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Workplace Literacy Issues in Canada

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OVERHEAD: Title Page

Introduction

I am pleased to be here to speak about some of my research. I would like to thank the Humanities and Social Sciences Federation of Canada for the opportunity, and for arranging this meeting. As a university professor, I am sometimes reminded of Mark Twain's comment that "*a university professor is someone who talks in other people's sleep,*" or of the observation by dear old Professor Anonymous that "*being a university professor on stage in a big lecture hall is akin to walking in a graveyard - lots of people below you, but no one is listening.*" But I don't expect such to be the case this morning. You have made the effort to be here early in the day, and I look forward to some interesting debate following my presentation.

Before I begin, I must acknowledge the collaborative aspect of social science research, particularly my own. For the past fourteen years, I have worked on many different research projects with my colleague, Dr. Graham S. Lowe of the Sociology department at the University of Alberta. In our research, we have examined various aspects of the changing Canadian labour market, but the link between education and training, on the one hand, and labour market outcomes, on the other, has been central to most of our research. The study of *workplace literacy issues* I will discuss this morning is one of our most recent collaborations.

I must also acknowledge an excellent working relationship with researchers in Statistics Canada and Human Resources Development Canada. These two departments have sponsored a number of our studies over the past decade. We have also been invited to work on various studies with researchers in these departments, and this is one of them.

Defining Literacy

Let me begin with some comments about how “literacy” has been defined in the past, and how it is being defined today. When we examine the scholarly and policy-oriented writing on the topic that has accumulated over the past decades, it quickly becomes apparent that the conceptualization of “literacy” has changed.

In the past, early in this century and up until several decades ago, there was much more emphasis on “illiteracy,” on the complete absence of basic reading and writing skills. It was widely recognized that people needed at least a minimal level of reading and writing skills to cope successfully in an industrial and resource-based economy. In some respects, Canada was a leader in addressing the problem of “illiteracy.” For example, Frontier College was, and remains, an innovative educational institution that sent teachers out to where people worked, to help those with limited or no skills to learn to read and write.

But today, in an information-based global economy, the issue is seldom one of complete illiteracy. Most Canadians have at least some reading and writing ability. The benchmarks today are higher – one needs to be able to process more complex textual information in more diverse settings. The premium on communication skills has risen as a service-dominated economy has evolved. And the need for quantitative skills, in work and in everyday life, has also increased. Consequently, the definition of “literacy” has been broadened at the same time as the benchmarks have risen.

Hence, perhaps even more than in past, low levels of literacy continue to be seen, legitimately so, as an individual problem. Research has clearly documented that adults with reading and writing difficulties are at much greater risk of becoming and staying unemployed, of having low incomes if employed, and of not enjoying a reasonable standard of living while employed and after retirement.

Research has also shown that there are strong links between low literacy skills and the probability of receiving social assistance, of being incarcerated, and of having poor health. The cause-and-effect relationships are not completely clear, but the correlations indicate that, at the aggregate level, low levels of literacy constitute a social problem as well as an individual problem

Furthermore, low levels of adult literacy are frequently seen as a problem of democracy, the argument being that democratic societies contain literate citizens who can make well-informed political, moral, and ethical decisions. This is an interesting argument with some value. However, it may over-emphasize the written aspects of communication. Less literate adults may still inform themselves through spoken communications, but this may be a declining aspect of the political process. A recent American poll of young students revealed that 40% obtained the majority of their information about politics from Jay Leno

and David Letterman. With a circulation of 4.3 million, the *National Enquirer*, hardly a newspaper that taxes one's literacy skills, has more readers than any other newspaper in North America!

