



CHAPTER 8

THE KITIMAT COMMUNITY SKILLS CENTRE IN BRITISH COLUMBIA, CANADA

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LOCATION AND CONTEXT

The Kitimat Community Skills Centre is located in Kitimat, a community of 12,000 in the northwest corner of British Columbia, about 1,000 kilometres north of Vancouver and 500 kilometres west of Prince George. It is in a valley that is surrounded by high mountains and is situated at the head of the scenic Douglas Channel, which leads to the Pacific Ocean. It has a typical northwest climate with a heavy rainfall and some of the highest snowfalls ever recorded in Canada. Kitimat actually means “people of the snow.” More than 50 different ethnic groups are represented in the community, which has one of the highest per capita incomes in Canada. Most of Kitimat’s workforce is employed by the three major industries within the district, Alcan Aluminum Smelters and Chemicals, Eurocan Pulp and Paper, and Methanex Chemicals. The community was established by Alcan in the early 1950s, close to the site inhabited for hundreds of years by the Haisla First Nations people. The company was drawn by the opportunities for plentiful hydroelectricity and a deep-water port on the Douglas Channel and decided to establish an aluminum smelter in the area. Training and education have always been important to Alcan in the development of its workforce and, subsequently, for Eurocan and Methanex as well.

HISTORY

The Northwest is relatively isolated from Vancouver, Victoria and British Columbia’s other major urban centres. A small campus of the Northwest Community College, an institution that provides college centres in communities in the Pacific Northwest region, was established to serve Kitimat, Kitimaat Village and Kemano in 1976. The college’s primary focus, however, has always been on community education rather than on industrial training, and it really lacked the resources to provide training for the industrial workforce which, by the 1990s, totalled more than 3,000. Much of the training for local industry had to be provided by bringing in trainers at very high cost from Vancouver or elsewhere in Canada and even the U.S. The alternative was that the trainees had to be sent out of Kitimat to various training institutions, workshops and seminars throughout North America, which was also a very costly proposition.

In 1992, the Northwest Community College began to put in place a distance education system to link its six campuses and four community education sites throughout the Northwest. Up to this point, much of its education and training had been offered at a centralised location and trainees had had to drive for hours, often in adverse winter conditions, to attend their classes, workshops and seminars. The new vision called for training to be brought directly to the client. The college lacked the financial resources to provide face-to-face instructor-led training at these remote centres and it was therefore envisaged that distance education could provide the solution.

To explore this new model of provision, initial contact was made with the three industries in Kitimat and a series of hands-on workshops and demonstrations were organised to showcase the educational technologies available at that time — satellite-based talk-back TV, interactive multimedia and audioconferencing. There was strong interest in the possibility of accessing high-quality training delivered directly into Kitimat by external experts via such technology. Support was especially strong from the engineering, technology and supervisory and management groups. In the wake of these workshops and demonstrations, it was agreed to proceed with a needs analysis and exploration of possible partnerships.

It was decided not to change the status of the college campus itself, but rather to approach the Open Learning Agency, the internationally recognised Vancouver-based provider of flexible lifelong learning and workplace training systems, and seek their support and expertise for the development of some form of technology- and workplace-based training centre at Kitimat. The Open Learning Agency saw great merit in the proposal and agreed to partner such a centre. Contact was then made with the various federal and provincial government organisations, industries and community organisations identified as potential clients for such training: Alcan, Eurocan, Methanex, the Canadian Auto Workers' Union, the Pulp and Paper Union, the City of Kitimat, the Kitimat Chamber of Commerce, Kitimat School District #82 (Coast Mountain), Haisla First Nations, Human Resource Development Canada, and the B.C. Ministry of Advanced Education and Training. This needs analysis demonstrated overwhelmingly these organisations' lack of access to training and preparedness to make a strong financial commitment in support of the new initiative.

Through the Open Learning Agency, contact was then established with the provincial government of British Columbia. At that time, the government was launching its Forestry Renewal Funding scheme, a partnership of forestry companies, workers, environmental groups, First Nations, communities and government to ensure that stumpage fees and royalties paid by forest companies for the right to harvest timber on Crown lands were reinvested in the forests, forest workers and forest communities. The provincial government pledged to support the project and provide funding for the establishment of what was called the Kitimat Community Skills Centre. Additional support was obtained from the District of Kitimat which pledged to provide a new building for the Skills Centre. In total, Can\$650,000 was obtained from these federal, provincial and local sources towards the start-up costs.

