



Case Study December 2002

Achieving Industry Standards in a Remote Northern Community Developing Employees' Skills at La Ronge Motor Hotel

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

certification establishes a benchmark for training and skills development and gives “bragging rights” to those who have been certified, as well as to the hotel, itself.

OVERVIEW

The La Ronge Motor Hotel is located in the small northern Saskatchewan town of La Ronge, on land owned by the Lac La Ronge Indian Band. The hotel, which is part of the holdings of the Kitsaki Management Limited Partnership, provides a wide range of hospitality services to a vibrant northern community.

The La Ronge Motor Hotel increases the attractiveness of its services by helping its staff train for, and achieve, the Saskatchewan Tourism Education Council's national industry certification in housekeeping. Industry

Effective practices case study in providing training and supporting workplace literacy

Name of Program

Workplace Open Learning Fulfillment (WOLF)

Date Established

1997

Skills Developed

- Literacy
- Numeracy
- Leadership
- Communication
- Teamwork

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Employee certification also enables the hotel to retain its Canada Select two-and-a-half star rating.

La Ronge: Where the Road Ends

La Ronge is an important trading and social hub. The town and its environment, which are described by the local people as “down-town northern Saskatchewan,” are home to key public services, including the Northern Lights School Division, a hospital, Northlands College, an airport, and various federal and provincial government offices.

La Ronge is a key staging point for expeditions into northern Saskatchewan. All roads end here, in this gateway to the province’s 100,000 lakes. From La Ronge, local people and a growing contingent of Canadian and American travellers make their way, via plane and boat, to popular hunting and fishing camps. In La Ronge, German business people make deals to purchase delicacies like wild rice, for export to the European market. The settlement at La Ronge owes its historic trading origins to the once lucrative trade in beaver pelts that fed the European appetite for luxurious hats.

Today, La Ronge retains its inland port flavour, hosting local people and long distance travellers alike, in a familiar, yet urbane, fashion. The La Ronge Motor Hotel is a key player in providing hospitality to this diverse clientele, who come to La Ronge to experience the relaxed environment of the Zoo (a traditional Aboriginal meeting place and thriving entertainment centre), along with the comfort and convenience of a well-appointed hotel.

BUILDING ON LOCAL STRENGTHS

In what might, to outsiders, appear to be a challenging market, the La Ronge Motor Hotel finds opportunities to leverage the resources of a unique Aboriginal community, to provide a range of services to locals and adventurers alike. The hotel converts the potential challenge posed by a transient population into an opportunity, based on the easy commerce and low resistance to new faces required in a social and trading hub. Locals, Aboriginal travellers, and foreign tourists share the facilities offered by the hotel while they are in La Ronge. The hotel’s restaurant serves 200 customers per day, while the hotel provides accommodation for 1,000 overnight stays per month, in 45 rooms.

To some extent, the local workforce is transient, as well. Members of the largely Native workforce continue to participate in their traditional way of life (including hunting and fishing), which sometimes requires them to take informal leaves of absence from their work at the hotel. Often, Aboriginal workers use their work at the La Ronge Motor Hotel as a steppingstone to employment elsewhere. The hotel tends to welcome Aboriginal workers who have relatively low skill levels, and train them. In a “southern”

environment, this situation might be seen as a barrier to retaining talent, and would make employers leery about investing in training and development for transient employees.

But the La Ronge Motor Hotel accepts this reality and turns it to its advantage. Hotel management simply chooses to see it as very probable that, if workers leave for a short time, they will come back. In this way, the hotel takes a “turnstile” approach to developing staff; employees are trained for now—and for later. Over time, the result is that the hotel has developed a broad-based, talent pool of “available” workers. Sometimes, this can have a truly “just-in-time” flavour. When the hotel is short-staffed, the manager can usually find someone nearby who, at some point, was trained, and is now available to help out.

The La Ronge Motor Hotel also operates in a community-minded environment, where the measure of success is not so much individual achievement, as it is balance—meeting the priorities of home, community, and steady work. The hotel turns this virtue to advantage in its training programs for Aboriginal workers. How they do so is the focus of this case study. It is refreshing to see a virtue being leveraged, when it is all too common to achieve results through ambition and competition, which pits one person against another.

Finally, among the Cree of La Ronge, there is a strong oral culture. For some Aboriginal peoples, like the Cree, access to formal education has been limited. The transmission of oral culture requires well developed storytelling skills, which are useful in coaching situations in the hotel. Again, rather than be hamstrung by the relative lack of formal education among employees, the La Ronge Motor Hotel plays to the strengths of its Aboriginal workers, by using the vehicle of oral culture to facilitate workplace training, while fitting training around the traditional way of life and the commitment to family that is so strong in Aboriginal culture. For example, one employee indicated that she would go to school in La Ronge during the summer, when her father came to town to do construction work. At other times of the year, she was with her family at a camp in the bush.