Finally, much more than in the past, we have come to think about low levels of adult literacy as an economic problem. If work organizations and, at a broader level, nation-states, are to be competitive in a rapidly-changing, high-technology, information-dependent economic world, they will require a highly literate work force. As the Conference Board of Canada concluded in a 1997 report on *The Economic Benefits of Improving Literacy in the Workplace*:

“The country's economic well-being depends on its capacity to make the most effective use of people and to maintain the skills of its workforce. More highly-skilled, literate people are the key to increasing productivity.” (pp. 1-2)

OVERHEAD: Quotation from Jerome Bruner

But while the discussion has shifted from the individual to the economy, let's not lose sight of all of these concerns – low levels of literacy need to be seen as individual, social, political, and economic problems. An American literacy expert, Jerome Bruner (1991) makes the point succinctly:

We have come to recognize that literacy is linked with virtually all aspects of our national life, public and private. It is a passport to employment and a key ingredient to a fulfilling life. And without requisite literacy ... we can neither survive as a democratic nation nor prosper as an economic power.

OVERHEAD: Measuring Literacy

Measuring Literacy

In the past, literacy levels in society were measured on a very crude scale – essentially a measure of the proportion of adults with very basic reading and writing skills, being able to write a simple letter, for example, or being able to read a newspaper headline. Such measures still have value in less developed societies, but they are not very useful in Canada and other modern societies.

As educational attainment has risen in societies like ours, and as literacy has come to be seen as an economic, as well as an individual and a social problem, the need for more discriminating measures of literacy has risen. Statistics Canada has been a world leader in developing such literacy tests. In 1989, it broke new ground with its national survey of *Literacy Skills Used in Daily Activities* (LSUDA). The more recent *International Adult Literacy Survey* (IALS), completed in 1994, built on what had been learned from the earlier study.

In the IALS, a large random sample of adult Canadians completed a wide range of reading and mathematical tasks with varying degrees of difficulty. Sophisticated testing techniques were then employed to create highly reliable and valid measures of three types of literacy:

prose literacy, defined as the knowledge and skills needed to understand and use information from texts, including editorials, news stories, poems, and fiction;

document literacy, defined as the knowledge and skills required to locate and use information contained in various formats, including job applications, payroll forms, transportation schedules, maps, tables, and graphics; and

quantitative literacy, defined as the knowledge and skills required to apply arithmetic operations, either alone or sequentially, to numbers embedded in printed materials, such as balancing a cheque-book, figuring out a tip, completing an order form, or determining the amount on a loan from an advertisement [report 3, p. 14]

Since 1994, the IALS has been replicated in a dozen countries, and the cross-national findings are becoming more and more interesting. The researchers and analysts who developed this research program should be commended for their effort and ingenuity. The managers behind the project should also be commended, for their foresight in sponsoring the research program and, subsequently, for making an effort to involve academic researchers with a wide range of interests in the analysis of the data.

In the rest of my presentation, I will introduce some of the findings from the analyses Dr. Lowe and I have conducted with the IALS data, as well as some of the findings from other analyses conducted by Statistics Canada and HRDC researchers. There are now at least four excellent reports based on IALS data, and I recommend them to you.

OVERHEAD: Four Basic Questions about Workplace Literacy in Canada

Workplace Literacy Issues in Canada

In my presentation of findings, I want to address four basic questions:

1. *How literate is the Canadian workforce, compared to that of other countries?*
2. *How much “fit” or “mismatch” do we observe between the literacy skills of workers and the literacy requirements of their jobs?*
3. *If literacy skills are under-utilized, might they weaken or be lost?*
4. *What can be done to address these workplace literacy issues?*

1. How literate is the Canadian workforce, compared to that of other countries?

Before we can answer the first question, we need to know a little more about the literacy scales developed in the IALS research program. The *document*, *prose*, and *quantitative literacy* scales all have a possible range of 0 to 500. It is unlikely that anyone would score 0, and it would be very difficult to score a perfect 500. The average scores of Canadian workers are about 290 on each of the three scales (with a standard deviation of about 60).

While some of our more complicated analyses have been based on this “0 to 500” scale, most have used the simpler, four-category classification system (Levels 1, 2, 3, and 4/5) devised by the measurement experts. Since very few Canadians score at Level 5 on any of the three literacy scales, Levels 4 and 5 have been combined. The average Canadian, with literacy scores of about 290, would be found in the lower end of Level 3.