With the funding in place, and with the full support of the local industry, unions, business organisations, educational institutions, First Nations, and provincial and federal governments, the Kitimat Community Skills Centre was able to proceed and was incorporated on August 17, 1994.

The Skills Centre was conceived as a non-profit society, operating on a cost-recovery basis and becoming fully self-funding after five years. Its mission was to “ensure the

competitiveness of Kitimat industry and its workforce through the provision of training which meets the requirements of industry, the employed workforce and those within the community requiring training and upgrading prior to employment.” As well, the Skills Centre would “serve as a mechanism for identifying industry and community needs and ensuring the co-ordination and integration of available and new resources in the development of initiatives to meet them.”

Thus, the Kitimat Community Skills Centre came into being, responsible for its own facility design, technology allocation, programme provision, marketing and staffing. It went on to become the prototype for the other Community Skills Centres throughout British Columbia.

FUNCTIONS

The initial needs survey indicated that the Skills Centre had to provide:

- basic skills upgrading for the local industries’ workforce;
- trades training and upgrading;
- occupational health and safety training for industry;
- training in management and personnel development;
- technologist upgrading, specifically in electrical engineering and computer technology;
- general computer training;
- professional development for teachers;
- emergency and fire services training;
- language training (French, English and Spanish);
- small business development;
- recruitment and human resource support for Alcan; and
- employment services for Human Resources Development Canada.

It was always intended that the Skills Centre should function as a broker, not necessarily providing all of the training itself, but drawing upon training resources across the region wherever necessary. Although expertise in such areas as human resources development and computer training was readily available in Kitimat, the increased demand for accredited training soon meant that the Skills Centre had to look wider afield.

The Skills Centre established a strategic partnership with the Southern Alberta Institute of Technology (SAIT) in Calgary, Alberta. Through this alliance with a major post-secondary institution that had strong partnerships with industry leaders, the number of technology-based courses available to Kitimat increased dramatically. Building on the success of the SAIT partnership, another alliance was forged with the local school district, in this case for the provision of accreditation for basic skills upgrading programmes, primarily in the areas of math, physics, chemistry and English.

It was also apparent to the local communities and industries that many of the training needs in emergency services and fire fighting were not being met, especially those pertaining to the volunteers. The Skills Centre therefore developed a major initiative called the Northern Emergency Services Training Academy (NESTA) which was designed to:

- provide training in emergency response, public safety and industrial safety to member partners in northwest British Columbia;
- reduce the training costs, both to municipal and individual responders;
- identify common training needs;
- co-ordinate the design, delivery and evaluation of high-quality, cost-effective training to meet the needs in the region;
- establish a leading-edge, technology-based training network to enhance education and training opportunities for all members;
- represent members collectively in negotiations and partnerships with educational and training institutions, government and other agencies; and
- develop synergies and network with other emergency services training providers in North America and globally.

One innovative approach developed by NESTA was the Distributed Access to Learning (DIAL) network, which utilises fully interactive, Internet-based training and can link up with up to 10 communities through a system of local “electronic classrooms.”

The demand for emergency training has grown rapidly since 1999 and now encompasses such topics as:

- fire fighter training
- fire instructor training
- training in rescue
- confined spaces training
- occupational first aid
- emergency response training
- emergency vehicle operation
- incident facilitator training
- industry safety indoctrination

On the latter point, great emphasis is placed on awareness-building and skills development to promote and develop a health and safety culture in the industries in and around Kitimat and to ensure that such values are fully upheld by management as well as the workers. Such safety training has become a major function and source of income for the Skills Centre.

The provision of human resources services is also a growth area for the Skills Centre. Opportunities for providing such services opened up when both industry and government stated a preference for out-sourcing recruitment services (in the case of industry) and human resources services (in the case of the federal government). Examples of the latter include career decision-making, skills enhancement, job search, employment maintenance and employment counselling.

Over the past three years, there have been 1,300 enrollees in the Centre’s industrial programmes (basic skills, engineering, technology, safety, trades, personal and professional development and computer training); 1,350 enrollees in its programmes for small business, the unions, First Nations, local government and the general community; and 1,100 clients, including the unemployed, for its human resources services.

