

FOSTERING EMPLOYER INVESTMENT IN WORKPLACE LEARNING

Report on a Series of Regional Roundtables

WORK AND LEARNING

Knowledge Centre

April 2009

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This report was prepared by Ron Saunders of Canadian Policy Research Networks (CPRN) for the Canadian Council on Learning's Work and Learning Knowledge Centre, with financial support provided by the Canadian Council on Learning (CCL). It is issued by the Work and Learning Knowledge Centre as a basis for further knowledge exchange. The opinions and conclusions expressed in the document, however, are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Canadian Council on Learning.

The Work and Learning Knowledge Centre is one of five knowledge centres established in various learning domains by the Canadian Council on Learning. The Work and Learning Knowledge Centre is co-led by the Canadian Labour Congress and Canadian Manufacturers & Exporters.

This publication is available electronically on the Canadian Council on Learning's Work and Learning Knowledge Centre's website at www.ccl-cca.ca/WorkLearning, and on Canadian Policy Research Networks' website at www.cprn.org.

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Cite this publication in the following format:

Saunders, Ron (2009). *Fostering Employer Investment in Workplace Learning: Report on a Series of Regional Roundtables*. Work and Learning Knowledge Centre and Canadian Policy Research Networks: Ottawa, Canada. 26 pages.

Ce rapport est aussi disponible en français sous le titre *Inciter les employeurs à investir dans la formation en milieu de travail : Rapport sur une série de tables rondes régionales*.

The Canadian Council on Learning is an independent, not-for-profit corporation funded through an agreement with Human Resources Development Canada. Its mandate is to promote and support evidence-based decisions about learning throughout all stages of life, from early childhood through to the senior years.

Executive Summary

Investment in developing the skills and knowledge of Canadian workers is becoming increasingly important, for several reasons:

- We can no longer rely on large youth cohorts to renew the skills of the workforce: most of the people who will be in the workforce in 2015 are in it today.
- The rapid pace of change in technology and the demands of the global knowledge economy have resulted in higher and frequently changing skill requirements.
- Skills training can help improve the future employment prospects of laid-off workers while helping growing industries to meet their skills needs.

The Canadian Council on Learning's Work and Learning Knowledge Centre (WLKC) partnered with Canadian Policy Research Networks (CPRN) to convene a series of roundtables—in Toronto, Halifax, Yellowknife, and Edmonton—on employer investment in workplace learning, involving senior government officials and senior representatives from business, labour, colleges/universities, Aboriginal organizations and NGOs from a particular province, territory or region. The goal of the roundtables was to identify practical steps to ensure that the quantity and quality of workplace learning in Canada matches the needs of the economy and maximizes the potential of Canadian workers. About 120 people participated in the four roundtables.

This report provides highlights of these discussions, noting common themes as well as regional differences in the issues and in the proposals for action. Separate reports with more detail on the discussion at each of the roundtables are available on the WLKC and CPRN websites.

Each roundtable began with a presentation of some background data and an overview of the issues, based on the discussion paper, *Employer Investment in Workplace Learning in Canada*, which was commissioned by the Canadian Council on Learning (CCL) and authored by CPRN Research Associate Mark Goldenberg. The key findings of this paper included the following:

- Canada's performance in workplace learning has been mediocre. Less than 30 % of adult workers in Canada participate in job-related education and training, compared to almost 35 % in the United Kingdom and nearly 45 % in the United States.
- There are barriers to doing more: employers are concerned about "poaching," time off the job, and whether the returns to training justify the costs; they often lack information about how to find/organize training programs.
- There have been many ideas to overcome the barriers and there are promising practices here and in other countries. Proposals/practices include: partnerships among firms, workers, unions, governments and educational institutions; active advocacy by business organizations to encourage a training culture; a tool box with a wide variety of supports and initiatives and the flexibility to tailor their application to specific needs and circumstances; awareness campaigns and the collection of evidence to convince employers about the benefits of investing in workplace learning; and enhanced government financial incentives to firms and/or individuals, especially with regard to basic skills/literacy training.

