



Case Study October 2005

Awards for Excellence in Workplace Literacy, 2004 Winner Elmsdale Lumber: At the Cutting Edge of Workplace Education

OVERVIEW

Elmsdale Lumber Corporation (ELCO) is a family-owned producer, exporter and wholesaler of kiln-dried lumber, specializing in white pine, hemlock and SPF (spruce/pine/fir mix). ELCO has operated successfully for over 100 years and currently employs 57 people at its mill in Elmsdale, Nova Scotia, approximately 40 kilometres north of Halifax. Although a relatively small business by North American standards, it is a major employer in Elmsdale, with many families dependent on the company for their well-being. ELCO recognizes this fact and demonstrates its commitment to the community by continuously looking for better ways to harvest one of Nova Scotia's most valuable resources and by investing in the skills of its employees.

Staying competitive in a rapidly evolving global lumber industry challenges this family business in many ways. Changes in technology have brought computers

into lumber mills, transforming the industry from a low-tech sector to one using sophisticated equipment, and thereby increasing the demand for a skilled and literate workforce. The introduction of silviculture—the science and practice of caring for forests—also requires specialized knowledge and new, environmentally sound techniques. Recent competition from countries with

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

Name of Program
Workplace Education Program

Date Established
2000

Skills Developed

Literacy
Communication
Computer

Contact

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lower wood, labour and environmental costs makes owning and operating locally run mills increasingly difficult. In addition, the lumber industry in Atlantic Canada has been adversely affected by tariff wars and trade policy disputes with the U.S., and by the damage caused by Hurricane Juan in September 2003. ELCO has also introduced its own changes, including new management techniques emphasizing communication skills, professionalism and industry certification, and increased its investment in workplace safety.

Learning is now part of the corporate culture at ELCO.

All of these changes required ELCO's management to look carefully at its human resource capacity, and decide whether to hire new employees with enhanced workplace skills or invest in its long-time employees. For this family-run business, the decision was easy. Basic skills training became the foundation of ELCO's Workplace Education Program (WEP) for its existing workforce.

Learning is now part of the corporate culture at ELCO. For the past four years, ELCO's WEP has been the catalyst for managing changes. Developed in partnership with the Nova Scotia Department of Education, the WEP is managed by an on-site project team.

OBJECTIVES

The WEP was established to address the technological changes in the Canadian lumber industry as well as the individual learning goals of employees. The overarching goals of the program are to:

- Enhance the workplace performance of current employees through skills training; and
- Address individual learning needs to improve basic skills.

TARGET GROUPS

The program targets:

- Employees interested in academic upgrading and enhancing their basic skills; and
- Managers wanting to improve their communication and supervisory skills.

ACTIVITIES

The WEP project team, made up of managers, a training coordinator and instructors, canvassed employees and identified gaps in computer skills, science skills related to silviculture, and required certifications. In addition, the project team found that employees wanted to further their education for both personal and professional reasons. To best meet employee training needs, ELCO partnered with Nova Scotia's Department of Education and developed a series of industry-relevant in-house courses. The curriculum was co-developed by the project team and instructors, in cooperation with employees.

Through the WEP at ELCO, employees can obtain their General Education Diploma (GED) and participate in many general education courses to satisfy their personal interests. In addition, the WEP offers a series of courses on topics that have direct application to the participants' employment duties, including:

- Oral and written communication skills;
- Computer literacy;
- Essential skills for supervisors; and
- Public relations.

Employees wanted to further their education for both personal and professional reasons.

All job-related courses take place during working hours in a designated training space, including a computer lab, provided by ELCO. The company celebrates the hard work and achievement of its employees in graduation ceremonies attended by family and staff.

RESOURCES

Over a five-year span, ELCO has invested over \$80,000 to support its learning programs. ELCO supports workplace education by offering:

- Paid training during working hours;
- Computers for the computer literacy and writing classes;
- Mentorship opportunities for less experienced employees; and
- On-site facilities for special-interest courses at no cost to the participants.

OUTCOMES

The WEP has yielded many benefits for ELCO, such as the following:

- Employees have developed increased confidence in their work and teams as a result of an increase in their own self-esteem.
- Workers are taking the concept of self-empowerment seriously and, with their essential skills training, have started taking on more responsibility at work.
- Computer and writing skills training is leading to increased computer use by employees.
- Some employees have gone from not knowing how to turn on a computer to helping solve computer-related problems.
- Supervisors are now included in all hiring at the mill and are better able to choose the right people. They can also train their new employees better, because they have learned how to identify skills gaps as the basis for making training plans.

