UNION LEADERSHIP IN ACTION

How SMART 47 is Helping Apprentices Succeed Through Cognitive Accessibility

The Sheet Metal Workers' International Association (SMWIA) Local 47, the Ottawa local of SMART Canada, is taking a neuro-inclusive approach to address apprenticeship challenges.

Through a recent project with Open, SMART Local 47 Training Centre is demonstrating how labour organizations can improve the success of their apprentices by removing cognitive accessibility barriers from their training and evaluation.

Co-designing Training that Fits the Trade

Looking to improve the success rate of apprentices, instructors at SMART Local 47 Training Centre recognized that learning variability amongst their trainees meant that not all of them were thriving in classroom or examination settings.

"As someone deeply engaged in apprenticeship training, certification pathways, and workforce development within the construction trades, I have seen firsthand the challenges faced by individuals with cognitive and learning differences," remarked Stuart Simpson, Training Director at Smart Local 47 Training Centre. "The construction industry relies on a diverse, skilled, and safety-focused workforce, yet traditional training and assessment models often create unnecessary barriers for capable individuals who learn and process information differently. This initiative directly addresses that gap."

An assessment of current practices uncovered opportunities to improve the cognitive accessibility of training materials and learning environments. Working side-by-side with the instructors, materials were co-designed to improve clarity and comprehension; classrooms were reimagined and rearranged to suit different learning styles; and teaching techniques were modified to improve outcomes for students of all cognitive abilities.

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OPEN Collaboration for Cognitive Accessibility

From Theory to Practice: Training Union Instructors

Building on this foundation, Open delivered customized cognitive accessibility training to SMART Local 47 trainers and administrators. The sessions focused on:

- Cognitive variabilities and safe disclosure
- iIclusive teaching practices
- Inclusive evaluation methods

Each training session combined evidence-based content on cognitive accessibility with trade-specific examples adapted directly from SMART Local 47's existing training materials. The strategies shared in the training were designed so that the trainers could apply them immediately in their classrooms and training settings.

"We didn't train instructors on how to accommodate the needs of individual students," explained Dr. Virginie Cobigo, Executive Director of Open. "We trained them on how to teach and evaluate in a way that removes cognitive accessibility barriers for every student, while still keeping material trade-specific and highly relevant to their apprentices."

A resource sheet was also developed by Open to support continued learning beyond the training sessions.

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Listening, Learning, and Refining

Feedback was an important part of the training and was built into every stage. The trainers were required to provide both verbal and written feedback after each training session. Overall responses were highly positive, with trainers highlighting the value of trade-specific examples and applied learning activities.

At the same time, the trainers also identified key areas for further development, including adding content on:

- accommodation rights, duty to accommodate and reasonable accommodations,
- the impact of cognitive disabilities on learning and how to support learners, perhaps providing different profiles of learners.
- identifying apprentices who face cognitive accessibility barriers, and
- how to foster safe disclosure early in the learning journey.

In the end, all training materials were revised in response to this feedback and formally approved by SMART Local 47 trainers to ensure a continued collaborative approach.

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What Was Learned

Several valuable lessons emerged from this collaboration.

First, there is a confirmed demand for cognitive accessibility training across the building construction trades. Trainers were vocal in expressing the need and value for cognitive accessibility training.

They also underscored the importance of even more concrete, practical guidance on accommodations and accessibility.

Lastly, trainers emphasized that longer, in-person training with hands-on activities and implementation coaching would help strengthen even more the skill transfer on cognitive accessibility.

“The work being done by Open aligns closely with the realities of today's construction workforce,” Simpson observed. “By promoting inclusive learning strategies, accessible training materials, and practical supports, this initiative helps ensure that workers are evaluated on their skills, knowledge, and competence-rather than on their ability to navigate systems that were not designed with cognitive diversity in mind.”

Looking ahead, scaling this work will require thoughtful planning, including sustainable funding, clear implementation strategies, and early adopters who are willing to pilot expanded and carefully curated training models created by Open.

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Audrey Hodgins is a third-year PhD student in Clinical Psychology at the University of Ottawa. Her research focuses on cognitive accessibility in the workplace, with a particular interest in inclusive practices that support individuals with cognitive disabilities in employment and vocational training settings. She holds a Master’s degree in Experimental Psychology from Carleton University, where she conducted research on the workplace mistreatment of individuals with disabilities, and a Bachelor’s degree in Psychology from the University of Guelph.

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