

Literacy *in the* Workplace

Literacy in the workplace: a series of five fact sheets

1. Introduction: literacy is a right
2. Proven advantages: for workers, employers, governments
3. Labour's vision for government support
4. Best practices
5. Measuring success

Thank you to the Labour Education Centre for preparing these fact sheets, and to members of the Canadian Labour Congress Literacy Working Group for their contributions.

Introduction: literacy is a right

Literacy is a right for all. It is increasingly important in the workplace, helping workers to succeed at work and in life. Literacy can be a critical foundation for further training and education and is an important vehicle for inclusion and participation.

Recent agreements between the federal and provincial/territorial governments bring new opportunities for funding literacy activities. The new Labour Market Agreements (LMAs) transfer funds and move responsibility for delivering training programs from the federal government to the provinces and territories.

The LMAs allow for training for employed workers with low literacy skills or without a high school diploma. This makes it possible to support literacy training in the workplace in meaningful ways.

But will provinces and territories act on the need for literacy in the workplace? The Canadian Union of Public Employees knows that programs held where workers already are – in the workplace – are effective. These five fact sheets reinforce our call on governments to invest in literacy programs in the workplace.

“Through literacy in the workplace programs, CUPE has built new relationships with hundreds of our union’s members. For most of these workers, it’s the first time that they’ve connected with the union. Our experience shows that literacy-skills learning not only helps provide workers with very valid education, but creates a positive impact on their family and community life as well.”

– Paul Moist, National President, Canadian Union of Public Employees

What does literacy mean to CUPE?

As workers, literacy empowers us to:

- develop our skills, knowledge and potential at work, at home, and in our community
- question, evaluate, envision
- assert our rights and build our union
- act as full citizens and work for social justice

CUPE has a long history of direct involvement in workplace literacy, including our national literacy program established in 2000. CUPE members have benefited from workplace basic skills programs, especially those workers who have had little access to educational opportunities or who need training in English or French as a second language. Workers have been able to build skills, adapt to changing job requirements, develop an interest in further learning and become more active in their union and community.

CUPE shares labour's active commitment to policies and programs that secure:

- the right to learn for both employed and unemployed workers mandated by law
- a pan-Canadian strategy and system of adult education and training, which ensures quality programming and equitable access across the country
- a serious investment in literacy and training by employers and governments
- the integration of literacy in skills training and apprenticeship programs
- the development of a culture of learning in our unions and workplaces

While provinces and territories are responsible for education and training, the federal government must continue to play a role in developing policy and increasing funding for literacy.

Literacy and basic skills

For CUPE, reading and writing are not ends in themselves. We understand literacy to be about reading the world, not just the words. Literacy is a tool for equity and social change, a means to further equality and access.

Most people agree that literacy is more than being able to read and write. People have a range of literacy skills – it's not an either/or skill set. But there is no single definition of literacy. The meaning of literacy continually shifts to reflect changing economic, social and political contexts.

Because some see “literacy” as a negative term, other terms are often used: basic skills, essential skills, adult basic education, or foundation skills. We describe literacy as the skills we need for work, learning and life. Basic skills programs include:

- reading
- writing
- math
- using computers
- oral communication
- English or French as a second or other language
- upgrading for certification or further education
- critical thinking

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Proven advantages: for workers, employers, governments

Time and cost are the most common barriers to education and training faced by workers. Literacy is a right. But for that right to be meaningful, workers must have access to literacy programs in their workplaces.

The advantages of workplace programs for workers

Shift workers, workers forced to take more than one job to make a living, and those with family responsibilities are not usually able to access literacy programs in the community.

Workplace programs allow access:

- workers are already in the workplace
- they have already arranged transportation and childcare
- they are part of a social community within the workplace

Reaching people at work, while they have the dignity of a job and a paycheque, helps ensure success. Participation in workplace programs improves when paid time during working hours is provided for people to attend classes.

Programs that are centred on the needs of workers ensure that workplace skills are part, but not all, of program content. Worker-centred programs are sensitive to workers' needs and aspirations and value their experience and prior learning.

