



Case Study **March 2005**

Building Essential Skills in the Workplace Teaching the Skills That Enable Employees to Manage Change at Syncrude Canada Ltd.

OVERVIEW

Alberta has the world's largest oilsands deposits, which are located 45 kilometres north of Fort McMurray in a physically challenging environment. Syncrude must use cutting-edge technology to mine the oilsands. It therefore requires a highly skilled, literate and numerate workforce that is capable of lifelong learning and that possesses key essential skills. Moreover, the organizational style at Syncrude is defined by participatory management practices, which involve empowering semi-autonomous work teams to plan and carry out work and take responsibility for resource allocation and end products. Again, in order to work successfully in this manner, employees must possess a sound foundation of essential skills. Syncrude was comparatively quick to come to the realization that its competitive position in the global economy depended critically on

developing the essential skills of its employees. By 1987, Syncrude had recognized that it would have to become a successful training organization in order to meet the challenges of technological change and the

The Education and Learning case studies examine outstanding education and lifelong learning programs and initiatives. This case study addresses best practices in developing essential skills in the workplace.

Name of Program
Effective Reading in Context (ERIC)

Date Established
1988

Skills Developed
Document use
Ability to read text
Numeracy
Personal management

Contact
Hildy Hanson
Coordinator, Workplace
Essential Skills Training
Keyano College
8115 Franklin Ave.
Fort McMurray AB T9H 2H7
Tel.: (780) 791-4858
Fax: (780) 791-4868
hildy.hanson@keyano.ca

information age, and that this entailed becoming a premier learning organization. Syncrude therefore allocates 5 to 7 per cent of its salary budget to employee development and has become a leader in developing its employees' essential skills, thereby earning the respect of education, industry, government and labour.

In 1988, Syncrude, in partnership with Keyano College in Fort McMurray, developed and launched Effective Reading in Context (ERIC), Canada's first workplace literacy program. The program was initially designed to enhance supervisors' key essential skills, such as reading comprehension, writing, and the confidence and ability to deal with organizational change (including the involvement of work teams in projecting and managing budgets), technological advances, issues relating to multi-skilling and all of the skill- and knowledge-related challenges of the information age. In 1988, the company was moving to a team-based management model, and Syncrude wanted to identify team leaders and supervisors, or others with the potential to move into those positions.

ERIC was so successful with supervisory personnel that Syncrude offered it to all of its employees and now makes it available to business, industry, unions, high schools and communities throughout Alberta. ERIC has been adapted for Grade 12 Business English in Fort McMurray's Westwood High School, where students learn to read workplace documents.

Syncrude owns the copyright for ERIC and does not charge a licensing fee. However, Keyano College adapts ERIC for different contexts on a cost-recovery basis with individual clients.

Building on the success of ERIC, Syncrude developed two other essential skills programs. It developed Syncrude Applied Math (SAM) in 1997 and piloted it in 1998, and launched Workplace Writing Fundamentals in 2002. The latter involves a two-hour, one-on-one writing consultation in which employees bring in a writing sample and work with a tutor to clarify the purpose of the piece and develop techniques to help the writer become more effective and efficient. Workplace Writing Fundamentals

often attracts employees whose second language is English. Over the years, the company has delivered numerous computer courses for its employees and has placed special emphasis on developing interpersonal and soft skills, including assertive communication.

Syncrude is aware that a shortage of skilled workers is pending—and it is doing something about it. It has partnered with educational institutions, including Keyano College, with whom it has a business relationship, to prepare its future employees for the specific needs of its industry.

Syncrude recognized that the single greatest challenge it faced in boosting productivity was a lack of essential skills in its current and future workforce. It turned to the local college, Keyano, for help. Keyano delivers many programs designed specifically for business and industry, including customized industry-specific workshops and seminars and heavy industry and trades credit programs. Syncrude's essential skills initiative neatly dovetailed with Keyano's excellent record of preparing students for employment and the College's mission to equip learners for the challenges of the modern workplace and to promote individual and community growth.

OBJECTIVES

- to improve Syncrude employees' workplace-related reading comprehension skills so that they can be effective employees, develop their skills, and be promoted within the organization
- to prepare all Syncrude employees to meet the challenges of technology, new organizational structures and multi-skilling
- to underline the operational benefits of lifelong learning—people who have solid essential skills are more trainable and therefore more valuable
- to continuously develop essential skills to ensure employees have the skills they need, whether in training contexts or in situations requiring leadership, flexibility and innovation
- to challenge other companies to recognize essential skills development as a critical factor in improving workplace training, safety and productivity

TARGET GROUP

- all Syncrude employees

ACTIVITIES

Syncrude enhances its employees' reading comprehension skills through participatory, relevant, adaptable and flexible reading programs. ERIC is customized for different groups based on an appreciation of the organizational structure of the group, a commitment to ensuring relevance and an assessment of the needs and abilities of the group members. Early on in the process, Keyano College meets with employees to determine the make-up of a pilot team.