The series of regional roundtables on employer investment in workplace learning reinforced findings from earlier research and dialogue that there is much that can and should be done in Canada to improve participation in workplace-based learning activities and to enhance the

quality of training programs. It also revealed new findings with respect to key points of agreement and divergence among the workplace learning stakeholder groups involved, and in some cases the very local or regional characteristics that skills and labour market development issues can take. Action is needed, in particular, to:

- Provide financial incentives, particularly with regard to investment in the development of highly portable skills, such as literacy skills,
- Strengthen the essential skill levels of Canadian workers,
- Improve access to learning opportunities for workers from disadvantaged groups,
- Demonstrate to employers that investment in learning activities usually generates a high return,
- Deliver learning programs that are adapted to the circumstances of the learner,
- Improve the recognition of prior learning,
- Evaluate training programs,
- Help small- and medium-sized enterprises participate in structured learning programs,
- Foster learning partnerships/collaboration among all labour market stakeholders, and
- Develop a culture of life-long learning.

Many ideas were provided to move forward in each of these areas. Each stakeholder group represented at the roundtables—government, business, labour, education/training institutions, NGOs—indicated that there were steps they could take to address these challenges and opportunities. All recognized the importance of taking leadership to act on the ideas put forward. Many were passionate about the opportunities to raise skill levels and improve outcomes for individual workers, their employers, and their communities. Many also expressed an interest in working together to develop new strategies and build or strengthen collaborative mechanisms.

The discussion at the roundtables and the commitment of the participants provides some ground for optimism about the future of workplace learning in Canada. However, there is also reason to be concerned that, with the downturn that we are seeing as a result of the financial crisis, employer investment in learning will suffer. One lesson from that crisis is the importance of basing investment decisions on long-term rather than short-term considerations. Will that lesson be applied to investment in workplace learning? Will governments help employers do what needs to be done to sustain our longer-term competitiveness?

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank John Hugh Edwards, Derwyn Sangster and Alex Stephens of the Canadian Council on Learning's Work and Learning Knowledge Centre (WLKC), who helped to plan and host the roundtables and who provided helpful comments on drafts of this report as well as each individual roundtable report; Ingrid Richter, Kathleen Howard, and Tony Nash, who expertly facilitated the dialogue sessions; my colleagues at CPRN, Heather Fulsom and Sue Horsley, who organized the events and managed all the logistics; Mark Goldenberg, a CPRN Research Associate, who authored the discussion paper and co-presented background information at three of the four roundtables; the WLKC for its financial support for this project; and all of the (over 100) participants at the series of roundtables, for their time, their commitment to fostering employer investment in workplace learning, and their insights as to how to accomplish that objective.

Ron Saunders

Introduction

Investment in developing the skills and knowledge of Canadian workers is becoming increasingly important, for several reasons. One is the demographic imperative. The aging of the baby boom cohorts will bring about a slowing of labour force growth. We can no longer rely on large youth cohorts to renew the skills of the workforce: most of the people who will be in the workforce in 2015 are in it today, so it is becoming more urgent to make the best use of the workers we have now. A second reason for the growing importance of workplace learning is the rapid pace of change in technology as well as the demands of the global knowledge economy, resulting in higher and frequently changing skill requirements on the job. In addition, changes in the labour market also point to the increased importance of workplace learning. On the one hand, skill shortages have been experienced in some sectors or regions, while other sectors or regions experience layoffs—a greater risk with the onset of the recent financial crisis—and/or sustained high levels of unemployment. Skills training can help improve the future employment prospects of laid-off workers while helping growing industries to meet their skills needs.

The issue of employer investment in workplace learning has been the subject of recent discussions at the national level. However, since the nature of the labour market and the institutional structure of education and training systems vary across provinces and territories, it is important to gain an understanding of these differing provincial, territorial or regional perspectives. The Canadian Council on Learning's Work and Learning Knowledge Centre (WLKC) partnered with Canadian Policy Research Networks (CPRN) to convene a series of roundtables on employer investment in workplace learning, involving senior government officials and senior representatives from business, labour, colleges/universities, Aboriginal organizations and NGOs from a particular province, territory or region. The goal of the roundtables was to identify practical steps to ensure that the quantity and quality of workplace learning in Canada matches the needs of the economy and maximizes the potential of Canadian workers.

