



The forest products industry is one of Canada's largest industrial employers, providing direct jobs to 340,000 Canadians, contributing nearly three per cent of Canada's GDP and exporting over \$40 billion of products to markets around the world. In fact, Canada is the world's leading exporter of wood, pulp, and paper products. [source: Forest Products Association of Canada]

The Company and its spokesperson are not named in this document, to comply with the company's communication policy to not endorse a supplier's product or service.

When the Human Resource Development Leader at one of Canada's largest forest products companies first saw the list of nine Essential Skills, he thought they were a good way to break down skills. So he wrote them on a piece of paper, tucked the list in his desk and promptly forgot about it. It was months later when he realized the value of that piece of paper.

"We were in the midst of a labour dispute, negotiating a new collective agreement, when we looked at the language and realized that we could consider the skills and ability of employees, in addition to seniority. It was always there; we just didn't use it. I started thinking, 'How can we measure the ability to do a job in a standardized, objective way?'"

He approached the local community college for a test to measure aptitude.

"The college tried to convince me that instead of measuring aptitude, we should measure Essential Skills. They are a much better indication of how well a person can perform on a specific job, and where they might need to improve."

"I remembered the list of Essential Skills in my desk, but I still didn't buy-in." He returned to his office with a stack of information that sat untouched for a few months.

The light finally came on when he visited the Human Resources and Skills

Development Canada Essential Skills website: (http://srv108.services.gc.ca/english/general/home_e.shtml). It contains hundreds of Essential Skills profiles developed by the federal government based on in-depth research with Canadian workers. The profiles are available online at no charge and they are commonly used by industry and educational institutions to develop curriculum and enhance human resource practices.

"I typed in 'pulp and paper' and up came the Pulp Mill Machine Operators profile (NOC 9432). I read the profile and thought, 'That's us! That's exactly what we do.' It all fit together in a job profile I could relate to."

"When we got the assessment results, the curtain lifted."

The company arranged to "test-drive" TOWES (Test of Workplace Essential Skills), an Essential Skills assessment provided by Bow Valley College in Calgary, Alberta. Six staff members who had experience on the front line completed the TOWES assessment and when the results were in, they knew they had a winner.

Human Resources approached management with plan to integrate

Essential Skills into their line of progression. With the buy-in of one operating department, they began crafting a job profile specific to a new position within the company.

"We downloaded as many Essential Skills profiles as we could find that were a good fit, locked ourselves in a room and built a customized profile in an hour-and-a-half," says the human resources development leader. "When we were done, our supervisors confirmed – that's the job."

With the labour dispute over, the company tested 35 employees in the paper machine lines of progression who were selected to move up to new positions.

"They were a little nervous at first but they knew their jobs were secure; they were grandfathered. We explained that it was all about skill development."

"When we got the assessment results, the curtain lifted. It explained why some people always had trouble."

Only one of the 35 test-takers met the Essential Skills requirements, which had complexity level ratings of 3 (reading text), 4 (document use) and 3 (numeracy).

The Human Resources department was not surprised by these numbers. Forty-two per cent of Canadians lack the skills required of a knowledge-based economy – and that percentage is even higher in rural areas.

"Despite what people may think, Canada is not competitive as a country in pulp and paper. We generally have old machinery and we haven't developed our skills and knowledge. To compete with countries like China, Finland or Brazil, we need the Essential Skills necessary to function productively and safely," explains the Human Resources Development Leader. "We have

to set ourselves up with the right equipment, the right people and the right product if we want to transform from traditional paper-making to a more modern environment."

The company found similar results as more employees were tested. "As we began applying the model to other departments and parts of the paper machine line, it explained a lot of the challenges we faced at the mill. We had a pool of people with low Essential Skills scores, so we had to ask ourselves – how do we address this?"

"Human Resources approached management with a plan to integrate Essential Skills into our line of progression."

The company worked in partnership with their local college, Bow Valley College in Calgary and the provincial department of education to build an assessment and training program designed to increase reading and document use scores – the two Essential Skills areas that were weak. Employees attend class at the local college for 2.5 hours each week on their own time and course costs are covered by the company.

"The union likes the fact that we have a training course for employees," says the Human Resources Development Leader.

"This is win-win for everyone," he adds, referring to the Essential Skills model. "We now have a standardized way to match skills to jobs and we are developing ways to help employees improve their skills so they can get the job they want."