

REGIONAL EMPLOYMENT BOARD OF HAMPDEN COUNTY

WORKPLACE LEARNING IN ESOL



Partnership Members:

Holyoke Works and Holyoke Community College

BayStateWorks Promising Practice Case Study

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"We have only been conducting classes for three or four weeks, but already we've seen that employees are able to use fuller more complete sentences. They're also better able to tell us exactly what's going on with their machines. It's been a big success!"

- Greig Elliott,
Plant Manager
Sealed Air Corporation

1 The Need

One of the manufacturing companies participating in BayStateWorks (BSW), and the focus of this case study, is the Holyoke, Massachusetts plant of Sealed Air Corporation, where approximately 108 individuals are employed. Lack of proficiency with the English language, including speaking, reading and writing English, is a significant barrier to the implementation of "world class" manufacturing standards within Sealed Air. The Company seeks to develop and implement a common training program for employees that will further the development of required job skills, improve employee retention and facilitate job progression to more highly skilled and better paying jobs. However, as a prerequisite, Sealed Air has discerned a need to improve the English skills of incumbent workers.

2 The Solution

The solution arrived at by BayStateWorks program leaders involves the introduction of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) training that will prepare current operating and warehouse employees for additional training and for career advancement within the firm. Thus, three ESOL courses were launched and operated on Company premises and time. Enrolling in and attending these three courses were 23 employees hailing from Portugal, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Asia and Jamaica. Program leaders anticipated that participants in this program would achieve improvements in their English skills as evidenced by standardized test results; participants will be assessed with the Basic English Skills Test (BEST-Plus) prior to and at the immediate conclusion of ESOL instruction. Program leaders expected that the acquisition of and/or improvement in the use of the English language would have a positive impact on the Company and its employees as well as on participants' quality of life in general.

Improved English skills will also facilitate future necessary training as identified by the development of WorkKeys Profiles for two positions within the Company and the WorkKeys Assessments of the 35 employees currently in these two positions. Armed with improved English at the conclusion of the ESOL courses, employees underwent a WorkKeys Assessment that indicated where their current job skills were in relation to the "ideal" set of skills identified by the WorkKeys Profile process. The difference, or gap, between this "ideal" and the

WorkKeys Assessment results will serve as the basis for the common curriculum the Company intends to develop and implement in the near future.

3 Implementation

Sealed Air became involved in this grant through the efforts of Greig Elliott, Plant Manager at the Holyoke site. Mr. Elliott attended a seminar conducted by the Greater Holyoke Chamber of Commerce on August 18, 2004 along with representatives from ten other Holyoke-area companies. This seminar described the benefits and requirements of participating in BayStateWorks. The primary objective of BayStateWorks was to help participating companies achieve specific business goals and improve overall performance and operating results by helping their employees increase their basic educational and occupational skills.

Sealed Air, a company seeking to adopt “world class” manufacturing techniques into every aspect of its business, elected to participate in the grant project and began receiving services in 2005. Sealed Air’s project consisted of two stages.

The first stage entailed the development and on-site delivery of an ESOL curriculum by Holyoke Works, a Holyoke-based Adult Basic Education/English for Speakers of Other Languages (ABE/ESOL) training provider participating in BayStateWorks. The curriculum integrated job-related basic education with ESOL instruction. Selected employees participated in this educational program on Company time and premises with Sealed Air absorbing the cost of wages and benefits while their employees attended the training. Because of a demanding production schedule, much of this class time took place either prior to or after normal work shifts and was typically paid at the rate of time and one-half. In fact, Sealed Air invested \$34,246.95 toward supporting these classes, represented by the wages and fringe benefits the Company paid to participating employees while they attended the classes.

More specifically, in April of 2005, the Director of Holyoke Works and the BSW Project Coordinator visited Sealed Air to make a presentation to employees about the training opportunity being offered through BayStateWorks. Following this presentation, Holyoke Works conducted assessments of English speaking ability of the 31 Sealed Air employees who volunteered, using an instrument called BEST-Plus. Assessments were completed in May 2005. Based on the assessments, the number of employees involved and the Company’s production requirements, Sealed Air was slated to receive one beginner level class and two intermediate level classes of ESOL, each of 120 hours duration. However, because of scheduling and staffing issues during the summer months, classes were not scheduled to begin until September 2005.

Three ESOL classes did begin in September of 2005 with 23 participants meeting two days per week for two hours each day. Scheduling work-based learning is always a challenge and the classes at Sealed Air were no exception; the company had to schedule twelve hours of ESOL classes each week while still meeting production requirements. In fact, due to production requirements, classes were briefly suspended on several occasions. However, classes still concluded by June 2006 with nineteen individuals completing the program.

The second stage of the implementation plan involves the development of a common curriculum that is expected to improve employees’ skills and job performance. This stage of the project

utilizes Holyoke Community College, another BayStateWorks grant training partner, and the ACT WorkKeys System. To begin with, WorkKeys Profiles of two key jobs were established (see appendix A). These Profiles were based on observations of and discussions with job incumbents who are perceived to be highly qualified in their particular jobs and are considered “subject matter experts.” Thus the benchmark or ideal standard of performance for the job is established. Next, all the incumbents in each of these two roles were assessed using WorkKeys Assessments that determine whether an incumbent employee has the “ideal” skills to perform the job and where any “gaps” may exist. This collective “gap” then becomes the foundation on which a common curriculum is built.

