

LABOUR MARKET DIALOGUES: LITERACY IN THE WORKPLACE

Labour Market Dialogues is a project of the Community Council designed to explore how employers in BC's Capital Region may be better supported to hire and retain people experiencing barriers to employment. This is one of nine discussion papers that share information on each barrier, with recommendations that could strengthen employers' success in recruiting and retaining staff.

Using background research, interviews with five local employers, two worksite literacy walks, and consultation with key informants and adult literacy students, this project looked at current literacy in the workplace trends, reviewing real jobs in local workplaces and providing feedback information and recommendations to the employer about the accessibility of the given job.

Literacy in the Canadian workplace

Background research into this topic reveals that the need to address literacy in the workplace in Canada is reaching a critical level. Almost half of working-age Canadians do not have the necessary basic literacy skills required for successful participation in our rapidly changing labour market¹.

The 2005 *International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey*² (IALSS) paints a picture of a lack of skills that is pervasive among the Canadian workforce, and that will only worsen as the skill demands increase through the adoption of information and communications technologies.

The labour market demands higher levels of skills than in the past. Like many other countries, Canada has experienced a transformation from a reliance on natural resources to a knowledge-based economy.

Traditional manufacturing and clerical jobs are being replaced by new jobs requiring higher technical skills. The study estimated that in 2004 more than 70% of all new jobs created in this country required some form of post-secondary education.

Canada's skill shortage problem is linked to our low literacy levels. More than half of the people who will be in the labour market in 2015 are already in it. Hence, many of today's workers may not be properly equipped to supply tomorrow's literacy skill requirements.

Findings also indicate that the demographic changes in Canada's workforce do not necessarily match the skill requirements of the current labour market.

Last year, the Canadian Council on Social Development (CCSD) released a report concluding that³:

- In the absence of a national strategy for adult literacy, provinces and territories have developed a patchwork of approaches
- Without government support programs or incentives, few employers have invested in workplace literacy training
- 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 and the nature of the available funding.

Literacy in BC's Capital Region's workplace

From the perspective of BC's Capital Region's business sector, managers and employers are willing to provide extra assistance with the literacy needs of their staff, and this, according to the suggestions collected in this study, can take the form of:

- one-on-one coaching or mentoring
- assigning a job adequate for the literacy comfort level of the person
- delegating literacy tasks to other employees.

Business managers and employers are interested in learning how to address the literacy needs of their workers. However, they are not sure how to access the services and information available and are addressing their literacy needs through a trial-and-error strategy.

When asked if they had received any outside information from the community, government or business organizations to help address literacy issues, all employers in our study responded negatively.

Life-long learning, improved literacy programs and increased workplace education are all part of the needs expressed by all topic participants. This requires adopting a literacy strategy that goes beyond the capacity to read and write.

Workers, management, private business, unions, community agencies, literacy organizations and governments can all be involved in developing and delivering a wide variety of learning programs to enhance the quality of the workforce.

A program to address the literacy needs of people experiencing employment barriers can be part of a well-designed workplace training strategy that benefits all workers. A skilled workforce requires continual training and upgrading, especially considering the demographic changes expected in the Canadian workforce.

Some of the benefits that workplace literacy programs can bring to the business community include:

- Greater employee self-confidence
- Improved literacy skills
- Increased participation in other training
- Increased loyalty and retention
- Better problem solving skills
- Better team-building skills
- Increased ability to use technology
- Increased health and safety
- Improved labour-management relations
- Improved productivity.

¹ <http://www2.literacy.bc.ca/facts/workfrce.pdf>
<accessed October 1st, 2007> See footnote 1.

² ABC Canada: http://www.abc-canada.org/media_room/news/ialss_2005_r3.shtml
<accessed September 29th, 2007>

³ http://www.ccsd.ca/pubs/2007/literacy/workplace_literacy_exec_sum.pdf <accessed october 4, 2007>

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