

Workplace Literacy

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PROGRAMS IN THE WORKPLACE:

Executive Summary



CANADIAN
COUNCIL
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DEVELOPMENT



Executive Summary

Increased attention has been paid to adult literacy in workplaces in both Canada and internationally, since the release of two literacy surveys between 1994 and 2003. In Canada, however, the issue remains largely invisible to the public and to politicians. There is no national strategy. Few provinces and territories have education and training strategies that include a component of workplace literacy and those that do, have significantly varied approaches. Neither employers nor labour leaders rank “inadequate literacy skills among current workers” as a serious problem. Those same employers rate “upgrading the skills of current employees” as their highest priority, but they do not link low worker literacy as a potential barrier to that skills upgrading.¹ But results from these international literacy surveys suggest that the Canadian public and politicians, labour leaders and employers should take the issue of workplace literacy much more seriously.

Results from the 2003 International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (IALSS) for Canada indicated that approximately 38% of employed respondents were at Level 2 or lower in both document and prose literacy proficiency. Approximately 45% of employed respondents were at Level 2 or lower in numeracy proficiency.² In all three domains, proficiency levels for were below Level 3 – the benchmark set by the IALSS as the minimum level “for coping with the demands of everyday life and work in a complex, advanced society.”³

Based on the IALSS data, we also know that Canadian respondents aged 16 to 65 who have lower literacy proficiency levels are less likely to participate in adult education and training than respondents with higher proficiency levels.⁴ The IALSS results also reveal that, not surprisingly, workers with lower literacy proficiency levels are more likely to be working in lower-skilled occupations.⁵ Furthermore, a 2006 report from the Canadian Policy Research Network suggests that in Canada, job-related training is lower than in other countries, and “when employers do provide training, they are more likely to provide it to higher-skilled workers than to lower-skilled workers.”⁶

The Statistics Canada report on IALSS suggests that “proficiency in literacy, numeracy and problem solving provides the foundation for the acquisition of new knowledge and skills.”⁷ From the IALSS data and studies like that of the Canadian Policy Research Networks, we know that over one-third of employed Canadian workers may experience difficulties with literacy and numeracy, and that these workers are less likely to participate in adult education and training. We also know that workers who experience difficulties with literacy and numeracy are more likely to be in low-skilled occupations, and they are less likely to receive training sponsored by their employer. The Statistics Canada report concludes that “the demand for high literacy and numeracy proficiency is likely to increase further as Canada moves more and more towards a knowledge-based economy...Continuous learning assists in maintaining competencies and acquiring new ones.”⁸

In 2003, the Standing Committee on Human Resources Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities released its report, *Raising Adult Literacy Skills: The Need for a Pan-Canadian Response*. According to that report, low literacy levels are a national problem “requiring a nation-wide response that is more coordinated and effective than our current efforts, and that

entails more resources to enhance our capacity to address this very important problem.”⁹ The Committee identified increasing workers’ literacy levels as a priority and stated that “...a more highly skilled and literate workforce is one of the keys to improving productivity and the economic well-being of Canadians.”¹⁰ The Committee was “somewhat mystified” by the low incidence of workplace literacy programs when there are so many workers with low literacy skills and the economic gains from increasing literacy levels would be great.¹¹

The CCSD Workplace Literacy Project

The Canadian Council on Social Development’s (CCSD) project, “Literacy Programs in the Workplace: How to Increase Employer Support” followed up on the results of the international literacy surveys and other reports documenting low literacy levels among many Canadian workers. Project goals were to help identify the types of approaches to workplace literacy training – internationally and across Canada – that might appeal to employers. Interviews were conducted with select employers across Canada to determine whether there was agreement on the types of approaches, incentives, and literacy programs that worked best in a range of employment environments. The three major components of the project included commissioning three working papers on different aspects of workplace literacy, conducting three case studies, and writing a final report on the project.

The Working Papers

As part of this project, research was conducted for three working papers on workplace literacy, and each paper will be posted on the CCSD website (www.ccsd.ca):

- *Canadian Literature Review and Bibliography* examines various perspectives and approaches to workplace literacy taken by different stakeholders, and discusses current research on the benefits of workplace literacy programs for both employers and workers;
- *Overview of Selected International Programs* examines the conditions for adult education and training, including workplace literacy, in eight OECD countries;
- *Overview of Provincial and Territorial Policies* examines the current policies and programs for adult education and workplace literacy across Canada.