COSTS AND FUNDING

The community-owned Kitimat Community Skills Centre operates as a non-profit society with a Board of Directors and provides its services on a full cost-recovery basis. Right at the outset, when the start-up funds were granted by government to help establish the facilities, it was made quite clear that the Centre must initiate a user-pay system and work towards self-sufficiency. The Skills Centre became self-sufficient on April 1, 2000, six years after its inception.

There are certainly easier ways of making money than running such an operation, but the Centre markets itself strongly, networks with chief executive officers and other key stakeholders, accommodates clients' needs and timelines for training provision, and identifies and delivers the programmes through providers and instructors who will give the clients what they need to succeed.

The Skills Centre's revenue is primarily derived from its contracts with the major industries in Kitimat and with government, in particular Human Resources Development Canada. Revenue is also derived from facility and technology rental, through NESTA and community, business and regional training, services and grants.

Recently, the Skills Centre introduced the concept of separate "profit centres," making its four programme consultants financially responsible for their particular areas of operation. The revenue targets are set annually for each profit centre by the administration and presented to the Board of Directors at the annual general meeting. It is then the responsibility of each profit centre to meet the annual fiscal goal, pay for its staffing and instructional materials, and contribute a percentage of its income towards the facility's administrative costs (advertising, insurance, facilities, maintenance, telecommunications, office supplies, licences, dues, subscriptions, etc.) and annual accumulative net income (for capital acquisitions and/or replacement). The administration is still responsible for applying for grants from government, industry and the community.

This profit centre concept has been found to work well in that it provides the staff with a sense of ownership and an incentive to work towards the Skills Centre's annual goals. While each centre is responsible for generating its own income, none works in isolation. All the centres are encouraged to work collectively towards the annual fiscal target.

All of the other Skills Centres subsequently established in British Columbia were given five years to become self-sufficient and operate on a full cost-recovery basis. At one time there were 20 of these centres. However, two failed, three or four were absorbed by local colleges, two were absorbed by the Open Learning Agency and a further four or five are expected to similarly lose their autonomy. The six or seven Skills Centres that have managed to survive have done so because their Managers had vision, entrepreneurial skills, went after the business or industrial market and did not make the mistake of assuming that the government would extend the five-year deadline or hoping for government contracts that rarely materialised.

ACCOMMODATION

At its start-up in 1994, the Skills Centre received funding for the design and construction of the main building. This custom-designed structure of about 4,000 square feet houses administration, the videoconferencing studio and two computer laboratories. It is owned by the society in partnership with the Northwest Community College.

Because of the increased demand for training and consequent increase in staff, a second building of 3,000 square feet has been leased to provide further classroom and office space.

MANAGEMENT

The Skills Centre is run as a community-owned non-profit society operating on a cost-recovery basis. It has a Board of Directors made up of 11 members representative of industry, business, education, government, unions and First Nations peoples.

The Centre is managed by a full-time Manager who is responsible for carrying through the policies of the Board, operating within the budget framework and managing all of the society's assets. The Manager's duties include hiring and supervising staff, developing proposals, managing programmes and administering all revenues, expenses and purchasing. To function successfully in such a role, the Manager must have skills in needs assessment, financial management and entrepreneurship.

STAFFING

The Centre's Manager and other staff are all on contract. The Manager is assisted by a full-time administrative assistant and a part-time financial assistant responsible for financial transactions and record-keeping.

The Skills Centre currently employs four "programme consultants," each with his or her own distinct set of skills, areas of responsibility and accountability to a specific profit centre. These consultants may, as budgets allow, hire instructors, programme assistants, tutors and mentors to assist them in particular tasks. Communications between staff is strongly encouraged through bi-weekly staff meetings and a newsletter.

TRAINING MANAGERS, STAFF AND USERS

It is recognised that staff training is critical to the ongoing development of the Skills Centre and its capacity to remain competitive within the tight Kitimat training market. There is occasional opportunity for staff to attend short professional development workshops and seminars. These are usually offered in co-operation with end-users such as Kitimat industry and Human Resources Development Canada. However, lack of time, geographical isolation and inadequate training dollars mean that the Centre's Manager and staff are not able to participate in professional development programmes as much as they feel they should. It is anticipated that there will be improved opportunities for online staff training as the regional DIAL training network is further developed and applied.

