ELEVATING WORKPLACE LITERACY & ESSENTIAL SKILLS
FOCUS: HEALTH CARE

Presented by
ABC Life Literacy Canada
Dear colleague:

On behalf of ABC Life Literacy Canada, I am pleased to present the following report highlighting results and activity from our workplace literacy and essential skills project examining the health care sector in Canada.

ABC Life Literacy Canada would like to thank The Office of Literacy and Essential Skills, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, for funding this important initiative and for their valued support and leadership of this project.

The project provided an important opportunity to feature training amongst front line, entry-level employees within health care. Over the course of this report, you will learn from new sector research and insights from leading health care and literacy professionals. Our project proudly generated major national and regional media coverage and produced a new series of marketing and communications tools. These tools will significantly help ABC Life Literacy Canada raise awareness for literacy and essential skills within workplaces across Canada.

ABC Life Literacy Canada believes the workplace is a critical partner in tackling Canada’s literacy and essential skills challenge. In the increasingly competitive global marketplace, our country’s economic well-being will increasingly depend on a highly-skilled responsive workforce. Adequate adult literacy skills are key to a highly-trained workforce and the benefits for the economy and employers are clear. These benefits include increased productivity and bottom-line performance, improved work relationships and better health and safety records.

In connecting with levels of government, business and our community literacy partners, ABC Life Literacy Canada is committed to enhancing understanding and support of literacy in the workplace. Everyday workplace tasks such as writing an email, reading and understanding a new workplace manual, verbal communication with colleagues, managing inventory and learning new online software are only a few of the important yet taken for granted workplace tasks requiring literacy skills.

Special thanks to the Work and Learning Knowledge Centre, Alliance of Sector Councils, Glades Lodge Long-Term Care Centre, Nova Scotia Department of Labour and Workforce Development, Literacy BC, The Learning Factor, Capilano University and the Hospital Employees’ Union. I’d also like to thank our project committee, staff and everyone else who contributed to the project. All of your time, effort and expertise have contributed to our success.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Margaret Eaton
President
ABC Life Literacy Canada
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Project Summary

The goal of this project was to stimulate action in increasing the Literacy and Essential Skills (L/ES) levels of workers at International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) Level 2, whose limited literacy skills pose significant challenges to their workplace performance and success. With the guidance of its workplace literacy advisory committee and data from the International Survey of Reading Skills, ABC Life Literacy Canada chose entry-level workers in the health care sector for its focus. The project provides new information on the implications and impacts of low literacy among entry-level workers in the health care sector. This information in turn provides the impetus for strategies to mobilize the health care sector in terms of addressing the L/ES of the entry-level workforce.

This summary outlines how the project achieved its objectives. It also identifies some of the challenges we faced and how the project worked around these challenges.

Achievement of Project Objectives & Outcomes

This section outlines how each project objective was achieved and the activities undertaken to achieve the objectives.

Objective 1

Demonstrate the potential costs and economic benefits of increasing the L/ES levels of workers in occupations and industries which generally employ lower-skilled workers, using existing data provided by the 2003 International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) and Statistics Canada’s newly released in January 2008 International Survey of Reading Skills (ISRS).

Data provided by consultants Data Angel Inc. on the proportion of Levels 1 and 2 by industry helped narrow the sectors to focus on for this project. The data showed that health care through residential care and hospitals had 40-45% of employees at Levels 1 and 2. Furthermore, committee members indicated that the sector would be a good choice because it represented both the private and public sectors. In addition, there is a great need in the sector with an ageing population and little recent workplace literacy activity. The sector offered a great deal of scope across the country in a variety of different venues. Originally, the position of health care aide was targeted for focus because of a growing move towards accreditation across the country and its pivotal position in a career laddering system. However, as the project progressed, it became apparent that this was too narrow a focus and that our focus needed to be on entry-level workers in general.
Following the identification of health care as a sector to focus on, an environmental scan was conducted to provide more qualitative data around L/ES issues in the sector. The scan showed that there is a dearth of material on the entry-level health care workforce in terms of training for literacy and essential skills. Furthermore, there are many changes happening that impact entry-level health care workers. Their jobs are becoming more complex with more issues around health and safety and more responsibilities around client care. The need to read and understand documents, write reports and use technology is an integral part of the changes for entry-level workers in the sector. However, training including L/ES is limited or nonexistent across the industrialized world in the sector. Contracting out in many cases has left these workers more vulnerable with less training and lower wages than ever before. Employers and workers see the benefits of training and L/ES. Employers believe that training and opportunities including literacy and language upgrading could reduce turnover, and address issues of quality of patient care, health and safety and advancement opportunities for these workers.

