

Literacy Matters:

Make it Work!

Workplace Literacy and Essential Skills
in Saskatchewan

Low literacy impacts personal growth and economic well-being

Labour market outcomes are clearly linked to the literacy skills of working age Canadians. Those with greater knowledge and skills are more likely to experience economic success than those with less.

Improved literacy skills among workers bring about numerous benefits, both to the individual worker

“...the need for investment in literacy and essential skills has never been greater...”

and to the organization. With a shrinking workforce, ever-increasing technological demands, unparalleled competition domestically and globally, and changes in the mix of the labour market - including

increased immigration - the need for investment in literacy and essential skills has never been greater.

The Canadian Business Task Force on Literacy estimated

that low literacy levels cost businesses \$4.1 billion annually. They found that \$1.6 billion was lost due to workplace accidents and \$2.5 billion was lost in productivity. Yet employers are spending an average of only 2% of their training, learning and development budgets on literacy skills development.

Just a 1% increase in average

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national literacy rates would create an \$18 billion dollar increase in Canada's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). (GDP is a way of measuring the value of all that is produced in Canada in a year.) Estimates suggest that a 1% increase in national literacy levels could increase

productivity by 2.5%

The benefits of investing in workplace literacy include increased workplace safety, enhanced employment opportunities, an efficient and productive workplace, and a more vibrant and engaged workforce.

This collection of resources will help to introduce workplace and essential skills, as well as offer ways to incorporate these skills into your business, organization or workplace. For further information, contact the Saskatchewan Literacy Network. (See back page for contact information.)



Essential skills are a set of nine foundational skills that are required before developing additional, more specific skills. These essential skills allow us to perform on-the-job tasks, help us adapt to change, and enable us to fully participate within our workplace and our community.

The nine essential skills are:

Reading Text

- Notes, letters, memos, manuals, books.

Document Use

- Graphs, lists, blueprints, clocks, equipment gauges, computer screens

Numeracy

- Using numbers and thinking in quantitative terms.

Writing

- Filling out forms, typing on a computer.

Oral Communication

- Giving and exchanging thoughts and information using speech.

Working with Others

- The ability to work cooperatively with others to carry out tasks.

Thinking Skills

- Problem solving, decision making, planning and organizing.

Computer Use

- The ability to comfortably use a computer to a certain degree of variety and complexity.

Continuous Learning

- The ongoing acquisition of skills and knowledge necessary to continuously grow.

*From Human Resources and Skills Development Canada

The Nine Essential Skills

1 Reading Text

2 Document Use

3 Numeracy

4 Writing

5 Oral Communication

6 Working with Others

7 Thinking Skills

8 Computer Use

9 Continuous Learning



What's In It For Me?

Employer buy-in for workplace and essential skills programs

10 years ago, one help wanted ad may have garnered 50 applicants. Today, the numbers are reversed, and most employers don't have the luxury to pick and choose through a list of applicants for those with the most developed skills. In today's competitive job market, employers should consider hiring an employee based on their potential, if not current, skill level.

Canadian businesses who adjust to a new way of thinking about their role in employee training stand to benefit immensely. Maximizing the skills of their work force allows a company to remain competitive and continue to grow despite the

demands of today's labour market.

If an employee is interested in advancing their workplace skills, and a business is willing to take on a greater portion of the education of its employees, there is a payoff for both parties. Paid, on-site workplace and essential skills training can:

- Lessen interpersonal issues among employees
- Build employee communication skills
- Increase long-term staff retention
- Decrease days missed due to personal crises
- Increase employee loyalty
- Increase employee productivity



**12 Workplace Literacy
Program Design
Elements Necessary for
Success**

Saskatchewan's labour shortage, combined with a rising level of complexity in emerging technology, has created an interesting challenge for businesses. Workplace learning programs provide a way to meet this challenge by not only enhancing employees' ability to succeed at work, but by providing an opportunity to become more engaged in their communities and more secure in their personal lives. Businesses win with increased employee loyalty and staff retention while meeting the needs of a labour market that calls for stronger employee skills. In the long run, these programs can reduce overall training costs.

Vecima Networks, a communications manufacturing plant located in Saskatoon, offers a 10-module Personal Development training program to all of their employees. It focuses on interpersonal skills, communication and team building. Training is paid for and offered during work hours. The response to this training has been overwhelming, says Debora Rutherford, Employee Development Coordinator.

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Implementing a successful workplace literacy and/or essential skills program is a great way to build a cohesive, skilled staff team, but it takes some forethought. The Conference Board of Canada undertook a 2-year research project entitled *Profiting from Literacy: Creating a Sustainable Workplace Literacy Program*. The following list highlights the key elements required to design a successful workplace literacy program:

1. Create a learning environment: Creating a safe, secure and positive environment that values employees' existing skills will instil confidence and help ensure that learning can take place. When employees feel valued, they will find it easier to address any gaps in their literacy or essential skills.