OVERHEAD % of Employed Canadians at each level of literacy for each scale - Table 1

Ideally, one would want a workforce with a high proportion of workers in the highest category (Level 4/5). What we find, for each of the three dimensions of literacy measured in the IALS, is that slightly more than one in four employed Canadians are in the top category, with about 35% in Level 3. Clearly, as a society, we have room to improve.

The 12% in the lowest category seems like a small percentage, but this still represents about 1.5 million workers. We do need to acknowledge that some of these individuals are older workers who might not be as well educated as their younger work mates. Even so, the fact that older workers, on average, have lower literacy skills, begs the question of whether some older workers might have been more literate earlier in their careers. I will return later to the question of whether under-utilized literacy skills might be lost.

For the remainder of my presentation, I will examine only *document literacy*, since it probably has the most immediate relevance to the workplace. But I should note that quite similar patterns are typically found for the other two dimensions of literacy examined in the IALS.

OVERHEAD: distribution of employed Canadians on document literacy; also the United States, Germany, Netherlands, Sweden and Poland (page 128 in Blue report)

How does Canada compare to other industrialized countries with respect to the literacy skills of the employed population? We can take some pride in observing that, compared to four of the countries I have chosen to examine here, we have a higher proportion (30%) of workers in Level 4/5. Canada continues to invest heavily in the formal education of its population, and there seem to be some positive returns to this policy. With respect to the distribution of document literacy skills across the four levels, we resemble the United States most closely, although the US has a higher proportion in the lowest level of document literacy and a smaller proportion in the highest level.

I have presented data for Poland to show the extent of cross-national variation in the stock of literacy skills – very few Polish workers appear in the top two categories. But we should really look at western European countries for our benchmark. Here we observe that, compared to Canada, Germany has a smaller proportion of workers in Level 4/5 of document literacy, but a larger proportion in Level 3. The total for these two levels, however, is the same as in Canada.

But Holland has a higher proportion of workers in the top two categories, and Sweden stands out even more. While it is not within the scope of this presentation to explore the reasons behind these differences, it is apparent that different formal education and workplace training policies lead to different outcomes. If a more literate workforce is a prerequisite for a more competitive economy, and there is strong evidence that it is, some of our competition is better equipped in terms of its stock of human capital.

OVERHEAD: distribution of unemployed Canadians on document literacy; also the United States, Germany, Netherlands, Sweden, and Poland (page 128 in Blue report)

What about the literacy levels of the unemployed in Canada, compared to other countries? Again, we observe some interesting cross-national differences. Canada appears to have a more polarized distribution of document literacy skills among its unemployed – 15% have very high literacy skills while almost 40% are in the lowest category. In Poland, most of the unemployed have very low literacy skills, while in the other countries, the majority of the unemployed are in the middle categories.

The unusual Canadian pattern deserves further analysis, but it does indicate that we might need to think about a two-pronged approach to addressing unemployment. For the majority of the unemployed, some skill enhancement, including literacy skills, might be useful. But for a minority, perhaps we need to find jobs that can take advantage of their already substantial literacy skills.

Returning to the much larger group of employed Canadians, and looking more closely at one significant occupational group – skilled craft workers and machine operators – how do we compare to the same six countries? How literate are the blue-collar workers who are employed in our manufacturing, mining, forestry, and other related industries?

OVERHEAD: distribution of “blue collar” workers on document literacy; also the United States, Germany, Netherlands, Sweden, and Poland (page 166 in most recent report)

If our goal is to have a highly literate blue-collar workforce, we can see that we are somewhat better off than the United States. But we should not be too complacent, given that the western European countries are ahead of us in this respect. In Canada, 43% of blue-collar workers have Level 3 or 4/5 document literacy skills, compared to 55% in Germany, 54% in the Netherlands, and 74% in Sweden. The higher levels of workplace training, and the greater emphasis on lengthy apprenticeships as the mode of entry into such employment, probably accounts for the different European pattern.