Those employers who have offered L/ES programming indicate that the results are: 1) improved patient care; 2) improved employee retention; 3) better ability to fill labour shortages; 4) improved job performance and; 5) increased health and safety. Union representatives and their members see opportunities for upgrading related to literacy and language skills as part of a strategy to get credentials, move into better paying jobs and improve health and safety issues.

Following the completion of the scan, ABC Life Literacy Canada conducted a detailed search across the country to find workplaces in the health care sector that would agree to be a promotional case study for the project. Organizations in British Columbia, Saskatchewan, Ontario, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick were approached. Two situations were selected for cases. The first was Glades Lodge, a long-term care centre in Halifax, Nova Scotia. The second was an employer, union, training and education partnership led by Literacy BC embarking on an embedding L/ES project in the health care sector in British Columbia.
To build awareness of L/ES with health care sector stakeholders, the project completed the following:

- Two videotaped cases in the sector with respect to L/ES; these cases will form the basis of website promotion at ABC and with its partners, and further print promotion
- An issue of *Training Matters* published in *Canadian Business* magazine with a focus on L/ES in the health care sector
- Featured articles on L/ES and health care in the *Globe and Mail* and *The Halifax Chronicle-Herald*
- Two articles on L/ES and health care in *The Canadian Learning Journal*, the member magazine of the Canadian Society for Training and Development
- A new workplace L/ES web section at [www.workplaceeducation.ca](http://www.workplaceeducation.ca)
- New business-to-business workplace literacy awareness campaign featuring a health care workplace

**Objective 2**

Target key stakeholders, employers, labour, sectoral councils, trade associations, decision-makers and practitioners, in one particular industry which has low recognition of, and/or a lack of strategy around, its workplace L/ES challenges.

ABC Life Literacy Canada spent a great deal of time searching out key officials in the sector through its Workplace Literacy Advisory Committee, staff and workplace literacy consultant. Throughout the project, there was communication with approximately 200 officials from provincial and national health care associations, employers, unions, government officials, communications and media personnel, academics, L/ES providers and other related organizations. Contact was made with officials in Canada, the UK, New Zealand, Australia and the USA. Communication with these key contacts focused on publicizing the project, understanding L/ES needs and activities of the stakeholders, providing key information on L/ES and looking for ways that the project might connect or work with these key contacts. Many of these contacts provided key information for the environmental scan, other colleagues to connect with and possible workplaces or projects for our promotional cases.
Objective 3
Assist the targeted industry to better understand its workplace L/ES challenges, to mobilize itself to create strategies for action, and to help it develop approaches for addressing labour needs.

The project focused on building awareness and promotional tools to assist the health care sector in understanding the need to address L/ES challenges and suggest strategies for action. While outcomes such as the health care studies identify effective practices and approaches for addressing these needs, it was premature within the time frame of the project to mobilize the sector for action. As the result of the outcomes and products developed as part of this project, there is now a readiness to mobilize the sector for action.

Objective 4
Broadly disseminate research findings and project results to key stakeholders to influence their decision to become strategically engaged on the issue.

ABC Life Literacy Canada will be sharing the sector report, new marketing and communications tools and overall project learnings to engage various stakeholders on the importance of workplace literacy and essential skills. The proactive outreach will include engagement with project partners, unions, human resources and public relations professionals in health care, and literacy partners across the country. The sector report results and activities will also support ABC Life Literacy Canada’s strategic mandate of increasing workplace literacy advocacy efforts with government, business and unions.
Glades Lodge

Glades Lodge is a 124-bed long-term care facility located in Halifax, Nova Scotia. It has 140 employees and is owned by GEM Health Care Group. In partnership with the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 1259 and the Nova Scotia Department of Labour and Workforce Development, Glades Lodge has offered workplace education programs since 2005.

