After being laid off three times, Vinod Shukla, 54, knew he’d need more training to find a lasting position in the workforce. Shukla is no stranger to fresh starts, having moved to Canada in 2006 from his native home in India.

Shukla was a mechanical instrument technologist in his home country. He learned his trade prior to the introduction of computer-aided design and manufacturing. “I ran my own gear-cutting business and supervised six machinists,” he says. “But when computers came along, I could not compete and could not improve my skills because I lived in a small village without access to training.”

It was the trigger for a bold step. “My brother who lives in Ottawa suggested I close the business in India to start a new life in Canada, and that is what I did.”

Shukla settled in Waterloo, Ont., and worked in a number of companies, including RIM, where he was an electronics assembler. But he was unable to ride the slowdowns and was eventually laid off from each job. Retraining in MasterCAM and AutoCAD programs at Conestoga College helped upgrade his skills. It also helped him secure a full-time position with Ontario Drive & Gear (ODG), a thriving manufacturing company that has tripled its business over the last five years.
Conestoga College offers a variety of retraining opportunities for mature workers, such as computer literacy and AZ licence training to drive commercial trucks, says Sherri Tryon, Conestoga’s manager of workforce access programs and career centre.

Such courses are often funded through federal and/or provincial government programs such as the Ontario Employment Service (EOES) or the Targeted Initiative for Older Workers (TIOW) programs, she says. EOES is focused on the under- or unemployed of all ages and is funded by the Ontario government. TIOW is a federal-provincial cost-shared program for unemployed workers aged 55 to 64 living in communities with less than 250,000 population, high unemployment and reliance on a single industry. Under certain circumstances, those between age 50 and 54 may qualify.

In addition to learning opportunities, participants in the TIOW program receive peer-to-peer networking with those in the same age-demographic. “Mature workers go through a different transition process than younger people who lose their job,” says Tryon. “For those over 50, it’s similar to grief. They may have been thinking about retirement: Looking at the next career phase was something they hadn’t planned for. It requires a whole mindset change, and that’s why participants tell us the peer-to-peer support is so important.”

For regions of the country where labour is in short supply, mature workers are an important element of the workforce. While older workers across Canada average about a third of the working population, they make up approximately 43 per cent of workers in Saskatchewan, says Alistair MacFadden, the province’s assistant deputy minister of the economy. “Our ability to retrain workers and keep them active is critical for Saskatchewan,” he says. “We expect about two-thirds of our workforce to retire over the next decade. In anticipation, we need to ensure that there is a good transition of knowledge and skills – it’s about succession management.”

For Shukla, it wasn’t only his new skills that impressed the hiring team at ODG, says Joel Wright, president of the company’s gear division. “His innate knowledge of math and geometry along with his ability to speak the language of gears made him an excellent fit,” he says. “When people come from an old world to a new world, they bring a lot of work and life experiences that have been gained along the way – those experiences are invaluable.”

The over 50 group bring a work ethic that is hard to find, adds Carol Gorenc, ODG’s human resources manager. “They’re grounded, reliable and have a respect for our business – and they’re role models for younger workers. Age is certainly not a deterrent here.”
Machine operator Vinod Shukla sets up a gear inspection machine at the Ontario Drive & Gear factory in New Hamburg, Ont., September 5, 2014.

Photograph by: Ron Scheffler, Postmedia News