

## « STRATEGY »

# LEARNING FOUNDATION

Western University educates the educators—  
from the ground up

*By Tammy Burns / Photography by Jaime Hogge*

**“We ensure  
the balance is  
kept between  
our objectives  
and employees’  
interests”**

— Nancy Stewart,  
Western University

**A**t Western University in London, Ont., the students aren’t the only ones getting an education. For the past 10 years, the university has made learning top of mind for staff—thanks, in part, to its annual Staff and Leaders’ Conference held every February.

According to Nancy Stewart, learning and development facilitator with Western, the purpose behind the conference is threefold. One, the university wants employees to learn about trends in higher education and information relevant to their work. Two, it wants to build awareness among its staff about the work and research that Western does. And three, the conference is an opportunity for employees to take part in an event that creates a sense of community while enhancing their skill sets. Stewart explains that Western wants to create a culture of lifelong learning in its employees—a culture that encourages employees to engage not only with their employer but also with one another.

Over the years, workshop topics have included nutrition and fitness, mental

health, financial literacy, communication and leadership, as well as information sessions and campus tours showcasing ongoing research at Western.

Stewart describes the event as a “choose your own adventure,” in which employees are free to attend any session that they feel contributes to their personal and professional development. She says this enables more employees to take part, since they can structure their attendance around their availability. “It’s designed to be as accessible as possible for staff.”

### **By Employees, For Employees**

Western’s conference is unique in that it grew out of an employee-driven desire for more development opportunities. In the early 2000s, various staff groups at the university began to seek out more opportunities and funding for employee education and training. With the help of management and HR, an advisory team made up of representatives from unions, employee associations and Western’s communications and HR departments was created to put a formal plan in place. The inaugural conference took place in 2003, with approximately 700 employees in attendance. Today, the conference is

ingrained in Western’s culture, and employees are eager to participate—as attendees, organizers or volunteers.

Stewart says the conference’s success can be attributed largely to its grassroots nature and to the fact that employee feedback continues to be a driving factor in its design. “We work to ensure the balance is kept between our organizational objectives and employees’ interests when we brainstorm ideas for sessions,” she says. “We ensure there is application to our jobs and skills...but, at the same time, we allow themes to emerge that are of interest to employees. We ask them to consult with each of their groups and for people to bring forward ideas.”

“The employees themselves helped us formulate the concept and the agenda,” adds Louise Koza, Western’s director of HR, total compensation. “It’s much better than HR just theorizing about what might be nice or what skills *we* think [employees] need. We got that advisory team involved from the beginning.”

In addition to personal and professional development, there are also talks on issues and global trends in the education industry, both in general and specific to Western. The lineup changes from year to

year, based on feedback from both the advisory team and Western's broader employee base. "We try to be responsive to the agenda while, at the same time, being strategic with the major priorities we have on our plate," says Stewart.

### Developing Healthy Minds

This year's sessions included talks on environmental sustainability, intercultural communication and—a big concern for many employers—mental health.

Employee mental health is an issue in any workplace, but it takes on a new dynamic in a university setting. Post-secondary students are particularly vulnerable, so staff may be required to assist students in distress. According to a 2009 survey by the American College Health Association (which included six Ontario campuses), 46% of students said they had felt hopeless within the past 12 months, nearly 30% said they were so depressed that they were unable to function, and 6% said they had considered suicide at some point.

Western includes mental health as a topic in its conference lineup each year, but the university also extends that education beyond the conference. More than 350 employees have been trained in mental health first aid, and the training is available to staff across campus—from residence supervisors, to instructors, to custodians. By offering such training, Western hopes not only to provide early intervention but also to remove the stigma of mental illness—a stigma that often exists due to lack of awareness and education.

### Making Money Make Sense

Addressing lack of awareness also drives some of Western's other learning initiatives at the conference. The university learned with its attempts at teaching financial literacy that timing and context can make all the difference when it comes to creating a successful education program.

Western had been offering lunch-and-learn sessions focused on its DC plan since 1997, but employee interest wasn't there. Attendance was minimal, and it seemed to be the same people attending again and again. ("They were coming for the cookies," jokes Koza.) It was becoming increasingly difficult to get new employees

interested in learning about the plan.


To boost interest, the conference team decided to include a financial literacy session in its lineup. Even though it featured the same consultants and curriculum as the lunch-and-learns, the session had such a high enrollment that the team kept changing its location to accommodate the growing registrations. Koza and Stewart say the session's success can be attributed to the fact that they offered it at a time when employees were already excited about learning and, as a result, weren't afraid to ask questions.

"Part of our marketing strategy when we offered the session at the conference was to stress that it was basic-level information," including an explanation of DC plans in general, Stewart explains. "When you realize that there's a bunch of other people who actually don't understand the pension plan, there's a comfort level," adds Koza.

### Creating Community

With more than 11,000 employees, Western is a large employer, so creating a sense of community is critical to building employee engagement. The conference presents an opportunity for employees to connect with colleagues they might not know or have a chance to work with.

The conference also serves as a way to connect employees with the university. The site tours, where employees can visit selected campus research facilities to learn about the university's work—such as studies on the human body in a 3-D "anatorium" virtual reality theatre—are among the most popular sessions each year. "They're an opportunity for staff to see what our students are doing, and to gain a better appreciation for the university as a whole," notes Koza.

"It's become part of our culture," she says of the conference and of Western's overall emphasis on education. "Employees are excited about it. And when you see that level of employee engagement, there are a lot of benefits—everything from reduced absenteeism to improved productivity and application of the skills they've learned. They really want to learn. We've created a learning organization." 

Tammy Burns is associate editor of Benefits Canada.com. tammy.burns@rci.rogers.com



## Q&A

**CARA CARSON, WESTERN'S 2012 CONFERENCE CO-ORDINATOR, DESCRIBES THE TEAM EFFORT THAT GOES INTO CREATING A SUCCESSFUL EDUCATION PROGRAM**

### What challenges come from creating a conference based on an advisory team rather than HR or management?

It's a tricky balance at times: consulting and engaging a group in a planning process while being on a tight timeline and needing to forge ahead. We try to manage this proactively by creating a detailed project plan and ensuring that team meetings are well timed with decisions and consultations that need to happen.

### How do you develop a program that appeals to such a broad employee base?

When we are considering the type of speakers and session topics to offer at the conference, we try to provide a wide variety of opportunities for employees to choose from. Not every topic will be applicable to everyone, so having choice is important. We also seek feedback at the end of every conference through an online survey. This allows staff to submit topics of interest and to ensure their voice is part of the process.

### How do you encourage employees to engage in the conference (as volunteers or attendees) and maintain that engagement for the remainder of the year?

The conference really has become part of our culture. Even more powerful than our central marketing, word-of-mouth is what creates excitement for participating and volunteering for the conference. The best way for us to encourage positive word-of-mouth is by offering a high-quality conference experience. Delivering a conference doesn't need to be huge and complicated—getting high-quality speakers on relevant topics is the priority. That's the foundation to build on.