These programs have included academic upgrading, document use, basic computer training and communications courses.

Roundtable Sessions at Glades Lodge

ABC Life Literacy Canada conducted roundtable sessions with senior managers, CUPE representatives, the project team, program participants and other program stakeholders for a total of 24 people. Our main goal was to find out from stakeholders what the organizational and individual impacts of workplace literacy programming were.

Organizational and Individual Results

Management perspectives

Senior managers at Glades Lodge indicate that the results of literacy and essential skills programming include improved resident care along with more independence, adaptability and accountability. Improved independence saves time and makes for a more efficient workplace. Employees are also taking on more leadership at work and feel empowered as a result of having opportunities to learn new skills. Comments from these managers indicate that the whole facility benefits when people are better at communication with residents and resident documentation.

Union perspectives

CUPE representatives said that the workplace education program has provided education opportunities that their members never would have had. There is a thirst for learning especially from the older workforce. Some people had never operated a computer before and were really afraid. Other people wanted to get their Grade 12 equivalency. There are many visible results from participation in the program that go well beyond the walls of the workplace. One father was able to read to his grandson for the first time. Other people take more of a leadership role in the union. Participants tell the union they feel grateful, confident, and that they learned a lot.

Participant perspectives

Participants say that they now have increased confidence, comfort and sense of pride and accomplishment. Their motivation for learning is not just for work but also to help their children. They have learned additional skills including computer skills, communication techniques and resident documentation. Some of the learning relates to tasks that they did not have to do in the past. These new skills help them at work but also at home with their families and their children. Some participants talked about being a role model for their children.

Parvathi Tummalaagunta, a physiotherapy assistant at Glades Lodge, shares her experiences in the workplace education program.

Visit www.workplaceeducation.ca for the video case study.
Embedding Literacy & Essential Skills in the Workplace

Literacy BC, in partnership with the Ministry of Education, received three-year funding from the Office of Literacy and Essential Skills (OLES) for a project: Embedding Literacy and Essential Skills (ELES) in the Workplace (2009-2012). The project is looking at ways to embed L/ES approaches in three different sectors including health care. Entry-level workers, especially those in housekeeping and food services, have been contracted out to large multinationals. Infection control is more of an issue as is the need for more health and safety training.

The work in health care builds on previous joint labour management workplace literacy programming funded by the Health Care Labour Adjustment Agency that took place over approximately eight years in 14 health care facilities from 1995-2003. At that time, stand-alone workplace education programs were offered jointly by management and unions. The project partners believe that an embedding approach is important because it is a way to reach more workers and develop a learning culture especially when funding is not available for stand-alone programs. This approach looks at opportunities in the everyday work life and training of an organization to embed literacy and essential skills. The first two years of the project are developmental involving research and training of work groups for each sector. The third year will involve trying out approaches and involves assessment tools for learners.

Roundtable Sessions at Literacy BC

ABC Life Literacy Canada conducted roundtable sessions with Hospital Employees’ Union representatives and staff, and representatives from Literacy BC, Capilano University and the Learning Factor for a total of six people. Our main goal was to find out what the impacts of the previous workplace programs had been and the expected results for an embedding approach.

Results of Early Workplace Programs

In the mid-1990s a lot of health care workers were in transition and losing their jobs. There was a requirement for re-training to move into new jobs. The joint union-management initiative or BEST (Basic Education and Skills Training) program used a hybrid model involving instructors and peer tutors. Some participants were able to get their Grade 12 equivalency. Some participants became tutors and coordinators for the programs. Other participants moved on to other jobs or to college programs. Management noticed that employees were more engaged in staff meetings and in sharing ideas for efficiencies in the workplace. The teamwork in the programs rippled out to the workplace and broke down silos. They became more involved in in-services and more proactive around health and safety issues. Participants began to hold themselves differently—they became more confident. They also understood their rights at work better. There was a ripple effect to their families and communities. One woman gained the respect of her teenage son when she was able to help him with his math.