LEARNING CULTURE AT THE LA RONGE MOTOR HOTEL

The hallmark of learning at the La Ronge Motor Hotel is that employee development is conceived as a process, not an event. Learning is also embraced as a priority at all levels of the organization, from the Indian band that manages the hotel and other businesses, to the operational management of the hotel, to line managers and individual employees within the hotel. For example, among the band's businesses is a trucking company that trains Aboriginal people to be truck drivers and helps them to become owner-operators of their own rigs. Learning is a daily activity and is supported by senior managers within the Kitsaki Management Limited Partnership, who regard education and skills development to industry standards for Aboriginal peoples, as a top priority.

The hotel's General Manager, Clarence Neault, links the delivery of high-quality services to the ongoing development of staff. Learning is a key responsibility of line managers at the hotel; they are expected to coach employees on hotel policies and quality standards, as they relate to job performance. Finally, individual employees have gone beyond the bare requirement of developing the skills associated with their jobs, to assisting each other with achieving industry certification, in their roles as housekeepers, desk clerks, food servers, and bar staff.

FROM WORKPLACE LITERACY TO WORKPLACE SKILLS TO WORKPLACE CULTURE

The La Ronge Motor Hotel has made a virtue out of necessity with regard to its workplace literacy and skills development initiatives. Since 1999, the hotel has worked closely with Northlands College to put together a series of effective workplace education programs and to secure funding to get those programs off the ground. This effort has culminated in the Workplace Open Learning Fulfillment (WOLF) program, under which the La Ronge Motor Hotel helps its staff train for, and achieve, industry certification.

In 1996, Northlands College conducted a community-wide needs assessment of basic skills among employees working for La Ronge businesses. The needs assessment generated a lot of data regarding the strengths of local Aboriginal people, as well as the requirements of local employers. One of the findings of that needs assessment, specific to the La Ronge

Motor Hotel, was the need of housekeeping staff to gain more basic academic skills.

Workplace education at the La Ronge Motor Hotel has unfolded in a series of waves. Clarence Neault regards literacy as being important in its own right and also useful as a vehicle for developing workplace skills and workplace culture. In other words, he believes that literacy leads to attitudes and behaviours appropriate to high performance in the workplace. The idea of refreshing and developing literacy and numeracy for Aboriginal employees led to the first wave of workplace education at the hotel. In the second wave, department heads within the hotel were trained. The focus on the third wave of workplace education was to use peer coaching to help housekeeping employees achieve industry certification.

OBJECTIVES

- To better equip employees to do their jobs
- To enhance workplace performance

TARGET GROUPS

- Aboriginal workers
- Women

ACTIVITIES

WAVE 1: Building Employees' Literacy and Numeracy Skills

Workplace education at the La Ronge Motor Hotel started from humble beginnings. In 1997, with the help of funding from the National Literacy Secretariat of Human Resources Development Canada, the La Ronge Motor Hotel created a learning resource room, equipped with a whiteboard, magazine rack, and chairs. Housekeeping staff used the learning resource room as a home base for basic skills training in reading, writing, and numeracy, as they related to tasks expected of them in their jobs at the hotel. The staff needed help to read, understand, and follow written directions, involving standardized vocabulary specific to the hospitality industry. With the help of the resources in the learning room, staff could learn how to complete accurate, written reports, adapt formulae, and measure cleaning solutions in correct proportions.

To achieve their literacy and numeracy goals during this first wave of activities, cleaning staff met with their tutor in the learning resource room for about an hour, after they had finished their cleaning responsibilities, but while they were still on paid time. Learners signed a contract to progress through a literacy and numeracy workbook—an hour at a time—that had been specifically adapted for them by their tutor. This initial literacy project has been the foundation for all subsequent workplace education at the La Ronge Motor Hotel.

This was a new experience for Aboriginal workers who had not participated in formal education for some time or who had been exposed to formal education only sporadically in their early years at residential schools or during summer visits to La Ronge. Learners' basic skills were informally assessed, using the Test of Workplace Essential Skills (TOWES), developed by Bow Valley College, with support from Human Resources Development Canada. This test had the advantage of engaging learners directly, in relation to their skills, while other tests required learners to apply their skills, using their knowledge of concepts—a method that can be intimidating to some adult learners.

During the assessment process, a number of barriers to learning were identified. These included low levels of academic skills (which tend not to be emphasized as much in an oral culture as they are in a reading and writing culture), uncorrected vision problems (some participants had not renewed prescriptions for corrective lenses because they were not “readers,” even though reading labels was part of the job), and other priorities (such as caring for families and curling).

