

Building Momentum  
*and* Finding Champions  
*for* Workplace Literacy  
*in* Ontario

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Field Report

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Building Momentum  
*and*  
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*for*  
Workplace Literacy in Ontario

**Field Report**

*by*  
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## Acknowledgements

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You can find a complete copy of the final report on-line at: [www.on.literacy.ca](http://www.on.literacy.ca)

## **Project Goals - *What we wanted to do***

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1. Conduct a **literature review**
2. Carry out a **questionnaire survey** that would identify the current level of awareness and commitment to workplace/workforce literacy among human resource professionals in Ontario
3. **Establish a baseline** measure to gauge the impact of a social marketing strategy for workplace literacy
4. **Use the survey information** to develop a marketing strategy for workplace literacy in Ontario

## **Project Outcomes - *What we produced***

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- ▶ a **literature review** to provide background for decisions about the content of the questionnaire and the target sample of respondents
- ▶ the design and administration of the **survey**
- ▶ an **analysis of the results** with a view to developing a better understanding of employers' awareness and commitment to workplace literacy vis-à-vis for developing a social marketing strategy for upgrading programs
- ▶ **recommendations** stemming from survey and literature review findings

## Literature Review - *What we already know*

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The literature review focuses on two areas:

- ▶ the awareness and commitment of employers to workplace literacy
- ▶ social marketing and public awareness campaigns ([see page 5](#))

The literature review highlights research findings that address issues of workplace literacy from the employer's standpoint. The information clarified and directed the research component of the project *Building Momentum and Finding Champions for Workplace Literacy in Ontario*.

It will supplement the findings from the research to help the literacy field build awareness about workplace education as well as help to focus on directions for developing marketing strategies.

In the last fifteen years, research on workplace literacy has suggested two contradictory situations:

- ▶ Ontario's economy is becoming increasingly service-oriented; basic reading, writing and numeracy skills are more important than ever
- ▶ awareness of and commitment to basic skills training on the part of employers is still lacking

Approximately 50% of employed Canadians read letters and memos daily, while 20% reported they rarely do.

Krahn and Lowe,  
(1998),

## **Employer Awareness and Commitment to Workplace Literacy**

Research suggests that in order for a company to survive, its employees must be able to adapt to the changes associated with the new economy (Picot,1998). The most significant changes are in the areas of:

- ▶ technology
- ▶ globalization
- ▶ centralization or decentralization of services
- ▶ restructuring and reorganization

Change issues that appear to impact training include changes in technology, legislation (WHMIS etc.) and certification (ISO).

Employers become aware of literacy problems only when job performance is affected. (DesLauriers,1990) Performance indicators relating to literacy issues are:

- ▶ reviews of written materials, reports and log books
- ▶ performance appraisals, interviews and résumés
- ▶ training and testing difficulties

While the research continues to find that employers do not see literacy and numeracy training as essential to their success, employers who have introduced literacy or basic skills training through the workplace have identified significant corporate benefits. These are:

- ▶ increased ability to handle on-the-job training
- ▶ improved team performance
- ▶ improved labour-management relations
- ▶ increased quality
- ▶ improved results in job-specific training
- ▶ increased output of products and services

### **Key pieces of the puzzle:**

- ▶ Workplace literacy has a low profile even in organizations with training cultures .
- ▶ Literacy has traditionally not been identified as a training need.
- ▶ Need is usually identified when performance plummets, either on the job or in a training situation.
- ▶ Change is a good indicator of training needs.
- ▶ When literacy training is offered, the results are measurable and they impact positively on an organization.

### **The Paradox**

Researchers have identified basic reading, writing and numeracy skills as being increasingly important in the workplace, yet awareness and commitment in those workplaces is lacking. What is going on in those workplaces? If the paradox does exist, a number of questions need to be answered:

1. Do employers perceive workplace literacy issues to be a significant problem?
2. Do employers consider workplace literacy issues to be their responsibility?
3. Are they working towards addressing the problem without the public being aware of their efforts?
4. Are they not aware of the resources available to help them effectively and efficiently deal with the issue?
5. Are employers and human resource managers not committed to workplace training because they have other ways of dealing with the issue?

## Social Marketing and Public Awareness Campaigns

Social Marketing is the tool that was originally proposed as being most appropriate for marketing Workplace Literacy in Ontario. A social marketing strategy combines the best elements of marketing, communications and social change theory.

*...a planned process for influencing change...*  
Health Canada

*...the selling ideas...*  
McKenzie-mohr and Smith (1999)

Social marketing differs from corporate marketing as far as the product that is being marketed. Corporate marketing persuades a targeted audience to buy a product or service. A social marketing strategy persuades a targeted audience to agree with an idea or concept and then to take action. In order to sell workplace training to organizations, the decision-makers must buy into and be convinced of the importance of workplace literacy.

We need to define the community that we are targeting — business & industry

- ▶ What does the business community look like in our communities?
- ▶ What sectors are represented?
- ▶ What are the emerging trends in the identified sector targets?
- ▶ What are the demographics of the local workplaces?

