

The ABC's of Workplace Literacy

By Carter Hammett

The province of Ontario's recent decision to quadruple teachers specializing in literacy and numeracy to 16,000 from the current 4,000 is good news for schools and employers alike. Almost half of Ontario's students are not meeting the standard on province-wide tests, and the goal to increase success rates to 75 per cent by 2008, will only improve the skills needed for an entirely different kind of literacy: that of the workplace.

No longer does the term, "literacy" mean just the ability to read and write. Indeed, the term has come to encompass a broad range of skills, behaviours and attitudes deemed essential to workplace success, including the ability to understand printed data in daily, activities at work, home and in the community. Workplace literacy includes basic skills and education programs offered to employees in the workplace. These can range from grade 12 equivalency courses to computer skills upgrading.

"Making sure employees have the requisite workplace literacy skills has become an economic imperative to address the challenges facing corporate Canada today. The information technology revolution has significantly raised the bar on the minimum skill levels necessary to enter, perform and progress in the workplace. Now, more than ever, there is increasing demand for higher literacy skills in the workplace, even for entry level positions," says Alexandra Dunsmuir, director of communications for ABC CANADA, a national non-profit organization that organizes national literacy awareness programs, supports local literacy groups and conducts research to facilitate the development Canadian literacy.

The International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) is a 20-country comparative study of adult workplace literacy among industrialized countries, and has identified three literacy types:

- Prose literacy is the ability to understand text, including editorials, newsletters and news stories.**

- **Document literacy includes skills needed to locate and use information contained in various formats, such as job applications, payroll forms, travel schedules, maps, charts, tables and graphs.**
- **Quantitative literacy includes numeracy skills for balancing a cheque book, calculating tips or determining interest on a student loan.**

The need for these skills is increasing. IALS indicates that 45 per cent of all new jobs created over the next decade will require at least 16 years of education.

According to the IALS, about 22 per cent of adult Canadians had difficulty dealing with printed materials. Nearly one-third of employers surveyed indicated training problems, because some of their staff were functionally illiterate.

A significant number of adults with literacy problems also have some kind of learning disability.

One local agency, Preparatory Training Programs of Toronto (PTP) has offered a range of workplace training and literacy programs since 1991. Acting executive director Barbara McFater says PTP programs emulate the workplace through training in customer service, shipping, dispatch and pet care. Classes create simulated experiences where learners receive document literacy in reading and writing newsletters, invoices and numeracy through bookkeeping. “Students don’t write essays here, but there is an emphasis on filling out forms,” says McFater.

Five years ago, McFater noticed that changes in welfare reform had created a shift in her client base, to persons with more barriers who were forced to participate in the program. These clients include persons in recovery, single mothers and persons with learning disabilities. In short, the need for workplace literacy and basic skills training had become even more necessary in order to serve individuals who might not have completed secondary school.

“People with multiple barriers are interested in returning to work but need more skills,” she says. “Clearly, we can’t let them slip through the cracks.”

In addition to community-based training, there are many other programs dealing with workplace literacy, including transitional programs offered in community colleges, through independent learning centres and distance education, which allows students to work at their own pace and availability.

The General Educational Development Testing Program (GED) recognizes adult learning can occur through work, travel, reading and other avenues, and provides an opportunity for adults who did not complete secondary school to obtain an equivalency.

“The benefits of workplace literacy programs include greater employee self-confidence, improved skills in literacy, problem-solving and team building, as well as an increased ability to use technology, increased health and safety and improved labour management relations” says Dunsmuir.

For further information about workplace literacy, check out the following sites:

ABC Canada - a national, registered charitable organization committed to promoting literacy to the general public and to the private sector.

www.abc-canada.org/

Canadian CEO Magazine, ABC CANADA publication profiling CEOs who have created successful workplace literacy programs.

www.canadianceo.ca

Directory of Canadian Adult Literacy Research <http://www.nald.ca/crd/>

Conference Board of Canada: Workplace Literacy Central

<http://www.conferenceboard.ca/workplaceliteracy/default.asp>

International Adult Literacy Survey: www.nald.ca/nls/ials/introduc.htm

Preparatory Training Programs of Toronto: www.ptp.ca/about.html

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