“Everything equates to dollars and cents. There are lots of hidden costs and ripple effects of low literacy, such as more administration and supervision.”

– Ed Thomas,
Union Past Chair of
Education Joint Committee,
City of Hamilton

“An investment in workplace learning programs pays off – in a better-skilled workforce, improved quality of work life, and employees who have an increased commitment to the organization.”

– Simon Farbrother,
Past President,
Canadian Association of Municipal Administrators

Literacy programs can help workers gain access to further workplace training. They can contribute to job security, opportunities for promotion and successful participation in technological and other workplace change.

The advantages of workplace programs for employers

There is a strong business case for workplace literacy. Employers identify significant gains resulting from workplace literacy programs, including:

- increased ability to do on-the-job training
- better team performance
- increased quality of work
- increased productivity: reduced time per task, increased output, lower error rate
- better health and safety records
- reduced wastage, cost savings
- better employee and customer retention
- increased profitability
- increased participation and communication
- improved problem-solving, decision-making and capacity to work independently
- increased worker confidence
- improved workplace morale

The advantages of workplace programs for governments

The majority of adults with low literacy skills are employed. Government efforts to improve adult literacy skills are more successful when programs take place where people are – in the workplace. Workplace literacy is an important part of a well-balanced literacy strategy that includes community literacy, family literacy, and other streams.

“Higher literacy can boost the economic and financial success of individuals and the economy as a whole. It can reduce poverty, improve health, lift community engagement and lead to a higher standard of living. In fact, it is hard to identify any other single issue that can have such a large payoff to individuals, the economy and society.”

– Craig Alexander,
Vice-President & Chief
Economist,
TD Bank Financial Group

Literacy partnerships in the workplace

Implementing workplace programs pose challenges to employers and unions:

- developing an effective, worker-centred program
- finding quality programs, instructors and materials
- paying for program planning and delivery
- scheduling and work coverage

Government programming with public infrastructure and financial support is to successfully meeting these challenges. Manitoba, Nova Scotia, Quebec, Saskatchewan and PEI all have provincial programs and funding for various aspects of workplace literacy programs.

Joint labour-management committees are also critical for success. Joint committees permit the employer and the union to overcome challenges and create effective programs. This model is central in the partnership between CUPE and the Canadian Association of Municipal Administrators (CAMA). Joint committees are also integral to the workplace project team structure in Nova Scotia.

¹ See, for example: Conference Board of Canada survey results, as described by Craig Alexander, Vice-President & Chief Economist, TD Bank Financial Group in *Literacy Matters: A Call for Action*, p. 12; and Ellen Long, “The Impact of Basic Skills Programs on Canadian Workplaces: Results of a National Study for ABC Canada Literacy Foundation,” ABC Canada, 1998.

http://www.nald.ca/fulltext/abc/impbas/english/impbas_e.pdf

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Labour's vision for government support

Sustainable funding for a comprehensive strategy

Governments must make a commitment to literacy and essential skills as a priority within a well-funded, pan-Canadian training strategy. Such a strategy must include objectives for equity and access to learning in all provinces and territories. The strategy needs to take a broad approach by viewing literacy as a systemic rather than an individual issue to be addressed. Literacy must be integrated in pre-apprenticeship, apprenticeship and skills training.

The Right to Learn must be mandated in our laws including:

- a well-funded public education system providing free literacy and essential skills upgrading for adults
- a training levy to ensure all employers participate in workplace programs
- mandated training included in the Canada Labour Code and Employment Standards
- an entitlement to training leave through Employment Insurance

This fact sheet looks at three key aspects of a training strategy:

- provincial and territorial funding for infrastructure, coordination and delivery of literacy programs in the workplace
- Labour Market Partners' Forums including employers and labour as key stakeholders at the federal, provincial and territorial levels
- a continuing role for the federal government

Provincial and territorial support for workplace literacy

Provincial priorities in the new Labour Market Agreements include employed workers with low literacy skills. Across the country, labour is advocating for provincial and territorial funding for workplace-based literacy programs as part of this LMA commitment.

