



Workplace Learning

Bridging Employer and Employee Needs in BC's Capital Region

Phase 1 Literature Review and Bibliography

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1. Introduction

The READ Society's Workplace Learning: Bridging Employer and Employee Needs in BC's Capital Region research study was undertaken between February 2008 and February 2009 to understand workplace literacy needs and issues in BC's Capital Region. The study explored ways to help employers recruit and retain workers by providing basic skills training in the workplace (READ, 2009).

As part of the research project, this literature review was conducted to identify best practices in workplace literacy and essential skills training. The objective was to uncover human resource options that are suitable for Greater Victoria's small business climate.¹ In particular, the focus was on practical, feasible solutions of immediate relevance to employers who wish to implement workplace basic skills education programs. Publications from 1980 onwards in the fields of literacy, essential skills and workplace education were reviewed, as well as pertinent Canadian provincial and federal reports.

The contents of this literature review evolved as it became apparent that workplace learning is a vast field with many aspects to consider, including:

- varied definitions and theoretical approaches to workplace literacy, based on the perspectives of employers, unions, workers, service providers, researchers, policy-makers and community groups
- best practice guidelines for workplace literacy programs
- benefits of workplace literacy programs for business, employees and the economy

- literacy needs assessments – sectoral, company and individual
- success stories and case studies
- barriers to worker participation in literacy training
- stages of employer readiness to invest in programs
- specialized curricula that blend basic skills training with job-specific training
- program evaluation – ways to measure program success and return on investment
- national, provincial and territorial policies, programs and initiatives
- sectoral and regional needs assessments.

The sections for the literature review were determined after reviewing and analyzing the citations in the bibliography, as well as considering the goal specified in the project proposal, namely, “to identify, review and analyze workplace literacy best practices with a focus on options and approaches appropriate to up to five employment sectors in the Capital Region District.”

Because the focus was on practical applications and feasible solutions for employers, the resources reviewed included a greater variety of sources than a typical academic literature review. We read brochures, websites, government documents, reports from business and non-profit organizations, journal articles and academic research reports.

¹ Seventy-five per cent of businesses in BC's Capital Region have five or fewer employees (Capital Region District, 2001).

2. Background

2.1 International

Following the International Literacy Year proclaimed by UNESCO in 1990, there was increased discourse about literacy policy. In 1994, the world's first internationally comparative survey of adult literacy was conducted, comparing literacy in 20 countries (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2000). This study, and a follow-up study conducted in 2003 (Statistics Canada, 2005), confirmed that there was reason for concern. Findings indicated that large numbers of working-age adults (ages 16–65) had literacy levels below what is needed to be successful in today's knowledge-based economy. There was little improvement in the nine years between studies. This continues to be a concern because rapid changes in technology make it increasingly necessary for workers to be able to continuously learn and adapt to change. Various strategies are being explored internationally to enhance the skills of employed individuals and maintain a productive workforce.

New Zealand workplace literacy consultant Chris Holland (2006) reviewed the history of workplace literacy in Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom from the 1990s to 2006, and summarized strategies used and lessons learned. Australia was well in the lead, having launched the Australian Language and Literacy Policy in 1991. National policy and a dedicated funding source allowed for the development of professional practice based on research and robust theory.

In the early 1990s, the UK took a whole-of-government approach that strove to coordinate relevant activities of education, economic and business ministries. The Basic Skills Agency funded 81 pilot projects around the country in Further Education colleges to explore the establishment of workplace literacy programs. Subsequently the UK developed a program in which union “learning representatives” supported workplace literacy. While the UK literacy movement had some success, it was founded on a functional deficit view of literacy, which did not prove fruitful. Most of the training consisted of off-the-shelf curricula delivered in classroom-like settings. This approach was not well received by employees or employers.

New Zealand joined the movement somewhat later and was able to benefit from what had been learned in the UK and Australia. New Zealand set up the Adult Reading and Learning Association, a federation of community-based providers, to run the Workbase project (www.workbase.org.nz). Workbase has become a leading non-governmental organization in the field, disseminating resources, conducting research and advising on projects related to workplace literacy. The current focus of workforce literacy in Australia is embedding basic skills competencies within vocational training, an approach they describe as “built in, not bolted on.”

Additional strategies being used in these three countries include:

- allocating funding to industry organizations and employers
- providing enterprise-based tutors
- providing professional development for workplace educators, to boost the number of qualified practitioners
- training instructors to contextualize learning for specific workplace applications
- creating benchmarks and quality awards
- funding research
- funding release time for employees to attend programming
- partnering with unions and funding them to train “learning representatives”
- encouraging employer pledges
- promoting basic skills to business through workplace literacy “brokers”
- consulting to business on workplace literacy
- giving recognition and awards to companies and providers
- mapping the literacy components of vocational training.

Holland (2006) recommends that any new strategy developed to support workplace literacy should

...ensure that there is opportunity for rigorous research (including the opportunity to learn from research and practice elsewhere), robust debate,

a professionally developed practitioner workforce in secure employment, and [that] a range of stakeholders...take part in strategy development, rather than simply in implementation (p. 17).