We could go on to look at other occupational categories and industries, but the data we have already examined make the point clearly enough. If we are to become more competitive globally, we need to ask ourselves about the types of education, training, and labour market policies that underlie these cross-national differences.

2. *How much “fit” or “mismatch” do we observe between the literacy skills of workers and the literacy requirements of their jobs?*

Let’s turn to our second key question. *How much literacy “fit” or “mismatch” do we observe in the Canadian workforce?* In other words, are most Canadian workers employed in jobs, the requirements of which roughly match their skills? Or, do we find some workers with low literacy skills in jobs that require considerable skill? Conversely, to what extent do we find highly-literate workers in jobs requiring only minimal skill?

The IALS has produced a rich data set that allows researchers to address such questions. Specifically, along with tests measuring their literacy skills, and questions asking about literacy practices away from work, employed respondents in the survey were asked how frequently they were required to perform a range of reading, writing, and mathematical tasks in their job.

OVERHEAD: Selected measures of workplace literacy requirements (from Table 5)

The results are very interesting. Looking at the most common types of workplace reading requirements, we observe that one in two employed Canadians read letters and memos on a daily basis in their job, while 20% report that they rarely do so. About one in three read reports, articles, magazines, or journals on a daily basis, but almost as many say they rarely or never do so.

As for writing requirements, only 35% of employed Canadians write letters or memos on a daily basis, but almost as many rarely or never do so. The proportion who rarely or never write forms, bills, invoices or budgets (40%) is larger than the proportion who do so on a daily basis (30%). We observe similar patterns for quantitative literacy job requirements.

It is important to acknowledge that these measures of workplace literacy requirements are not as precise and as comprehensive as the IALS measures of literacy skills. For example, it is possible that some workers who perform such reading, writing, and mathematical tasks on an infrequent basis are still required to do so at a highly complex level.

Even so, it is difficult to ignore the conclusion that some Canadian workers, in fact, a sizable proportion, may be in jobs that do not require frequent use of literacy skills. In fact, when we compare Canadian skilled craft workers to their counterparts in Sweden, we see some very significant differences. For example, while 30% of Canadian skilled blue-

collar workers read reports or manuals on a weekly basis, more than twice as many Swedish workers (62%) in this occupational category do so. We have already observed higher levels of literacy among Swedish workers, compared to Canadian workers, but this difference in workplace literacy requirements must surely also have something to do with how workplaces are organized and managed in the two countries.

OVERHEAD: Skilled craft workers reading on a weekly basis, Canada and Sweden (Blue report, p. 91)

When we start looking at both literacy skills and workplace literacy requirements, it is difficult to avoid the next obvious question, namely, are the most literate workers employed in the jobs with the highest literacy requirements. How good is the “fit” between skills and requirements? Alternatively, how much skill “mismatch” exists within the Canadian labour market?

Using responses to nine different (self-reported) questions about reading and writing requirements on the job, we constructed a single measure of *workplace reading/writing requirements* and then separated the employed IALS respondents into four groups, ranging from “low” to “high” literacy requirements in their job. We then cross-tabulated this measure by the four-category “literacy skill” measure, to create a 4 by 4 table of literacy “fit” and “mismatch” among employed Canadians. Individuals whose literacy skills were two or more levels above or below the (self-reported) requirements of their current job were classified as “mismatched.”

OVERHEAD: Document literacy “fit” and “mismatch”, Canada, 1994 (Table 9)

The results of this simple analysis raise some provocative questions about the nature of the “jobs-skill” gap in Canada, at least with respect to (document) literacy. About one in six (17%) employed Canadians have low document literacy skills and are in jobs that roughly match their skill levels. One-third (33%) are in the medium-medium category, and about one-quarter (24%) are in the high skill - high skill requirement category. Clearly, our national goal should be to develop educational and workplace programs and policies that push more of our workforce into the high skill - high skill requirement category.