Workers with low literacy skills include people who have some difficulty with reading, writing and numeracy. They may be immigrants whose first language is neither English nor French. Those with low literacy skills may be young adults. They may be people who have not had the chance to complete Grade 12. They may be high school or college graduates whose literacy skills have become weaker over time.

While labour urges and bargains for employer funding for literacy and training, our experience shows that government support is also crucial. In fact, provincial government dollars spent strategically have a proven capacity to lever significant employer investment in workplace learning. Funding models need to extend beyond corporate tax credits.

A provincial strategy is needed, together with public sector support for infrastructure and delivery.

Strategy

- require employer funding of training including literacy
- include indicators that reflect support for a systemic, holistic approach to literacy rather than an individual approach
- ensure English or French as a second or additional language is included under the umbrella of literacy programs
- integrate literacy in pre-apprenticeship, apprenticeship and skills training, particularly for workers in vulnerable industries

- include equity measures to ensure all workers get regular access to training
- require joint business and labour, or tripartite structures with government, to oversee funding and programs and ensure accountability at all levels of a literacy strategy
- ensure that labour is a full and equal partner in the development process and implementation of a literacy strategy
- require joint labour-management decision-making structures at the workplace

Infrastructure

- funding for labour to support, develop partnerships, coordinate and deliver programs (central labour bodies or unions)
- funding and support for needs assessment
- funding and support for instructors, including paid preparation time, good salaries and working conditions
- funding and support for literacy organizations and networks

Workplace program delivery: core elements

- joint labour-management workplace committee
- voluntary participation with confidentiality assured
- paid time (full or partial) for participation in programs
- content based on workers' needs, addressing the needs of the whole person
- accountability using individual and collective assessment and evaluation rather than learner testing

Several provinces provide financial support for workplace literacy. Several feature business-labour-government partnerships.

- The Manitoba government program Workplace Literacy and Essential Skills includes the costs of an instructor and preparation time. Workplace-based programs are run by a project committee that includes labour. Manitoba's Workplace Education Steering Committee, coordinated by the provincial government, has labour representation.
- The Nova Scotia government program Workplace Education is available to businesses and labour organizations across the province. Coordinators from the Department of Labour and Workforce Development assess learning needs, recommend programs, and help workplace teams select trained workplace educators. Labour is a full member of the Nova Scotia Partners for Workplace Education Committee. This multi-stakeholder committee advises the N.S. Department of Labour and Workforce Development on its Workplace Education program, including approving funding for workplace programs.
- Workplace Education P.E.I. coordinators are supported by the provincial Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. They approach employers, assist in organizational needs assessments, support instructors, and access funding for the workplace programs.
- In Quebec, funding is available for the development and recognition of skills, the adaptation of material for persons with disabilities, practitioner training, and setting up joint labour-management committees. All of the labour market partners are involved with supporting workplace literacy activities through the Labour Market Partners' Commission. Its responsibility includes allocating funds collected under Quebec's "Act to foster the development of manpower training."
- Saskatchewan's Innovation Fund provides financial assistance to develop or implement a community literacy plan. Community is broadly defined and includes labour-management partnerships focused on workplace literacy and essential skills.

Labour Market Partners' Forums

Literacy is one part of the broad range of labour market training. Government alone cannot adequately respond to the needs in this area. A partners' forum is needed to give voice to the concerns and interests of labour and employers – key labour market partners. Labour must be an equal partner with employers. The views of the public and voluntary sectors involved with service delivery and advocacy must also be heard.