2.2 Canada

Research conducted in 2003 showed that 42 per cent of working-age Canadians (ages 16–65) (ABC CANADA Literacy Foundation, 2005) and 40 per cent of British Columbians are functioning at literacy levels below what is needed for jobs being created by the current economy.² As this information makes its way into business circles, and the implications are understood, there has been more attention given to workplace learning. But historically Canada has under-invested in workplace training relative to other countries that are members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

In Canada, education is under provincial jurisdiction, so there is considerable regional variation. The history of Canadian workplace literacy has been documented by Kathryn Barker (1991), Audrey Thomas (2001) and Lynette Plett (2007). Plett's report reviews the international and Canadian context and then presents a detailed examination of workplace literacy practices in three provinces: Nova Scotia, Quebec and Ontario. These case studies examine the different approaches in Canada. They also uncover areas of agreement among employers about supports that would encourage them to implement workplace literacy programs. Plett (2007) concludes:

In the absence of a national adult literacy strategy, provinces and territories have developed a patchwork of approaches resulting in an inability for them to integrate workplace literacy training into coherent, long-term adult education and training strategies and programs. Without federal or provincial programs or incentives, few employers have invested in workplace literacy programs. The programs and initiatives that have been introduced by employers and non-profit organizations have tended to be only short-term in nature, reflecting the modest level of resources available and the nature of available funding (e.g. project as opposed to core funding). (p. 17).

² Canada's performance is in the middle range of the 21 countries studied (Statistics Canada, 2005).

The Canadian National Literacy Secretariat was formed in 1988 with financial resources dedicated to addressing workplace literacy through business and labour partnerships. A number of institutes for workplace educators were held in Ontario and Nova Scotia at that time. Nova Scotia began a provincial initiative in 1989 that became a core program in 1999/2000. Other provinces followed suit, to varying degrees, with workplace literacy initiatives.

In the early 1990s, Human Resources and Social Development Canada (HRSDC) launched the Essential Skills Research Project. Nine skills common to all workplaces and occupations at varying levels of complexity were identified (see Terms and Definitions, page 5). A system of job profiling was developed to describe skills across occupations and allow employers and employees to know if they have the skills needed for certain jobs. Over 200 Essential Skills profiles have now been written for occupations in the National Occupational Classification.

Many stakeholders have advocated for pan-Canadian policy. At a workshop hosted by HRSDC in 2002, for example, participants strongly agreed on the need for a pan-Canadian literacy strategy involving all levels of government, businesses, labour, education and training providers, as well as literacy groups and non-governmental organizations. Recommendations included a national approach to credentials recognition and national programs for embedding basic skills into vocational curricula (Industry Canada and Human Resources Development Canada, 2002). In 2003, the Standing Committee on Human Resource Development made specific recommendations, which included a call for "significant allocation of federal resources to address this serious problem" (Longfield, 2003, p. 3).

In 2007 the federal Office of Literacy and Essential Skills was created within Human Resources and Social Development Canada. The office currently offers a suite of Essential Skills tools for employers and employees.

2.3 British Columbia

Recognizing the need to address low literacy in British Columbia's workforce, the BC Ministry of Advanced Education convened the Skills and Learning at Work for BC conference in October

2007. Two hundred representatives from industry, government, non-profit agencies and education participated in a forum that explored strategies for a made-in-BC essential skills strategy. Eight plenary speakers and 15 roundtable presenters from British Columbia, Alberta, Manitoba, Ontario, the Northwest Territories, Nova Scotia and Australia facilitated dialogue designed to help shape the Essential Skills strategy. Successful initiatives in Canada and BC were highlighted, along with lessons learned and best practices. The conference report includes “enduring truths – the ‘carved in

stone’ tenets for successfully bolstering Essential Skills in our workplaces” and a sober review of the challenges to be overcome (Huget Consulting, 2007, p. 1).

Subsequently, in 2008, the BC government initiated SkillsPlus (British Columbia, Ministry of Advanced Education and Labour Market Development, n.d.) to help businesses enhance the foundation skills of their employees, particularly by integrating essential skills into workplace training.

3. Terms and Definitions

One of the themes that repeatedly emerged in the research project is confusion around the terminology used in the literacy field. Sometimes the same words are used to convey distinct meanings and sometimes they are used interchangeably. The term “literacy” is particularly subject to being misunderstood. The Alberta Workplace Literacy Marketing Project explained that

...although a significant effort has been made by people in the field to educate around the word “literacy,” the word still evokes a series of negative images and associations. Generally, people still make the assumption that the term means “illiteracy” and applies to those who simply are unable to read and write. (Salembier, 1996, p. 24)

Literacy levels

Level 1: Persons with very poor skills, where the individual may, for example, be unable to determine the correct amount of medicine to give a child from information printed on the package.

Level 2: People can only deal with material that is simple, clearly laid out, and in which the tasks involved are not too complex. It denotes a weak level of skill, but more hidden than Level 1. It identifies people who can read but test poorly. They may have developed coping skills to manage everyday literacy demands, but their low level of proficiency makes it difficult for them to face novel demands, such as learning new job skills.