In total, about three-quarters of employed Canadians appear to be in a “matched” labour market position, working in jobs that more or less take advantage of their literacy skills. About one in four are mismatched, at least according to the empirical definitions we have used. What is troubling about the findings is that *literacy surplus* seems to be more widespread than *literacy deficit*. In other words, using our admittedly crude measure of workplace literacy requirements, we observe about 20% of employed Canadians with skills exceeding their job requirements, compared to about 5% in the opposite situation (low skills but in jobs that appear to require considerable literacy skills). Obviously, if we moved the “workplace literacy requirement” cutting points, we would get a different picture, but it would not change substantially.

OVERHEAD: Document. literacy “fit” & “mismatch” by gender & age (Tables 12 & 13)

Further analysis reveals that employed Canadian women are somewhat more likely to demonstrate literacy skills in excess of their (self-reported) job requirements. Our youngest workers (age 16-25) are most likely to be in such a “literacy surplus” position – one in three are in the high skill - low skill requirement category.

OVERHEAD: Document literacy “fit” and “mismatch” by education (Tables 14)

Our analyses do show that better educated workers are more likely to be in the high skill - high skill requirement category. Not surprisingly, Canadians with less than a grade twelve education are least likely to be in the “literacy surplus” category. Those with a high school diploma, but no additional qualifications, are most likely to be in jobs that appear to under-utilize their literacy skills (33%), although this phenomenon is also quite common among workers with post-secondary education (23% for those with 13 to 16 years of education, and 20% for those with 17 or more years).

It is tempting to discount these findings, arguing, perhaps, that self-reported measures of workplace literacy requirements have not been sufficiently validated. However, other national and regional studies using different kinds of self-report measures tell a similar story. For example, the 1994 national *General Social Survey* conducted by Statistics Canada revealed 22% of employed Canadians with post-secondary credentials reporting themselves as “over-qualified” for their current job. In 1997, Graham Lowe and I conducted a study of over 6000 graduates of Alberta’s four universities. Two and one-half years after graduating from university, only 35% reported that they used their writing skills to “a great extent” in their current job.

Having observed that “literacy mismatch” comes in two forms, the one apparently more prevalent than the other, we should *not* draw the conclusion that policy responses to low levels of literacy are inappropriate. The IALS data clearly show that a significant minority of Canadian labour force participants, both employed and unemployed, have low literacy skills. Efforts to enhance such skill deficits would be helpful, for the individuals involved and for society as a whole.

However, we cannot ignore the parallel problem of highly literate workers employed in jobs that do not take full advantage of their literacy skills. As we observed when examining the Swedish IALS data, some national labour markets appear to take greater advantage of the literacy skills of employees. The question then becomes: what can we do to make better use of the literacy skills of our (generally) well-educated workforce, while simultaneously attempting to enhance the skills of those with literacy deficiencies.

3. If literacy skills are under-utilized, might they weaken or be lost?

But before addressing this question, let us consider for a few moments the possible implications of employing highly literate workers in jobs that may not be sufficiently challenging. *Are under-utilized literacy skills at risk of being lost?* We all can understand this question intuitively, when we try to assist our children with their high school algebra, for example, or when we try to remember the Spanish phrases we learned on a vacation five years ago. But does the “*use it or lose it*” hypothesis have any relevance to literacy skills or to the workplace context?

OVERHEAD: Adam Smith on “low skill” jobs

Adam Smith thought so. Over two centuries ago, in the Wealth of Nations, he commented on the effects of routine and repetitive tasks on workers. As he put it:

The man whose whole life is spent in performing a few simple operations, of which the effects too are, perhaps, always the same, or very nearly the same, has no occasion to exert his understanding, or to exercise his invention in finding out expedients for removing difficulties which never occur. He naturally loses, therefore, the habit of such exertion, and generally becomes as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human creature to become. (Smith, 1937: 734)

OVERHEAD: “Use it or lose it” - supporting evidence

This is a strong opinion, but is there any scientific evidence that under-utilized skills might be lost? The answer is “yes.” For example, there is evidence from sensory deprivation experiments conducted several decades ago that leaving an individual in an environment with virtually no stimulation (e.g., a dark, quiet room) for an extended period of time can lead to a significant loss of performance on complex cognitive tasks. Working in a low-skill job is not really like being put into such a room! Nevertheless, these experimental results are suggestive.