Labour Market Partners' Forums should be permanent advisory bodies at the federal as well as provincial and territorial levels. Their role should be to:

- advise on education and training strategies to enhance literacy, skills development, and labour adjustment strategies for laid-off workers
- make recommendations on various options for funding workplace-based strategies for upgrading, literacy, language training, basic computer skills, high school completion and other life-long educational initiatives
- include a focus on infrastructure, funding, quality models and programs, labour market research, equity and access

Quebec and Newfoundland and Labrador have had successful partners' forums for some years. Newfoundland and Labrador's Strategic Partnership Initiative is a collaboration of business, labour, and government on economic challenges facing the province. A tripartite Labour Market Committee includes the Deputy Ministers of the relevant government ministries, as well as representatives of the Newfoundland and Labrador Federation of Labour and the Newfoundland and Labrador Business Caucus.

Quebec's Labour Market Partners Commission is a province-wide consultative body composed of representatives of employers, unions, public education, community groups, as well as government observers. The Commission plays a critical role in the application of Quebec's "Act to foster the development of manpower training" and establishes funding criteria for the National Labour Force Training Fund.

A continuing federal role

Although the federal government has been shifting much responsibility and funding for training to the provinces, it still has an important role to:

- develop a pan-Canadian training strategy with guaranteed standards and principles
- require Labour Market Partners' Forums as part of the Labour Market Agreements
- provide and transfer additional funds to provinces and territories
- ensure equitable access
- amend the Canada Labour Code to mandate training leave and joint training committees

Though its role may be diminished, the federal government nonetheless has a continuing direct role in literacy:

- with employers under federal jurisdiction
- with Canadians in areas of federal responsibility: immigrants, Aboriginal Peoples, and francophones outside Quebec (under the Official Languages Act)
- through departments and programs such as the Office of Literacy and Essential Skills, Human Resources and Social Development
- through funding for sector councils and other organizations

¹ One example of a training levy is Quebec's "1% Law." Employers with payrolls over \$1 million must invest a minimum of 1% of their total payroll on training. Those failing to do so contribute an equivalent amount to the Training Fund that supports workplace training initiatives. See Paul Bélanger and Magali Robitaille, "A Portrait of Work-Related Learning in Quebec," Work and Learning Knowledge Centre, March 2008.

<http://www.ccl-cca.ca/CCL/Reports/Other+Reports/20080303Work-Related LearninginQuebec.htm>

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Best practices

Workplace literacy programs help workers participate more equitably at work, at home and in their communities. They help people develop new skills for a changing workplace. They give workers a chance to brush up on skills they have forgotten. They support those who were failed by the school system. They provide language learning opportunities for workers whose first language is not English or French.

Learning is a social process. The creation of a community of learners who can support and challenge each other distinguishes worker-centred literacy programs. Workplace programs that fully involve the union, use workers as peer tutors and are learner-centred are central to creating a safe, supportive learning community that encourages workers to articulate and pursue their learning goals.

Labour has been involved in workplace education programs in different parts of the country for many years. While the funding and therefore the sustainability of these programs have been precarious, we have learned a great deal.

Unions support workplace literacy programs that:

- enable workers to have more control over their lives and jobs
- build on what workers already know
- address the needs of the whole person, enriching learners' lives as individuals, workers, union members, family members and citizens
- open the door to further education and training
- reflect the diverse learning styles and needs of adult workers, sensitive to participants' gender, race, ethnicity and culture

"Attending the workplace program gave me a sense of accomplishment. I was elated and so proud of myself. I can't even describe the feelings I had."

– Learner, workplace program,
Cape Breton

"I learned so many skills that I haven't done before, like presentations, group communications, typing letters. Now I'm not afraid to touch the computer."

– Learner, workplace program,
Vancouver

- involve workers in setting their own educational goals and in making decisions that affect program design, content and planning
- seek to integrate literacy training with other aspects of workplace training
- are voluntary
- are open to all
- are accessible, scheduled at convenient times and places, with no fees
- include paid time to learn during working hours
- include replacement of workers when they are attending programs so that co-workers are not unduly burdened
- assure confidentiality for participants with no employer access to information about individual progress
- are accountable using individual and collective assessment and evaluation rather than learner testing

A worker-centred model of workplace literacy means...