ERIC is delivered in two principal phases: a curriculum adaptation phase and a pilot workshop phase. In the curriculum adaptation phase, input is solicited from all stakeholders relating to printed workplace materials with which they are very familiar.

In the pilot workshop phase, the skills of all participants are assessed individually in a process that involves determining why individual adult learners are participating in the program and ensuring that ERIC programming helps them to achieve their goals. Those who already have good reading comprehension skills are screened out. Those whose skills could use improvement are invited to take part in 12-, 28- or 40-hour workshops in which several groups of up to eight members participate.

Workshop participants are given samples of printed materials they regularly encounter in their jobs. They are assessed on how well they can generalize, synthesize and analyze. Essentially, they are selecting the main ideas from these materials and developing study strategies they can use for other work-related training or in other areas of their life. Afterwards, program evaluations are reviewed to ensure that participants can transfer the skills they have learned into new areas, including their work tasks.

RESOURCES

The ERIC program sustains itself without any direct government support: Keyano College delivers the program on a cost-recovery basis. Syncrude holds the copyright for ERIC, but Keyano manages, brokers and adapts ERIC materials. Keyano derives approximately \$62,000 per year from ERIC, based on providing essential skills training for 80 to 100 people per year.

It costs \$6,000 to \$12,000 to adapt ERIC for a specific workplace (a one-time-only charge covering four days of on-site work and 10 days at Keyano College to adapt printed materials for inclusion in ERIC, pilot assessments, a pilot workshop and costs of all materials for the pilot workshop). A typical course manual, which is rarely used in the same format twice, is 200 pages long and contains readings and printed materials that employees encounter on the job. Hence, instructor preparation for essential skills training is very labour intensive.

Other costs to Syncrude include travel for prospective students. Keyano's costs include staff time for individual assessments. One-on-one assessments take two to three hours and cost between \$150 and \$225 each. The College charges approximately \$100 per instructional hour to deliver its workshops (thus, a 12-hour workshop costs \$1,200).

Courses are delivered at Keyano College. Essential skills training at Syncrude is done on shared company and personal time. Participation is voluntary and confidential. Syncrude gives its regular "9 to 5" employees release time to attend classes. In the case of shift workers (the company employs workers in several different shifts), Syncrude pays for release time for the training days they do not already have off.

INNOVATIONS

ERIC operates with an adult learning philosophy that recognizes the experience that adult learners bring to the table, tailoring reading or numeracy programs to their workplace experience and to the written materials they encounter in the workplace. Instruction is delivered in a college setting, and employees participate in an orientation session to make them feel at home in what for some is an uncomfortable or unfamiliar environment. Participation in ERIC workshops is both voluntary and confidential, which somewhat accounts for ERIC's success in imparting essential skills since its inception over a decade ago.

ERIC instructors recreate specific workplace contexts because instructors are at the worksite and adapt curricula and learning resources from the written materials that employees encounter every day in their jobs. This allows participants to feel immediately comfortable with what they are learning and to apply what they

learn directly to the workplace. ERIC uses participatory teaching methods, for example, having participants make presentations during workshops.

ERIC sets reading skills development in context for workers. ERIC is not just another textbook off the shelf; it deliberately links reading to health and safety in the workplace. When workers spend their time in the program developing and strengthening their flexibility, focus, efficient recall and reading habits in relation to situations where workplace reading is essential to safe work practices, workers become more safety conscious and more productive. ERIC enables workers to transform effective reading *habits* from their life to date into effective reading *choices* in the workplace. Workers are taught to stay in the moment when they read workplace documents, especially those related to safety.

Adults do not want to be told they are reading at a Grade 9 level; they need to start where they are and move forward to their workplace reading goal. Rather than focusing on assessing employees' skills, ERIC seeks to develop them.

CHALLENGES

Challenges specific to encouraging the use of ERIC outside Syncrude include a reluctance to see value in developing employees' essential skills: "If employees can already read, why stigmatize them and our organization by buying into a literacy program?" As business begins to see ERIC as offering upper-level reading training and providing employees with opportunities to refine their reading skills, improve their workplace safety records and enhance their personal confidence, buy-in to ERIC increases.

Employers need to select a champion within their organizations to promote workplace literacy and therefore the development of essential skills. Employees need not only to have these skills but to maintain them as well in order to be able to take on increasing levels of ownership and responsibility in the workplace. ERIC is a strategic investment in the long-term development of its employees.

