



## National Occupational Standards for the Supply Chain: A framework for best practices

*By June Yee*

**September 2010**

In a sector that underpins the economy and involves about 745,000 workers in Canada, new national occupational standards are helping to ensure safe, high-quality services in the many roles that comprise the supply chain.

The development of standards was undertaken in 2009 by the Canadian Supply Chain Sector Council (CSCSC), an organization with a mandate to address workforce challenges in the sector. “The supply chain covers most private and public industries,” says Kevin Maynard, executive director of the CSCSC. “There was a need for a framework to guide career seekers in terms of the skill-sets they need, and to help employers in their human-resources processes.”

Occupational standards describe what a person in a particular occupation must know and be able to do to be considered competent at that occupation. Standards are usually organizational-based documents that define performance expectations, structure and processes, and also address service-provider education, organizational behaviour and system requirements.

Amid emerging technologies and an expanding base for distribution and manufacturing, the need for national occupational standards was reflected in recommendations of a 2005 study that touched all aspects of the supply chain—from employers, organized labour and learning-system providers to career seekers and those already employed in the sector.

Development of a skilled and knowledge-based workforce—and a related need for employees with the suitable skills and competencies—emerged as a priority across the sector, says Maynard.

The CSCSC’s innovative approach to standards development has been efficient and purposeful. “The traditional path to developing standards is very time-consuming on the part of the developer and on the part of the participants, and can be very expensive,” says Maynard.

Instead, the CSCSC fast-tracked the process through a best-practices approach developed in conjunction with CSA Standards, the successful candidate of a request for proposals.

The CSCSC first looked to stakeholders to prioritize its work, identifying seven functional areas and 26 occupations of the sector, and focusing first on occupations with the greatest need for support related to job descriptions, competency profiles and job-performance tools to help address workforce shortages. These are generally high-demand occupations and those with a current need for renewed training or skills development—needs that may have been driven by recent technological changes, for example.

Then, using a model based on standards development in other jurisdictions and for other applications, standards were developed and then validated through consultations with key stakeholders from across the country.

The first phase of the project, completed in 2009, led to 15 national occupational standards. Each occupational standard includes required qualifications in terms of education, training and related work experience, a list of tasks in the role, tools and technologies used on the job, a catalogue of the knowledge, skills and personal attributes needed to succeed in the position, and an essential-skills profile. The second phase, underway in 2010, aims to develop standards for the remaining occupations in the sector.

To date, the CSCSC has used the standards in the development of its National Accreditation Program, which was established to recognize supply chain education and training programs.

Further, a pilot to test functional use of the standards focused on human-resources programs and practices for Mississauga-based Centric Retail Logistics. Centric applied the standards to enhance its telephone screening process, using a pre-interview checklist as the initial step in the recruitment process. Based on the standards, questions were developed to probe a candidate's basic suitability for a given position. The result is that better candidates make it to the interview stage and, consequently, demands have eased on the company's human-resources department and hiring managers.

Indeed, a refined hiring process and more-focused job descriptions are more necessary than ever given recent advancements in the supply chain, according to Pat Carroll, general manager with Manitoulin Warehousing and Distribution, a division of Manitoulin Group of Companies. "The criteria to work in a warehouse are different today. You need to have some computer skills, you need to be fairly literate, and you need to be a forward thinker," says Carroll, who has worked in third-party logistics for 18 years.

With guidance from the CSCSC, Mississauga-based Manitoulin used the standards to develop comprehensive job descriptions for the 13 positions in the company's warehouse operations.

The process of crafting the job descriptions began with an operational perspective from management but, importantly, gathered input from employees on everything from function to language. The firm's employees have been crucial to the project's success, according to Carroll. "We got their buy-in and, going forward, I believe it will improve performance," says Carroll, who expects employees to benefit greatly from having a full understanding of their job requirements.

Ines Nishimura, senior manager of learning and development for Oakville-based Accuristix, sees similar potential benefits from the new standards. "I can see these standards being especially helpful to employees looking to advance within the company—they would know exactly what's required of them, including what courses they need, and that empowers them," says Nishimura. With 23 years of experience in third-party logistics, Nishimura is responsible for the company's training, including licensing and regulatory compliance. "There are more details and less "legalese," says Nishimura. She points out the standards could provide a useful point of reference for managers and employees working toward certification.

It comes as no surprise that the new standards are expected to be used by learning system providers, such as universities and colleges, as they refine their programs related to the supply chain.

As for Manitoulin, the company's now succinct and well-written job descriptions will be used to develop training plans for its 35 employees and help to ensure that prospective and future employees have the required qualities. "In warehousing, we've come a long way and these new standards help clarify that," says Carroll. "With the standards, we can focus and weed candidates down to where they really need to be and to the credentials that we're looking for."

The new standards enable functional excellence in the broader supply chain, according to the CSCSC's Kevin Maynard. "Without them, there's a loss of productivity, loss of job satisfaction, and a mismatch between skills, ability and knowledge of employers and employees. Occupational standards provide a pathway to make that match more efficient and more productive for both."

### **New National Occupational Standards for supply chain roles support:**

- *Employers*, in developing job descriptions, targeting recruitment and selection efforts, creating benchmarks for evaluating employee performance, and planning education and training for employees
- *Employees*, in identifying skills and knowledge needed for particular occupations, assessing their abilities and training needs, and identifying clear career paths
- Educators and trainers, in understanding employers' needs, and designing training and educational programs to meet them

### **Material Handler Skills Upgrading Project**

The Canadian Supply Chain Sector Council's focus on skills upgrading for material handlers was spurred by research that identified five types of equipment that account for 70 per cent of sales of material-handling equipment in Canada.

Newly established standards in material handling apply to: electric motor lift truck operator; internal combustion engine truck operator; mobile aerial work platform operator; rough terrain lift truck operator; and work station crane operator.

At the same time, material handling has been identified as an area of the supply chain where there is a significant demand for qualified workers and great potential to recruit workers entering the supply chain sector for the first time.

Through the Material Handler Skills Upgrading Project, the CSCSC has undertaken to provide the tools needed by the sector to define the occupational, training and certification standards to ensure high-quality and safe material handling within the sector. In particular, for forklift/reach-truck operation, a critical need has been identified to standardize certification requirements on a national basis.

Ultimately, through a systematic approach, the project will promote greater knowledge of the entry-level career opportunities in the sector and may even facilitate access to the sector. For employers, the project may support recruitment and retention of workers with nationally recognized skills.

As well, by identifying the essential skills required for material-handling occupations and the training providers whose training curricula reflect those skills, the program will establish an accreditation framework for training providers and promote this accreditation program within the sector.