



Ontario Northland is a provincial Crown corporation formed in the early 1900s to support economic development of the North through rail service. Today, its 1,100 employees provide rail and motor coach services for passengers and freight in Northern Ontario and Quebec, and innovative telecommunications solutions (Internet, phone service, etc.) for residents of Northern Ontario.



Greg Stuart faced a challenge. As Director of Human Resources at Ontario Northland (formerly referred to as Ontario Northland Rail or ONR), he needed to hire more than 100 skilled employees to work in North Bay and Cochrane, Ontario. The company had secured a large contract and it was his job to find the people – primarily electricians and mechanics – to fill the bill.

This was no easy task, considering North Bay and Cochrane are relatively small communities with populations of 54,000 and 5,000 respectively. Stuart knew he would have difficulty finding electricians and mechanics with railway experience.

“A locomotive is like a big electrical generator, so working on railway equipment is different from industrial wiring,” explains Stuart as he describes why he needed electricians and other trades people with railway experience.

“We chose TOWES (Test of Workplace Essential Skills) as a screening tool because we found ourselves hiring people without a railway background. We wanted to ensure they had skills that would transfer into our environment.”

Rather than screen applicants based on past academic achievement, TOWES paints a current picture of Essential Skills proficiencies, which are transferable. The stronger an individual’s Essential Skills

are, the better able he or she is to learn technical skills and apply their knowledge in new situations.

TOWES is the only assessment currently available in Canada that accurately benchmarks a test-taker’s level of three Essential Skills: document use, reading text and numeracy. It uses authentic workplace documents such as schematics and manuals to assess how well the test-taker can handle workplace situations.

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TOWES scores provide valuable information for screening and skill development, particularly when compared against occupational profiles that detail the complexity of the Essential Skills necessary to do the job well.

Essential Skills occupational profiles for hundreds of jobs are available online and free of charge on the Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC)



Essential Skills website (http://srv108.services.gc.ca/english/general/home_e.shtml). They are commonly used by industry and educational institutions to develop curriculum and enhance human resource practices.

Working with Canadore College in North Bay, Ontario, Ontario Northland used the HRSDC Essential Skills profiles to establish a test score threshold. Applicants had the opportunity to take a TOWES test at one of a several locations.

"We're happy with the new hires," says Stuart. "We screened out a lot of people, even though they were skilled trades people." This allowed the company to build on the transferable skills of its newly expanded workforce.

Although the big hiring push was in 2004, the company is still hiring today, and it continues to use TOWES as a screening tool. In fact, Ontario Northland is also using TOWES for apprenticeship selection.

Brian Kelly, President of Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) Local 103, says, "Our Local union fully supports the TOWES testing process. CAW Local 103 and Ontario Northland have included TOWES as part of our process for the hiring of all of our Skilled Trades Apprentices since spring 2005. TOWES is a fair, non discriminatory and accurate assessment of an individual's ability in reading, document usage and numeracy. We believe it is a valuable tool in our assessment process."

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