

Correctional Services Canada: Working the System with Learning

Kellye Whitney

With some 16,000 employees and 54 different correctional institutions spread from one side of the country to the other, the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) has a huge challenge creating and delivering training. It doesn't help matters that most of the institutions are 24x7 operations. If someone leaves the job to take training, he or she must be replaced, and there is usually an overtime cost.

In conjunction with its executive committee or senior decision making body, CSC has established four learning priorities: to identify and develop leaders at every level of the organization, focus on staff development and career development opportunities, comply with approved national training standards and support ongoing formal education for the workforce. "We try to have as much of our training as possible delivered on site," said Arden Thurber, director general learning and development, Correctional Service of Canada. "For example, we have to train a certain proportion of our staff on the proper and safe use of firearms. Rather than bring people to central locations to do that training, we train trainers who are based at the site and can deliver the training to small groups of individuals as they can be made available to us. When we can't do that, we assemble groups of people where there aren't enough in any one site to deliver the training that's required on a geographical clustering basis using a network of regional staff colleges."

CSC's primary learning delivery method is instructor-led training, but the organization has begun to experiment with a small number of e-learning products for use in more straight-forward knowledge transfer situations or as a refresher. "For example, it's important that our staff be aware of some key information about the transmission of infectious diseases, so we have created an e-learning module that they can access on our network," Thurber explained. "We're trying to move toward blended learning. We have a requirement that every new employee participate in an orientation program. That program has two components. There are about 24 hours of self-paced online learning material that they have to complete within their first six months of employment. Once they've completed that stage, we bring them together in groups in an instructor-led session to add new material and to give them the opportunity to talk about and do some exercises related to the material they learned online."

Part of the push for e-learning was motivated by cost savings, but Thurber said that increased accessibility was also an important consideration. "We have an 11-week long residential training program for every new correctional officer. It's quite a sacrifice to give up employment, be away from family, etc. for three months basically. If we can reduce that time so that their sacrifice is shorter, than we broaden our pool of potential recruits as well. The other thing we're coming to realize from our experience and reading the literature is that the ability to learn knowledge elements, it's just as effective using an e-learning model as it is a classroom-based model."

Thurber said that currently the CSC has trouble drawing a straight line between training and staff performance, but its 37 national training standards, which are updated and reviewed annually, help ensure that the right staff members get the right type of training at the right frequency in order to carry out their jobs. The standards also identify which programs are available to meet that training criteria. Each operational unit, institution or parole office then develops a plan that details which staff and how many employees

need to take which programs during that fiscal year. That plan and completion of training are tracked and reported centrally to CSC's national headquarters.

"The key is trying to make sure that our trainers understand fully why it is so essential that they follow the curriculum and reach the quality standards that we've established," Thurber said. "The more instructors understand those issues, the higher the level of compliance. Our business is public safety, delivering a corrections program that is consistent with the law of the country. We're monitored on those issues by a number of both formally structured organizations and by non-governmental organizations. Our measure is really the degree to which we're able to deliver our program in a manner that enhances the safety of both the staff and the offenders and complies with all of the laws of the country with respect to protecting the human rights of offenders, health standards, etc.

"We cannot draw that direct cause-and-effect relationship between programs and those kinds of results. We do know from anecdotal evidence that we've had institutional wardens who successfully managed disturbances in their institutions who said, 'You know, the training we took from the crisis management program was key to help us get through this situation.' We have some other proxy indicators. Over the last few years the number of serious incidents within our institutions has been lower than it traditionally was. The fact that we have been offering more training to more staff has to have contributed to that kind of outcome."

—Kellye Whitney, kellyew@clomedia.com

copyright 2002 - CLOmedia.com / Chief Learning Officer Magazine - MediaTec Publishing

Chief Learning Officer Magazine
<http://www.clomedia.com/>