- the union is an equal partner with management in decision-making
- union involvement is highly visible to learners
- there is a joint committee with co-chairs; the union co-chair is active and involved
- the joint committee oversees all aspects of the planning, program delivery and evaluation process
- the Terms of Reference for the joint committee as to how the program will operate are agreed to jointly. The terms reflect worker-centred education principles.

These key points are based on adult education principles and best practices. They are broadly supported and promoted within the adult education and literacy communities.

"This program was very useful. It guided me to my goal... I got my papers validated in Canada (for a Bachelor's degree earned in Mexico)."

– Learner, workplace program, Saskatoon

Workers "are moving on to other education and getting promotions. Most importantly, they want to be role models for their children. People say they feel so much better and that the program has opened the world for them."

– Union Coordinator, workplace program, Winnipeg

When to just say "no"

A badly-designed workplace literacy program can harm workers and their union. Unions do not believe that "any training is better than no training." Unions will reject programs in which:

- the design and approach undermine workers' employment rights and opportunities, or damage their self-respect and dignity
- the content and goals are imposed
- participation is not voluntary
- testing is used and individual results or progress are reported to the employer
- the union is not a full partner, able to protect its members' interests and union principles

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Measuring Success

Unions are committed to improving workers' literacy skills and to meaningful, effective literacy programs. How do we measure success toward these goals?

Just as labour has a broad, holistic approach to literacy, so too labour urges a broad understanding of success. We are concerned when success is measured in grades and levels using test results based on narrow definitions of job and employability skills.

Governments and employers emphasize the need for improved literacy for a skilled, adaptable workforce; an efficient labour market; and increased labour productivity. This is linked to an individual's "skill gaps." Unions ask: what are employers and governments doing to meet training gaps? In this context, testing is not the point. Rather, the point is for governments and employers to provide opportunities and put resources into learning rather than testing.

Unions are particularly concerned with the government trend to require literacy programs to measure individual learning using grades and levels. The focus of the programs then becomes moving learners "up a level," with individual testing as the measurement method. Such an emphasis does not measure whether:

- learners met their goals
- learning was meaningful
- workplace and employer benefited
- the employer created and sustained literacy-rich jobs
- the community benefited from engaged and skilled citizens

Program evaluation is a better measure of success.

Individual and collective program evaluation examines whether the program achieved the desired outcomes. Does the literacy program meet the needs of participants? Does it meet the needs of the workplace? Are there tasks that workers can do now that they could not do before? Are workers better able to participate at work, in the union, community and home life?

Like other aspects of a workplace program, the joint committee plans and implements a program evaluation. Participants in evaluation include learners, tutors, instructors, union representatives, supervisors, managers, and others involved in various ways in the program. Individual contributions to the evaluation are confidential.

Program evaluation can identify impacts that are important for all involved and provide a case for continuing the program and securing needed resources.

Essential Skills

What is it?

Nine essential skills are named by the federal Department of Human Resources and Skills Development:

- Reading Text
- Document Use
- Numeracy
- Writing
- Oral Communication
- Working with Others
- Thinking Skills
- Computer Use
- Continuous Learning

The government describes the Essential Skills as “the fundamental skills that make it possible to learn all others. They are enabling skills that help people participate fully in the workplace and in the community.”

Profiles

The government has developed close to 200 occupational profiles which describe the use of Essential Skills in different occupations. In addition, authentic workplace materials have been gathered to illustrate how skills such as Reading Text, Document Use and Writing are actually used in Canadian workplaces.

Levels of Complexity

Levels of complexity are a rating tool to measure Essential Skills. Complexity levels from 1 (basic tasks) to 4 or 5 (advanced tasks) are assigned to sample tasks performed by a worker in a specific job. These levels are used in the occupational profiles.

Levels are tied to the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (IALSS) levels.