2. Recognize literacy needs: Use a needs assessment to understand the gaps that may exist within an organization and the skill level of employees. Be sure to convey that determining their skill level is not a reflection of their abilities so much as it is a measuring rod for the company's need to provide further training.

Consider partnering with experts in literacy and adult learning for the assessment stage. They can provide invaluable information on how to move forward in the most positive and respectful way.

3. Plan before initiating: Management must present a unified voice in underscoring the importance of workplace literacy and employee learning and be prepared to represent this position with employees. "We spent a year in meetings determining the issues we needed to address," says Rutherford, "but we wouldn't have figured it out ourselves." Consulting with READ Saskatoon and Radius Community Centre for Education and Employment Training was key to planning a successful program.

4. Find adequate funding and support: Be ready for

the challenge of balancing need with support. Seek community partnerships so that in-kind donations such as classroom space can be made available.

5. Make decision-making inclusive: Include representatives from all groups affected by the program to ensure buy-in, including management and participants.

6. Design an effective curriculum: Make sure that the curriculum, the instructor and the program delivery are all well-matched to the learning needs of the organization and the participants. "Our expertise is in electronics, not adult learning," says Rutherford. Input from READ Saskatoon and Radius

Community Centre was crucial for the program's success.

7. Select the right instructor: Be sure he/she encourages and engages learners, and

understands the needs of the workplace and the individuals.

8. Use the best delivery mix: There are many factors to consider here, including time, budget, and learning styles. Regularly assess the effectiveness of the delivery method you choose.

Understanding the variety of learning styles was a huge factor in the changes Rutherford has seen at Vecima. "Learning about learning styles really took us to the next level," she says.

9. Market and sell the program: Entice participants' enrolment by showing how their efforts will be valued and what they stand to gain. Ongoing marketing of the program to current and future participants throughout will provide ongoing program interest and long-term sustainability. Since management typically controls budget, be sure to keep managers aware of the need and benefit of an employee literacy program.

10. Engage supervisors: Supervisors play a vital role in encouraging employees to participate; keep them engaged and involved in decisions.

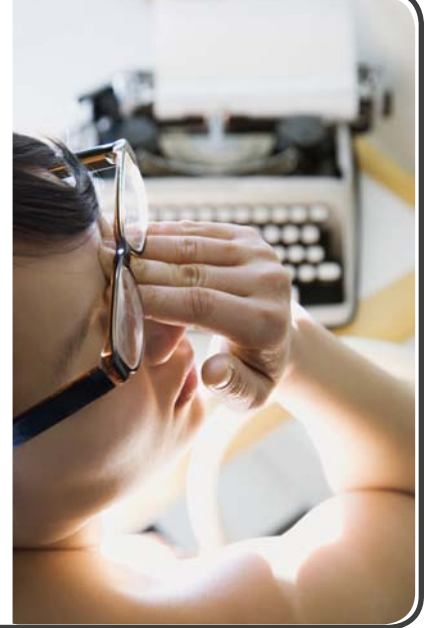
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"...this is not just altruistic - there are real benefits for the company..."

Ten Tips for Better Communication

1. Slow down your speech and pronounce words clearly and correctly.
2. Vary your pitch, tone and volume to emphasize key words or sentences.
3. Be conscious of your speech to avoid filler words.
4. Organize your thoughts and ideas before speaking.
5. Do not interrupt when someone else is speaking.
6. Respond non-verbally to show understanding and interest when communicating.
7. Make eye contact when listening or talking to people.
8. Ask questions until you are sure you understand what is being said.
9. Use common words rather than technical terms or acronyms to communicate.
10. Maintain focus on your key message when presenting to a group.

Using Plain Language in the Workplace



Today more than ever, it's important to use clear, straightforward language in workplace communication – from posted signs and safety manuals to contracts and policy and procedure documents. Plain language offers a style of writing that is simple, direct, and written with the reader in mind. Incorporating plain language into the workplace doesn't have to be daunting. Here are some tips to get you started:

- Start small. Look for the easiest item that could affect the most change with the least effort. Could the sign stating 'no food or drink allowed' include a picture of a coffee and sandwich with a line stroked through them? How about the sign that reads, 'please ring bell for service'? Signage is often the easiest place to start.
- Keep the message's original intent: Plain language does not change the message or disrespect the reader by "dumbing it down."
- Avoid unnecessary technical jargon: Sure, specific technical terms are required knowledge at almost every workplace. Be careful that internal jargon is kept to a minimum and that any required technical terms are explained, not assumed.
- Avoid slang: Informal terms that make sense within a conversational, cultural context may not be understood by all.
- Don't assume you don't need to use it: There is a strong stigma attached to low literacy, and those who struggle with it often develop very inventive ways of hiding it. Approximately 40% of Saskatchewan's population struggles with low literacy. Chances are, some of your employees do as well.

