

Point of View

September 2005

Knowledge and Creativity: Results Benefit All

By Wayne Hanley



The textile sector faces many challenges, from low-cost competition to changing world markets. I firmly believe that it is how we confront these challenges that will determine the stability, prosperity and security of our future.

For many years now, UFCW Local 175 has been using today's "knowledge-based society" to our members' advantage. In an age of accessible information and multiple communication options, we had hoped to create the unprecedented capacity to develop knowledge and creativity, while providing our members with all the benefits of lifelong learning.

Given that we have 50,000 members in 21 sectors of the economy, in the early 1990s, Local 175 made the strategic decision to concentrate on foundation skills literacy, numeracy and English as a second language. As we started to reach our targets in these areas, we expanded into computer skills training and other general interest programs.

In the last few years, we have had great success with technical literacy training. Even with the greatest writing and reading skills, today's economy requires workers to use computers and new communication systems. We believe that computer skills allow our members to be full participants in society, at work, in their communities and for their own personal development.

The success of these programs led to the development and implementation of our Mobile Computer Lab program. The two computer labs visit members on-location for week-long classes. Each is equipped with 17 laptops and are fully functional for Internet activities.

Not only do the Mobile Computer Labs introduce basic computer skills, but they also set the stage for online delivery of advanced skills programs. Looking ahead, we hope to deliver some of the programs created through the Textiles Human Resources Council this way, as well as other programs specific to the industries in which our members work.

All of our successes have been extremely rewarding. Our programs are reaching unprecedented numbers and the results have been impressive. Our completion rates are much higher than studies would have you believe is the norm for adult education, showing an increased appetite for lifelong learning among today's employees. The trick seems to be in ensuring programs are relevant to on-the-job needs or personal development goals.

Despite our successes, there is much more to do. This is where the cooperation of union and industry becomes so important. Recently, we began working with Firestone Textiles in Woodstock, Ontario, to implement a Skills and Learning Site, with the assistance of the Textiles Human Resources Council.

This kind of multiple-stakeholder partnership is unlike any other. UFCW Local 175 has the opportunity to share its expertise and make programs available to its members onsite, everyday. As we seek new ways to support lifelong learning, this model moves us ever closer to the ongoing partnership and cooperation required to overcome the challenges we face, today and in the future.

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