

# CHAMBER CHATTER

## Invest for Success: Cost-Effective Training Solutions for SMEs

by Julianne Philpott

In our last article entitled, “Investing in Staff for Long-Term Success,” the Chamber outlined the importance of attracting and retaining highly educated and skilled employees. We highlighted the importance of investing in staff to ensure future organizational preparedness and success, and touched lightly on the financial assistance programs and opportunities that are available for students, apprentices, employees and employers in the province and Labrador region.

Companies driving the major developments in Labrador’s resource sector have been directly challenging the capabilities of the regional business communities located in close proximity to each development itself. Without going into much detail surrounding the Lower Churchill Hydroelectric Generation Project, and reiterating a key point made by Nalcor Energy surrounding the need for business readiness upon the potential construction phase of the project, the company stated that considerations should be made in relation to “price, quality, technical sustainability, service and delivery.” As with other developments taking place in the iron ore mining industry in Labrador West, the message is clear that in order to reap the benefits of mega-projects in the region, and to be considered a partner in any stage of development, companies must address any shortcomings related to the five considerations listed above.

A business can look at this statement in a number of ways, but its underlying meaning is evident: invest in the critical components of your business that will ensure its sustainability and rise to the top of the industry food chain.

“Substantial employment opportunities will arise due to major developments taking place in Labrador,” says Brian Fowlow, executive director of the Labrador North Chamber of Commerce (LNCC). “Investing in staff really means investing in your business’ productivity and overall long-term sustainability.”

When considering components of a business in which to make key investments, human resource capabilities must always take precedence. As stated in last month’s article, many programs are available to financially assist organizations in the effort to attract and retain skilled workers.

Over the last few years, the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador has committed to providing major investments to human resources. On a so-called “larger-scale,” divisions such as the province’s Department of Business have implemented programs such as the Business Development Fund and the Oil and Gas Manufacturing and Services Export Development Fund (OGEDF) which are designed to support large-scale, strategic investments in business ventures, and assist in the attraction of business to the province through providing loans and other investments.

To coincide with these larger investments on the new business opportunities side, other divisions including the Department of Education have implemented financial assistance programs such as the Targeted Wage Subsidy program and other training opportunities including the Apprenticeship Incentive Grant (AIG). Particularly useful given today's increased need of trained apprentices, the AIG is available to registered apprentices upon the completion of their first or second year, or level of apprenticeship in one of the Red Seal trades, and is a taxable cash grant of \$1,000 per year.

Briefly touched upon during last month's article, the Department of Human Resources, Labour and Employment (HRLE) has also implemented a Graduate Employment Program which aims to assist recent post-secondary graduates secure valuable work experience in their chosen field of study. The subsidy covers a period of 52 weeks, and the employer may also be eligible for a \$500 training allowance to offset costs and aid employers in the recruitment and retention of staff.

Many other regional training opportunities also exist. For example, initially announced in 2010, the provincial and federal governments and its partners Nunatsiavut Government, Innu Nation, Labrador Metis Nation and Nalcor Energy – Lower Churchill Project, will invest \$30 million through the Labrador Aboriginal Training Partnership (LATP) to provide Aboriginal people in Labrador employment opportunities created through resource development throughout the region. Initiatives under this program include a Training-To-Employment Plan and certification and job placement support.

During the announcement, Nunatsiavut's Education and Economic Development Minister Darryl Shiwak said: "It's good to see efforts are being made to train individuals and provide them with employment experience before major economic development projects actually start" (*February 11, 2010*).

The College of the North Atlantic (CNA) is also striving to prepare students for regional employment upon graduation. The CNA offers many industrial trades programs at the Happy Valley-Goose Bay Campus such as electrical, engineering, welding, natural resources, heavy equipment and also an Aboriginal Bridging program which aims to "bridge the educational gaps" in the lives of Aboriginal learners, assisting them to succeed in college programs.

There are undoubtedly hundreds of programs available to assist both employees and employers prepare for successful and sustainable careers. Organizations must adapt quickly to today's changing business trends, even if it means adapting to the needs of today's tech-savvy professionals by offering dozens of free courses outside of the classroom and onto the World Wide Web.

Over the next two years, the Newfoundland and Labrador Association of Technology Industries (NATI) and Bluedrop Performance Learning is offering free online training to

employers and employees through SmartForce NL, an initiative implemented by the Department of Human Resources, Labour and Employment (HRLE).

With an investment of \$1.7M, SmartForce NL is a pilot project that was created to develop and deliver free human resources training to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) that assist with career development and advancement. Newfoundland and Labrador is the first province to use SmartForce.

"I think this initiative is a global first-- and we are already negotiating agreements with other provinces and states," says Emad Rizkalla, president and CEO of Bluedrop Performance Learning. "I am very proud that Newfoundland and Labrador could lead the way in providing meaningful training to employees, small firms and not-for-profits. Online learning is growing exponentially, and through SmartForceNL, someone in Mary's Harbour now has access to the same workplace training as someone in Boston or London. That is powerful!"

Employees can build a Life Long Learning Record that allows them to complete up to 10,000 free courses, build their own courses to customize the program, set up their own accounts, monitor the progress of employees and track results.

A pilot project developed right here in the province, CoursePark currently offers 15 hours of custom free online training to individuals, governments, not-for-profits and other provincial corporations that would otherwise cost \$30 - \$70 per course. Also, very soon the initiative will be adding 15 additional courses to its roster that will help SMEs and not-for-profits improve their human resource and management capabilities, as well as improve their online presence with social media sites such as Facebook and LinkedIn.

"So often training courses are offered in locations such as St. John's, and it sometimes makes it very difficult for businesses to travel outside of Labrador," says Fowlow. "Through initiatives such as Smartforce NL, those in rural areas or who are located far from major city centres have the ability to complete free first-rate online courses that are relevant to their business."

*For more information on any of the initiatives listed above, please visit [www.latp.ca](http://www.latp.ca), [www.cna.nl.ca](http://www.cna.nl.ca), [www.gov.nl.ca](http://www.gov.nl.ca), or [www.coursepark.com/nl](http://www.coursepark.com/nl). To contact the LNCC, please call (709) 896-8787 or email [admin@chamberlabrador.com](mailto:admin@chamberlabrador.com).*