



Environmental Scan of the Alberta Business Community

Analysis of Findings from One-on-One Interviews Phase 2

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The findings in this report provide a summary of the opinions expressed by participants in one-on-one qualitative interviews. Qualitative research utilizes small, moderator-led discussions that are exploratory in nature. One-on-one interviews allow researchers the flexibility to uncover and examine issues or subjects as they arise in the collection process. Within the rigor of established qualitative research parameters, moderators have the flexibility to explore the range of topics that exist within the marketplace. Due to the limited number of respondents, results cannot be generalized or quantified, but rather are to be considered in a qualitative frame of reference.

1. BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

1.1 Background and Research Objectives

In November 2008, Leger Marketing was contracted by the Centre for Family Literacy to conduct an environmental scan of the Alberta business community, as part of their two-year Workplace Family Literacy Project.

The scan was required to explore employers' current awareness level and interest in directly supporting the literacy development of employees. The findings will be used by the Centre to develop a plan through which literacy organizations, together with businesses would implement a range of family literacy programs in the workplace.

The specific objectives of the research were to:

- Explore the current awareness level and interest of employers in being directly involved in supporting the literacy development of employees
- Ascertain the current levels of awareness of the impact of literacy on the economy;
- Determine the types of workplace literacy programs being used; and
- Understand the types of partnerships that exist between the business sector and literacy organizations.

This report presents the findings of qualitative (one-on-one interviews) research conducted with members of the Alberta business community. Other members of the Alberta business community were consulted through online and telephone surveys; findings from these surveys are presented in a separate report.

1.2 Methodology

A total of ten (10) one-on-one interviews were conducted with Alberta employers between June 8th and July 28th. Participants were recruited according to their level of involvement with workplace literacy or essential skills programs as identified in Phase 1 and included respondents who expressed an interest in participating in further research upon completion of the Phase 1 questionnaire.

Each interview consisted of one participant and one interviewer, and interview participants were asked to review an informational document and a package containing literature from the Centre for Family Literacy prior to the interview.

Those interviewed included representatives from:

- For-profit (private sector) and not-for-profit organizations;
- Organizations with a range of 100 to more than 500 employees; and
- Industries such as construction, financial services, hospitality, manufacturing, transportation, utilities, and health and social services.

Interview participants were selected for their position within their organization, and included safety coordinators, human resource directors, managers, executive directors, and owners.

2. DETAILED FINDINGS

2.1 Reaction to the Concept of Family Literacy

An information sheet was sent via email or mail to all interview participants. The first page of the information sheet includes definitions of key terms such as Literacy, Family Literacy, and Workplace training (literacy and essential skills), and statistics about literacy rates and the impact of increased literacy skills on the Canadian economy and individuals involved. Overall, reactions to the concepts presented in the handout are positive. However, surprise and disbelief are occasionally expressed regarding the statistics presented, particularly the statistic stating “40% of Albertans lack the skills necessary for managing everyday reading and writing tasks.”

Concepts are perceived to be clear and easily understandable, and the terms “literacy,” “essential skills training,” and “family literacy” are well understood.

Interest in the subject is frequently expressed, and many employers feel that their employees could benefit from increased literacy skills; however, many employers express doubts as to whether they have enough need within their organizations to support these programs. When asked about other employers that might be interested in family literacy programs, suggestions include:

- Very large organizations (for example, Ford) due to the size of their workforce;
- Organizations with a large proportion of workers with English as a second language (ESL) due to a need for enhanced communication ability;
- Organizations that implement other training (such as job-specific or safety training) to ensure employees are able to comprehend the concepts and skills presented; and
- Employers interested in community service activities.

Most have never offered family literacy programs nor have they heard of other organizations offering these programs. Some employers state they offer financial and other kinds of support for employees attending literacy programs offered by external organizations such as continuing education programs provided through the local education system.

2.2 Reaction to Specific Examples of Family Literacy Programs

The second page of the information sheet provides examples of family literacy programs implemented by a variety of organizations, and reactions to specific examples are generally positive. A taster collection of books is considered to be interesting, but concerns are expressed that the books will be borrowed and never returned. Lunchtime seminars are also frequently mentioned as an interesting approach; however, employers are concerned about time availability and whether employees will have the internal motivation to stick with the program.

Employers offer mixed opinions on whether they would offer these specific programs in their workplace. While they express some interest in a taster collection of books or a lunchtime seminar, there is a lack of strong commitment due to the concerns mentioned above as well as the perception that their employees are likely to seek out external sources for literacy support.

In terms of deciding whether family literacy programs would be a good idea for their organization, employers are primarily interested in knowing that their employees want these kinds of programs made available to them in their workplace. Many employers feel they are aware of the needs of their employees and the organization, and literacy training is a low priority compared to other training needs.

2.3 Reaction to Promotional Materials from the Centre for Family Literacy

A folder was mailed to all interview participants containing a bookmark, a brochure entitled "Literacy Begins at Home!", a brochure entitled "Literacy Develops in Families First", the Centre for Family Literacy's 2008 Annual Report, and the Centre for Family Literacy's March 2009 Newsletter. General impressions of the materials in the folder are positive, and the newsletter and the annual report are commonly mentioned as being most interesting or appealing.