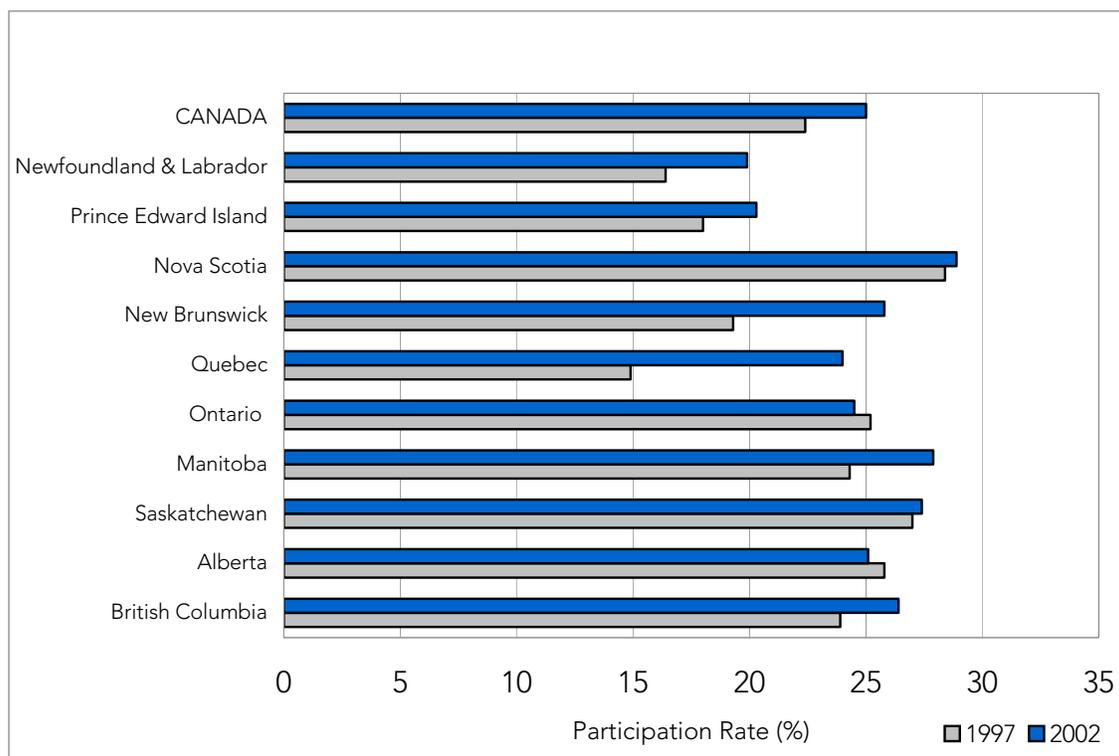
The first of these roundtables was held in Toronto on December 6, 2007, the second in Halifax on February 18, 2008, the third in Yellowknife on May 21, 2008, and the fourth in Edmonton on November 18, 2008. About 120 people participated in the four roundtables. They came from a variety of backgrounds and perspectives: employers; employer associations, labour; all levels of government (but mostly from provincial or territorial government), educators, and NGOs. A list of the participants at each roundtable is provided in the appendices.

This report provides highlights of these discussions, noting common themes as well as regional differences in the issues and in the proposals for action. Separate reports with more detail on the discussion at each of the roundtables are available on the websites of the Canadian Council on Learning (Work and Learning Knowledge Centre section) and CPRN.

Background

Canada's performance in workplace learning has been mediocre. Less than 30 % of adult workers in Canada participate in job-related education and training, compared to almost 35 % in the United Kingdom and nearly 45 % in the United States (Goldenberg, 2006). Figure 1 shows that there was also little increase in employer-sponsored training in Canada as a whole between 1997 and 2002, though there were sizeable gains in the provinces of Quebec and New Brunswick.

