



Workplace Learning Project

Issues Background -- Questions and Answers

Q. Why do Capital Region employers need to know about workplace learning programs?

A. Employers struggling to cope with the one of the lowest unemployment rates in the country are looking for ways to improve their recruitment and retention strategies, however:

- Though workplace learning programs are a proven strategy for addressing these labour market issues, Capital Region employers don't have enough information about how to improve their employees' basic skills, according to a recent Community Councilⁱ study.
- Currently, employers say they are addressing basic skills gaps using stop-gap measures such as one-on-one coaching or mentoring, assigning a job adequate for the literacy level of the person, and delegating tasks to other employees.
- The small business climate in Victoria--75 per cent of businesses have five or fewer employees--makes the task of improving the workforce's basic skills particularly challenging as employers find it hard to dedicate the necessary time and money to improve their worker's basic skills through workplace learning programs.

Q. What's being done in the Capital Region to improve the workforce's basic skills?

A. The Victoria READ Society's Workplace Learning Project is conducting a community-based research project on find out and offer employers affordable options for basic skills learning:

- Community-based research, through in-person interviews with employers and employees in the will be conducted between June and September.
- Stakeholders in the five sectors most affected by the labour shortage – construction, retail sales, accommodation, food services and healthcare – are being addressed first.
- In early 2009, research findings will be shared and employers interested in implementing workplace learning initiatives identified.
- Findings will also be available on the Victoria READ Society's website, on the workplace learning page.

Q. Is this a problem outside of the Capital Region?

A. Yes – basic skills levels in the workforce are a broad concern:

- Provincially one million residents have literacy levels below what's considered necessary to function in a modern society. ⁱⁱ Even though their basic skills are lacking, these people are employed in major industries such as commerce, construction, accommodation, food service, health care and social services.
- Employers increasingly note symptoms of low literacy amongst workers, such as: difficulty completing everyday documents (production logs, leave forms, machine breakdown reports); misunderstanding oral instructions; limited participation during team meetings; regular mistakes when making calculations; poor health and safety compliance and difficulty understanding the company goals and objectives.
- As Canada's economy is shifting from reliance on manufacturing and natural resources to a knowledge-based economy, it is becoming increasingly necessary to have all workers continually upgrade their skills.
- The new job market requires higher literacy and technical skills, but much of the available labour pool does not have skills that are adequate to meet the demand.
- The literacy skills of 48 percent of working-age Canadians are below the level needed for the jobs created by the Canadian economy ⁱⁱⁱ.
- People who are able to read and write adequately often need training in practical applications, such as how to decipher a bus schedule, complete forms, or read a chart.
- Even highly skilled workers find they need continuous training, as computerized systems are implemented and upgraded.

Q. What evidence is there that basic skills training is effective?

A. Improvement in basic skills training can increase a company's ability to recruit and retain staff while also improving productivity, profitability and jobsite safety:

- An increase of just one per cent in literacy scores relative to the international average is associated with an estimated boost to national productivity of 2.5 per cent -- worth \$18 billion per year to Canadian Gross Domestic Product. ^{iv}

- The costs of not addressing these issues can be high. Truck drivers with level one (lowest) reading skill, for example, are 176 per cent more likely to be involved in a workplace incident, such as accidents and spills, than those at reading levels three to five.^v Lower skilled adults tend to work fewer weeks, experience more and longer periods of unemployment, and earn lower wages.
- At the Northern Alberta Institute of Technology, the pass rate in the first-year carpentry program jumped from 73 to 100 per cent with the introduction of the basic skill intervention.^{vi} Each student was given a Test of Workplace Essential Skills (TOWES) to assess their skills in reading, document use, and numeracy. Upgrading was offered within the program where, traditionally, only technical training was available.

Q. How are workplace learning programs usually implemented?

A. The most successful programs require voluntary buy-in from both employer and employee, are custom-designed and incorporated into the employee's regular tasks:

- Training programs can be offered in-house, either through training an employee to deliver programs, or by bringing a professional educator in. Sometimes employees are sent out to learn basic skills through post-secondary educational institutions.
- Documents and manuals used in the workforce form the basis for each lesson, so the training is extremely relevant to each job.
- The Canadian Government has developed an Essential Skills framework to help employers implement workplace learning programs.^{vii}
http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca/en/workplaceskills/essential_skills/index.shtml

Q. What is the Victoria READ Society?

A. The Victoria READ Society is a non-profit organization providing literacy and numeracy tutoring to children, youth and adults by professional educators:

- The READ Society was founded October 1976 with a mandate to provide basic instruction in reading, writing, math and study skills to children who were struggling to learn.
- In subsequent years, programs were added for adults needing basic skills upgrading.
- In 1990, READ expanded to offer English as a Second Language programs for immigrant and refugee adults.
- This project reflects the society's growing awareness of workplace learning issues and the organization's commitment to developing programs that meet learners' needs.




- READ serves learners at three locations in the Capital Region. The Workplace Learning Project is based at the Quadra Street office.

Q. Who do I contact for more information?

A. To find out more about workplace learning, or to participate in the research please contact:

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ⁱ Community Council, *Labour Market Dialogues: Literacy in the Workplace*, October 2007

ⁱⁱ ABC Canada, *IALSS Report Summary*, (November 2005), Retrieved April 20, 2008 from http://www.abc-canada.org/en/system/files/all_summary_may_05_1.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ Kjell Rubenson, Richard Desjardins and Ee-Seul Yoon, (October 2007) *Adult Learning in Canada: A Comparative Perspective, Results from the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey*, Statistics Canada. Retrieved April 10, 2008 from <http://www.statcan.ca/english/research/89-552-MIE/89-552-MIE2007017.pdf>

^{iv} ABC Canada, *Workplace Literacy Facts*, Retrieved April 10, 2008 from http://www.abc-canada.org/en/workplace_literacy/facts

^v Canadian Trucking Human Resources Council, (March 24, 2004) *Essential Skills as a Predictor of Safety Performance among CPPI Certified Petroleum Professional Drivers in Alberta*, Accessed April 10, 2008 at http://www.cthrc.com/en/documents/CPPI_Report.pdf

^{vi} Northern Alberta Institute of Technology (NAIT), *Essential Skills*, Retrieved April 10, 2008 from http://www.nait.ca/pthosted/ContinuingEducation/pdf/2006_07/CEFall%5CCEF06_Essential.pdf

^{vii} Human Resources and Social Development Canada (HRSDC), retrieved April 10, 2008 from http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca/en/workplaceskills/essential_skills/index.shtml