



Over the last decade, a rapid increase in the use of technology has led to higher workplace skill requirements, particularly among trades' occupations. The Canadian Steel Trade and Employment Congress (CSTEC) became aware of this transformation and identified the need to train workers to help ensure they are able to adapt to these ongoing changes in the workplace.

"Technology for Evraz, and for all steel mills, has changed so much. We could see it across the country from all of the (employer) surveys that we've done - workers' skills haven't kept up to the advancement in technology," says Brian Stettner, who worked at the Evraz mill for 32 years and is now a regional coordinator at CSTEC.

In addition to advancements in technology, changes in workforce demographics, driven by an aging baby-boomer population and coupled with a recent shortage of workers in Saskatchewan, have added to the challenges. This prompted Evraz to evaluate their approach to hiring. "At one point you could hire contractors or post a job and expect a large pool of applicants. Nowadays you either do not have the applicants, or the applicants that apply do not have the required skills. At this point, you cannot hold (unskilled) people back; you really need everybody to advance."

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With federal and provincial funding, CSTEC embarked on a WESS (Workplace Essential Skills Saskatchewan) pilot project with Evraz Regina Steel and the United Steelworkers to respond to this need by supporting the training and up-skilling of workers. Evraz established a Joint Training and Education Committee, including key senior members from both management and the union. The committee consulted with Lou Charlebois of the Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology (SIAST) to determine how to best address the training need. Brian explains, "Lou helped shed the light on why you need to focus first on Essential Skills before you can do anything else. You have to have that basic knowledge before any job specific training will stick."



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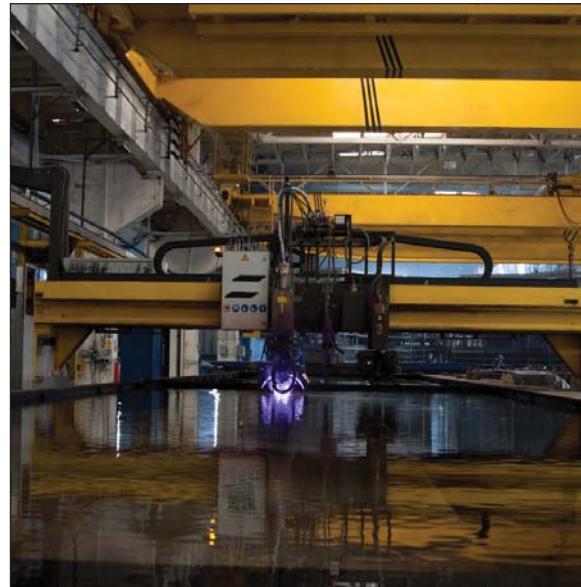
The committee recognized the need to establish benchmarks of the employees' skills prior to developing a training program. This would ensure that curriculum and training would target the requirements of the participants. "When adopting an Essential Skills approach, you need a starting point: Where are the workers' skills currently at? You build on these skills and ensure you fill in the gaps. TOWES was the assessment tool for establishing this base." TOWES (Test of Workplace Essential Skills) accurately measures the three Essential Skills needed for safe and productive employment: reading text, document use and numeracy.

Ten employees, from various positions within Evraz and with a range of educational and training backgrounds, were selected to participate in the pilot project. Employees first wrote TOWES to establish benchmark scores. Committee members also wrote TOWES to demonstrate that the program was relevant to everyone regardless of their background. "All the way through we were trying to create a positive environment and let them know that we weren't trying to do anything that could hurt them." Brian explained. David Miltenberger, Supervisor of Maintenance Steel Operations at Evraz and a committee member, also wanted employees to see the transferability of Essential Skills and their value in their personal daily lives. "We let them know that these are life skills. They are skills that you also use outside of the workplace."

Employees then participated in 28 hours of Essential Skills training over a 5 week period, directed by a SIAST instructor. A custom-designed suite of materials was incorporated with existing curriculum to address the three Essential Skills measured by TOWES and address the skill gaps identified with TOWES results. Employees were given time off for the training and were compensated for classroom time.

After five weeks of training, participants completed a TOWES post-test, with encouraging results. All participants moved up to at least level 3 in each domain, with average gain scores of 26 points (IALS 500-point scale).

The value and importance of investing in training has been realized by both management and participants. Feedback from the employees who participated in the program has been positive as well. Rick Kayter, an employee who participated in phase one of the project, notes "I found that after being in a job for so long, you don't see anything outside of the box and you don't have to. This definitely helped. I tried to put as much as I could into it because I wanted something out of it. I enjoyed it."



Evraz continues to demonstrate commitment to their employees and to the Canadian workforce with plans to offer the program regularly in the future. To enable this process SIAST developed and provided a Train-the-Trainer workshop for Evraz employees to deliver the Essential Skills program internally. Participating Evraz employees are eligible to receive a SIAST completion document. CSTECC is now duplicating the program at Essar Steel in Ontario and the materials are being translated into French for delivery in Québec.

Brian explains, "What was proven here was the fact that we can help employees improve their skills. We can take people from level 2 and move them to level 3 in a 30-hour period of time without a huge investment. At the end of the day, it made people feel better about themselves and about the company that they work for."