

Recorder/Paul Franz

Harold Green, president of Heat-Fab, says that helping the non-English-speaking workers learn the language will, in the long run, prove to be a plus for the business.

# Learning English on the job

## Business sees the benefits of helping employees with the language

By **RICHIE DAVIS**  
Recorder Staff

**TURNERS FALLS** — When Tatiana Seleznea St. Hillaire arrived from the Ukraine five years ago, she juggled English classes by day and worked by night. "It was really hard," she remembers. "I didn't understand anything, I couldn't do anything because I was so tired." Now, as a team leader at Heat-Fab, she's enrolled in an intermediate course in English for Speakers of Other Languages for on-the-job training of a different kind. "I needed more grammar," the 30-year-old factory worker says, explaining that part of her work as a team leader involves

writing notes for fellow workers, "so I'm not embarrassed to leave something, so I know it will still be correct. If I know more actually correct words, if I can spell more correctly and write more correctly, that is my goal." For Heat-Fab, the 28-year-old maker of metal chimneys, the goal is to help the 20 percent of its workers who are from the former Soviet Union, along with other non-native English speakers. The Montague Industrial Park company recently was named one of three "Workforce Development Leaders" by the Franklin Hampshire Regional Employment Board, for the English classes and quality improvement training.

"They're very good workers, very good people," said Harold Green, Heat-Fab president, of the roughly 30 workers in the two levels of intermediate English classes being offered at the factory by the Center for New Americans. "As they were becoming the logical choices for lead people, team leaders and things like that, we felt need the need to give them a little boost in their English proficiency. They love it." Employment Board Director Patricia Crosby said she sees a trend of foreign-born workers in the area's manufacturing jobs, especially their willingness to work second-

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# English: Business helps its employees with the language

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and third-shift. "They're very reliable and motivated workers," she said. "Our concern is that they can get stuck there. They need English to advance."

Heat-Fab, which hired a number of workers from the former Soviet republics after a 2004 fire gutted Kimball's Laundry in Greenfield, is one of two factories in the two-county area that have contracted with CNA to offer language classes. The other is in Easthampton.

"Heat-Fab has been very proactive," Crosby said. "It's a matter of looking ahead and investing in people."

The two-hour classes, offered three times a week, are tailored for what the workers see, said Green, whose parents founded the company two years before he joined it in 1980.

"Whether it's getting food out of the cafeteria machines or showing them how to say, 'Give me a wide-get,' there's a lot of technical stuff: How do I punch in, or swipe my badge or record that this material's not working well?"

St. Hillaire's mother, Walentyna Seleznea, has worked at the company for 1½ years and in the more rudimentary class learns to better understand what her supervisor expects from her.

"It's very hard to understand what the team leader is telling her to do," St. Hillaire says. "For her, it's absolutely great because right now she's learning what is the meaning of seam welding or pipe expanding, because we're not using that in the Ukraine or the Russian language. They give them the vocabulary, what they can explain to the team leader or the team leader can explain to them."

Green said that the classes, offered for the past month and half, run for 14 weeks — 28 weeks for the more rudimentary sessions that are two-thirds of the ESOL students are taking—for the roughly 20 percent of the workers who are not native speakers.

"For us to carve a chunk out of

bear that pain temporarily." The training, which the company has just begun offering factory workers, after providing it for a little over a year to about 30 managers, is in team building and cross training so workers can cover for one another.

Tapping into a \$222,661 state Workforce Training grant—which also pays CNA for its language classes—provides what Green calls "a perfect opportunity to make our employees better, which is better for themselves, for future employers and for us."

The year of training for managers, Green said, has resulted in "lots little tweaks around in what

we do and how we do it." But he added, "Whether it's saved us any money or not, it's making things work better and making people feel better about their job. That's more important than the bottom line at this point."

Yet Heat-Fab has done well, tapping into the same energy-efficiency market that started the business off when airtight wood stoves became popular in the aftermath of the mid-1970s jump in oil prices.

With an expanding market for high-efficiency, gas-fired water heaters and boilers—which now accounts for two-thirds of Heat-Fab's stainless-steel venting system business—the company has grown from three workers to more than

115 today, has than \$12 million in annual sales to customers across the continent.

"We had a very good year last year, and it's looking very good this year, and it's because of the cost of energy," says Green. "When someone's upgrading from a conventional water boiler or heater, they're likely to put in a high-efficiency unit to save money. If they upgrade past a certain level, they have to use a special gas vent. That's what we produce."

Having new water heaters and boilers that are 15 percent more efficient than what you could have bought when the company started out has kept Heat-Fab cooking. Next year will mark a decade since

the factory moved from Haywood Street in Greenfield to a Montague home more than three times larger.

After watching the air-pollution issue dramatically slow the growth in wood stove sales, that chimney market has been essentially flat for the company, Green said. Without adding the high-efficiency venting systems, he said, "we would still be in Greenfield, with 30 employees happily doing that. We would certainly not be employing nearly 120 people."


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