Expected Results of the Embedding Approach to Literacy

The project partners expect and hope that the same kinds of outcomes and ripple effects will result from their embedding approach to literacy and essential skills in the workplace.
The funding contribution and support of the skills coordinators from the Nova Scotia Department of Labour and Workforce Development is also critical. Many employees could not take advantage of education opportunities outside of work because of cost and time. In addition, everyone invests and collaborates in the program—management, the union, participants, the project team and the skills coordinator. This partnership model makes it successful.

Effective practices include:

- using the project team to plan and guide the program—ownership held by everyone and results for everyone
- using a learner-centred approach that focuses on all aspects of a person
- conducting an organizational needs assessment
- creating a safe and comfortable environment for program participants
- confidentiality of results and discussions within programs
- being flexible around program delivery tailored to workplace realities
- creating a culture of learning at the workplace, not just a one-off program
- customizing program content to each workplace

Maureen Lovell talks about the benefits of the workplace education program at Glades Lodge.
Similar to Nova Scotia, the stand alone programs offered in the past were at the workplace. Critical to success was this accessibility, paid time and government funding for similar reasons to those expressed in Nova Scotia.

Common Success Factors
The two approaches show a number of common success factors, most notably the need for government funding and infrastructure support. Also essential is the involvement of workers in the design and delivery of programs, and having the program at the workplace with an employer contribution of time.

A learner-centred approach that respects confidentiality and creates a comfortable environment for learning is key. In both provinces, roundtables participants identified a need for more emphasis on collecting individual and organizational outcomes in a systematic way.
Training Matters Published in Canadian Business Magazine

The sector project provided opportunity for ABC Life Literacy Canada to produce Training Matters 2009. Training Matters was published in Canadian Business magazine and showcased leadership in workplace literacy and essential skills training across the country. It featured case studies of successful workplace literacy programs, the value of investment in workplace literacy, and served as an excellent resource for organizations looking to start their own workplace literacy and essential skills program.

Feature editorial included telling facts and statistics to demonstrate the potential costs and economic benefits of increasing literacy and essential skills levels in the workplace. The cover story makes a compelling case for the economic impact of literacy and featured a one-on-one interview with Craig Alexander, VP and Deputy Chief Economist for TD Bank Financial Group. “Working Towards a Cure,” an editorial on the case for improving skills in health care was also featured, and highlighted insights from leading health care, government and labour professionals.

Training Matters was distributed to a comprehensive list of officials in the health care sector. Over 150 issues were targeted directly to unions, human resources and public relations professionals in the health care industry. These key audiences are important to create improved understanding of workplace literacy and essential skills challenges.

Training Matters 2009 is available for download at www.abclifeliteracy.ca
Elevating Workplace Literacy and Essential Skills - Focus: Health Care

The Case for Improving Skills in Health Care

Working Towards a Cure

When the public thinks of skills change in the health care sector, people tend to think of shortages of doctors or nurses. The reality is that there is a growing demand in all provinces, including support staff.

Between 2001 and 2006, the health care and social-assistance sector in Canada added 19,000 jobs, growing by 3.8%, well above the national average growth of 1.6%. Traditionally, most of the health care workforce is composed of people who are employed part-time or casually and is very much in a state of flux, with increasing requirements not just for new skills but also literacy. Where will these workers come from?

Many are already working in hospitals, clinics, long-term care and other facilities. But they bring with them skills acquired from day to day, from training required on the job.

Eileen Gan, a nursing unit clerk at the British Columbia Women’s Hospital and Health Centre in Vancouver, and a local literacy advocate for the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), has experienced that first-hand. She is currently working on her second year of a local literacy program for the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), which is focused on improving literacy skills in the health care sector. “Health care introduses workforce to workplace literacy all the time,” she says. “Every time they introduce, they change everyone’s job.” With change comes uncertainty: new scheduling programs to learn and new software to master. Some of our licensed practical nurses [LPNs] now have to have email access to read memos and meeting notices,” Gan says. “But they have no skills in email. A lot of these people are in their late 40s and 50s, so it’s difficult.”

