



Case Study *December 2005*

Awards for Excellence in Workplace Literacy,
Medium Business Winner, 2005

Upgrading Employee Skills to Meet Corporate Standards— Technocell Canada, A Felix Schoeller Group Company

OVERVIEW

Technocell Canada (TCC) is a subsidiary of the German group Felix Schoeller Holding, the world's largest producer of photographic and decor paper. In 2001, Technocell Canada purchased a paper plant in Drummondville, Quebec, as it was the only plant in Canada with the capability of fabricating the specialized paper product needed. The Drummondville plant employs 150 people and exports approximately 80 per cent of its production to the United States.

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

Name of Program
TCC Training Program

Date Established
2001

Skills Developed

Basic Skills
Communications and Teamwork
Problem Solving
Health and Safety

Contact

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With this plant purchase, however, came unexpected challenges. Most of Technocell's newly acquired workforce was not familiar with the materials or the technology required to produce the quality standard required by Technocell. In addition, the employees had not received any training for the various positions associated with the paper machine production line. With the introduction of new products, higher quality standards, and significant increases in production volume and speed, staff had difficulty adapting to the new work methods.

It was clear to both local and German managers that the skill deficiencies were taking their toll on the company and its bottom line.

Beyond the lack of production knowledge, there was an overarching problem: the current workforce was lacking in basic skills. This was partially due to the fact that the previous plant owner had received a government subsidy for hiring local people, and especially those who had had difficulty finding work. Members of this workforce had been regularly promoted and now held key positions within the operation. They were expected to take on the role of head operators but had never received proper training, nor had they been required to upgrade their skills to match their job responsibilities. Their limited skill sets were also compromising health and safety standards.

With the introduction of new TCC standards and the creation of additional positions, existing job descriptions, responsibilities and employee skills set were now ambiguous or obsolete in comparison to the real needs of the company. In addition, market requirements demanded a much more in-depth knowledge of the production processes than what was typically required in traditional paper factories. The technical requirements associated with manufacturing these new products served only to further emphasize the inadequate skill set of Technocell's workforce.

The reality of an untrained workforce had a direct negative impact on the organization and, in particular, on product quality, efficiency and productivity. It was clear to both local and German managers that the skill deficiencies were taking their toll on the company and

its bottom line. Immediate action was required to stabilize and improve the productivity of the Drummondville plant and to avoid job instability.

Management also realized that the recent monetary investment in Technocell was not yielding the expected level of success. This was chiefly due to the difficulties inherent in updating knowledge and competencies of employees in the core jobs—employees who were already challenged by their lack of basic skills and training.

The company's goal of developing a highly skilled workforce was further complicated by difficulties in finding and recruiting specialized and qualified staff, because Technocell's product and area of expertise were not well known in the Quebec pulp and paper industry. The only solution to overcoming this shortage was to improve the quality of the training provided to current employees to ultimately increase both productivity and staff retention.

OBJECTIVES

Immediate action was necessary to justify foreign investment in maintaining a specialized workforce in the Drummondville region and, by extension, at the provincial and national levels. The overarching goals of the TCC training program were to:

- ensure the company could become more productive and profitable as soon as possible; and
- ensure the plant and its products met TCC's high standards and those of other producers of decor paper.

The key objectives of the program were to:

- enhance and improve employee knowledge and competencies to become productive workers;
- provide employees with the tools and competencies necessary to improve their workplace performance as they relate to workplace safety and operations;
- improve basic and technical skills for all Technocell employees;
- prepare and train employees for technological transitions and succession to vacant positions;
- instill staff with the organization's values and orientations; and
- improve technical and generic knowledge about the pulp and paper industry.

TARGET GROUPS

All Technocell employees, from all levels, were surveyed, assessed and ultimately will be trained to upgrade their skill sets. Targeted employees included supervisors, mill operators, laboratory technicians, maintenance and shipping and receiving workers, mill management and support staff, office personnel and senior management.

ACTIVITIES

In building a training action plan, the company recognized that a transparent and specific process was required to achieve its corporate goals. In order to gain full employee support, Technocell first presented its corporate plan to the union. Jointly, TCC and the union shared the corporate vision with the employees—upgrade skills so that employees would become experts in their field. Once this concept was understood, and with the guarantee that no jobs would be lost, Technocell received full support for the training initiative from both the union and the employees.

The company recognized that a transparent and specific process was required to achieve its corporate goals.

Before training could take place, a full analysis of the skill set and training needs of each employee was required. To ensure impartiality, an external firm was hired to survey the employees, evaluate and measure their essential skills, analyze the results and prepare a structured training plan. The audit consisted of preparing, distributing and analyzing employee surveys and results. The external company then tested the technical and generic competencies of each employee. After analyzing the results, a matrix of training needs was prepared. Training schedules and activities were then put into place.

In addition, all job descriptions were reviewed and revised; a skill set was identified for each job, including the attitudes and behaviours required to be successful in that position. A proficiency assessment was imple-

mented for each position, identifying a set of competencies which had to be met in order to be proficient in the job. The criteria were based on academic skills, work skills, technical skills and generic skills. Once all employees had been tested and their skill sets evaluated and identified, the company was then in a better position to match jobs to each employee's qualifications.