In a study from the 1970s, US researchers compared high school students in college-track and basic curriculum programs. Taking into account gender, socioeconomic background, and IQ at the beginning of the study, those students in the more stimulating school environment showed IQ gains, compared to those in less challenging classes who, in some cases, actually showed an IQ decline over several years. Similar positive results have also been observed for younger children enrolled in *Head Start* programs, in contrast to their peers who were not exposed to a more stimulating pre-school environment.

Research with the elderly shows that, with age, some cognitive impairment can be expected. However, there are also research findings showing quite clearly that elderly people who are in more stimulating environments, where a variety of higher-order skills are still required, show less evidence of cognitive impairment.

In sociology, there is a large research literature on the “*long arm of the job*,” the argument being that jobs influence people’s attitudes and behaviours away from work and, sometimes, even change their personalities. Mel Kohn, an American sociologist tracked

large samples of workers over several decades, interviewing them about their work and other aspects of their lives. His research shows quite clearly that workers in complex, stimulating jobs, jobs that required self-direction (e.g., autonomy; little supervision, independent judgment, complex tasks) became more self-confident, less conforming, less fatalistic, and more flexible in dealing with ideas. In turn, their careers improved as well. Kohn recognized that, on average, more skilled workers found better jobs. But, in addition to this expected finding, his longitudinal research also demonstrated that better jobs produced smarter workers.

All of this supporting research does not focus on literacy. However, it does present a strong argument for a *theory of complex environments* that would also be relevant to the issue of adult illiteracy. Specifically, this research suggests the possibility that workers with well-developed literacy skills might lose some of these skills in the absence of opportunities to use them on a regular basis.

Graham Lowe and I have explored this issue with the IALS data. Ideally, one would want longitudinal data that looked at the literacy skills of workers before they worked in low skill jobs for an extended period of time, and then again some years later. Since the IALS only tested respondents at one point in time (1994), we cannot conduct such an analysis. Instead, we had to rely on statistical models that looked at the combined effects of *working in a job with limited literacy requirements for an extended period of time*, and then statistically “controlled on” every other possible factor that might have influenced the individual’s measured literacy skill, including education, age, occupation, literacy activities away from work, and so on.

OVERHEAD: Regression of document literacy on interaction term, etc. - Table 18

The results of this regression analysis, while not particularly strong (this is not surprising, given that the data were not intended for such a test), are in the direction we predicted. Specifically, they indicate that workers who have spent considerable time in a job with limited literacy requirements have lower literacy skills than we would expect, given their education, and age, their literacy practices away from work, and a variety of occupational and industry characteristics. In combination with the strong evidence from other areas of social science, we believe that there is something to the “use it or lose it” hypothesis, with respect to a range of employment skills and competencies, including literacy.

4. *What can be done to address these workplace literacy issues?*

OVERHEAD: Program and policy responses to workplace literacy issues

My emphasis today has been on literacy in the workplace, but it is very clear that literacy is not simply a workplace concern. If we wish to enhance the literacy skills of Canadians, and so improve their quality of life while also improving economic productivity in the aggregate, we need to look beyond the workplace, at the education system and society

that produces our workforce. The research literacy on the determinants of literacy provides some clear indications as to where we must begin.

A. *Raising Literacy Levels via Education*

It is becoming increasingly apparent that investments in early childhood education have huge payoffs later on, for individuals and society. Researchers have consistently shown that young children exposed to enriched learning environments do much better later on, as students and as workers. In fact, the same “theory of complex environments” that I introduced when discussing low-skill jobs is equally applicable to the education of children and youth. Hence, we need to start thinking about educational policies and programs as integrally linked with labour market and economic policies.