Health care faces the challenge of retraining veteran employees or losing them at a time of growing need. Gan herself has benefited from a medical technology course and a typing course. She went from being an aide in the maternity ward to a higher-skilled technical clerk. Thanks to programs agreed upon by the hospital and the union, many workers have not only upgraded their skills but also gained promotions. “We had a couple of people,” says Gan, “who had been housekeepers and became registered nurses.”
The conference focused on ‘Revving Up for the New Economy’ and attracted human resource professionals and business executives. ABC Life Literacy Canada networked with various stakeholders to promote the sector project and other workplace literacy initiatives. As an exhibitor, ABC Life Literacy Canada managed an event booth that showcased workplace literacy and essential skills information.

ABC Life Literacy Canada conducted targeted media outreach to build awareness of workplace literacy and essential skills. The Halifax Chronicle-Herald ran a feature story on January 9, 2010 on the workplace education program at Glades Lodge Long-Term Care Centre, one of the organizations that participated in ABC Life Literacy Canada’s roundtable.

The article featured details of the workplace education program and testimonials from employees. Additionally, ABC Life Literacy Canada secured a feature article on the front page of the Careers section in the Saturday, March 6, 2010 edition of the Globe and Mail. The article talked about the new knowledge economy and the importance of improving literacy levels among workers in order to stay competitive. The Globe and Mail article also featured the Glades Lodge Long-Term Care Centre as a model workplace education program.
Canada’s economy may be picking up, but experts say there’s still one challenge that could stand in the way of the country’s long-term economic success: workplace literacy.

“Technology has pushed the need for different skill sets,” says Margaret Eaton, president of ABC Life Literacy Canada in Toronto. It’s knowledge-based jobs that will carry Canada in the future. And those jobs require higher-level literacy skills. It’s no longer just about reading and writing. Today, the definition of literacy includes such things as numeracy, comprehension, communication, problem-solving and technology know-how – essential skills that employees need to do their jobs, she adds.

Learn@Work Week to be Celebrated

The sector project provided opportunity for ABC Life Literacy Canada to participate in Learn@Work Week 2010, hosted by the Canadian Society for Training and Development (CSTD). Learn@Work Week is a week-long celebration that promotes the importance of workplace learning and performance.

ABC Life Literacy Canada composed a feature editorial for the Learn@Work Week 2010 member Toolkit, and will be meeting with CSTD officials to develop additional activities during the week. The partnership with CSTD has also seen two stories on workplace literacy published in the Spring 2010 and Fall 2009 issues of CSTD’s member magazine, The Canadian Learning Journal.

Excerpt from “Building Confidence, Improving Care,” The Canadian Learning Journal, The Official Publication of the Canadian Society of Training and Development, Spring 2010:

Managers, union representatives and program participants attest to the enormous impact of the Workplace Education Program. They all comment on the confidence that program participants have gained. This increased confidence is the foundation for all other learning.

Senior managers claim that a more skilled workforce leads to improved care for residents, a thirst for learning, more independence and more adaptability. Greater independence saves time and creates a more efficient workplace. Employees are also taking on greater leadership roles at work.

Anna Ordinelli, administrator for Glades Lodge, explains that employees are taking much more initiative and ownership in their work. She states, “There is a feeling they can do just about anything.”

Kathleen Doane, Director of Social Work, echoes these impacts. She notes that staff members have improved their skills, that they feel empowered, and that the overall quality of their work has improved. She emphasizes that the bar for the whole facility is raised when people are better at communicating with residents and at documenting resident care.
New Workplace Education Website

In an effort to provide more detailed information for employers who are considering workplace education programs, ABC Life Literacy Canada enhanced its workplace literacy web section as part of the business-to-business workplace education advertising campaign.

