

Debbie Lavallee

Debbie Lavallee was the Manager of Employee Services in the Human Resources (HR) Department of the City of Kingston when she started lobbying the need for workplace education. It took some time and a lot of work to get the go-ahead but eventually in 2005, the Senior Management at the City of Kingston agreed to set up a Joint Employee Education and Development (JEED) committee composed of Cupe and supervisory employees.

JEED's focus was on courses that would upgrade or give employees new skills - computers and keyboarding, along with a new initiative that allowed employees to complete their High School Diploma while working.

Thanks to Debbie's efforts, Robbie Snyder, an employee of the Kingston Transit city services for over 30 years, was the first to complete his Grade 12 in 2008 while working full time. The City's workplace learning program raised awareness on the need for essential skills.

We asked Debbie Lavallee to look back on those years, as she is now retired.

The initial project on workplace learning programs wasn't about literacy & essential skills. What made you think there was a need for that kind of training?

Debbie: In HR, we heard expressions of frustration around some of the academic qualifications in job postings. Employees didn't have the requested grade levels or specific skills for advancement or a job change. Also, we compiled an assessment questionnaire that showed that literacy issues were some of the top items identified by both employees and managers.

What do you think the city did great in terms of offer and impact on its workers?

Debbie: The city developed a partnership with a local high school that provided continuing education credit courses towards a High School



Diploma so that full-time workers could benefit from it. The Maturity credit assessment that the local high school offered helped employees who had lots of years of work and life experience. But I think that we also raised awareness on something that was not even on the radars...

Rob Snyder was the first employee to graduate, how was it perceived? Did it change anything?

Debbie: There was that nice article in the newspaper and it sure was a great example of a successful learning path for the employees and management. It was the demonstration that it could be done. I personally think that his successful completion had a lot to do with his wife's support. Results come of course directly from your efforts, but you need encouragement... Speaking of encouragement, I got a lot of that from Patricia Nutter who was involved in the project early on through CAMA. She was always there to encourage us to keep going. She became a mentor for me in this area of learning. Now she's involved with the

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Learning Champion Network of CUPE and she's still fully engaged and encouraging.

What are your thoughts on the future of basic training in a municipal context? Are you optimistic?

Debbie: I think it's a challenge; that nothing has been definitively won. And I think the union involvement is very important, very instrumental. Officers also have to get involved as active advocates. And one must remember that ultimately there needs to be continuous buy-in by senior management. People should realize that everybody wins when employees manage to get more skills, training and education.



CUPE Literacy Program

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