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# Canadian Business

APRIL 28, 2008

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## IN BRIEF

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market changes are equally compelling. "In today's environment, the need to recruit and retain is crucial," says Stuart. "I don't think a number of companies are feeling the crunch yet. But the crunch is coming."

#### Hard data on benefits of literacy training

It stands to reason that if you upgrade the literacy skills of workers so they can understand health and safety messages better, you reduce their risks—and, potentially, the health and safety-related costs of the enterprise.

Anecdotal evidence supports this, but a new two-year study will put hard numbers to the claim. Conducted by The Conference Board of Canada (CBOC) and due for completion by 2009, the study will: collect data on the costs of low literacy skills in the area of workplace health and safety; and demonstrate the benefits and impact of improving employee literacy and essential skills on workplace health and safety.

Alison Campbell, CBOC Senior Research Associate and project manager of the study, says it will target a broad range of industry and service sectors, especially those with higher reports of worker-compensation claims and time-loss injuries. The report will include case studies to reveal current practice and real outcomes. "The business case for investing in

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# Northern Exposure

## HUDSON BAY MINING IS READY TO INVEST IN EVERY JOB HIRE

BY D'ARCY JENISH



Hudson Bay Mining tests all new hires: (from left) Tom Goodman, Vice-President, Technical Services and Human Resources, employee Richard Fourre and Personnel Officer Bill Morrell

J. Naylor, CP Images

Richard Fourre went to work recently as a labourer at a copper and zinc refining plant owned by Hudson Bay Mining & Smelting Co., Limited (HBMS). It's the biggest employer in Flin Flon, Man., a town of about 7,000 located 670 kilometers north of Winnipeg. The 31-year-old father of three started at the bottom, doing cleanup and shoveling spilled material onto a conveyor belt. Prior to being hired, though, he took a company-administered math- and literacy-skills test. He had to spend a week upgrading his math, but then passed with the proverbial flying colours the second time around. "I've worked all over the North, but this

was the first time I had to write a test like that," he says. "It didn't bother me in the least. I wanted this job, and I want to move up."

HBMS began testing when it restarted its apprenticeship program towards the end of 2004. Since the company's workforce is aging, many skilled trades people—boilermakers, welders, carpenters, machinists, electricians, instrumentation mechanics, heavy-duty mechanics and industrial mechanics—are approaching retirement. The apprentices selected to replace them are required to take eight weeks training per year over four years at a community college. But when they were placed in a classroom setting, says HBMS

## IN BRIEF

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workplace literacy and essential skills is not just about fewer absentees and less waste, but about decreasing insurance premiums, claims and fines," says Campbell.

The study will draw correlations between literacy training and cost outcomes that may persuade companies to increase their investments in essential training. On average, two per cent of an organization's training budget is spent on literacy upgrading, says Campbell, and "there is sometimes an inverse relationship where companies requiring a high level of health and safety in their workplace invest the least on literacy- and essential-skills upgrading."

**Unique Quebec law revised to address job standards**

A Quebec law, unique in North America, that mandates a minimum corporate expenditure on workplace training

now also encourages the development of occupational standards. "There's a kind of revolution happening," says

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Personnel Officer Bill Morrell, some of the recruits lacked essential math and literacy skills.

The company subsequently extended testing to all new hires, including those who, like Fourre, start out as labourers. The reasoning is that today's labourers are tomorrow's plant operators, supervisors and managers who will be required to read and understand complex instruments, manuals and documents. "We're looking for people who want to progress through the organization," says Tom Goodman, HBMS's Vice-President,

Technical Services and Human Resources. "We believe it is invaluable to identify the essential skills required by our workforce and to measure individual skills."

When the company extended testing to all new hires, about 95 per cent of applicants had Grade 12 diplomas. Yet only about 48 per cent were performing at Grade 11 or higher, the rest at Grade 10 or lower. It was neither in the interest of the company nor the community to turn away those who failed to make the grade. First, unemployment in northern Manitoba is above the national average. Second, hiring locally makes good business sense. "We need to attract people living in the North," says Morrell. "They are more likely to stay in the North. Developing people in this region is the way to go."

To introduce essential-skills testing as part of the

hiring process, HBMS turned for help to the Le Pas-based University College of the North, which recommended the Canadian Adult Achievement Test (CAAT). In Spring 2007, the company initiated a one-year pilot project in partnership with the college and Employment Manitoba, a provincial government department. HBMS hired an educational consultant to administer the tests, identify the skills needs and direct applicants to agencies where they can find training to fill any gaps in their skills. "We have helped people achieve the benchmarks for employment," says

Morrell. "We recently hired five people, and four of them went for gap training, challenged the test a second time and made the cut. That's a success."

The company is now working with Employment Manitoba and Manitoba Apprenticeship Trades & Training to refine its approach. The provincial Apprenticeship Branch is assessing the math and literacy requirements for specific positions and will develop assessment tools appropriate to individual jobs. As well, HBMS has put workplace literacy on the agenda of the Northern Manitoba Employers Sector Council, an organization formed with provincial support to deal with personnel issues common among the region's mining, forestry and hydro companies. "Other employers are closely watching what we're doing," says Morrell. "Many of the local education agencies are ready to get involved and provide the essential training. We all have the same problem with skills shortages and we all need to work together." ■

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