The website aims to provide important resources for HR and C-suite executives wanting to get started on a program. The revised web pages feature a needs assessment framework; successful case studies and employee testimonials; listings of regional workplace literacy providers/practitioners; a Business toolkit—a customizable PowerPoint presentation that will help enrich and influence decision makers; and an interactive component to help connect employers with literacy partners.

In addition to the web pages, ABC Life Literacy Canada developed colourful web banners to complement the workplace literacy section of the website. These web banners are quick links to successful case studies and listings of regional workplace literacy providers/practitioners.

Visit ABC Life Literacy Canada’s new workplace literacy section at www.workplaceeducation.ca

Online Promotion

ABC Life Literacy Canada promoted the sector project as part of its strategic online editorial content plan. This included a feature article in Literacy at Work, ABC Life Literacy Canada’s national e-newsletter distributed bi-monthly to 2,000 stakeholders in government, business and the literacy field.

In addition, ABC Life Literacy Canada showcased its attendance at the Canadian Manufacturers & Exporters conference in the March 2010 e-newsletter, as well as on abclifeliteracy.ca. Throughout the sector project, ABC Life Literacy Canada featured articles on its homepage, including updates on the roundtables in Halifax and Vancouver.

Low literacy has far-reaching implications for Canada’s businesses and our economy. Both the ability of businesses to advance their operations and Canada’s readiness to compete on the world stage, are jeopardized if adult workers lack the requisite literacy skills.

Workplace literacy encompasses 9 essential skills that include:

1. Reading
2. Document Use
3. Numeracy
4. Writing
5. Oral Communication
6. Working With Others
7. Thinking
8. Computer Use
9. Continuous Learning
New Awareness Campaign

ABC Life Literacy Canada created a new business-to-business focused advertising campaign to communicate the importance of workplace education and raise awareness in the business community. The new campaign promotes literacy training as a key business solution and features the successful case study of Glades Lodge Long-Term Care Centre (in Halifax, NS) where workplace education is seen as a vital part of the organizational culture.

“We feel incredibly proud of our workplace education program at Glades. It’s helped our staff feel better about their work, and improved the way that we do business,” says Anna Ordinelli, Administrator, Glades Lodge Long-Term Care Centre. “By upgrading skills, employees feel ready for new challenges and are always willing to learn. Plus we’ve seen increased productivity and efficiencies in health and safety practices. It’s a win-win situation.”

A series of advertisements form the campaign and are rolling out over the course of 2010 in targeted media outlets. The campaign includes both full-page, full-colour print ads as well as animated web banners with embedded video that showcase workplace education successes and staff testimonials. Advertisements were placed in issues of *HR Professional* and *Canadian HR Reporter*, as well as on the publications’ websites. A video case study of Glades Lodge Long-Term Care Centre that offers testimonials that speak to the power of workplace education was also featured.
Are your employees prepared?

• In a workplace literacy study, 90% of employers indicated that employees who took basic skills programs had an increased ability to work independently.

• Enhanced literacy skills prepare employees for managerial and technological changes in the workplace, and position the company for greater competitiveness.

• When literacy skills are enhanced, employees are better suited to meet the demands of the job and better prepared to assume greater responsibilities and seek promotion.

We feel incredibly proud of our workplace education program at Glades. It has helped our staff feel better about their work, and improved the way that we do business. By upgrading skills, employees feel ready for new challenges and are always willing to learn. Plus we’ve seen increased productivity, efficiencies in health and safety practices and a major return on our investment. It’s a win-win situation.

– Anna Ordinelli, Administrator, Glades Lodge Long Term Care Centre, Halifax NS

Connect with resources to help you empower your employees, increase your competitive advantage and create a more vibrant and engaged workforce.

Contact ABC Life Literacy Canada at abclifeliteracy.ca for more information.
ABC Life Literacy Canada is a non-profit organization that inspires Canadians to increase their literacy skills. We connect and mobilize business, unions, government, communities and individuals to support lifelong learning and achieve our goals through leadership in programs, communications and partnerships. ABC Life Literacy Canada envisions a Canada where everyone has the skills they need to live a fully engaged life.

For the latest news and information on adult literacy please visit www.abclifeliteracy.ca