

IN BRIEF

continued from page 2

tions. Sullivan cites critical thinking as an example of a transferable skill that will make students more adaptable to changing job demands. "You might have a welder working on one part of the line with a set of drawings that has been explained to them, then shifted to another part of the line with a different set of drawings. When they move, they don't necessarily have the critical-thinking skills to analyze the new set of drawings."

This change in curriculum has been a long time coming, but Sullivan believes it only makes sense. "There's a business case for us changing, but the strongest case is in terms of serving the student."

Food processors train to beat market change

A new online survey and human-resource tool kit to help Manitoba's food processors assess strengths and gaps in their worker training is scheduled for a May launch. It's all part of a sharpened focus on readying the workforce for increased competition, says Beverlie Stuart, HR Training & Development Co-ordinator for the Manitoba Food Processors Association.

Increased use of robotics and a shrinking workforce are putting added pressures on processors to train and retain employees. Companies that identify training needs, including literacy and gaps in

Driven by Technology

AUTO TECHNICIANS GET UP TO SPEED ONLINE

BY PAUL BRENT



Service apprentice Dolly Grech and Roy Rump use high tech to learn about increasingly complex auto systems at Ottawa's Roy Rump & Sons auto repair shop

Photo: CP Images

Operating for half a century, Ottawa's Roy Rump & Sons auto repair and service business has witnessed massive changes in automotive technology. Customers of the family-owned business likely don't realize it, but employees keep up with the dizzying pace of change through web-based training. "There is always something," Roy Rump says of current advances that encompass diesel engines, gas-electric hybrids and the profusion of remote sensors measuring everything from outside temperature to tire pressure. "You think you have it down, and then they change something else."

The Canadian Automotive Repair and Service

Council (CARS) produces online courses geared to automotive technicians and service representatives. CARS introduced its program more than a decade ago, originally delivering it via satellite but converting to an on-demand, Internet-based service last year. Employers find this not only helps address the fast pace of technological change, but also the literacy challenges some employees might have comprehending a technical manual. At his shop, Rump says that the online service delivers the information in a clearer, more digestible form.

For a number of his workers, online courses are a superior way to learn. "Not for all of them,"

says Rump, "but the newer ones, the young ones coming up."

With about 980 hours of training courses available in English and French, CARS has enjoyed a surge in usage since switching to the cheaper and more convenient online format. The number of user accounts has jumped from 14,777 in February 2007, when it moved online, to 22,286 this year.

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Canadian Tire was one of the prime movers in getting CARS to develop its original program. With 5,400 repair bays and approximately 3,000 technicians across the country, the company regards the new web-based service as a huge boon. "[Technicians] can do it any time they want, at home or at work," says Phil Myers, Manager, Auto Education and Equipment. "It has taken the last big hurdle away in that they used to have to schedule time off the floor, which was a real hardship."

Smaller operators such as Rump like the online training because it doesn't require expensive satellite equipment or take his workers off the repair floor at crucial times. One of his

employees, four-year service apprentice Dolly Grech, has taken CARS online courses ranging from air conditioning to engine and suspension repair. "It keeps you sharp," says the 21-year-old, who is preparing for final automotive technician exams. "They are helpful, especially for people who are about to write their licence and may have a hard time sitting in front of a textbook."

Currently, CARS is studying the area of essential-skills assessment and development after recognizing a few years ago that people might be having difficulties processing the information they need to do their jobs. "The information we convey now is so technical," says Jennifer Steeves, Executive Director of CARS. "From our own experience with a support line technicians could call, we learned that they often had the information in front of them, they had the diagnostic bulletin, but they couldn't follow it. They couldn't pull out the information they needed."

"We have workshops to help trainers recognize when a trainee is having an issue with the technology itself and when more fundamental skills are needed. They can pull back a little bit to address the real challenge and really help the trainee."

Essential-skills assessment is "still in its infancy," Steeves adds. CARS focused first on reading, document use and numeracy, but discovered that for auto-sector technicians, communication and critical thinking were top required skills. There were no assessment tools for these.

CARS is working on the issue with other groups, including the Canadian Trucking Human Resources Council. Many truckers and dispatchers also lack the skills necessary to deal with new safety materials and mounds of other documentation. "People who have been driving trucks for 30 years or so probably got into the occupation because they weren't academically strong," says Steeves. "The Council has the same sort of problems we do. So we've been sharing information both ways." ■

essential skills, will be in a better competitive position. The online initiative, funded by the Workplace Skills Initiative of Human Resources and Social Development Canada, will help companies take an inventory of their skills needs.

"There are real concerns in the area of literacy, document use, numeracy, comprehension and problem-solving," says Stuart. "Unfortunately, many workers really aren't prepared for the world of work."

What Stuart calls "employers of choice" lead the way with an increased attention to training. "They don't have the turnover and they're able to maintain a very young workforce." They're competitive locally and globally, she adds, "and they're not necessarily the

largest companies by any means."

There are over 200 food processors in Manitoba, many small- or medium-sized enterprises, employing about 8,500. Annual shipments valued at more than \$3 billion represent about 25 per cent of the province's total manufacturing output.

Occupational health and safety benefits have always been strong arguments for investing in worker training in this sector, but labour-

continued on page 6