There was nothing that employers did not like about the materials in the folder; however, some employers from outside Edmonton suggested that the folder should also contain materials describing programs offered outside the city (i.e. in Calgary or smaller cities like Edson).

2.4 Awareness of Literacy Organizations

Knowledge about literacy organizations like the Centre for Family Literacy is low, with most employers having no prior exposure to these organizations and having no experience with or awareness of partnerships with these kinds of organizations. Once they have some understanding of what organizations like the Centre for Family Literacy might do, these organizations are seen as being capable of providing benefits to companies or the community as a whole.

Employers were asked about their perceptions of what an organization like the Centre for Family Literacy does, and responses include:

- *Assessing individuals on level of English, both reading and written, and how they need to take ownership of it and not just depend on their place of employment;*
- *Looking for points where programming can be developed to intervene in improving literacy – employers, churches – areas where programming can intervene and help, and assisting those employers / organizations to develop and implement that programming;*
- *Promoting adult learning or ESL – helping people to be more confident and more comfortable reading and understanding everything around them;*
- *Increasing literacy through Canada / the world in order to better people so they can realize their potential and be able to take advantage of opportunities;*
- *Partnering with existing institutions, schools, or groups that offer ESL (continuing education) and providing learning over and above what you would see in a regular learning institution;*
- *Promoting and facilitating literacy in Alberta;*
- *Helping people who are illiterate learn to read;*
- *Providing the support for programs within the community; focusing on stuff that's in the community, not so much employer-run, but the centre would be the support for those community programs; and*
- *Assist employers with setting up programs to help people with literacy problems.*

The most frequent suggestion for additional services that could be provided by these organizations relates to connecting with the public directly, as literacy is considered a sensitive issue that employees may not feel comfortable discussing with their employer.

2.5 Benefits of Family Literacy Training Programs

The main benefits arising from family literacy programs are perceived to include:

- Improved communication skills for ESL employees;
- Increased effectiveness of other training due to higher comprehension of the training materials;
- Increased communication and connection within the employee's family; and
- Help break negative cycles within the community.

Most interview participants say they would likely implement a family literacy program only if approached by staff requesting such a program. Those who say they would be willing to offer these programs suggest that the type of program would be driven by the specific need, and would likely take the form of a seminar led by an instructor.

While some acknowledge that different decision-makers within their organization may have different motivations due to different socioeconomic backgrounds or attitudes, none were able to suggest different motivations for implementing this type of training program.

2.6 Barriers to the Implementation of Workplace Family Literacy Programs

Employers' reasons for not offering family literacy programs are varied, and include:

- Perception that this type of training is not required within their workplace;
- Lack of employee interest;
- Insufficient number of employees to make the program worthwhile;
- Out of proportion financial or time commitment;
- Difficulty in finding temporary workers while regular employees are in training sessions;
- Irregular shift schedules resulting in a situation where not all employees are available for training at the same time, or individual employees are not available to attend at the same time each week;
- Difficulty in getting employees to participate in mandatory training let alone voluntary training;
- Question of availability of programs in smaller cities and cities other than Edmonton;
- Question as to the availability of qualified instructors; and
- Fear of offending employees by suggesting they need to participate in a literacy program.

The most commonly cited hesitations about offering family literacy programs relate to costs in the form of time and money or an inability to justify a return on the investment.

Employers would like to have a syllabus and more information about the structure of a lunchtime seminar. They would also like to see testimonials showing how the programs impact the employees and the company in both the short and long term, and how they can be applied to companies of different sizes facing different challenges.

Most employers are not resistant to any specific types of programs because it is clear that the different programs would work for different needs, and the type of need in the workplace would drive the type of program implemented.

For most employers, the main barrier to offering family literacy programs comes back to the perception that employees do not want or need this type of program. Most employers say they would consider running a family literacy program if they were approached by a group of employees asking for this type of training.

2.7 Additional Information and Support Requirements

2.7.1 Requirements for Support

Suggested forms of assistance for organizations running family literacy programs include:

- Financial support;
- Instructors;
- Someone external to the company who would manage logistics; and
- External space due to lack of space on-site at the work place.

Employers are frequently not aware if assistance for these programs is currently available, and most state they have not made any effort to find this information.

If the required assistance was made available to them, most employers say they would be likely to run a family literacy program with the caveat that it would depend on employee demand for this type of training.

2.7.2 Information Requirements

Employers are most open to receiving information via email. Other suggestions include:

- Health and safety fairs;
- Brochures for employers and employees; and
- Guest speakers in business-oriented clubs, associations or conferences.

Additional information requested by employers includes:

- Background information about the Centre for Family Literacy and what it does;
- More detail as to the statistics provided (i.e. what is the stratification within those who “lack the skills they need to manage everyday reading and writing tasks” – how many are completely illiterate and how many just don’t read that well?);
- Details about the programs offered (cost, time required from employers and employees, schedules, syllabi, information on instructors, etc.);
- Availability of programs outside Edmonton; and
- Case studies and examples showing the opportunity, the action undertaken, the result, the impact on the family and the business, and why family literacy programs are better than traditional literacy programs.

