

ACR Aboriginal Programs Project Program Template

Program Area:	2.0	Workforce Development
Sub Program:	2.1	Supporting Educational Opportunities
Template:	2.1.4	Workplace Literacy and Learning Program
Sponsor(s):	<i>BHP Billiton Limited</i>	

1. Objective

To improve the literacy of employees with very low literacy levels, using this as a stepping stone to increasing job skills and opportunities.

2. Description

BHP Billiton Diamonds Inc. is committed to building a sustainable Aboriginal and Northern workforce. Through signed agreements with the Government of the Northwest Territories, the North Slave Métis Alliance, the Inuit of Kugluktuk, the Tli Cho Government, the Yellowknives Dene First Nation and the Lutsel K'e Dene Council, the company has committed to Aboriginal hiring preferences.

The population of the NWT is 42,000, of whom 21,000 are Aboriginal. Almost 30 per cent of the Aboriginals in the small communities that form the potential workforce have less than a Grade 9 education. BHP Billiton initially did not have a minimum education requirement for entry-level positions. As a result, low literacy levels are common in the entry level positions. As the mine expands, the company plans to continue to hire employees based on aptitude as opposed to education level for entry-level positions.

The Workplace Learning Program ranges from pre-literate to pre-apprenticeship levels. The program includes individual literacy assessment and one-on-one and group instruction; computer-based literacy training is also used. The program content is designed in collaboration with team leaders to ensure lessons are relevant to the worker's job duties. Workplace documents are used in the program design. Both immediate and long-term needs of employees are considered.

A major impetus for this program was safety, which is the main priority in the planning and execution of all activities. Improving the literacy skills of the employees was imperative to keep them safe.

Over 80 employees are currently taking part in the program. All employees are invited to participate. The company has employees from all over the NWT as well as Kugluktuk in Nunavut.

3. Implementation

Some of the key elements for implementation and management of this program are:

- The company allows significant segments of this training to take place during normal work hours. Over the long term, employees and their families need to see the benefits both in the workplace and at home of increased literacy. Hopefully this will encourage children to stay in school.
- While literacy is an issue that should be dealt with by government, the company has had to take this issue on by itself to make the program happen.
- Most established adult basic education programs target only higher-level learners and demand regular attendance, both of which are barriers for most of our employees. The type of workplace literacy program offered by the company is a better way to improve literacy.
- This program is part of a culture of acceptance and support for non-literate workers. Other techniques used by the company to support non-literate employees include having them work with a "buddy" and having teachers work alongside the worker in the mine.

4. Timeframe for Results

The program started in January 2001. It will continue as long as a need exists. However, the levels of education are increasing rapidly in the local communities, and with time this program will evolve and eventually may not be needed.

5. Measurable Criteria

These include:

- Employee participation in the program (80 currently participating)
- Progression to other job levels and levels of education
- Safety records

6. Budget

This program is wholly subsidized by BHP Billiton Diamonds Inc. Estimated program start-up costs were \$750,000. Ongoing costs average \$400,000 annually. This does not take into consideration lost production time while workers attend the program. There was a contribution by the Government of the Northwest Territories Department of Education of approximately \$120,000 to help bring on an instructor to work with people preparing for apprenticeship training and those in apprenticeship programs.

7. Partners and Sponsors

Collaboration with industry groups such as the Workers' Compensation Board, Diavik Diamond Mines Inc., Government of the Northwest Territories, and educational providers was important in the development and implementation of this program. The company also worked with the NWT Literacy Council to get advice in the developmental stages. Bow Valley College in Calgary and Skillplan in British Columbia were contracted to assist in test development and essential skills identification.

8. Experience with the Program

The program is proving successful and valuable to the individuals and to the company. Some of the benefits include:

- **An increased awareness of the importance of education.** Employees are now promoting the importance of an education back in their communities. Workers talk about how their wives and children help them with reading and writing while they are home. One worker said that he had never written a story or letter before.
- **Improved self esteem.** Workers want lessons on calculating interest for purchases, access to information and maps for planning vacations, assistance with writing down their life stories and family history, and reviewing band council meeting minutes so they have a better understanding of community events. One of the engineering technicians noticed an improvement with one worker, saying: "He has been doing very well on WENCO (on-board computer system in heavy equipment). His data for the 11th of June is perfect and his log sheet is easier to read than most of the operators."
- **Increased motivation to learn and progress.** Many of our Aboriginal employees get discouraged watching co-workers move through progression plans to earn higher wages and take on more challenging positions. They are held back because they cannot read and write. As they gain successes in the program, employees become more motivated to participate. They can see that, one day, they too will be able to take part in our progression plans and develop a career path. One worker attends the morning class for two hours, works his remaining 10-hour shift, and returns after dinner to work at the computer on his own time for another two hours. One instructor reported: "I have been observing a low-level worker who is very reluctant to write anything. He doesn't know the alphabet letters. He holds the pen so tightly, making circular motions for a long time before forming a letter. He was pressing so hard that he was leaving imprints on the pages underneath. After two months, he started writing more freely. He has been practicing the alphabet letters and sight words. He recently wrote out his children's names so he could send them birthday cards."
- **An increased awareness of safety.** A major impetus for this program was the first Core Guiding Principle: Safety is the #1 priority in the planning and execution of all activities. Teaching employees to read was imperative to keep them safe. Workers can now read road signs and participate in PASS meetings. One team leader noted that a member of his team participated in a PASS meeting for the first time in over a year. After practicing phrases and scenarios in class, he had the confidence to contribute. After a lesson on the importance of log books and referencing vehicle walk-around checks to the Mines Health and Safety Act, another employee's supervisor said that the worker's safety attitude had improved and he was now taking time to do a proper walk-around check prior to using his truck.
- **A close working relationship with local community adult educators.** This relationship has developed since the start of the program and ensures that workers have support when they return from the mine site to their home community.
- **Improved communication skills.** This allows the individual to work more closely with his team, relay problems with machinery, participate in crew meetings, and understand instruction more clearly.

9. General Applicability

This program provides a valuable model for integrating literacy and learning with work experience for companies with potential employees who cannot meet the minimum requirements for trades or employment.

10. Additional Information or Support

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