Labour's view

Positive

- a better alternative to crude indicators like grade level proficiency
- seen by some as a more useful term than literacy: they apply to everyone, are developmental and portable; they are complex and measurable
- may lead to a better understanding of the job demands (including literacy) and a worker's existing job skills
- may lead to more relevant and fair entry requirements
- may lead to less subjectivity and favouritism in employee assessments
- can help develop a framework for Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition
- Essential Skills Profiles can be used to develop self-assessment tools and learning plans for upgrading and training
- Profiles give a context for developing transferable skills

Negative

Frames skills as those most useful to employers and devalues important skills and goals, particularly critical thinking and social change. For example, Essential Skills values the skill of "working well with others," but for the purpose of being a "good employee," not for the purpose of organizing collectively, attaining justice and other union goals.

Emphasizes individual deficits rather than collective or systemic factors, problems and solutions. Focuses on individual responsibility for training: implicitly blaming workers for not having the skills they should, and placing the onus for getting the skills on the worker rather than on training interventions and supporting dollars from government and employers. Can lead to "just-in-time," narrow training that serves the employer and not workers.

Promotes a narrow and simplistic view of literacy, education and skills, decontextualized from power relations and complex workplace dynamics.

TOWES: Test of Workplace Essential Skills

What is it?

- assessment tool to measure Essential Skills in workplace settings
- assesses competencies in three of HRSDC's nine Essential Skills: Reading Text, Document Use and Numeracy
- seen as better than other standardized tests since test content is based on workplace documents
- people are required to process information in the documents to complete a task
- TOWES results are correlated to the rating scales of IALS (International Adult Literacy Survey) and Essential Skills
- use of TOWES is controlled by Bow Valley College and those with whom Bow Valley has contracts. Fees are charged for customization and related curriculum.
- individuals who take a TOWES test receive only a score. The test administrator (for example, an employer) receives a group report which may include individual scores.

Labour's view

- test-takers not able to use compensatory strategies to accomplish tasks as they do at work with co-workers
- does not measure all of what a person knows (excludes the real situations that individuals find themselves in)
- can be used as a screening tool by employers, in hiring and promotion for example
- does not produce an explanation of results for the test-taker
- is not a good assessment tool, providing inadequate information to develop a training plan
- recreates negative aspects of school (testing), making workers feel vulnerable
- uses materials that are biased in favour of the employer
- culturally biased, particularly difficult for workers whose first language is not English
- does not respect confidentiality, an important labour principle
- may lead to a better understanding of the job demands (including literacy) and a worker's existing job skills

International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (IALSS)

What is it?

The 2003 International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (IALSS) is the Canadian component of the International Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey. More than 23,000 Canadians from every province and territory participated in the study.

The survey rated people's ability to deal with everyday literacy demands. Literacy is defined as "using printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential."

The survey measured skills in the following areas:

- prose literacy: understanding text, such as newspaper articles
- document literacy: understanding informational text, such as maps and charts
- numeracy: working with numbers
- problem solving: the ability to solve problems by clarifying the nature of the problem and developing and applying appropriate solution strategies

IALSS Levels

Participants' literacy "scores" were grouped into five levels: Level 1 is the lowest skill level and level 5 is the highest.

Level 3 is the minimum skill level considered necessary to meet the challenges of today's world (Statistics Canada).

Key Finding: Four in ten working-age Canadians do not have the literacy skills they need to meet the ever-increasing demands of today's world (Level 3).

Labour's view

Positive

IALSS has been useful for raising the profile of literacy needs in the media, government, with employers, and in society generally.

The survey's broad definition of literacy helps people understand that literacy goes beyond reading and writing and cannot be reduced to: "either you are literate or you are illiterate." Literacy is a continuum, or range, and changes as society changes.

Cautions: *how IALSS is used*

There is simplistic overemphasis of the survey result that 42% of working-age Canadians are below Level 3, the "minimum" literacy skills needed for today. Too often people understand this as being "illiterate," not being able to read or write. Levels 1 and 2 become merged in public perception.

There is a tendency to ignore the survey aspect of the study. IALSS takes a broad snapshot, it is not a tool for individual assessment.

As IALSS levels get linked to the government's Essential Skills levels, there is a trend to focus on moving people "up a level" as a goal. Measurements, tests and levels detract from the broad approach needed, with expanded training and literacy opportunities.