Level 3: The minimum skills level suitable for coping with the demands of everyday life and work in a complex, advanced society. It denotes roughly the skill level required for successful secondary school completion and college entry. Like higher levels, it requires the ability to integrate several sources of information and solve more complex problems.

Levels 4–5: People demonstrate a command of higher-order information-processing skills. (ABC CANADA, 2005)

In fact, literacy is a complex concept. It is measured across a continuum of ability levels and often includes reference to skills beyond reading and writing. The International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (Statistics Canada, 2005), for example, rates literacy on five levels of proficiency, in each of four categories: prose, document use, numeracy and problem-solving. Canadian workplace literacy consultant Brigid Hayes (2006) commented, “I have always maintained that the notion of literacy and essential skills as a continuum was the most revolutionary contribution to adult literacy. We no longer saw literacy as and either/or scenario” (p. 6).

Pan-Canadian studies have shown that the term “literacy” carries a stigma and is not well received by employers or employees. Therefore, other terms, such as “basic skills,” “fundamental skills” and “essential skills” have been substituted. These terms are often used interchangeably with “literacy” but they are not totally equivalent, which creates more confusion. Additionally, there are definitions of literacy based on varying stakeholder perspectives, including employers, unions, employees, service providers, researchers, policy-makers and community groups.

Whatever terms are used, practitioners struggle to find a single key message that conveys the realities in the field. For example, it is common to cite the fact that 42 per cent of working-age Canadians have literacy levels below what is needed to succeed in today’s economy, but this obscures the wide range of literacy levels within that classification. Actually, 20 per cent of Canadians function at Level 1, and another 28 per cent function at Level 2. But most people do not know what that means either. Advocates of literacy at a pan-Canadian roundtable summed up the communication challenge thus: “The tendency to combine Level 1 and 2 of the literacy scales into one number (42 per cent) has resulted in considerable confusion. This number does not resonate with the Canadian public, who seem to find it hard to believe” (Adult Learning Knowledge Centre and Work and Learning Knowledge Centre, 2008, p. 4).

Workplace learning is a broad term that refers to both formal and informal learning that takes place

on the job for people at all levels. Hayes (2006) notes:

With the development of the Essential Skills Framework, we were able to see how essential skills were used in every job, from the least complex to the CEO. Literacy and essential skills was moved out to the world of “those people” and into a world of “all of us”. All of us need to keep our skills honed and fine-tuned. All of us need to improve skills, to

make sure we have the skills needed for the task at hand... these skills are anything but “basic”. (p. 6)

In this report we have chosen to use the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey definition for the term “literacy.” “Basic skills” means reading, writing text, document use, numeracy, oral communication, problem-solving and computer skills. The HRSDC definition is used for “Essential Skills.”

Workplace literacy terms and definitions

Literacy is defined by the International Adult Literacy Surveys as “using printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one’s goals, and to develop one’s knowledge potential.” This includes:

Document literacy: The knowledge and skills required to locate and use information contained in various formats, including job applications, payroll forms, transportation schedules, maps, tables and charts.

Numeracy: The knowledge and skills required to effectively manage the mathematical demands of diverse situations.

Problem-solving: Involves goal-directed thinking and action in situations for which no routine solution procedure is available. The problem-solver has a more or less well-defined goal, but does not immediately know how to reach it. The understanding of the problem situation and its step-by-step transformation based on planning and reasoning constitute the process of problem-solving.

Prose literacy: The knowledge and skills needed to understand and use information from texts, including editorials, news stories, brochures and instruction manuals. (ABC CANADA Literacy Foundation, 2005).

Employability Skills 2000+: “The skills you need to enter, stay in and progress in the world of work – whether you work on your own or as part of a team....Employability Skills 2000+ include communication, problem solving, positive attitudes and behaviours, adaptability, working with others, and science, technology and mathematics skills” (Conference Board of Canada, 2000).

Essential Skills: Essential Skills are the skills that people need for work, learning and life. They provide the foundation for learning all other skills and enable people to evolve with their jobs and adapt to workplace change. There are nine Essential Skills: reading, document use, numeracy, writing, oral communication, working with others, thinking, computer use, and continuous learning. (Office of Literacy and Essential Skills, 2008).

Workplace basic skills: These are the core skills that employees need to do their jobs successfully. They include literacy and other important skills, attitudes and behaviours that are essential to workplace success. (Conference Board of Canada, n.d.).

4. Approaches to Workplace Literacy

There are many theoretical and ideological approaches to workplace literacy. The main debate revolves around whether “literacy should be for the workplace which [sic] also benefits the individual, or that literacy should be for the individual, that [sic] also benefits the workplace” (Thorn, 2001, cited in Roberts and Gowan, 2007 p. 7). Adrian Blunt (2001) describes these two competing points of view within the field, their historical development, and their impact on public policy, research and implementation.