Research for the papers was conducted between 2004 and 2006. Since that time, there have been new developments in the field, both internationally and in Canada. In Canada, for example, the federal government created the Adult Learning, Literacy and Essential Skills Program (ALLESPP) in April 2006, which integrated the National Literacy Program, the Office of Learning Technologies, and the Learning Initiatives Program.¹² Unfortunately, it is beyond the scope of the current study to explore the implications of these recent changes in government policies and programs.

The Case Studies

Case studies on workplace literacy were conducted in three provinces: Nova Scotia, Quebec, and Ontario. Each study included an in-depth examination of the provincial approach to workplace literacy and examined adult education and training policies in that province, including those for workplace literacy training. Interviews were held with employers or employer representatives to

obtain information about the types of approaches, incentives, and programs for workplace literacy training that worked best for them, based on their own experiences. The employers' suggestions were then summarized according to the type of government policies and programs that they felt would increase support for workplace literacy training. All study respondents were invited to provide feedback on those suggestions and it was incorporated into the case studies. Each case study is presented in its entirety in the full report of *Programs in the Workplace: How to Increase Employer Support*.

The Report

The full report, primarily descriptive in nature, provides a summary of the project divided into five sections:

- Section I introduces the project.
- Section II provides a brief overview of some of the international conditions for workplace literacy. Lessons learned from the international context are highlighted, to better understand how other countries provide funding and incentives for workplace literacy training in order to help inform the kinds of policies and incentives that could be developed in Canada.
- Section III provides an overview of the roles that different stakeholders across Canada play with respect to workplace literacy training. It also examines some of the approaches of different provinces and territories towards workplace literacy training and draws out lessons learned from these approaches.
- Section IV examines in detail case studies of the adult education and training policies and programs in Nova Scotia, Quebec, and Ontario. Each case study includes summaries of interviews with select employers in that province, and employer suggestions for policies and programs that would help increase their support for workplace literacy training.
- Section V summarizes the lessons learned from the project research and case studies about how to increase support among employers for workplace literacy training.

Lessons Learned

International Conditions for Workplace Literacy

Employer support for workplace literacy is evident in countries where:

- 1) National governments take a strong leadership role on workplace literacy training by:
 - Directly funding workplace literacy training;
 - Providing incentives to employers who offer workplace literacy training;
 - Providing incentives to workers to participate in education and training;
 - Investing in a public education system that includes an adult learning system; and
 - Developing national adult education and training strategies.
- 2) Employers take on greater responsibility and cover more of the costs for providing training, including workplace literacy training.
- 3) Labour plays a significant role by:
 - Providing workplace literacy training;
 - Negotiating with employers for release time for members to attend training; and
 - Negotiating workers' rights to training, including a workplace literacy component, in their collective agreements with employers.

Workplace Literacy in Canada

- 1) In the absence of a national strategy for adult literacy, provinces and territories have developed a patchwork of approaches. As a result, workplace literacy training has not been integrated into coherent, long-term strategies and programs for adult education and training.
- 2) Without the support of federal or provincial programs or incentives, few employers have invested in workplace literacy training.
- 3) Programs and initiatives that have been introduced by employers or by non-profit organizations have tended to be short-term in nature, reflecting the modest level of resources available (at the provincial and federal levels of government) and the nature of the available funding (i.e., project funding, rather than core funding).

Case Studies

The provincial governments chosen for the case studies in this project represent a wide range of policies and programs in workplace literacy training:

- Nova Scotia has a workplace literacy policy and provides funding for delivery.
- Quebec levies a tax to encourage employers to offer training that can include workplace literacy. A national training fund supports the delivery of workplace literacy and French-language training.
- Ontario funds organizations – such as local training boards and regional literacy networks – to support workplace literacy training, but it does not provide direct funding or support.

The Nova Scotia government has a workplace literacy policy – the Workplace Education Initiative. The provincial government is also a member of the Nova Scotia Partners for Workplace Education, a partnership which includes the government, employers, labour, and workplace educators. The provincial government’s role is to coordinate the Initiative by promoting workplace education to employers and labour, by helping to design, implement, and evaluate workplace programs, and by providing adult education expertise through its field officers. The provincial government also funds workplace literacy training by covering the costs of initial needs assessments and paying for some or all of the instructors’ salaries.

In Quebec, the provincial government’s *Act to Foster the Development of Manpower Training* mandates employers to spend a certain percentage on training, which can include workplace literacy. Furthermore, the Act specifically earmarks funds for literacy and French-language training. Organizations such as education and training bodies, labour groups, and employers can apply to the fund for monies to cover the costs of instructor salaries or employee wages related to workplace literacy programs.

