

Educating The New Canadian: the Worker of the Future

By the end of the decade, immigration will account for all net labour force growth in Canada. * A profile of these immigrants shows that only 50% to 60% speak fluent English or French. **

How will competency in health and safety matters be affected by this influx of workers whose experience and languages are so different from those of Canadian-born workers?

The federal government is eager to find the answer to this question for the Canadian workplace. In fact, the government is so concerned about this issue that it developed a comprehensive report outlining challenges and plans for our future labour market. Canada's Innovation Strategy (www.innovationstrategy.ca) was released on February 14, 2002. The federal targets and priorities set out in the report are intended to help Canada develop the most skilled and talented labour force in the world and to help immigrants achieve their full potential in the Canadian labour market.

Canada's Innovation Strategy is presented in two papers: *Knowledge Matters: Skills and Learning for Canadians* and *How to Communicate with a Changing, Multilingual Workforce* (<http://www.hrdc-drhc.gc.ca/stratpol/sl-ca/doc/knowledge.pdf>). The first report looks at what we can do to strengthen skills and learning, to develop people's talent and to provide the opportunity for all to contribute to and benefit from the new economy. It also offers suggestions for establishing required learning infrastructures, including formal post-secondary education resources, private institutes, apprenticeship programs and the efforts of employers and unions.

The second report has a message for those of us working in the education sector. The diversity of our changing, multilingual workforce will require innovative, proactive ways of addressing health and safety.

✓ Cross-language instruction will need to play a more important role. Occupational Health and Safety legislation requires all workplace parties to know their responsibilities. While many enforcement

agencies provide information in Canada's two official languages, some government agencies, such as the Ontario Workplace Safety and Insurance Board, are now providing information in numerous languages.

✓ Display of international signage is not sufficient to demonstrate reasonable communication efforts. In order to establish proof of due diligence, organizations will need to adopt more proactive forms of training, such as visual

Knowledge Matters: Skills and Learning for Canadians

How to Communicate with a Changing, Multilingual Workforce

based training and multi-lingual courses/workshops. In addition, retaining skilled workers will require training in appropriate languages at appropriate levels of comprehension, along with offering upgrade options to ensure competency. Examples of this could include close caption on videos in appropriate languages; visual/hands on training; training in English while using participants' manuals in the required language (as ESAO currently does in French).

✓ All organizations will have to recognize and address language barriers. While there will be generic safety programs in multiple languages, they may not focus on specific workplace concerns – an essential component of a healthy and safe workplace.

Mary Smith, a consultant with Dudley Enterprise Inc., which focuses on environmental, construction and occupational health and safety, suggests the following step-by-step approach to begin developing a plan to educate immigrant workers.

1. Identify training needs for skills and for legislated requirements
2. Determine the linguistic makeup of your workforce
3. Identify workers' first language, including reading and writing capabilities
4. Determine the language needs of the majority of your workforce
5. Devise a training program that meets these language requirements
6. Ensure the program is performance-based and includes written and oral quizzes.

Along with assuring the health and safety of our workers, there is another incentive for adopting creative approaches to training: reduced risk for employers. Cautions Mary Smith, "if workers don't understand what the employer is trying to teach and they don't comprehend labels, your liability as an employer will grow substantially."

New Canadians require a new approach to health and safety and training. Time to put on our thinking caps and get creative.

For more information about educating the new Canadian worker, contact esao@esao.on.ca

* *Immigration, Labour Force and the Age Structure of the Population*, Denton, Feaver & Spender, Applied Research Branch, Human Resources Development Canada, 1999

** Volume 2, Number 1 (Winter 1995-96), *The Importance of Language to Immigrants' Labour Market Outcomes*, Applied Research Branch, Human Resources Development Canada, Kimberley Boyuk