4.1 Social practice

The first perspective – which Blunt calls a “social practice approach” – views workplace literacy as:

...essential to social development, the maintenance of democratic institutions and the achievement of social equity and justice. This perspective informs an emancipatory literacy education focusing on social outcomes and is located in community-based programs managed by non-governmental organizations and publicly funded institutions to respond to individual, family and community needs, including employment. (Blunt, 2001, p. 89, quoted in Roberts and Gowan, 2007, p. 4)

The primary purpose of this approach is to help workers gain knowledge and skills that enhance their whole life, including work, family, civic participation and leisure time.

Examples of the social practice approach

“BEST is about empowerment for working people. The program’s aim is to enrich the lives of workers and to expand their potential as workers, as individuals, as family members, as union members, and as citizens. BEST is about returning to learning. The overall aim of the program for all of these learners is to help them get back into learning and to view themselves as lifelong learners.” (Evans and Twiss, 2002, p. 4)

“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.” (Canadian Union of Public Employees, 2008, p. 1)

“Unions support literacy programs that enable workers to have more control over their lives and jobs; 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.” (Canadian Union of Public Employees, 2008, p. 1)

4.2 The technical-rational approach

The second paradigm – which Blunt (2001) calls “the technical-rational approach” – views workplace literacy primarily as a tool to boost business productivity and bolster the economy. In this model, the main reason for improving workers’ literacy skills is to enable them to do their jobs better and improve business outcomes. Training objectives are keyed to business objectives. This approach is supported by considerable literature about the business benefits of workplace literacy programs. (See Benefits section in the bibliography, page 30.)

Critics of the technical-rational approach caution that taking a narrow approach to workplace literacy risks limiting the impact on both the workplace and learners’ lives. If customizing curriculum and job task analyses leads merely to a list of skills to be mastered, the broader understanding of teaching and literacy issues may be obscured. Holland (2006) notes that:

How people understand and improve practices of reading and writing at work is much more complex than tweaking a few identified technical language skills...The communicative requirements of the new work order (requiring workers to handle change, ambiguity and variation) are in direct contradiction to the current school-like functional skills approach to adult learning.” (p. 2)

Hayes (2006) comments that Essential Skills:

...is a framework that needs to be used in conjunction with the other tools that have been developed over the years, such as Organizational Needs Assessments, project teams and avoidance of standardized testing. Essential skills should not be about teaching each of the nine skills as discrete or separate skills, but rather a way for the practitioner to better understand the requirements faced by the worker. (pp. 7–8)

Holland (2006) concludes, “Literacy is not simply about addressing a lack of skills in individuals, but about practices in the context of the whole of an organization’s routines, systems and culture and relationships” (p. 10).

The approach that dominates at any one time is reflective of economic and social conditions. Shifts in policy and funding follow suit. When Blunt published his report in 2001, he reported that the technical-rational paradigm was dominant, as reflected in the number of programs aimed at encouraging employer investment in “human capital” in order to achieve business objectives.

Some characterize the social practice and technical-rational approaches as opposed to one another – workers’ needs versus employers’ needs. But in day-to-day practice there are successful, thoughtfully designed programs that simultaneously address the needs of both parties. Participation by all stakeholders in the planning and implementation stages facilitates a unified approach.

Technical-rational approach

“Workplace literacy training curricula, structure, and delivery methods reflect the workplace and its requirements.... Human resource development is part of the company’s overall business strategy and links employees’ continuous learning with the company’s continuous improvement efforts. Training objectives are derived from the company’s overall performance objectives, workplace practices, and job requirements. Training gives workers the skills to continue their learning and transfer knowledge or skills from one work situation to another.... Training encompasses the basic and higher-order skills needed to meet company goals and customer needs and carry out company work processes and job tasks, including the skills needed to solve problems, work in teams, and make decisions related to products and processes affecting employees’ work.” (National Alliance of Business and National Workforce Assistance Collaborative, 1999, p. 1)

5. The Benefits of Workplace Literacy Programs

There is a considerable body of evidence that documents the benefits of workplace literacy programs for employers and employees (Bailey, 2007; Bloom, 1997; Bloom & Lafleur, 1999; Bundale, 2008; Campbell, 2008 a and b; Kelly, 1997; Long, 1997). Most of the research uses community-based methodology, including interviews, surveys and focus groups. Quantitative data documenting impact is just beginning to emerge. In general, employers do not undertake rigorous return-on-investment studies due to cost and time constraints. Furthermore, many do not wish to intensively monitor their employees and they state that the positive benefits are obvious to them. Other options for measuring program effectiveness are tracking customer service satisfaction, employee retention, quality of internal communications, absenteeism, health and safety, accidents, wastage and other organizational objectives. (Bailey, 2007; MacLeod, 2004; Campbell, 2008 a and b)

There are a few studies by human resource experts that have found a strong correlation between training investment and business performance. One of the most well-known researchers in this area, Lauri Bassi (n.d.), found that company investment in employee training is the single most powerful predictor of stock price. Another study reported that an increase of just one per cent in literacy scores relative to the international average would be associated with an estimated boost to Canadian productivity of 2.5 per cent – worth \$18 billion per year to Canada's Gross Domestic Product (ABC CANADA, n.d.). Some companies that have invested in programs have reduced staff turnover by 70 per cent (Smith, 2001). According to Nova Scotia's Labour and Workforce Development (n.d.) department:

After investing in workplace education, Minas Basin Pulp [and] Power Company saw their efficiencies exceed 80 per cent on their machines every month, something the company had never seen before. Absenteeism reached an all-time low. And there was a 13-fold reduction in time lost as a result of accidents. (para. 4).

