



Marine Atlantic Inc. is a federal Crown corporation that operates four ferries between Newfoundland and Nova Scotia. Each year, it carries thousands of passengers, 50 per cent of the cargo and 90 per cent of the perishable items destined for Newfoundland. With 1,200 employees based out of three ports, Marine Atlantic Inc. works with six separate unions.

Marine Atlantic
Marine Atlantique

Transporting thousands of passengers and tons of cargo across the Cabot Strait between Nova Scotia and the Island of Newfoundland is serious business. That's why Marine Atlantic Inc. uses Essential Skills in its hiring and selection practices.

"Years ago, the Master and Chief Engineer could move employees into the entry level positions between departments on a vessel without any pre-requirements," explains Michel Gratton, Employee Services Officer with Marine Atlantic Inc. "People with fast food experience all of the sudden found themselves working as mechanics or deckhands."

"The company stopped that practice completely, ensuring that no employee would go into the engine room or the deck department without proper certification and or experience," says Gratton. "Safety is our number one priority. We were the first marine company in Canada to achieve International Safety Management Certification."

The company's new selection practices met high safety standards but created internal barriers to mobility for some employees, who may have had the aptitude to progress in the marine industry and with the company.

"Recognizing the benefits of introducing an internal program that would provide

an opportunity for progression with the company and also assist in meeting operational staffing requirement, a meeting was held with the union to look at opportunities for people in hospitality to move to Deck and Engine," says Gratton.

Marine Atlantic Inc. created a new selection system – one which incorporates Essential Skills.

"The door to employee mobility is now re-opened, where it was closed before."

Employees are pre-screened using TOWES (Test of Workplace Essential Skills) to demonstrate that they have the Essential Skills necessary to develop the required knowledge and challenge the certification exam.

"We chose TOWES because it sets employees up for success," says Gratton. "Employees demonstrate they have the Essential Skills to be able to learn."

If they meet the minimum Essential Skills scores established for the position, employees begin preparation for the certification exam.

The minimum scores were determined by Nova Scotia Community College using Essential Skills profiles created by Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC). Occupational profiles for hundreds of jobs are available online and free of charge on HRSDC's Essential Skills website (http://srv108.services.gc.ca/english/general/home_e.shtml). Based on in-depth research with Canadian workers, the profiles are commonly used by industry and educational institutions to develop curriculum and enhance human resource practices.

The first round of TOWES testing was conducted in 2005 for Engine Room Assistants, an entry level position in the Engineering Department.

"We went through some trials and tribulations. We gave the first group of employees instructions to prepare for TOWES but some people did not take it seriously and they failed," says Gratton, referring to the minimum scores required for the job. "Word got around and now people take it seriously."

If they do not meet the Essential Skills scores necessary to be screened in for a position, employees can re-take TOWES when another employment opportunity arises. Gratton says he often sees an improvement the second time around because employees use tools such as the Measure Up website (<http://measureup.towes.com/>) to prepare, which offers practice exams and skill development modules.

Once they have been screened in with TOWES, employees prepare for the certification exam using a self-directed learning guide created by Marine Atlantic Inc.

"We approached Transport Canada for a list of skill requirements necessary for certification. Working with our Chief Engineers, we created a detailed program for each of the skills," explains Gratton. "Employees have up to 12 months to complete the entire learning guide. If they don't pass the certification exam, they have another opportunity in two months."

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Marine Atlantic Inc. is creating its own Essential Skills training.

"Essential Skills is really relevant to what we do," explains Gratton. "Our Engineers, for instance, have detailed preventative maintenance programs for each piece of machinery they operate. A computer prints detailed charts and instructions, and you have to be able to understand and interpret them correctly – that's document use."

Having tested more than 100 employees, Marine Atlantic has expanded the use of TOWES as a screening tool for other positions.

"Assistant Terminal Manager, for example, is a critical position and there is a high learning curve," says Gratton. "If we hire from inside or outside the company, we want to know these people have the skills to learn."

"Overall, the union is pleased with the idea that the door to employee mobility for entry level positions in Deck and Engine is now re-opened, where it was closed before. We worked together to meet mutual goals."