**What have successful campaigns such as Health Canada's ParticipACTION taught us?**

In order to actively and successfully promote workplace/workforce literacy in Ontario we need to ...

- ▶ Develop a wide variety of partners
- ▶ Acknowledge that long-term commitment is essential
- ▶ Acknowledge that social marketing campaigns need to be comprehensive
- ▶ Develop resources to educate potential workplace partners
- ▶ Recognize that social marketing is one part of a comprehensive promotional campaign

**Has there been a successful social marketing campaign in the literacy field?**

The LEARN campaign was launched in 1994 by ABC Canada. An impact study found:

*"the results of the study are unequivocal: the LEARN campaign is having a profound impact on literacy learners and literacy groups in every part of Canada.*

Long, E. "Learn campaign is working" Literacy at Work(17), 1-3, 1996

## Research - *What we did*

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### Methodology

The study focused on four industries: long-term health care institutions, plastics manufacturers, wholesale distributors and cable installers.

Chosen industries met two criteria:

1. The industry had to be economically significant in terms of numbers of current employees and/or growth potential.
2. The industry had to include a large proportion of employees in occupational categories that:
  - a) did not require post-secondary education beyond short vocational programs
  - b) were subject to changes in technology and/or job descriptions that might significantly increase the necessary basic skill levels

The four industries represent a range of economic areas: business and personal services, trade and manufacturing. The cable installation sector was dropped from the study because of poor response rates.

Industry	Key Occupational Categories	Targeted Sample Size	Reponse Rate %
Long-term Senior Care Facilities	Health Care aides Personal Support Workers	30	37.3
Plastics Manufacturers	Machine Operators	30	30.0
Shipping	Inventory Control Scheduling Shipping Clerks	30	34.5
Cable Installers	Installation and Repair Workers Cable Television Service and Maintenance Technicians	30 10.0	

## Questionnaire

### *Organization*

This section gathered basic information about the company including type, number of management levels, size, composition of workforce, and educational requirements for entry level positions.

### *Changing Conditions*

This section asked questions about changes in technology, supervision, skill sets and work organization and how they might impact on literacy and numeracy levels needed to complete job tasks. (It was limited to the past three years.) Employers were also asked to anticipate changes in skill requirements due to changes in the way business is done.

### *Training and Basic Skills*

This section examined respondents' beliefs and attitudes about upgrading. This included whose business it was to teach upgrading and whether or not upgrading would be a good thing in respondents' establishments.

### *Role of Respondent*

The *role* of the employee responding to the survey asked about direct human resource responsibilities of the respondent and the size of the HR department .

### Profile of Respondents

- ▶ Plastics and shipping industries were from populations of 100,000 or more
- ▶ Senior care respondents were more likely from populations of less than 100,000
- ▶ Only two respondents were from northern Ontario
- ▶ Shipping establishments had fewer than 50 employees. Plastics had a range from under 50 to over 150 and senior care was in the mid to large range of employees
- ▶ Most plastic and shipping companies were independent firms. Senior care companies were split 50/50 between independent and subsidiaries of larger companies
- ▶ Owners were more often directly involved in operations in plastics and shipping companies

## Research Findings - *What we learned*

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### Hiring for Entry Level Positions

- ▶ Most companies accepted the GED and upgrading courses in place of a high school diploma
- ▶ Educational requirements had not changed in the past five years
- ▶ When educational requirements had been raised, 40% of employers still did not require a high school diploma

### Employee Training

The top three sources named by all three sectors (in no special order):

1. In-house training programs
2. Local colleges of applied arts and technology
3. Industry associations

### Factors Limiting Training to Improve Reading, Writing and Numeracy Skills

- ▶ For the plastics industry few if any training needs, employees not being interested, and cost of training were cited as primary factors limiting training
- ▶ The senior care and shipping industry also cited lack of training needs as factors limiting training

### Changes in Operating Conditions

- ▶ Each industry had a distinct pattern of change with the plastics sector subject to more broad-based changes.
- ▶ Changes in plastics were related to rotation of jobs, more stringent quality control measures, equipment and technology.
- ▶ Shipping firms indicated changes in computer technology.
- ▶ Senior health care facilities reported that there was more reliance on team responsibility.
- ▶ Respondents indicated that all or most incumbents in each job class would have to cope with changes.

## **Perceptions About Literacy**

### **Identifying Problems**

- ▶ The three highest rated indicators of problems related to literacy/numeracy of employees were:
  1. Reports from immediate supervisors
  2. Poor job performance
  3. Health and safety problems/accident reports

### **Beliefs About Skills Match**

- ▶ In all three industries, respondents (human resource professionals) reported that their current workforce has the right level of literacy and numeracy for their jobs .
- ▶ Few thought that employees were over-skilled .
- ▶ Most felt that skill requirements for jobs would stay the same or increase somewhat.