Two key studies investigated the specific benefits of Canadian workplace literacy programs. Roberts and

Gowan summarize Long's findings:

...one of the greatest benefits of workplace literacy programs is increased employee confidence, a benefit which is linked to other workplace improvements. Long likens confidence to an engine that drives employees to problem-solve, communicate and lose their fear of technology. Challenging the commonly-held view which separates confidence from skills, Long asserts that "confidence provides the critical underpinning upon which everything else is built". If employers understood this connection, Long argues, they would not continually request "hard measures" of the benefits of workplace basic skills programs. Instead, they would understand that an increase in employee confidence positively affects the bottom line. (Long, 1997, p. 8, cited in Roberts & Gowan, 2007, p. 13)

Other benefits for employers and employees documented in the literature can be summarized as follows. Benefits for employers include:

- increased productivity and team performance
- improved health and safety records (fewer injuries and Worker's Compensation claims)
- reduced product defects, error rates and wastage
- becoming an "employer of choice," able to recruit the most valuable employees
- greater employee loyalty and retention
- ability to promote from within
- improved morale and labour-management relations
- employees who
 - are confident, and willing to adapt to changes and participate in ongoing training
 - are able to handle continuous on-the-job training
 - have better team-building and decision-making skills
 - take more ownership of their work

- assume a more engaged and participative role in the organization.

Benefits for employees include:

- more opportunities for advancement and further training
- higher incomes over the course of their career
- increased confidence and ability to adapt to workplace changes
- more transferable skills
- better relationships on the job
- better problem-solving skills
- improved job satisfaction and overall quality of life
- shorter periods of unemployment.

Workplace educators caution that workplace literacy programs cannot not be considered a panacea, however, because there are many other variables that affect business outcomes:

Workplaces are complex organizations. Literacy and essential skills are only two of a myriad of factors that affect performance and productivity. This is why practitioners do organizational needs assessments, to understand what are the various forces at play and to ensure that they do not "oversell" the benefits of workplace education programs. (Hayes, 2006, p. 7)

6. Best Practices in Workplace Literacy

“Best practice” is a concept commonly used to mean the most effective, efficient ways to achieve the best outcomes in a particular field of endeavour. For this study, 10 reports on workplace literacy best practices were reviewed. The content was consolidated into two lists presented here. The first list identifies best practices in overall program design and management. The second identifies best practices related to literacy instruction in the workplace. Additional experience and research is needed before sector-specific best practice can be identified. New training techniques and delivery strategies continue to emerge, and most industries have not yet accumulated enough experience to make sector-specific generalizations.

Workplace literacy builds on the well-established fields of adult learning, human resource training and organizational development, and there is considerable consensus about best practices in those fields. When it comes to workplace literacy, however, there are some conflicting ideas. For example, unions advocate that participation should be voluntary and open to all workers. But employers must sometimes prioritize who can participate, based on resources available and specific business objectives. Sometimes employers must require participation in training in order to meet specific business objectives. In cases where there were varying ideas in the literature reviewed, these are identified in the lists below.

In general, the literature shows that workplace literacy and basic skills programs are most effective when embedded in organizations that have a learning culture. In these workplaces, everyone, from management to entry-level employees, engages in lifelong learning. Further education and training are part of the strategy for overall organizational success: “Learning is an integral and ongoing component of successful work performance and fosters a desire for continued learning which can benefit other aspects of the learners’ lives” (National Alliance of Business, 1999, p. 1).

It has become evident that embedding literacy and essential skills training in on-the-job training is the most successful method of service delivery: “Workplace education does not mean taking a pre-

packaged course that is offered in a more academic setting and plunking it down in the workplace” (Folinsbee, 2000 b, p. 9). Australia’s “built in, not bolted on” model of integrating essential skills education with vocational training is an example of leading-edge practice (Wignall, 2000). Flexible, customized programs relevant to each workplace are the state of the art.

Another common recommendation in the literature is that instruction be delivered by well-trained professional educators. Workplace education requires a specialized skill set that includes knowledge about the workplace environment and the ability to work comfortably with multiple stakeholders. Workplace educators in Nova Scotia, for example, act in a variety of capacities, including consulting on program design; planning, management and evaluation; conducting organizational needs assessments; collaboration with various stakeholders to create project teams; customized curriculum design; individual skill assessment and instruction; and action research (R. Peters, Nova Scotia Department of Education, personal communication, December 2, 2008; M. Dawson, Association of Workplace Educators of Nova Scotia, personal communication, December 29, 2008). Experienced workplace educators share the opinion that intercultural abilities and a deep respect for people and different kinds of work are key traits for success. They also point out the complexities of being accountable primarily to learners, but also to management, unions, government, funders and community agencies. Sue Folinsbee (2000b) provides a detailed list of knowledge, abilities and skills needed by workplace educators.