Figure 1
Employer-sponsored training in Canada



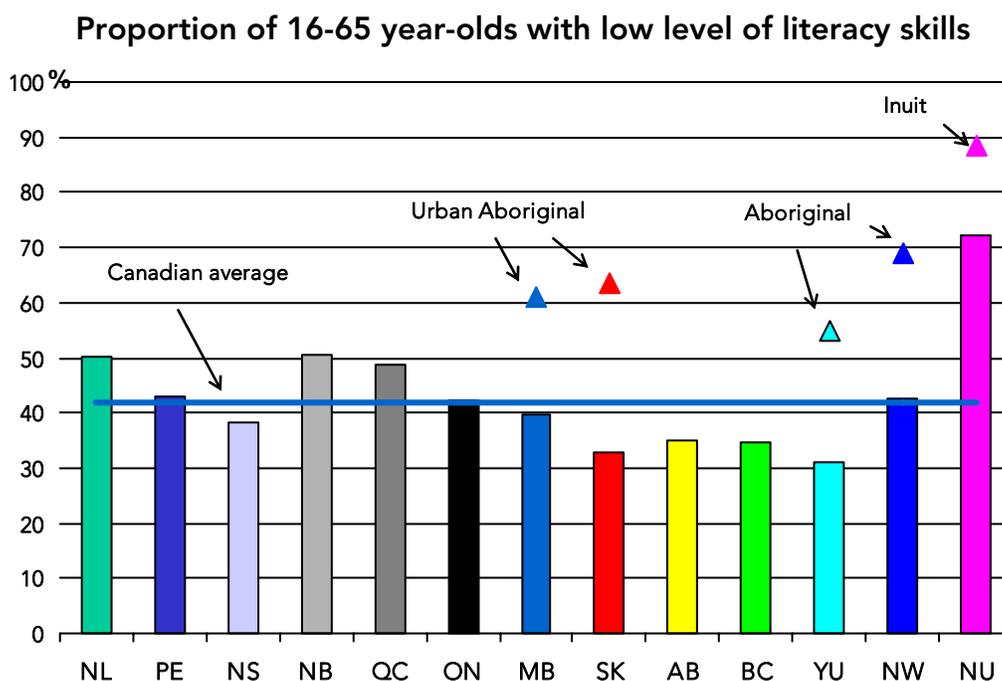
Source: Reproduced from Peters (2004). *Working and Training: First Results of the 2003 Adult Education and Training Survey*, Statistics Canada.

Evidence is emerging that employers who do invest heavily in learning programs for their employees usually experience a high rate of return on that investment (Bailey, 2007).

Access to learning opportunities for less-educated adults, whether by returning to the formal education system through government-funded programs in the community or through employer-sponsored training, is generally poor in Canada (Myers and de Broucker, 2006). Yet approximately 40 % of adult Canadians lack the literacy skills they

need to live and work in today's society.¹ As shown in Figure 2, some provinces and territories are clearly doing better than others in terms of adult literacy, but even in the best performing jurisdictions, the percentage of adults at the lowest two levels of the international adult literacy scale is high enough, at over 30%, to be of concern.

Figure 2



Source: *Building on Our Competencies: Canadian Results of the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey, 2005 (IALSS)*, Statistics Canada.

In 2006, the Canadian Council on Learning (CCL) commissioned CPRN to prepare the discussion paper, *Employer Investment in Workplace Learning in Canada*, which was authored by CPRN Research Associate Mark Goldenberg. This paper sets out data on Canada's performance (as summarized above), reviews what is done in Canada and elsewhere to foster investment in workplace learning, and reports on interviews with leaders in Canada from business, labour, government, and the education sector. Its key findings include the following:

There are barriers to doing more

- Employers (especially small- to medium-sized firms) are concerned about "poaching," time off the job, and whether the returns to training justify the costs.
- Sometimes they lack information about how to find/organize training programs that would meet their needs.

¹ Statistics Canada (2005). *Building on Our Competencies: Canadian Results of the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey*.

- Workers question the commitment of government and employers to substantive initiatives in workplace training.

There are many ideas to overcome the barriers and there are promising practices here and in other countries. Proposals/practices include:

- Partnerships among firms, workers, unions, governments and educational institutions;
- Active advocacy by business organizations to encourage a training culture;
- A tool box with a wide variety of supports and initiatives and the flexibility to tailor their application to specific needs and circumstances;
- Awareness campaigns and the collection of evidence to convince employers about the benefits of investing in workplace learning; and
- Enhanced government financial incentives to firms (e.g., tax credits, matching training funds, levy systems as in Quebec) and/or individuals (e.g., training leave, vouchers, learning accounts, use of Employment Insurance to provide benefits to workers on training leave), especially with regard to basic skills/literacy training.

Similar ideas were expressed at a national roundtable in the fall of 2006 and at the WLKC's Second Annual Symposium on Workplace Learning held in June 2007. These findings provide a backdrop to the discussion at the regional roundtables on employer investment in workplace learning.

Highlights of the Discussion at the Regional Roundtables

In this section of the report, we summarize the issues raised and actions proposed in the four roundtables. While this summary is grouped into categories, the categories inevitably have some overlap, and so issues placed in one area may also be relevant for another.