### **Education and Hiring Requirements**

- ▶ Three-quarters of respondents felt that a high school diploma was a good indicator of adequate literacy skills
- ▶ Respondents for companies requiring a high school diploma were more likely to see the diploma as an effective screening tool

### **Views on Upgrading**

- ▶ Responses generally showed a positive orientation to the value of upgrading
- ▶ Respondents believed that upgrading would help work practices and cut costs
- ▶ They didn't believe that employees who needed to upgrade would do so on their own

## Implications - *What it means*

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The response rates to the survey were disappointingly low despite extensive telephone follow-ups. This result is consistent with the widely held view that individual businesses are largely indifferent to literacy/numeracy issues, regardless of the occasional enthusiasms of some prominent business associations.

- ▶ Respondents report changes in operating conditions and, to a lesser extent, hiring circumstances, which imply increased upgrading needs in functional literacy or numeracy .
- ▶ What management expects to happen to basic skill requirements emerges as likely our best predictor of openness to considering provision of upgrading. Experience of problems in the past, the accumulation of changes in operating conditions and hiring circumstances are other predictors.
- ▶ Working from and with what HR managers already know about past problems and past, present and expected changes in their organizations helps literacy providers to develop effective marketing interventions.
- ▶ Social marketing will be most effective where it is underpinned by local knowledge - of the industry if not the specific establishment. Our study indicates there are not large gains to be made by mounting a 'hearts and minds' campaign targeted to general attitudes and beliefs about upgrading.
- ▶ A social marketing strategy based on working with HR managers to form reasonable expectations of their own needs involves real learning on both sides. There is a risk that literacy and basic skills may not be an appropriate priority for an establishment. What our survey results suggest is that literacy and basic skills will need to be marketed in the same way as business insurance, based on plausible, grounded expectations of risk.

The low response rates dictate caution in generalizing from the results of our survey. It is reasonable to assume that respondents are more aware of the possibilities of literacy/numeracy problems within their organizations and more open to the potential value of upgrading than those who declined to complete to the survey.

# Recommendations

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Based on the results of this study, we have generated the following recommendations:



## **A Baseline to Measure the Impact of MTCU's Workplace Literacy Strategy**

We recommend using social marketing as a tool at the local level, within specific establishments. Part of social marketing will be working with local industries to understand their needs and what factors might interest them in offering upgrading.

We recommend looking at the before and after results of both social and specific marketing efforts of the five first site networks in their regions to establish a baseline for measuring the progress of the workplace literacy strategy. We recommend working closely with the local establishments in the regions; closely documenting the results of the marketing efforts, indicating why companies have offered basic skills programs and services, or not. If not, why not. If so, why.

The results of this survey are inappropriate as a provincial baseline against which to measure progress of the workplace literacy strategy. Several factors include:

- ▶ the difficulty in finding industry partners for this project (none were found)
- ▶ the small number of industries targeted in the survey
- ▶ the low response rate (almost 50% less than expected)
- ▶ the location of the industries (most in population centres of 100,000 or more; only two firms in the sample from northern Ontario)
- ▶ the fact that the firms in the survey represent a much higher than average investment in basic skills upgrading (maybe due to their self-selection into the survey)
- ▶ the fact that the majority of respondents believed in the value of upgrading already; while, conversely, the majority of firms surveyed did not offer this upgrading to employees

Moreover, the survey results suggest that a general social marketing campaign aimed at influencing general attitudes about upgrading would not be successful because the majority of survey respondents already believed in the value of upgrading.

We recommend working with industry partners (especially those that represent the majority of industries for the first sites) to develop an industry-wide social marketing strategy with before and after results in terms of basic skills upgrading.

First site networks that have existing local contacts with industry associations can pave the way for this work. Detailed documentation of why companies have or have not engaged in upgrading for their work force will be critical.



## **OLC's Marketing Strategy**

The findings and implications from the literature review and the survey show that generally, employer awareness and commitment to workplace literacy is low even though employers might believe in the value of upgrading. However, the literature review and survey show some small windows of opportunity in terms of the development of both a social marketing strategy and a specific strategy for marketing programs and products. The two need to go hand in hand. We recommend taking the information from both the literature review and the survey to develop a marketing strategy. This includes:

- ▶ understanding organizational needs and issues at a local and industry level
- ▶ reviewing the benefits and motivations of those companies that have already invested in basic skills upgrading (Long, 1997; Howell, etc.)
- ▶ understanding companies' perceptions of risk and expectations that basic skills requirements will increase can serve as an opener
- ▶ avoiding focusing on non-starters in promotion of workplace literacy, including a focus on overcoming barriers to offering programs
- ▶ assisting providers in targeting their marketing efforts based on a clear understanding of the local situation



### **A Distribution Plan for the Survey and its Findings**

Our plan for the distribution of the findings of the survey is as follows:

- ▶ produce a Field Report to inform the LBS field of the highlights and recommendations emerging from this project

This report will be available for order from OLC at:

**Ontario Literacy Coalition**

365 Bloor Street East, Suite 1003

Toronto, Ontario M4W 3L4

Tel: 416-963-5787, Fax: 416-963-8102

[www.on.literacy.ca](http://www.on.literacy.ca)

- ▶ make an electronic version of the full report available on the OLC and NALD websites?
- ▶ publish a report of the findings in *Literacy on the Move*