Volunteer tutors, mentors and job coaches are often used for program delivery because of their natural rapport with fellow-workers and as a way to stretch limited resources. This is a valid option, provided they are given adequate training and are coached by professional educators. La Ronge Motor Hotel in Saskatchewan, for example, used a carefully chosen Cree-speaking Aboriginal woman to tutor and mentor their Aboriginal housekeeping staff (Kitagawa, 2002). The tutor took literacy tutor training and apprenticed under a qualified

Northlands College instructor. In addition, she successfully completed the Saskatchewan Tourism Education Council's Train the Trainer program. This choice of instructor allowed training to proceed in a non-threatening and culturally sensitive manner.

Standardized testing is sometimes suggested as a means of measuring success. Experts in the field question whether a person's competency in all nine Essential Skills can be accurately measured and certified (Huget, 2007, p. 36). Where valid assessments are available, they should be used sparingly, for several reasons. First, testing only measures a narrow band of skills and often misses some of the most significant gains, such as self-confidence. Sometimes life-transforming changes are made in the space of months, but it may take longer for skills testing to reflect those gains. Secondly, most tests have been developed for purposes unrelated to work and may not be valid in the specific work environment. Additionally, testing intimidates many low-literacy adult learners and presents a significant barrier to their participation, especially if they perceive test results as a threat to continued employment. And finally, the results of workplace learning programs are often influenced by factors outside the instructional program (see Facilitating employee participation in literacy programs, p. 16), so testing may not accurately measure program effectiveness.

An alternative practice is to use portfolios, self-testing and other methods of assessment that yield more robust information. Participants set their own learning objectives and determine when they have been met. If standardized testing is used, it should be used for particular students in relationship to their learning goals. For example, if they would like to enter an apprenticeship program, it would be useful for them to know what skills may need upgrading and to what extent, in order to be successful in that program. Individual test results should remain confidential, and never be shared with the employer without permission.

In the UK, the Skills for Life program was implemented in different jurisdictions based on two different approaches. In England and Wales, the curriculum was designed to help students improve specific skills that were tested at the start and end of training. In Scotland, recognizing that learners arrive with a wide variety of needs and prior experience,

learners were allowed to set their own goals based on what they wanted to learn. The teachers created a curriculum based on each student's needs, and success was measured by asking learners, "Did you learn what you wanted to learn?" The results are being tabulated, and the jury is still out on the results.

Another best practice is to conduct an organizational needs assessment prior to program design and implementation. This determines what skill gaps require remediation. Customized programs can then be created to meet the needs of that specific workplace.

Sometimes a needs assessment is skipped, due to lack of time or resources, and off-the-shelf curricula are put in place instead. These initiatives have not usually been successful. In the early 1990s, for example, the UK funded the national Basic Skills Agency, which targeted individuals with skills deficits. Much of the programming was delivered in college learning centres, in classroom-like settings, using pre-packaged materials. According to Holland (2006), the UK learned that

...such initiatives failed to gain the commitment of employers, and tended to stigmatize workers whose attendance at class was very visible... At completion, students would be awarded a "Wordpower" or "Numberpower" certificate, which had dubious exchange value in terms of employment. (p. 7)

Holland adds that "Not surprisingly, perhaps, employer buy-in is a key issue in the UK" (p. 12). He describes various other government strategies that have been tried without success to build employer interest, including employer pledges, awards, funds to cover employee release time, and brokerage schemes that match employers with suitable resources.

The field is moving towards methods that integrate literacy within organizational practice, rather than focusing on individual deficits. Attention is being given to embedding literacy in on-the-job training, and pegging it to overall business objectives. Strategies include using authentic workplace documents to create relevant vocational learning materials that simultaneously upgrade basic literacy skills. New Zealand has been particularly strong in

embedding basic skills competencies in vocational training. The New Zealand Ministry of Education works with Industry Training Organizations for each

industry sector to develop integrative approaches and provide professional development for workplace educators.

Program management best practices

- Create an overall learning culture in the workplace.
- Partner: develop programs collaboratively with input from all stakeholders, including management, labour, employees, employers, educators, service providers and funders.
- Address business objectives, as well as employees' individual learning goals.
- Communicate clearly – program assumptions, intended benefits and standards for measuring success – at the start.
- Conduct an organizational needs assessment prior to program implementation.
- Make participation voluntary. (Employers may need to require participation in training programs in order to meet business objectives.)
- Make participation open to all. (This is not always feasible due to limited resources.)
- Avoid mandatory testing. (This is sometimes required by outside funders. If standardized testing is required, use reliable, valid assessment tools.)
- Assure confidentiality for participants, particularly regarding the results of assessments and progress reports. (Test results may be pooled for purposes of program evaluation.)
- Share the cost of training between employers and employees. (This does not exclude other arrangements that may be better suited to particular circumstances.)
- Provide incentives for successful learners, such as certification, opportunities for advancement, college credit, stipends, bonuses and other recognition.
- Hire well-trained professional educators to deliver instruction and coordinate programs.
- Provide peer tutors with adequate training and supervision by professional educators.
- Give instructors the opportunity to talk with and observe workers so that they understand the context for needed skills.
- Make provision for ongoing professional development for all instructors and tutors.
- Write workplace documents in clear, plain language to accommodate lower literacy levels.