In Ontario, the provincial government views literacy training as a crucial component to competition in the global economy, however, it has not directly funded any workplace training, including workplace literacy, since the mid-1990s. Employers must assume responsibility for direct training costs. Instead, the Ontario government provides funding to local training boards and regional literacy networks to support and promote workplace literacy.

Interviews with employers for this project indicated that workplaces are recognized as a key venue for adult literacy learning. The employers stated that governments can – and must – play a greater role in addressing the challenges of workplace literacy.

Conclusion

Research for this project revealed that there are many workplace literacy initiatives and programs across Canada, and that many workers have participated in these kinds of programs. However, more needs to be done by the federal, provincial and territorial governments to encourage employers, labour leaders, and education and training providers in non-profit organizations to increase their support for literacy programs in the workplace.

Recommendations

To increase employer support for workplace literacy training, it is recommend that:

The federal government take a leadership role by convening key literacy partners – including representatives from provincial and territorial governments, employers, labour groups, and adult education providers. Together, this partnership should develop a coherent action plan for workplace literacy training, taking into account the needs of different jurisdictions and stakeholders. The action plan should include the following components:

1. Financial incentives for employers to offer workplace literacy training. These incentives could include a combination of the following:
 - Wages subsidies;
 - Tax credits;
 - Payroll levy;
 - Subsidizing the costs of instructor salaries, needs assessments, material development, and evaluations.
2. Services to support employers offering workplace literacy training. These services could include:
 - Referrals to appropriate workplace literacy resources;
 - Referrals to appropriate workplace literacy providers;
 - Support for employers with the required paperwork (such as with funding and reporting forms);
 - Support for employers with program development, implementation, and evaluation.
3. Promotion of workplace literacy programs to prospective employers. This could include providing information about current funding and available resources and disseminating that information among employers in different sectors and regions.
4. Funding for non-profit organizations that provide workplace literacy support to employers nationally, provincially, or regionally, and for key workplace partners.

Endnotes

¹ Brigid Hayes, "Presentation," in *Measuring Success: International comparisons and bottom lines*. Calgary: WWestnet, 2003, p. 5. Hayes is referring to a 2002 survey conducted by the former Canadian Labour and Business Centre of private and public sector managers and labour leaders. See Canadian Labour and Business Centre, *Viewpoints 2002: The Perspective of Business, Labour and Public Sector Leaders, Spring 2002 – Skills and Skill Shortages*. Ottawa: Canadian Labour and Business Centre, 2002.

² *Building on Our Competencies: Canadian Results of the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey*. Ottawa: Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, Statistics Canada, 2003, pp. 16-62.

³ *International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (IALSS)*. ABC CANADA, 2005, p. 2. The International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey measured the proficiency levels of the Canadian population in four domains: prose and document literacy, numeracy, and problem solving. The survey measured literacy and numeracy along a continuum of proficiency where Level 1 is the lowest proficiency level, and Level 4/5 is the highest. The study set Level 3 proficiency as the benchmark (*Building on Our Competencies: Canadian Results of the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey*, pp. 12-14.).

⁴ See *Building on Our Competencies: Canadian Results of the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey*, p. 183.

⁵ *Building on Our Competencies: Canadian Results of the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey*, p. 189.

⁶ Karen Myers and Patrice de Broucker. *Too Many Left Behind: Canada's Adult Education and Training System*. Ottawa: Canadian Policy Research Networks, 2006, p. 46.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

⁸ Myers and de Broucker. *Too Many Left Behind: Canada's Adult Education and Training System*, p. 73.

⁹ Standing Committee on Human Resources Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities, *Raising Adult Literacy Skills: The Need for a Pan-Canadian Response*. Ottawa: House of Commons, 2003, p. 12, as quoted in Canadian Council on Social Development, *Canadian Literature Review and Bibliography*, Ottawa: CCSD, 2007.

¹⁰ Standing Committee on Human Resources Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities, *Raising Adult Literacy Skills: The Need for a Pan-Canadian Response*, p. 65, as quoted in Canadian Council on Social Development, *Canadian Literature Review and Bibliography*, Ottawa: CCSD, 2007.

¹¹ Standing Committee on Human Resources Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities, *Raising Adult Literacy Skills: The Need for a Pan-Canadian Response*, p. 65, as quoted in Canadian Council on Social Development, *Canadian Literature Review and Bibliography*, Ottawa: CCSD, 2007.

¹² See *Adult Learning, Literacy and Essential Skills Program (ALLESPP)*. Ottawa: Human Resources and Social Development Canada, 2007, available from <http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca/en/hip/lld/olt/ADULTLESP.shtml>, [cited May 9, 2007]. The policy reviews for this current study were conducted prior to this change.