4 Results

The outcomes of the first stage of the program for both the employer and its employees have been highly positive. At the outset, the employer stated a need “to address employees’ poor English skills,” adding that “over 80% of operating and warehouse employees are working in a language other than English.” In addition, the Company’s turnover or attrition rate is 22%. Sealed Air management feels intuitively that the company is benefiting from the training and intends to measure this impact through an agreement with CommCorp to engage in “employer research” by counting the Clarification Requests and Employee Suggestions it receives from course participants in comparison with those received from a cohort of employees who are not participating in the program. Managers believe that the number of Clarification Requests will be the best measure of improvements in employees’ ability to read instructions and communicate about work in both spoken and written English. In addition, improvements in the ability to speak English are demonstrated in the pre- and post-testing that took place using BEST-Plus, which showed an average increase of two levels in participants’ Student Performance Level (SPL).

It was rewarding to see both the initial excitement generated among employees over the prospect of improving their English skills and the level of bonding that developed between employee classmates during the course of the project. Morale and support for the classes from the Company and one another were consistently high. The aggregate rate of attendance among those who completed classes was 91%. One of the high points during the grant period came when the local ABC affiliate, WGGB TV Channel 40, did a news piece on the classes being held at the company focusing on two students, the teacher and the Plant Manager, all touting the various benefits of BayStateWorks and the classes being conducted at Sealed Air (CommCorp has the recording on videotape). A brief testimonial from one of the participants in the classes really expresses well the emotion generated by the opportunity to improve her English skills and how it impacted her life both at work and at home (see Appendix B).

Regarding the Company’s objective to identify and provide a common curriculum that will foster the adoption of “world-class” manufacturing techniques, the WorkKeys Profiles and Assessments indicate that, of the 35 employees who were assessed, 28 scored lower than the minimum skill requirements for Locating Information, 24 scored lower in Applied Math and 18 scored lower in Reading for Information. So, although the Company has its work cut out for it in addressing employee training needs and, thereby, achieving its specific business goals, it has made significant progress by improving employees’ ability to read, write and speak English. In

addition, the general content of further training has been identified through the use of the WorkKeys System.

5 Lessons

The challenge of preparing employees who are “Speakers of Other Languages” to participate in and fully contribute to the success of the companies in which they work is clearly before us. In recent years, the only growth in Massachusetts’ labor force has been through immigration. Thus, teaching immigrant employees to use English proficiently is essential if local companies are to compete successfully in a global (or National) economy. In Sealed Air’s case, the provision of ESOL training was necessary as an intermediate step on the path to providing a common training curriculum that will continuously move the Company forward on its path to becoming a “world class” manufacturer.

Historically, manufacturing has been the route of entry and pathway to eventual economic success for immigrants. Manufacturing offered an entry-level opportunity for decent earnings and generous fringe benefits to immigrants. But entry-level manufacturing jobs have, unfortunately, become fewer, as well as more complex; this trend seems to be continuing. For example, Sealed Air expects their employees to run at least one machine, performing all but major maintenance, quality testing, computerized production reporting, as well as tracking and charting of specific goals and metrics. The company needs employees who are capable of making recommendations for innovations and of moving up into more highly skilled positions.

The lesson learned from this project is that everyone benefits from training employees in ESOL. In order to compete and grow and remain viable as an organization, Sealed Air needs employees who can use English proficiently. For immigrant employees, there is a direct correlation between English proficiency and earnings. More importantly, perhaps, is that for many jobs, even in manufacturing, English skills are required qualifications – even for entry-level jobs. The Commonwealth and the local community benefit from a tax revenue perspective. Society also benefits from the development of a productive, gainfully employed populace. In the final analysis, our civic and economic vitality will depend on our ability to provide adequate opportunities for immigrants, whether employed or not, to become proficient in their usage of English.

Appendix A: ACT WorkKeys System



Sealed Air Corporation

WorkKeys Profiles (two positions)

Minimum Skill Requirements

Co-ex Machine Operator

Observation	5
Teamwork	3
Locating Information	4
Reading for Information	4
Applied Math	4

Envelope Machine Operator

Observation	5
Teamwork	3
Reading for Information	3
Locating Information	4
Applied Math	4

WorkKeys Assessments

Of the 35 employees assessed by Holyoke Community College, following are the numbers of incumbent workers, at Sealed Air, scoring lower than the minimum skill requirements:

Locating Information	28 employees
Applied Math	24 employees
Reading for Information	18 employees

Appendix B: Letter from Participant

F
ESL

"About my English class"

At this time in my life, I feel good about taking this English class.

I can talk to my partner my boss

at work, and my children. When

I go to my children's school to talk

with the teachers, I understand more

of what is being said to me, than I

I did before taking this class. It is

helping my English a lot.