Workplace education best practices

- Use recognized adult education principles as the foundation for good teaching practice.
- Offer a variety of training techniques and delivery models to accommodate various learning styles, interests and needs of individuals and organizations.
- Treat all participants with respect, appreciating diversity of gender, race, ethnicity and culture. Focus on assets and avoid language such as “illiterate,” “low-level” or “lacking.”
- Recognize that learning is a social process. Make every effort to create a comfortable atmosphere and develop positive student-teacher relationships. Small groups and low student-teacher ratios facilitate this.
- Create individualized learning plans, with student input, based on the student’s prior knowledge, experience, interests and assessments. Develop clear goals that meet personal and employer needs. Refine learning plans regularly.
- Measure success by attainment of learning objectives, not by the amount of time spent in training or by standardized tests.
- Ensure that learning materials are appropriate for adults and relevant to the work setting.
- Provide flexible scheduling, or consider using self-paced, modular curricula.
- Be aware of community services and make sensitive referrals to programs that support learner success, including employment, childcare, transportation, counselling, health care, housing and income assistance.

7. How to Develop a Workplace Literacy Program

Many factors influence employers' decisions to invest time and money in workplace literacy programs. Decisions are influenced by a combination of perceived incentives, as well as potential barriers. Some of these variables can be managed by companies, and some are beyond their control, such as economic cycles. Usually a cluster of factors converge to increase readiness.

Incentives include potential business benefits, which have been described above. Other drivers include concerns about safety; the need to recruit and retain employees; concerns about productivity; wastage and errors; changes in technology or customer requirements; and a desire to boost morale. Implementation is also facilitated by readily available access to information about workplace literacy and to appropriate service providers.

In a report to the Canadian Standing Committee on Human Resource Development, the following barriers to starting workplace literacy programs were brought to the Committee's attention:

Being unaware of the problem and the economic benefits related to fixing it; the belief that adult education is the responsibility of the public education system; and many businesses, particularly small ones, do not feel that they have the financial resources to finance workplace literacy programs (Longfield, 2003, pp. 66–67).

Other factors that sometimes present barriers include:

- management attitudes and level of commitment to training
- job skill requirements and labour supply
- workplace organization
- rate and type of industry and workplace change, decline or growth
- changing markets and customer requirements
- regulatory pressures
- industry conditions and training culture (Schick, 2005).

Some perceived barriers are unfounded. For example, a common concern is that trained employees will be poached by other companies.

In fact, research shows that employees are usually more loyal to employers who invest in their training. The Canadian Council on Learning (Bailey, 2007) compared turnover rates and found that trained employees are actually less likely to leave, because they believe they are more valued and have higher morale. A University of London study concluded that “the evidence points consistently towards the provision of training actually lowering the risk of workers leaving, rather than increasing it” (Ananiadou, Jenkins & Wolf, 2003, p. 31).

A New Zealand study found that there is significant variability in employer attitudes about workplace literacy training (Schick, 2005). Employers were classified into four stages of readiness:

- 1 Unaware and unfavourable – would not consider workplace literacy training
- 2 Unaware and favourable – would consider workplace literacy training, but don't see how it is linked to business objectives
- 3 Aware – see the connection to business objectives and have considered workplace literacy training
- 4 Doing it – have invested in workplace literacy training.

Knowing the stage that an employer is at can determine appropriate next steps.

Small business generally has the lowest participation rate in workplace training, due to lack of time and money. There are several successful models of sector-wide partnerships that have succeeded in overcoming this barrier, notably SkillPlan, the BC Construction Industry Skills Council and the Canadian Automotive Repair and Service Council. The automotive repair industry, for example, is primarily made up of small shops with five or fewer employees. There is a need for constant training as new technology develops. In the Canadian Automotive Repair and Service Council model, interactive distance learning is provided via flexible, web-based modules. Employers subscribe to the service and then employees access the training through worksite computers. The Canadian Sector Council Program has also supported other successful sector-wide training initiatives.

7.1 Facilitating employee participation in literacy programs

Employees have varying attitudes about participation in workplace literacy programs. Only 5 to 10 per cent of adults with low literacy ever enroll in programs to improve their literacy skills (Long & Taylor, 2002, cited in Roberts & Gowan, 2007, p. 13). On the other hand, one study found that 60 per cent of respondents have considered upgrading or completing their high school education since leaving school prior to completion. The barriers to participation are complex and interrelated. Understanding them provides crucial information for program planning, as these barriers must be addressed in order for learners to be successful. Roberts and Gowan (2007) provide an in-depth review of studies about adult participation. Reasons for non-participation include:

- highly developed coping skills, leading people with low-literacy to believe they do not have a need to improve their literacy
- ability to maintain employment without upgrading
- intervening factors, such as financial problems, family or work responsibilities, transportation, childcare
- unfavourable perceptions about what programs would be like and/or negative experiences with the formal education system
- concerns about disclosing inadequacies to employers
- concerns about the pace, difficulty or relevance of a program
- ethnic and cultural values that affect people's engagement with formal learning
- health issues
- unstable or seasonal working conditions.

