



MW Canada and the



Textiles
Human
Resources
Council

Conseil des
ressources humaines
de l'industrie
du textile

Textiles Human Resources Council

Developing a Learning Culture in Today's Technology-Driven Primary Textile Industry

Industry Challenges

Today's textile manufacturers face the unprecedented speed of change and a number of pressing challenges. With rapidly accelerating technology, an aging workforce, intense international competition, rising energy prices and a high Canadian dollar, it is increasingly vital that the textile sector build on its inherent strengths and maximize potential to capture market share and maintain a competitive advantage.

Today's capital-intensive industry shipped \$6.1 billion worth of fibres, yarns, fabrics and textile articles (excluding clothing) to customers in more than 150 industries in North America and abroad. The industry, which employs roughly 48,000 Canadians, recognizes the important role that a highly-skilled workforce plays in ensuring that its technology – which is widely available around the world – is working better for them than it is for their competitors. This relies, for the most part, on a skilled and adaptable workforce.



Developing a Workplace Learning Culture

The Canadian textile industry has begun to develop a workplace learning culture that supports continuous learning opportunities in the workplace. More and more, workplace training is filling a strategic role to help position companies to deal with current and future challenges, ensuring workforce skills levels support business objectives. This may include manufacturing new products, entering new or niche markets, or reducing costs by cutting waste and increasing personal productivity. At the same time, workers benefit from opportunities to assess their skills and competencies, develop personalized, contextual learning plans that support work-related and personal training goals, and ensure they are well-positioned to take on new roles in a changing industrial sector.



An Industry-wide Learning Initiative

With partial funding support from the Government of Canada's Sector Council Program and in partnership with 32 textile manufacturing workplaces, MW Canada among them, the Council has overseen the development and implementation of fully-supported, state-of-the-art *Skills and Learning Sites*.

The *Skills and Learning Sites* initiative was conceived to provide ready access to flexible, cost-effective skills development programs on the shop floor. The *Sites* bring learning opportunities right into the workplace, providing access to hundreds of skills development programs from a variety of sources. The *Sites* also support mentoring and personal development, as well as providing opportunities for networks within and among textile companies. Customized web-based *Skills and Learning Portals* have also been developed for each *Site*, giving employees access to learning content, internal company communications and industry-wide information.



Company Partners

MW Canada was among the textile companies that has wholeheartedly embraced the concept behind the *Skills and Learning Sites* initiative.

Combining innovative design and practical applications with forty years of experience in textiles, MW Canada specializes in window coverings, cubicle fabrics and niche market specialty items. Established in 1963 and originally located in Montreal, MW Canada consolidated its operations in Cambridge, Ontario in 1976.

Until the last couple of years, MW Canada had never had dedicated human resources personnel. However, looking ahead, the company has made substantial commitments to developing a workplace learning culture. In addition to dedicated HR personnel, the company will be conducting detailed training needs analyses with individual employees, encouraging employees to complete their GED and providing all employees with two hours of paid training per month.

At MW Canada, the decision to take part in the *Skills and Learning Sites* project was a reaction to the unprecedented change occurring in the Canadian textile industry. With fundamental market shifts underway, senior management recognized the critical role that workplace training was going to play in ensuring that the company was prepared for the future.



Future Directions

While the *Sites* focus on a blended learning solution, combining the advantages of eLearning with coaching and mentoring, they also provide opportunities for collaborative learning through knowledge networks. *Sites* in 32 textile workplaces are linked, giving occupational groups the chance to problem-solve, share expertise and collaborate – encouraging partnerships within workplaces and between companies. By creating a workspace geared both to personal development and collaborative learning, there is extensive opportunity for employees in a wide variety of occupations to share valuable tacit knowledge, establish mentoring relationships and undertake group instruction on critical ongoing issues.



This kind of demand-driven training is creating workplace champions and providing individuals with a sense of accomplishment, creating a more engaged workforce. The *Sites* personalize access down to individual employees. More than ever before, needs assessments take into account individuals, training plans are based on a greater sample size and content is customizable down to the individual level.

We expect that the *Sites* initiative will have a number of long-term implications for the industry. While the Council has been very successful with past initiatives in terms of increasing the incidence of human resources planning and skills development program use at the company level, the results of the *Sites* promise greater depth in terms of reaching individuals. This is especially the case for those on the shop floor who have traditionally had limited access to flexible, cost-effective skills development programs.