Emphasis was placed on designing a training program following adult learning principles and good business sense.

To maintain employee support, the external assessors firm met with all employees individually to discuss the results of their evaluations, review their training needs and discuss next steps. The training programs and methods were compared with those of the parent company's German plants for corporate validation. Emphasis was placed on designing a training program following adult learning principles and good business sense.

RESOURCES

Technocell has made a significant commitment to training its workforce. Over the past four years, Technocell has invested approximately \$2 million in development of employee skills and expertise, which translates into an average of \$30,000 per employee.

INNOVATIONS

The company works closely with its employees, the union and the community to produce a model training session, with very positive results. Upon completion of a training module, employees are tested and require a passing grade of 85 per cent. Additional training programs are available for those employees who fail to obtain a passing grade.

Through this inclusive retraining program, Technocell is one of the first pulp and paper plants in North America to offer a provincially recognized certificate in specialized paper products. Recognizing the benefit of establishing a credential for the training program, TCC partnered with the local college (le Cégep de Trois-Rivières) to help

evaluate, create and deliver a provincially recognized certificate program. Upon completion of the training program, operators receive a certificate recognized by the Quebec Ministry of Education.

CHALLENGES

As a new employer in the region, TCC discovered that not only were the local employees' skills weak but improvements in their attitudes and behaviours were also required. For example, initial survey results showed that employees were not sensitive to the urgency of completing a task; employees did not take responsibility for product quality; workplace safety was not exercised; management were not necessarily well qualified for their job responsibilities; and employees were not concerned by the consequences of their actions on the company's fragile bottom line.

Finding technically trained and experienced local workers was not possible, since the Quebec public education system did not offer academic courses related to the needs of the decor paper industry.

The previous company owner had instituted a hiring requirement of recruiting unemployed individuals through the local Manpower centre. These new hires had poor pulp and paper knowledge and little or no experience in the production of decor paper. There was no structured training program in place for either new hires or employees who had previously been promoted into supervisory roles. Also, production volume expectations throughout the plant were initially very low. As the new employer, however, Technocell had high expectations of increased production capacity and a new product line. Technocell also had to achieve higher quality standards within its market segment than what the inherited workforce was used to.

Moreover, another issue remained: the technology employed was European, and not found anywhere else in Canada. Finding technically trained and experienced local workers was not possible, since the Quebec public education system did not offer academic courses related

to the needs of the decor paper industry. No pulp and paper apprenticeship programs existed, such as those in the German Scholarship System that head office was familiar with.

SOLUTIONS

TCC tailors its training program to meet the specific needs of individual learners. At the same time, the program strives to ensure that the overall workforce acquires the essential job skills specific to the decor paper industry and that workplace safety and productivity goals are met.

By encouraging workers to take responsibility, the program has gained the confidence and support of learners and supervisors alike.

Learners receive training and improve their competencies in a non-threatening environment, since training takes place on company time, is customized to their individual needs, and is job-specific. By encouraging workers to take responsibility for their own learning and ongoing education, the program has gained the confidence and support of learners and supervisors alike.

OUTCOMES

The introduction of the training program was motivating; it instilled a mood for change which has had a positive impact on all company activities. Management believes that the program's well-grounded activities and common goals are the keys to its success.

Overall, the company counts on the training program to improve the quality of its products and services, as well as productivity (i.e., decrease the amount of discarded products). Future plans to improve employees' knowledge of plant operations will facilitate quick and efficient integration of new products and technology. The ability to deal with changing production needs will allow Technocell Canada to handle market fluctuations and will contribute to stabilizing production parameters and profitability, continued development of the organization and employee satisfaction.

IMPACTS AND BENEFITS

Technocell's training program has contributed to an improved corporate culture and work environment. Its benefits have included:

- improved literacy and numeracy skills;
- enhanced understanding by machine operators, managers and supervisors of the importance of basic skills in the workplace;
- improved attitudes and behaviour and a stronger sense of community within the workplace;
- enhanced teamwork;
- improved employee motivation to do better and take pride in their work;
- improved ability of employees to troubleshoot;
- improved workplace safety record; and
- increased self-confidence, self-esteem and activity in the workplace and community, due to a transfer of the learning culture to employees' personal lives.

After the first six months of training, there was a noticeable improvement in the above-noted impacts, thus confirming and reinforcing that the company had made the right decision.

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USE AS A MODEL

With more than 25,000 training hours given to 150 employees over a four-year span, Technocell has now developed a level of expertise that the company and its employees can share with the community.

Technocell is an effective skills development model for all worksites, but it is particularly relevant for plants where the education levels and literacy rates of the local population may be below Canadian averages. Recognized for its success in implementing this ambitious program, Technocell is now viewed as a local source of expertise in project management, and generously shares its winning formula with other companies in the community.

Acknowledgements

Our thanks to Sylvie Tougas and others at Technocell Canada who provided comments and information.

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 *Linda Scott*

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ISSN 1492-501X • Agreement No. 40063028
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