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11. Encourage employee participation: Some adult learners have had negative experiences with formal learning. Encourage participants throughout the entire process. Be clear that this experience will help them build needed skills, and give examples. Entice employees before the learning begins, during the process and after the fact to sustain interest and gain momentum for improving employee skills long-term.

12. Evaluate programs realistically: Assess the program continuously and be ready to make improvements where necessary. Evaluations that truly show impacts (such as changes in behaviour and job performance) rather than simply outputs (such as the number of program graduates) can allow a program some longevity.

Vecima's training programs aren't so much about raising literacy levels as they are about determining the skills required for staff to do their jobs well, and just as importantly, how to help employees feel more positive about themselves, says Rutherford. "But this is not just altruistic - there are real benefits for the company." The training has improved staff morale, lessened days missed due to personal crisis, and has instilled a new level of company loyalty among staff.

Vecima Networks received the 2008 Lieutenant Governor's Literacy Award of Merit for its innovation in training, and is currently developing a Professional Development skills program that will build on previous training with a focus on business communication.

To read The Conference Board of Canada's full report on workplace literacy program development, visit them online at www.conferenceboard.ca.

Myth or Fact?



MYTH: Young people entering the workforce will have the requisite skills necessary to meet the technological and literacy demands of a modern workplace, and will effectively fill the spots previously filled by the Baby Boomer.

FACT: Employers face a workforce with fewer young people aged 20 to 39 than in the past. Furthermore, the forecast is for a decline in the share of that age group from 32% in 1996 to 26% in 2015. Conversely, those aged 50 to 64 will increase from 14% to 21% over the same period. Employers will need to train and retrain workers already in the labour force (The Economic Benefits of Improving Literacy Skills in the Workplace, Conference Board of Canada, 2007). Additionally, youth require upgrading, with more than one third of Canadians age 16 to 25 having low literacy (International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey, Statistics Canada, OECD, 2005).

* From ABC Canada



How-To:

Training Activities for Essential Skills Development

The following is a list of suggestions to help employers incorporate Essential Skills into workplace training. Activities that focus on each of the nine skills are provided. They can be used in formal or informal training to help employees improve their Essential Skills.

*From HRSDC.

Thinking

- Participants identify a workplace problem and develop possible solutions.
- Participants brainstorm ways to improve their job performance and briefly explain how their ideas could be implemented.

Working with Others

- Participants create a list of common workplace terms and acronyms with definitions.
- Participants practice appropriate responses to a conflict with a co-worker (Note: This activity can be done through role-playing. The situation should be developed by the trainer).

Reading

- Participants read the training session agenda and circle areas of particular interest.
- Participants read sections of safety manuals or employee handbooks and answer short questions (Note: Questions should be developed by the trainer).

Document Use

- Participants plot data on a graph and identify trends (Note: Data should be provided by the trainer).
- Participants practice using documents they typically encounter in their jobs such as WHMIS, timesheets and schedules.

Oral Communication

- Participants interview a co-worker and introduce him/her to the group.
- Participants describe what they like best and/or least about their jobs.

Writing

- Participants write a brief summary of what they hope to learn during the training session.
- After the session, participants complete a written evaluation of what they liked and/or disliked about the session.

Numeracy

- Participants review the calculations on a fictitious pay stub (Note: Pay stub should be developed by the trainer).
- Participants calculate the total cost of a business trip (Note: Information should be provided by the trainer).

Computer Use

- Participants find, open and print a file needed for the training session (Note: This activity can be done during the session or in advance).
- Participants search the Internet for information (articles, reports) related to the training session (Note: This activity can be done during the session or in advance).

Continuous Learning

- Participants evaluate what they have learned during the training session.
- Participants list the skills they would like to learn or improve over the next year.

*From HRSDC

Resources

ABC Canada - www.abc-canada.org/workplace_literacy

Canadian Council on Learning - <http://www.ccl-cca.ca>

Conference Board of Canada - <http://www.conferenceboard.ca>

Human Resources and Skills Development Canada - <http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca/eng/workplaceskills>

Literacy BC Workplace Literacy Fact Sheet Series - <http://www2.literacy.bc.ca/facts/workplac/1.htm>

NALD@Work - <http://www.naldatwork.ca>

Office of Literacy and Essential Skills - http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca/eng/workplaceskills/oles/olesindex_en.shtml

TOWES (Test of Workplace Essential Skills) - <http://www.towes.com>

Western Canada Workplace Essential Skills Training Network - www.nald.ca/WWestnet

Workplace Basic Skills.com - <http://www.workplacebasicskills.com>



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Promoting and Supporting Literacy in Saskatchewan Since 1989

If you have any questions or comments about this publication, or if you want to learn more about workplace literacy and essential skills, contact the Saskatchewan Literacy Network or visit our website.