The literacy research literature, as well as a long tradition of sociological research on educational inequality, has clearly documented the strong correlation between parents’ education and the educational attainment of their children. To the extent that more education results in higher literacy, and it does, programs and policies that reduce inequalities in access to higher education (e.g., student loan policies) will also, in time, pay off with higher levels of workforce literacy. As the most recent report based on IALS findings concluded:

“Societies that are rich in human capital, as gauged by the literacy levels of their youth, achieve this wealth by enabling children from less advantaged backgrounds to achieve relatively high levels of literacy.” (p. 76)

B. *Reducing Literacy Deficiencies in the Workplace*

Experts in literacy program delivery all agree that the most successful workplace literacy enhancement programs use workers’ own interests and experiences as the source material and context for learning. *Contextual instruction*, in the workplace, is most effective. There are examples of Canadian firms that have built literacy programs into their workplace training strategies (Syncrude, in Fort McMurray, Alberta is an excellent example), but we need more initiatives of this type.

Traditionally, workplace literacy programs have targeted individuals with very low literacy skills. But once we begin to think about literacy as a continuum, we can immediately see the value in programs that further enhance the reading, writing, and quantitative skills of employees at all levels in the workplace. Thus, it is important to view literacy enhancement as a central component of the overall training strategy within an organization, and to push for additional investments in training.

We have observed that, compared to a number of other countries, a larger proportion of the unemployed in Canada have low literacy skills. Since we know that literacy skills are most likely to improve with contextual instruction, it would make sense to not separate literacy (and other skill upgrading) programs from employment programs. Can we invent “literacy and employment” programs for the unemployed that link upgrading with

employment (like apprenticeships or co-op programs for the unemployed), rather than focusing mainly on skill upgrading, hoping that with additional skills the unemployed will, subsequently, find employment?.

C. *Reducing “Literacy Surplus” in the Workplace*

As we have seen, Canada clearly has some literacy deficiency problems that are best addressed with “supply side” solutions, by trying to improve the skills of workers and the unemployed. However, given evidence that some workers may not be fully using their skills in their jobs or, in other words, that we may also have a “literacy surplus” problem, we need to look at the “demand side” of the labour market equation as well. The importance of this policy and program direction is underscored by the argument that if workers do not have the opportunity to use their skills, some of those skills might be lost.

How do you enhance the skill requirements of jobs? Over the past few decades, various management strategies have been promoted as solutions to low productivity. Perhaps the most popular has been the “downsizing” solution. While corporate and public sector managers are beginning to recognize that “you can’t shrink to greatness,” we have not yet seen a reversal of the trend. Trying to avoid widespread layoffs, some firms and government departments have cut down on hiring. This is a commendable compromise. But one of the consequences has been that many members of the most recent cohort of well-educated (and literate) Canadian youth have had difficulty finding jobs that take advantage of their skills. Thus, if we are serious about addressing the “literacy surplus” issue we need to re-examine hiring policies in both the private and public sectors.

Fortunately, downsizing has not been the only medicine recommended for addressing low productivity. Whether they are called “quality of work life” programs, or whether they are seen as part of a “high performance organization,” a range of contemporary management theories share a common commitment to the importance of “up-skilling” rather than “de-skilling” jobs. The idea, quite simply, is that both productivity and employee satisfaction will rise if workers are given more autonomy and responsibility, if their skills are tested rather than being wasted. Unfortunately, the research literature indicates that many Canadian workplaces are still quite traditional in this respect, unlike their counterparts in some European countries (e.g., Sweden, Norway, Germany)

Thus, while we need to continue to focus on educational policies that will develop the literacy skills of our population, and on workplace literacy and training programs that will enhance the literacy skills of the workforce, we also need to look carefully at our management strategies and organizational structures in order to take advantage of the literacy skills that already exist in the Canadian workforce.