To overcome these barriers, Alison Campbell (2003) suggests that:

- there be a well thought-out outreach program that addresses common concerns and dispels myths
- employers and unions encourage participation
- childcare, eldercare and transportation needs be taken into account, and
- income replacement programs be provided.

7.2 Six steps for creating a successful workplace literacy program

Once a decision has been made to go forward with a workplace literacy program, there are six main steps to navigate. These steps are applicable to programs of all sizes, including individual companies as well as whole industry sectors. It is recommended that this process be used in its entirety, but it is recognized that it may not be practical to complete all the steps in all cases.

1. Create a partnership or project team that includes representatives from all stakeholder groups: management, labour, employees, employers, educators, service providers and funders (Folinsbee and Jurmo, 1994; Hammond and Bennett, 2000; Anderson, 2000; Steele, Johnston, Folinsbee, and Belfiore, 1997).
2. Conduct an organizational needs assessment, taking into account learner goals as well as business objectives. (Folinsbee, 2000a; Folinsbee & Jurmo, 1994; Lewie, 1992).
3. Identify specific training objectives.
4. Select appropriate training techniques and delivery methods. Choose:
 - formal and/or informal methods
 - comprehensive or quick, targeted training
 - how to remove barriers to employee participation (e.g., share the costs; provide transportation, childcare, on-site training, e-learning, and/or flexible schedules, integrated with on-the-job training) (Campbell, 2002).
 - location and timing of service delivery
 - training techniques; options include:
 - classroom training
 - e-learning
 - on-the-job training
 - mentoring
 - self-study
 - one-on-one instruction, coaching
 - peer tutoring and mentoring.
5. Obtain management and employee support, then implement the plan (Plett, 2007).

6. Evaluate the program and make continuous improvements (Barker, 1991; Charney and Conway, 2005).

This six-step process will yield solutions that are unique to each workplace. The process provides the best means for creating a program that is relevant for employees and has a positive impact on business' bottom line.

8. Success Stories and Case Studies

Case studies provide an opportunity to learn from the success of others and stimulate creative thinking. The literature listed in the bibliography contains many examples of imaginative and effective business solutions that involve workplace literacy education. The case studies reviewed include successful collaboration across sectors, as well as programs implemented by individual companies. The reports show how companies of all sizes, from all five sectors that we investigated, benefit from workplace literacy programs. Real-life examples are provided, including workplace literacy programs that are formal, informal, in-house, off-site, delivered by professionals or volunteers, short or long-term, delivered individually or in groups. The reports show how literacy education can be embedded into existing on-the-job training, and they give insights into what works and why.

Of particular value to small businesses is Douglas Watt's (2008) report for the Conference Board of Canada, in which he reviewed 65 small and medium enterprises in ten countries. For each business he succinctly offers readers specific information about why training was required, how a program was selected, costs, challenges and obstacles, keys to success and outcomes. He summarizes, "Workplace learning pays great dividends to all that take part. The key: that employers and employees alike recognize the value and importance of knowledge, skills and lifelong learning; and that training activities and learning programs are meaningful, timely and relevant" (p. 2).

We hope readers will find examples in the cited literature that apply to their situation, or that stimulate their own creative solutions.

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HRSDC. http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca/eng/workplaceskills/essential_skills/general/home.shtml. Free and easy-to-use tools to help learners, employers and practitioners take action on Literacy and Essential Skills. Search over 300 job profiles to see how these skills are used in the workplace. Use the Literacy and Essential Skills Toolkit to help improve skills at work and in everyday life.

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Office of Literacy and Essential Skills (OLES), Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC). http://srv108.services.gc.ca/english/general/home_e.shtml. A series of easy-to-use tools that guide employers through the steps to integrating essential skills into the workplace, including needs assessment, program planning and measuring program success.

SkillPlan. <http://measureup.towes.com/english/index.asp>. Measure Up! is a free web-based tool that tests essential skills. Each problem set is based on a document – a memo, catalogue, regulations or work order – associated with various workplace contexts.

Test of Workplace Essential Skills (TOWES). <http://www.towes.com/home.aspx>. A standardized test that uses workplace documents to accurately measure the three essential skills that are needed for safe and productive employment: reading text, document use, and numeracy. Training to administer the test is offered by Bow Valley College.

Toronto Training Board. http://ttb.on.ca/e/project_literacy.php. Literacy Works! project information and various fact sheets.

Work and Learning Knowledge Centre. <http://www.ccl-cca.ca/CCL/AboutCCL/KnowledgeCentres/WorkandLearning/WorkandLearningHome/?Language=EN>. Composed of a consortium of more than 90 organizations, led by the Canadian Manufacturers and Exporters (CME) and the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC). Created to help ensure that Canadians continue to learn for work and from work, and to improve their opportunities for a successful and fulfilling career.

Workbase: The New Zealand Centre for Workforce Literacy Development. <http://www.workbase.org.nz>.

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