

DAWN project has an impact

Posted 4 months ago

By Ashleigh Viveiros

The numbers by themselves are impressive enough: over \$460,000 in government grants distributed to 19 regional companies to help with the skills training of 160 immigrant workers over a two year period.

But it's the human faces of the Determining and Assessing Workplace Needs (DAWN) project that had the biggest impact on those in attendance at a wrap-up luncheon held in Winkler Jan. 14.

Faces like that of Daniel Kauenhofen, an employee at Lode King Industries in Winkler, who honed his English-language skills thanks to DAWN-sponsored training.

When he came to Canada from Mexico a few years ago, communicating in English was a struggle for the German-speaking Kauenhofen.

"I knew some English ... but the first few years here, it was really hard," he said. "You never feel fully comfortable (talking to people)."

Once his company got involved with DAWN - which provided employers with funding to train immigrant employees in everything from basic skills (reading, writing, numeracy, etc.) to specialized skills such as project management, computer usage, blueprint reading, and even robotics, to name just a few - Kauenhofen began taking courses to help him succeed both as an employee and as a new Canadian.

"It was very helpful for me. I can now communicate with co-workers that don't speak German, and I can now understand the work orders better because I can read English better," he said.

His new skills have also made him a better communicator off the job, as well, Kauenhofen said.

Whether it's answering the phone at home, communicating with his family physician, or simply reading a book in English to his children, he's now able to do so with considerably more ease.

"I am more confident, now, thanks to DAWN," he said.

Meanwhile, for participant, Geoffrey William, DAWN meant a chance to continue his education.

Education is a precious commodity in his home country of Tanzania, East Africa, said William, who works as a production supervisor with the Jodale Perry Corporation in Morden.

Having the opportunity to take work-related, sponsored courses these last few years has been a great gift, he said.

"I was excited, ecstatic," William said, noting he took courses in project management, Microsoft Office use, and welding supervision, all of which have increased his productivity on the job.

"I never had any knowledge about Microsoft (Excel) before ... now I use it a lot at work every day," he said, noting the welding course helped him better understand the technical terms of the trade, while the management course made him a better supervisor, overall.

PROJECT EXCEEDED EXPECTATIONS

These and other stories presented at last week's luncheon served to show the real impact DAWN has had in the region over the last few years, said project co-ordinator Carol Gavard.

"It was even more than I had hoped for," she said. "We had hoped to show businesses that training is good for business, but what I think we really confirmed here today is it was great for people, too.

"A lot of people have been given opportunities that they might not have had otherwise," Gavard said.

The whole point of DAWN - which was funded by the federal government, and run by the Winkler and District Chamber of Commerce - was to help the Pembina Valley's growing number of immigrant employees succeed in the Canadian workforce, Gavard said.

Many come to Canada with the hands-on skills they need, but struggle to communicate in a second-language and to adjust to a new workplace culture, she said.

"We were identifying the gaps, and providing the training needed to fill them," Gavard said. "Training results in more capable and efficient employees, which, in turn, results in increased production ... (and) increased profits."

When it was launched in 2007, DAWN's goal was to provide training opportunities to at least 80 immigrant employees throughout the region over its two-year run.

They reached twice that number, at companies in Winkler, Morden, Altona, Plum Coulee, and Sperling, Gavard said.

Many non-immigrant employees were impacted, as well, she noted, when companies were able to bring in trainers through DAWN for a handful of immigrant employees, and have other workers sit in on the lessons, too.

Jennifer Wood, human resources manager with Lode King, said the DAWN training really made a difference in the lives of the several Lode King employees involved with the program.

"There was a really big buy-in for the employees; they were really proud to be chosen for the program," she said. "They got a lot out of it ... and, with them feeling more confident, they were more productive, as well."

"It's a really good feeling when you can help someone feel better about themselves, about their abilities," Wood said.

The DAWN project may be over, but Gavard is convinced its effects will continue to be felt throughout the region.

"I think we got the message out," she said of the importance of both employers and employees recognizing the necessity of ongoing training in the workforce. "We got people engaged in training."

Copyright © 2010 Winkler Times