of senior management, supervisors and peers result in positive changes for the employees and the corporation.

“Outside of work I really feel much better. It is worth it. I read a paper and can use the Internet and I feel it is because we have learned so much at work. We are encouraged to do it and we must take the opportunity. Now I feel like other people do in life.”

—Dofasco Essential Skills Program participant

- Participants share the following benefits:
- Increased ability to deal with daily literacy challenges;
 - Increased mobility within the workplace;
 - Development of transferable skills;
 - Enhanced capacity to meet the challenges of rapid change;
 - Relationship-building between co-workers, instructors, team members and peers; and
 - Lifelong learning at work and at home.

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IMPACTS AND BENEFITS

More than 400 employees have voluntarily participated in the program to date. Many are repeat students, and many have gone on to different jobs within the company or participated in continuing education within their community.

The program at Dofasco has been recognized in various ways in the literacy and business communities, including:

- The Canadian Manufacturers and Exporters' Business Results through Literacy Manual and Workshops;
- The Conference Board of Canada's 2004 Awards for Excellence in Workplace Literacy;
- The 2002 Canada Post Literacy Award;
- The 1997 ABEA Corporate Literacy Award;
- Workplace Education Development, Customizing Accreditation Curricula; and
- Action Research in Workplace Education.

USE AS A MODEL

The positive results of the Dofasco Essential Skills Program demonstrate that this type of program can work in a large company. Large companies that seek flexibility in their delivery of training will find Dofasco's experience of engaging community partners, outsourcing training and granting scheduling independence to business units an efficient means of meeting their changing

organizational needs while benefiting employees. Although Dofasco allocates \$15 million a year to training, this model shows that in addition to financial commitment, investing time in the development, maintenance and evaluation of the programs is key to ensuring a successful training program. Although Dofasco outsources training delivery, the company is involved every step of the way.

Acknowledgements

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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.

Awards for Excellence in Workplace Literacy, 2004 Winner—Essential Skills: “The Dofasco Way”
by *Maryester Gonzalez*

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