3. CONCLUSIONS AND OBSERVATIONS

Generally, employers recognize that literacy training offers various benefits and could be applicable to some organizations. However, it is often not considered a top priority and many barriers are perceived to stand in the way of implementing these types of programs.

Awareness of family literacy organizations that partner with businesses is low. This low awareness presents an opportunity for the Centre for Family Literacy to approach employers to educate them about the existence of these programs and the benefits they can have for organizations. Partnerships with other organizations such as Chambers of Commerce or Rotary Clubs can act as an entry point to community business leaders and help the Centre for Family Literacy communicate its message to employers.

Even when employers are aware of the availability of these programs, implementation of workplace family literacy programs is seen to depend on employee pull. Employees may hesitate to admit to their employer that they require literacy and essential skills training, so the ability to ensure anonymity is extremely important. By providing information in the work-place in the form of posters or brochures, the Centre for Family Literacy can inform employees that these resources are available and how to access them without facing the stigma that may be associated with disclosing their need to their employer. This method would provide the opportunity for individuals to address their personal need for training, with the potential limitation that employers may or may not be willing or able to anonymously reimburse employees.

Competing priorities and limited budgets for workplace education and training result in literacy often not being considered a high priority by employers. Education supported by evidence may be necessary to make employers more aware of the benefits of family literacy training, and thereby increase the level of priority for this type of training. The Centre for Family Literacy's positioning of family literacy training as an opportunity to improve other training initiatives by increasing comprehension and retention of information is one example of an employer benefit that could be motivating. In addition, the Centre for Family Literacy can show how, by increasing literacy among its staff, an organization can reduce training costs associated with other forms of training. Testimonials from and examples of organizations that implemented literacy training and saw an impact on other training and general work performance will be critical to convince hesitant employers that these programs have wide-ranging benefits. Champions who have experienced these benefits first hand can be extremely effective in communicating the benefits of the programs and convincing other employers that the programs are worth the investment.

A call to action is required to bring the issue of literacy in the work place to the attention of employers. This type of training program is frequently not top of mind for employers, and it falls upon the Centre for Family Literacy to act to bring the issue to their attention. Communication to increase awareness about the prevalence of the issue and how employers might act to resolve it within their own organization would serve to benefit both employers and employees. It is important that the Centre for Family Literacy make the process as easy as possible by providing clear steps and contact information for Centre employees who can address questions that arise.

The materials currently in use by the Centre for Family Literacy are effective in communicating the Centre's message, and are capable of getting employers to a place where they can perceive

some of the potential benefits of literacy training for the workplace including improved communication skills, increased effectiveness of other training, and breaking negative cycles within the community. However, the barriers to implementation are numerous and are perceived, in some cases, to be insurmountable. The most prominent hurdles that must be overcome include employers' perception that this type of training is not required within their workplace, a perceived lack of employee interest, and an insufficient number of employees to make the program worthwhile. Given these barriers, employers often rely on outside organizations offering the programs, and it is the employees who must seek out the information and make the decision to attend; the employer is not necessarily aware that the employee is doing so. More information about how employers might address barriers such as small organization size or a perceived lack of employee interest could be provided either through the informational materials or via in-person, telephone, or email contact with employers. This could help to alleviate fears employers have regarding the risk and effort involved in implementing workplace literacy training programs.

If family literacy programs were to be considered by an organization, concerns over program management such as monitoring book borrowing and returns, and scheduling seminars so that all employees can attend would need to be addressed. Providing additional information about how the plans are structured and who is responsible for organizing and running them could help mitigate concerns. Offering an advisory service to help organizations implement a structured system and providing a designated contact to help address points of concern could help to ease employer doubts about their ability to manage these programs internally.

Three strategic options emerge as to how employers might be approached about providing literacy and essential skills training for their employees.

1. Link employers to literacy and essential skills training providers, and have the employers disseminate information about the programs within their workplace. This can include active referrals or passive provision of information in the form of posters or brochures. This option allows employees to remain anonymous, and is appropriate for smaller organizations that lack the critical mass to support an in-house program.
2. Educate employers about how they can provide literacy and essential skills training programs internally. By providing details and resources for various programs, the employer will be able to select the appropriate training courses to ensure that its employees are gaining the skills they require while meeting the needs of the employer. Depending on the size and structure of the organization, these programs can be tailored to accommodate specific training requirements and support needs.
3. Explore partnerships with organizations like the Centre for Family Literacy, industry associations, or other companies with similar training needs to help address financial and space requirements. Employees from several organizations can congregate to attend seminars or other forms of training in one location, and this allows the costs to be spread among the participating employers while still allowing the companies to control the type and timing of training. The Centre for Family Literacy could manage the attendees, instructors, and training location, and this would be seen by employers as a cost- and time-effective means of offering this type of training only to employees who are interested in attending.