PUBLICITY

Publicity is considered to be extremely important in the competitive training market. Marketing and public relations are the responsibility of the Manager and the programme consultants. The Centre also retains the services of a part-time marketing specialist, and it has access to public relations services through SAIT, government, industry and the District of Kitimat.

Periodic news stories in the local and regional newspapers have developed a greater public awareness of the Skills Centre, and the development of a Web site (www.sno.net/kcsc) has also greatly aided the promotion of the Centre's training products and services. The Centre also publicises its offerings through brochures, radio and TV advertising and by participating in trade fairs throughout the Northwest. Joining and regularly attending such community groups as Rotary International and the Chamber of Commerce are also found to pay dividends, as such contacts can often lead to requests for proposals and, ultimately, contracts.

ACCESS

Many of the Skills Centre's clients are industry shift workers, so it is necessary to provide access to at least some of the facilities on a 24-hour basis. The hours of opening in the main building are from 8:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. Staff are always present during these times to provide support and ensure security.

The leased facility provides 24-hour access through a computer-based "smart card" system that allows a certain number of trainees independent and full-time access to the study hall, Internet and technology library. User access is monitored by computer through the individualised card system and the facilities are made available on an honour basis.

TECHNOLOGY

From its inception, the Skills Centre was conceived as a leading provider of educational technology in the community. And, indeed, because of Kitimat's isolated location, technology has become the cornerstone of the Centre's existence.

The initial technologies included a satellite-based talk-back TV system using both C and Ku band and this has proved a very popular vehicle for training. The transmission costs, which are primarily charged out from the educational institutions, are not exorbitant; the quality of the presenters has been high; the one-way video, two-way audio allows for interactivity; and the picture quality on the 60-inch TV screen is superb. Much of the popularity of this mode of training, especially with the engineers and technologists, is the result of the Centre's affiliation with the U.S.-based National Technological University. It is an independent university with its own accreditation authorisations, and it harnesses expertise in 50 affiliate universities to deliver competitive and profitable certificate, baccalaureate-degree and graduate-level engineering programmes by satellite TV and online to corporate clients at 350 North American sites and 1,000 international locations.

The Skills Centre also has a videoconferencing suite which operates on switch 56 (112) Kbps. Although the telephone transmission costs are relatively high, this live, fully interactive service is inexpensive compared with the costs of air travel to and from Kitimat. Videoconferencing is currently gaining in popularity with several industries, and government departments are now using this service for their recruitment purposes. The Centre is constantly seeking new markets and clients for its videoconferencing services, and in the future it may apply this service to meet the needs of the health services, emergency and safety training, and police training.

The Skills Centre owns its own server and the computer laboratories have 586 Pentium units with full Internet access via cable at 512 Kbps. Ever since its opening, the Centre has used the Internet for its administration services and researching and developing training programmes. However, new opportunities for online training became evident through the partnership with SAIT and its ACCESS programme using LearnLinc software. Building on the success of the ACCESS pilot programmes, the Skills Centre acquired its own LearnLinc software to establish a northwest regional network, linking the communities of Prince Rupert, Terrace, Kitimat and Smithers. All of these communities have established electronic classrooms designed for both delivering and receiving online training. These classrooms are equipped with large monitors, Intel Pentium 200 MHz processors, Internet connection (min 33.6 Kbps) and LearnLinc software for interactive course delivery.

Demand for the Centre's facilities continues to grow and the facilities include an Industry Literacy and Numeracy Laboratory (using PLATO Learning), an Engineering Technology Internet Laboratory, a Trades and Technology Classroom and a French and English-as-Second-Language laboratory.

RESEARCH AND EVALUATION

Evaluation of the Skills Centre's processes and outcomes is definitely lacking. To be competitive, the Centre must work to a very tight budget and few, if any, resources are allocated to researching and evaluating programme delivery and services. However, the Centre finds that client response is an effective evaluation tool and it therefore constantly solicits feedback from its clients. Any negative feedback is dealt with instantly through self-evaluative staff workshops and follow-up with the client.