LESSONS LEARNED/KEYS TO SUCCESS

- having a thorough understanding of each workplace and the needs of its employees
- sensitively adapting audience-specific materials and resources into a curriculum
- delivering customized workshops based on stakeholder input
- ensuring business is prepared to accommodate workshop schedules
- having manageable class sizes?10 or fewer is ideal; 24 is too many and rushes individuals who need more personalized attention
- having workplace champions everywhere in an organization
- diplomatically positioning ERIC for supervisors
- presenting a real value proposition to supervisors to justify providing employees with release time? ERIC is not just about reading, which an employee can do; it is about making the worker more effective on the job
- advertising ERIC as "Safety and Reading in the Workplace," rather than "Improving Your Skills and Abilities," which is derogatory
- ensuring teaching materials are relevant to learners in their jobs
- having dedicated instructors

BENEFITS

FOR EMPLOYEES

- perform more competently, confidently and safely on the job; safety, for example, is typically related to employees' ability to follow written procedures to the letter governing the operation and maintenance of equipment
- experience personal growth and enhanced self-esteem; their improved essential skills carry over into other areas of their life and can improve family communications and facilitate community involvement
- take ownership of change management by actively keeping up with the changes wrought by new technologies
- become interested in furthering their own education and take a more active role in their children's education and learning
- find, select, organize and transmit information more effectively

- improve their decision-making abilities
- execute instructions more efficiently
- are more willing to take on new tasks
- improve their writing skills

FOR INDUSTRY

- benefits from employees' enhanced capability and capacity; employees are more flexible, better able to transfer their skills from situation to situation and better able to adapt to a continuously changing workplace
- gains a more effective workforce; workers are more efficient and make better and faster decisions
- profits from a more motivated and generically skilled workforce; employees are willing and able to take on new tasks more readily
- gains a safer workforce; workers are able to assess and interpret information accurately and quickly

FOR EDUCATORS

- gain a foothold in business as a result of ERIC partnerships and are able to enhance essential skills in the family as well as in the workplace by heightening employee awareness of the importance of developing essential skills at home, school or work

OUTCOMES

- Since ERIC's inception, more than 1,500 people have participated (out of a workforce of approximately 5,000 employees).
- Aboriginal employees represent 13 per cent of the participants in ERIC (a figure equivalent to their representation in the workforce).
- Delivering ERIC and SAM in pre-employment programs at Keyano College has enhanced students' ability to pass the Test of Workplace Essential Skills (TOWES), which both Syncrude and Suncor use as a pre-employment screening tool.
- Syncrude employees who failed their apprenticeship exams passed their tests after taking ERIC and SAM.
- ERIC participants have moved up to team leader and supervisor positions within Syncrude.
- When it was launched in 1988, ERIC was the first program of its kind. Since that time, the project has expanded greatly—both in content and in reach.

- When ERIC was first offered in 1988, 40-hour workshops were the norm; now participating employees, including engineers, enroll in 28- or 12-hour workshops. Engineers benefit from the workshops because they are used to reading technical documents, but as they move into management, they find they need to develop new reading strategies (for example, not reading every single word, but skimming for main messages).
- The Syncrude Essential Skills training program has grown from one reading workshop (ERIC) to include a math (SAM) and a writing (WWF) component.
- Initially, just one instructor/program manager delivered ERIC, but now there are five instructors in addition to the program manager.
- In 1994, Syncrude won the Canada Post Flight for Freedom Corporate Award for ERIC.
- Syncrude began piloting a workplace numeracy program in 1997 to enhance the business literacy of its employees.
- Syncrude and Keyano also worked with the Construction Owners Association of Alberta (120,000 members) to adapt and deliver ERIC and SAM to provide essential skills training on job sites.
- Over the past 16 years, six large industry partners and nine educational partners have been involved in the delivery of ERIC, which has been successfully adapted to a variety of settings: industry, construction, union and high school. For example, ERIC is integrated into the Grade 12 Business English curriculum at Westwood High School in Fort McMurray.

IMPACTS

- Worker productivity has increased.
- Work-related incidents have decreased.
- ERIC's range of participants has broadened. It was new supervisors who signed up in 1988, but now frontline workers, operators, tradespeople, administrators and engineers do, too. The most recent participants include new hires from other countries, including China, South Africa and Venezuela.
- Participation is voluntary and confidential, but employees are proud of their accomplishments and act as ambassadors for the program.

- ERIC has been adapted successfully for the Construction Owners Association of Alberta, Husky Oil, Alberta Power, the Canadian Manufacturers and Exporters Association of Canada (Manitoba Division), the Communications and Energy Paperworkers Union (Local 707), and for the Northern Lights Regional Health Centre.
- ERIC has also been used with great success in an Aboriginal pre-trades program at Keyano College, as well as in the Shapotowak program (a Cree word which means *opening* or *clearing*) to help Aboriginal workers upgrade their essential skills and find more meaningful employment.

About the Education and Learning Case Studies

The Education and Learning case studies examine outstanding education and learning programs and initiatives. The case studies provide in-depth analysis of the methods used to develop, assess, implement and deliver education and lifelong learning in schools, colleges, universities, workplaces and communities. They focus on goals, activities, resource requirements, achievements and outcomes, benefits, innovations, and keys to success and challenges.

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by *Kurtis Kitagawa*

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255 Smyth Road, Ottawa ON K1H 8M7 Canada
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The Conference Board, Inc. 845 Third Avenue, New York, N.Y., 10022-6679 U.S.A. Tel. (212) 759-0900 • Fax (212) 980-7014 • www.conference-board.org
The Conference Board Europe Chaussée de La Hulpe 130, Box 11, B-1000 Brussels, Belgium Tel. +32 2 675 54 05 • Fax +32 2 675 03 95
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