

ESL Training Boosts Morale and Productivity at Dental-Device Manufacturer in Lakewood, NJ

Emiliano Zuleta, Joan Aquino and Aleida Ramirez are not simply “good” employees.

Employed by SS White, a dental-device maker in Lakewood, Ocean County, they are confident, highly engaged, and proud to be part of the SS White family-owned business.

With its white cinderblock walls, SS White from the outside looks like thousands of other small manufacturing plants that dot the state.

Step inside, however, and you will find many others like Zuleta, Aquino and Ramirez. SS White enjoys remarkable longevity among its more than 200 employees. The average tenure of production workers is 28 years – so the company must be doing something right.

And a big part of what SS White has been doing right recently is offering employees who have emigrated from other countries on-site instruction in English as a second language (ESL). The instructor, Sylvia Shottinger, teaches the ESL classes as part of Ocean County College’s Business Engagement program managed by Michael Forcella.

The grant-funded training is provided without tuition charge to SS White or its employees thanks to the NJBIA Basic Skills Workforce Training Program, run by the NJ Community College Consortium for Workforce and Economic Development. The program – funded by the NJ Department of Labor and Workforce Development for the past 11 years – has delivered training in ESL, Microsoft Office products, written and verbal communications, leadership, teamwork and many other skills to more than 125,000 New Jersey workers over the past 10 years.

Dentists worldwide use SS White’s high-quality dental burs, the carbide tips of dental drills. Their burs are made within exceedingly high tolerances of up to a 10,000th of an inch or more. Computer-controlled machines do most of the cutting, but the multi-step production process also requires enormous human skill and concentration. Precise communication is a vital part of the mix.

Gregg Oliver, the company’s HR Director, said the on-site classes held recently in ESL I and II, and the certificate



(Left to right) Joan Aquino, Emiliano Zuleta, and Aleida Ramirez are three of 40 employees who have taken ESL classes at the SS White dental-device production plant in Lakewood, NJ.

ceremonies that followed, have instilled great pride and confidence in the company’s 40 ESL graduates, among them Zuleta, Aquino and Ramirez. Employees are grateful for the instruction, which will open new job opportunities for many.

Zuleta, who makes quality-control inspections of finished burs, said the ESL classes have given him a big shot of confidence. “Every day I learn something new, I speak more English and improve my communication,” he said, adding with a comic flourish of his hands: “No more body language!”

Next on the training agenda? What could be more logical than a class in Spanish in the Workplace? Seventeen employees have already signed up, eager to learn Spanish to further narrow the language gap at SS White.

“It’s been a game changer, working with these folks (at Ocean County College),” HR Director Oliver said, adding he has observed notable improvements in employee morale, productivity and performance. “Everybody is so engaged now; the level of employee engagement is huge.”



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