The first wave of workplace education culminated in the production of a basic training video for the La Ronge Motor Hotel. Narrated in Cree, Dené, and English, the video was sponsored, in part, by Industry Canada.

WAVE 2: Training the Trainers

Early and ongoing literacy training at the La Ronge Motor Hotel prepared the way for a second wave of workplace education, which focused on training supervisors from various departments of the hotel to be workplace instructors or group leaders. This wave saw the head chef, the head waitress, the head bartender, and the head housekeeper trained and certified to industry standards in workplace skills. Northlands

College and the Government of Saskatchewan sponsored this phase. The underlying premise is that, if supervisory staff are properly trained, they can provide coaching for their direct reports.

The Saskatchewan Tourism Education Council (STEC) course required a weekly three-hour commitment for 13 weeks from managers, as well as their cooperation during follow-up activities designed to ensure that the training they received was being put to use in the workplace.

WAVE 3: Peer Training Project

The third wave of workplace education at the La Ronge Motor Hotel came onstream once supervisory staff had been trained. Peer training in workplace skills was launched with funding from the Saskatchewan Labour Force Development Board (SLFDB), through its Learning at Work project. SLFDB funds paid for the services of a Cree tutor (who had been a housekeeping supervisor at the La Ronge Motor Hotel), as well as for certain classroom materials, including training binders for all participants. The purpose of this phase was to build on the previous literacy and train the trainer initiatives, to help housekeeping staff achieve STEC national industry certification in housekeeping.

During this wave of workplace education, learners' tuition was paid for, but participating employees were not paid to learn. Instead, they studied at times that suited their own schedules and needs. Many employees studied at home and helped each other with assignments over the telephone in the evenings.

As part of this wave of workplace education, employee-learners worked with a tutor from Northlands College on their vocabulary and reading comprehension, calculator math, keyboarding, and Internet surfing skills. Dictionaries and big screen calculators were made available for learners to use and keep. Employees had access to the tutor in the Learning Centre for three hours per day, five days per week, as well as at other times that fit their schedules.

During the Learning at Work project, learners also engaged in role-playing exercises designed to help them make sound judgments on the job. This experience led to the production of a restaurant training video, which is available (at a nominal cost) to other employers who employ Aboriginal workers in the hospitality sector.

When employees completed their training, the La Ronge Motor Hotel contributed \$75 towards the \$275 fee required by STEC for certification.

RESOURCES

From the Employer:

- Paid employee time (the time between housekeepers completing their duties and the ends of their shifts)
- Contribution toward certification fees for individual employees
- \$5,000 toward the cost of producing a training video

From Government Sources:

- \$5,000 toward the cost of producing a training video
- Money to pay a tutor
- Money to customize and purchase learning materials

INNOVATIONS

The most innovative aspect of the La Ronge Motor Hotel's approach to workplace education is the persistence with which the general manager has worked with managers and employees, at every stage, to leverage gains, in order to move forward into the next phase. Literacy prepares the way for workplace skills development, which, in turn, reinforces the kind of workplace culture that is key to business success.

Running a close second to persistence is a commitment to working with the circumstances at hand. The La Ronge Motor Hotel has converted the reality of operating in a small, northern community into opportunities to enhance its business and develop the skills of its employees.

BARRIERS

Barriers for Management

- Sustaining workplace education with government program dollars requires employers to constantly write proposals to seek funding for projects that address their employees' needs. This tends to give workplace education a "stop and start" character, as the company awaits the arrival of funds for subsequent program stages.
- For workplace education to be the most effective, line managers must coach their direct reports and

employees must be accountable for applying what they learn. Managers often lack coaching skills and employees frequently are not challenged to transfer their training to day-to-day workplace situations.

Barriers for Learners

Aboriginal employees have relatively low levels of formal education and have been raised in an oral culture.

- Many have had negative experiences with formal education.
- Most require basic literacy skills training, as a first step toward developing workplace skills.

SOLUTIONS/KEYS TO SUCCESS

Process

- Making workplace education happen by being creative about the steady pursuit of limited, short-term funding.
- Encouraging employees to take advantage of workplace education.
- Building on successes, and leveraging the results of one project to set the stage for achieving impacts in the next phase.
- Engaging a Cree tutor, who was a former employee of the La Ronge Motor Hotel, to do training.
- Having a mandate from the Lac La Ronge Indian Band to provide training to band members helped to create a climate of acceptance among Aboriginal employees.

Infrastructure

- Providing a home base, in the form of a learning centre, gave learners somewhere to study.
- Having access to the expertise of a community college helped to customize industry training materials and provide coaching support.