Employees have developed increased confidence in their work and teams.

IMPACTS AND BENEFITS

The WEP has helped to keep ELCO at the cutting edge of the lumber industry. In addition to a more knowledgeable and well-trained workforce, there have been real economic benefits to the company, including:

- Reduced sick time and absenteeism;
- An improved safety record;
- Increased productivity;
- A better working environment; and
- Greater initiative shown by employees.

Through the WEP, 10 employees have earned their GEDs and others have completed courses in the forestry program at the University of New Brunswick. In addition, individuals have achieved recognized standing in the industry, including:

- One 4th Stationary Engineer;
- One licensed Lumber Grader; and
- One licensed Log Scaler.

Learning is now part of the culture at ELCO. Employees are proud of their educational achievements, awards and certificates. Two employees earned Nova Scotia's Workplace Education Ambassador Award for creating a learning culture in the workplace and demonstrating their commitment to lifelong learning as they mentored younger learners. This is a significant accomplishment that was greatly valued by ELCO.

“This program gives everyone ownership of what they want for their careers, and the result has been good for them. And ELCO is a much more efficient mill.”

—WEP Project Team Leader

One Man's Success Story

Successes have been many at ELCO, but none has been as well documented as the story of Mel Lively. Mr. Lively left school in Grade 2 to work in the woods and help support his family. As a result, he never learned to read or write—something that he described as “his only regret in life.” In his late forties, he permanently damaged his foot while working in the woods, leaving him unable to perform the job he had held for so many years. A few years after his accident, Mr. Lively's daughter passed away, leaving behind a young son. At the age of 57, Mr. Lively decided he would honour his daughter by learning how to read to his grandson. To help Mr. Lively achieve this goal, the ELCO Project Team partnered with the Nova Scotia Department of Education's Workplace Education Office and its Older Worker Project. Working one-on-one with a tutor, Mr. Lively quickly improved his literacy skills. His dedication to learning led to the publication of *Mel's Story*—an account of his life in the woods. More than 1000 copies of his book have been distributed to workplaces, libraries and schools. *Mel's Story* is available, free of charge, from the National Adult Literacy Database (NALD) at www.nald.ca/clr/mel/cover.htm.

INNOVATIONS

The fact that a small, family-run lumber mill has created a sustainable workplace education program is, in itself, an innovation. ELCO is continuously looking for ways to enhance the skills of its employees through academic upgrading, computer skills and industry-related certification programs.

BARRIERS

In the beginning, getting buy-in and support from employees was a challenge. Many were hesitant about identifying their need to improve their literacy and other essential skills. Some employees were sensitive about admitting they needed academic upgrading.

Although management recognizes the importance of basic skills training, being a small business poses challenges when allocating time for training programs. When 27 of 57 employees are designated to participate in a training program during working hours, as has been the case at ELCO, effective time management is essential.

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SOLUTIONS AND KEYS TO SUCCESS

The commitment to building a learning culture at ELCO begins right at the top. To show support, the company owner participated in an essential communication skills program along with his foremen. Management's enthusiasm for learning spread throughout the company, and soon more employees began to feel the benefits of their efforts.

To ensure that all designated employees receive training, ELCO conducts classes in small groups of five or six employees. Training employees in smaller groups minimizes the impact on production while meeting training needs. Any additional training that is not identified by management as essential to a person's job is done at the workplace, but on the employee's own time.

Training employees in smaller groups minimizes the impact on production.

NEXT STEPS

Next steps for ELCO include a public relations course for all employees who have contact with external clients. A 15-hour course will be delivered to 25 employees—nearly half of the workforce. To minimize its impact on production, the course will be delivered in-house to small groups during working hours. It is expected that this customized course will allow ELCO employees to better serve their customers.

USE AS A MODEL

The program at ELCO integrates specific workplace issues into the curriculum and takes place on-site over a period of months, fully or partially on work time. Support from management ensures the ongoing success of the program. ELCO has already played an important role in promoting the benefits of the Workplace Education Program throughout Nova Scotia and the Maritimes.

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.

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by *Maryester Gonzalez*

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