CONCLUSIONS

Today the Kitimat Community Skills Centre's network spans from Prince Rupert to Prince George and operates in partnership with the Northwest Community College, the Southern Alberta Institute of Technology, the University of British Columbia, the B.C. Ministry of Education and the Northern Emergency Services Training Academy. It also continues to receive considerable assistance from the Open Learning Agency of British Columbia. As well, it supports the Community Skills Centres Consortium and has developed active partnerships with other Community Skills Centres throughout the province. Community feedback is most supportive of the Centre. Leon Brown, Kitimat Fire Chief, writes, "Both NESTA and the Kitimat Community Skills Centre are valuable resources to the Kitimat Fire Department. As a small Fire Department with a limited training budget, the cost of sending staff out for training is prohibitive and the use of correspondence is only successful for some individuals. Both NESTA and the Skills Centre focus on the needs of the customer and matching their needs to existing custom-designed courses."

Doug Petersen, Employer Relations Manager, Eurocan Pulp and Paper, says, "I am impressed with the Centre's flexibility; they always meet Eurocan's needs. The Kitimat Community Skills Centre's training programmes are tailored to individual industry's needs."

Walter McLellan, Director of Personnel in the District of Kitimat commends the Centre: "The District of Kitimat is large enough to require ongoing employee training but too small to do it on our own. The Skills Centre offers the opportunity to pool our resources

with other organisations to access high-quality programming and leading edge technology. While the larger companies may use the Skills Centre's services more, its greater value is to smaller organisations."

Facilitator Tanya Stevenson says, "The Skills Centre is a great place to take advantage of technology. It allows us to communicate with people all over the world." Former student Liliano Santos observes, "Being located in a small community, finding educational and training programmes can be very difficult. The Skills Centre opens the door to a whole new world of technology and training. My experience at the Skills Centre was a promising one. I would like to express my gratitude to such a fine institute and to the knowledgeable staff."

In September 2000, the Kitimat Community Skills Centre completed its sixth year of operation. The Centre has managed to achieve self-sufficiency and has actually generated a small profit for capital re-investment, but it is obvious that without initial government grants, this task would hardly have been possible. Meeting these training needs at the lowest possible cost and breaking even or showing a profit is not a simple or easy task. Providing customised training any place and any time on a full cost-recovery basis, especially for the volatile industrial market, calls for vision and constant innovation in programme and technological delivery. Training is not necessarily a high priority for many businesses and industries. To survive in this market, operations such as the Skills Centre must understand the clients' needs and make speedy, appropriate and innovative responses to requests. Quality service to the employees and the trainees is absolutely pivotal for the Centre's survival.

The word "community" in the Centre's full title is important. It signifies that the Centre is there for the benefit of all the people who live and work in its vicinity. But liaisons and partnerships with organisations outside the community are also an essential ingredient, because few rural community training centres can have access to the educational resources taken for granted at institutions in the urban areas, especially if those centres are not part of the public education system.

Good human resource management is also crucial. Incentives must be provided for the Centre's staff, and management must be fully aware of its staff's individual needs, challenges and frustrations, and be ready to provide training, support and encouragement.

Commercial sponsorship, especially technology sponsorship, can greatly assist centres in acquiring the latest tools that are essential for their survival. Clients are acutely aware of outdated technology and are often capable of acquiring state-of-the-art technology themselves, thus bypassing the services of the centres. The systems at the Skills Centre must therefore be value-added in some way by the staff.

If centres are to operate as non-profit organisations, it is essential that their management committees represent the end-users or clients, as is the case with the Skills Centre Society. All of the Centre's Board members are volunteers and will only support the Centre if they are convinced that it is providing their businesses or industries with high-quality training at a competitive cost.

So, finally, what is the future of the Kitimat Community Skills Centre? There is no doubt that it will survive, even though it is totally dependent on local industries and their volatile aluminum, pulp and paper, and chemical markets. To counter any roller-coaster effect, the Centre needs to demonstrate ongoing flexibility, not only in the

provision of its programming, but also in its management and staffing. This is one of the reasons its Manager and staff are all on contract.

The trend in industry is towards out-sourcing training, which is a positive sign for the Centre, and new opportunities for training will always arise, but only for those facilities that can demonstrate flexibility, quality and entrepreneurship.

The experience of the Kitimat Community Skills Centre demonstrates that telecentres can survive — and even thrive — in a traditional educational and training market where, at the present time, vision is often absent and entrepreneurship and enterprise are rarely encouraged.