For Management

- Management was able to create a learning climate and see the benefits of supporting workplace education.
- Line managers were required to combine working with supervision and employee coaching in every eight-hour shift (for example, the bar manager trains other staff in responsible alcohol service).
- Training line managers to be leaders was crucial. Management demanded that they be experts in their departments and be self-supervisors.

That meant that they had to be able to work alone and be trusted to have others work for them, as a form of commitment to the performance of the organization. Department managers are given license to articulate their disagreement with the actions of the general manager, as long as they do not turn their backs on the organization and leave. The general manager regards this self-supervising quality as crucial to managers' effectiveness in setting an example for direct reports and in making the training "stick."

- Progressively giving employees more responsibilities and allowing them to make mistakes in a controlled environment helps them to improve in safe, non-threatening ways. Workplace education programs delivered by peer tutors who are not "the boss" are part of this approach.

For Employees

- Having the right incentives to participate in, and succeed at, workplace education creates motivation through acknowledgement. For example, employees are given a pin and a jacket, a certificate, and an awards ceremony, as well as a 50-cent-an-hour raise. Participating employees are adults with family responsibilities, and their efforts need to be rewarded in ways that are meaningful to them.
- Employees are able to work for a first year, to learn by doing, and then reinforce these skills through "book work."

OUTCOMES

- Staff achieved STEC industry certification for a variety of jobs.
- The hotel has retained Canada Select two-and-a-half star quality rating.
- Individual cleaning staff, who as a group tend to keep to themselves, have become more outgoing team players and more versatile (for example, they are able to step in and do the work of someone who is off sick).
- Employees have become more professional and more independent. They are more confident about making their own decisions and calculations, and are more articulate about themselves and what they are doing, including their needs on the job.
- Staff support each other in developing workplace skills and achieving certification.

IMPACTS AND BENEFITS

For the Employer

- Employee loyalty and retention was enhanced. Housekeeping staff are staying in their jobs at the La Ronge Motor Hotel.
- Employee awareness of the importance of protecting the privacy of guests and the security of their property has increased. For example, they now make sure to lock doors properly and not to disclose the names and room numbers of guests to strangers.
- Employees "notice more" in the course of their work. They start to think about how they would like to find their room by, for example, filling out customer service surveys when they are staying in a hotel themselves. They become more thorough in their jobs by, for example, picking bits of paper up off the floors in the bathrooms, ensuring that everything is "nice and clean," and that nothing is "missing or amiss," which helps everyone.
- The hotel saves on costs. Better training results in increased property life (such as when mattresses are turned over and rotated regularly) and supply conservation (as is the case when cleaning fluids are mixed accurately).
- Management ensures that the quality rating of their establishment stays at the two-and-a-half star level.
- When employees become self-motivated learners and workers, they come to work with a better attitude. STEC standards embody knowledge, skill, and attitudinal components, and require learners to behave according to commonly recognized principles of hospitality.
- Employees become more customer-focused, as a result of learning about customer needs from an independent source (the STEC binder).

For the Employees

- Employees have what they know and/or, have heard from the "boss," mirrored back to them in a non-threatening way, by an independent authority.
- They can validate their role and their skills.
- They gain awareness of information that is important in their jobs.
- Their self-confidence increases, and they feel better about themselves.
- Being able to achieve certification helps them to overcome doubts about their competence.

- Their communication, problem-solving, and team-work skills are enhanced.
- They enhance the self-esteem of co-workers who have not yet pursued certification.
- Gaining portable national industry certification is, in most cases, the first qualification for Aboriginal workers.
- They now know that they could work in the “big city,” if they wanted to.
- They get a 50-cent-an-hour raise for getting their industry certification.

USE AS A MODEL

The La Ronge Motor Hotel provides a model for other employers who want to develop the skills of employees who “have heart,” but may lack certain academic preparation to advance their education. The most important requirement, for employers who wish to use this example as a model, is to commit to workplace education for the long term. They must be prepared to invest in basic literacy and numeracy, as a vehicle for developing other, more specific, workplace skills and for encouraging the attitudes and behaviour that support a strong, workplace culture.

Our thanks to the people we interviewed, and others who provided comment, including:

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Clarence Neault, La Ronge Motor Hotel

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, resource requirements, achievements and outcomes, benefits, innovations, and keys to success and challenges.

This case study is one of a series addressing workplace literacy and basic skills development. The series is part of the *Overcoming Barriers* research project on workplace literacy being undertaken by The Conference Board of Canada and funded by the National Literacy Secretariat, Human Resources Development Canada.

Achieving Industry Standards in a Remote Northern Community:
Developing Aboriginal Employees' Skills at La Ronge Motor Hotel
by *Kurtis Kitagawa*

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