

Occupation Specific Language Training

Meeting the needs of skilled immigrants by Sharon Aschaiek

The prospect of a better life drew Miriam Sanchez to Canada, but a unique educational opportunity has helped transform her dream into reality.

In 2007, Sanchez, her husband and their two children left El Salvador for Ontario, eventually setting in London. A marketing and administration professional with 20 years experience, Sanchez sought to continue her business career in Canada. After a year of looking for work and taking courses to improve her English, Sanchez landed a part-time office administration job in the Continuing Education department at Fanshawe College, and nine months later, shifted into a customer service position involving presenting academic upgrading options to potential students—but found herself grappling with her communication skills. "I interact with clients and constantly give and receive information, and I needed to improve my abilities in this area," Sanchez says.

Eventually, Sanchez came across a flyer at work promoting a new communication training initiative—one that would ultimately get her on the path to greater workplace success: Occupation Specific Language Training (OSLT). Led by Colleges Ontario and funded by Citizenship and Immigration Canada, OSLT is an innovative series of comprehensive workplace-specific second-language training courses offering newcomers specialized communication instruction to help them build their careers. "One of the most common barriers to newcomers moving up in an organization is a lack of occupation-specific language and workplace culture training," says Linda Franklin, president of Colleges Ontario. "We want people coming to Ontario to be able to fully participate in the employment opportunities that are out there, and the OSLT courses are designed to help them do that."

Launched in 2009 at 13 Ontario colleges, these free communication training courses feature both language and workplace culture instruction relevant to 22 occupations within six employment sectors: business, health sciences, human services, construction, automotive and technology. These courses feature general sector-specific communication training on topics such as Ontario workplace legislation and relevant regulatory or licensing bodies, as well as specialized information for individuals of particular occupational backgrounds.

Participants learn how to effectively interact with colleagues, clients and supervisors in person, by phone and by e-mail. Students also develop a strong understanding of the socio-linguistic dimensions of their occupation and its sector, and how to communicate effectively within their workplace culture. So far, about 700 people have taken part in the 60 pilot OSLT classes, and due to strong demand, an additional 54 classes were offered starting spring 2010.

Sanchez took part in the Workplace Communication Skills for Business course, and says she gained a strong understanding of how to better communicate in a variety of ways with customers and co-workers, and how to better fit into her workplace culture. "The course made a big difference in how I communicate at work," Sanchez says. "I feel much more confident in my ability to present an idea, participate in a meeting, and have work-related discussions. I'm more involved in the way we run our department, and am overall just better at my job."

Sharon Aschaiek (sharon@cocoamedia.ca) writes about education, employment, lifestyle and automotive trends and issues.



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