



National Accreditation Program: Assuring quality of education in the supply chain

By June Yee

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How do we know industry needs are being fulfilled by the training that's available to prospective workers in the supply chain? At the same time, how can we be sure educational standards for Canada's labour force are meeting the challenges of one of the country's most-essential sectors?

Established by the Canadian Supply Chain Sector Council, the National Accreditation Program was designed to reflect industry needs and the best practices of educators in supply chain-related topics. The program was created jointly with CSA Standards and with significant input from stakeholders in the supply chain sector.

The National Accreditation Program recognizes educational offerings in supply chain-related topics that meet the complete set of national standards developed by the Council. These standards are based on national and international best practices and principles, with criteria that span course/program needs assessment, design, development, delivery and student evaluation.

"The supply chain industry has historically been fragmented because it grew [from the] bottom up," says Scott Hadley, who heads the graduate program in Business Process Management at Sheridan Institute of Technology and Advanced Learning. "Having the accreditation program in place, we now have a place where recognized programs are centrally located."

Educational programs offered by colleges, which have a built-in focus on helping students become employable, fit naturally with the goals of the NAP, says Hadley. "Accreditation differentiates us. We get students and prospective students finding us because of it," he says. With an offering that's grounded in the NAP, the school now demonstrates to potential students the program's ability to meet an industry standard, according to Hadley.

Sheridan's Business Process Management Program, which provides management-level training, was one of the first seven educational offerings to be accredited through the NAP following the inaugural round of submissions in October 2009.

Having an accredited program also boosts Sheridan's visibility among its peers and may even play a role in attracting potential faculty, according to Hadley. He sees accreditation as one way to identify a "talent pool" at the managerial level of the supply chain.

Educators aren't the only ones looking to the NAP to tackle some critical workforce issues. As Director, Business Solutions at Mississauga Ont.-based Pivotal HR Solutions, Shelley Adams knows the human-resource challenges facing small and mid-sized supply chain businesses in Canada today.

The days are gone, says Adams, when new workers could expect to be trained and mentored on the job, and employers could rely on long-term commitments from employees. "We have more of a transient work force now, and companies may not have the time or resources in-house to provide the necessary training, so employees have to come in more job-ready than ever," she says.

According to Adams, in this changing work environment, the NAP is helping to address two separate but related gaps in the supply chain sector—the ability of employers to assess the job-readiness of applicants and, on the part of students and other job-seekers, confidence in knowing their training and job skills meet on-the-job demands and enhance employability.

These priorities are increasingly pressing given the need for skills and knowledge related to technology use and occupational safety. “Now, if someone comes in [with accredited training], you know they’re work-ready and their training is applicable to what they are going to be doing,” says Adams.

On another level, “It’s important to engage students at an early stage so they have a better understanding of their career choices,” says Adams. Locally, Adams has helped spearhead programs that further the development of school curricula that align with the real-world skills demanded by the supply chain sector. “With supply chain being one of fastest-growing sectors in Canada, it only makes sense to build a curriculum that works,” she says.

Importantly, however, the NAP goes beyond school-based education to encompass the workplace training offered by employers in the supply chain. For material-handling jobs, in particular, accreditation helps ensure high-quality, consistent training programs for the most-visible roles in supply chain facilities. The NAP was developed with input from material-handling-equipment manufacturers, users and trainers, and experts in material handling are well represented on the CSCSC’s Accreditation Review Panel.

“Training is essential to ensure the safety of everyone in the workplace,” says Barry Coish, an 18-year veteran of the supply chain sector. Currently, as director of program development and senior material-handling instructor at Liftow Ltd. Instructional Services, he oversees training programs for various applications and equipment in material handling. Coish participated in development of the National Accreditation Program.

Without the accreditation program, companies have no assurances that training providers are upholding the standards necessary for workers to operate expertly and safely in the industry, says Coish. While Liftow’s training programs have not changed in light of accreditation, he says there are nonetheless important reasons to embrace the NAP.

“Being trained to a common standard of expertise ensures workers have the necessary skills to operate their particular applications and equipment,” says Coish. What’s more, he says, for employers, accreditation eliminates the need for a “buyer-beware” approach when it comes to the training programs they provide to their workers.

Whether in a college setting or in the workplace itself, the NAP works to guide further development of more-targeted training programs and courses. At the same time, the potential to enhance the productivity of Canada’s labour force means there are even greater benefits than those that can be realized by individual supply chain companies. According to Sheridan’s Hadley, the NAP is destined to improve the supply chain sector in a very fundamental way. “It creates a community not only of education providers but also for employers. It’s going to create awareness and cohesiveness for the supply chain sector.”

Accreditation: How-To

Submission of training and educational offerings for accreditation is voluntary but, as human-resources professional Shelley Adams points out, “Workers who come out with in-demand skills and recognized training are going to be that much further ahead.”

Post-secondary institutions, associations and private training schools are eligible to submit their programs and courses for review through the National Accreditation Program. Both individual courses and full programs may be submitted for review by the Council’s Accreditation Review Panel.

The Panel meets four times a year to consider submissions received by the Council during the preceding three months.