At each roundtable, participants were initially grouped at tables with a mix of people from different sectors, and issues/challenges/opportunities were identified in discussions at these tables. Later, participants were grouped according to sector (government, business, labour, educators/training providers, and sometimes NGOs). At these sector tables, they identified proposed actions, within their sector and others, to address the issues that had been raised earlier.

Although the roundtables took place in four different regions of the country, many of the issues identified and actions proposed by roundtable participants were similar across all four roundtables, with of course, some differences in nuance. However, some of the issues raised, particularly in Edmonton and Yellowknife, but to some extent in Halifax and Toronto, as well, were specific to the labour market context of the province or territory.

Issues common to all regions

1. Funding/financial incentives

Related to the issue of return on investment is the question of who should pay for workplace learning programs. Are financial incentives required/appropriate for employers to increase their investment?

Key issues

- For some employers, the perceived benefits of training may not match the direct (outlays for training programs) and indirect (loss of work time) costs of investing in workplace learning. Moreover, some of the gains to the economy and society from investment in training cannot be captured by the employer. Accordingly, governments need to provide incentives to employers to increase investment in workplace learning.
- The spill over benefits to the wider economy are particularly great for highly portable skills, such as literacy skills. The case for government incentives is particularly strong in this area.
- The infrastructure to provide training needs to be strengthened: facilities, instructors, expertise.
- Some roundtable participants noted that it can be difficult to obtain long-term funding for innovative training programs, even where good results are demonstrated. Governments need to ensure that initiatives that work are sustained. Many NGOs have precarious funding which constrains their capacity to deliver training or supports to workers.
- Unions can help create an incentive for more training by giving this priority in collective bargaining. In some cases (e.g., United Food and Commercial Workers), unions have successfully negotiated for training funds.

Proposed actions ²

The issue of how best to provide incentives for investment in workplace learning was more contested than the other issues discussed at the roundtables. Some participants, particularly at the Toronto roundtable, pointed out that the case for any government intervention must be compelling—it has to be clear that the problem cannot be solved in other ways, and that any government expenditures will lever increases in learning activity rather than serve as windfalls to those who would undertake training anyway.

The most animated discussion (again, particularly in Toronto) was around the question of training levies, outlined below in more detail:

² The sectors that proposed the action are shown in parentheses after each action: government (G), business (B), labour (L), educators/training providers (Ed), or NGOs. Where no indicator is shown, the action proposed came from all sectors.

- The federal government should establish a national, publicly-funded workplace training program. (L)
- Governments should consider tax incentives for employers, especially SMEs, to invest in workplace learning. (G, B)
- Governments should explore how to increase training opportunities using Employment Insurance (EI) funds. (L) Some labour participants suggested EI-funded training/education leave for workers, along with job protection in employment standards laws for workers who take such leave.
- Reduce EI premiums for organizations that invest heavily in workplace learning. (B)
- Provincial governments could seek a dialogue with the federal government regarding greater flexibility in the use of “Part II” Employment Insurance funds to support training of employed workers, including people who work on a part-time basis, particularly during a downturn in the economy where a combination of reduced work hours and increased training might be an effective strategy.³ (G, sector councils, NGOs)
- Governments could consider mandating a co-financing approach to training costs: shared by government, employers, and workers. (L)
- Unions and employers should put a higher priority on training issues in collective bargaining. (L)
- Government should ensure that workplace learning programs are funded in a way that supports the sustainability of delivery agencies.

In both Halifax and Toronto, labour representatives proposed that a national training levy along the lines of Quebec’s “1% Law” be put in place by the federal government. They pointed to evidence that the training levy in Quebec has led to more workers benefiting from training programs, such as data from the Adult Education and Training Survey showing that participation in employer-sponsored training increased the most in Quebec, in comparison with other provinces, in the period 1997-2002 (see Figure 1 above).

However, at the Toronto roundtable, representatives from small business expressed the view that it is more difficult for smaller firms to invest in formal learning programs than it is for larger firms and also more difficult for the former to deal with the paperwork involved in documenting compliance. More small firms may thus choose to pay the training levy than undertake the required training. The proceeds of the levy form a pool that firms can tap to support additional training. To the extent that it is larger firms that tap this pool, this can contribute to a transfer of resources from smaller to larger firms. Quebec addresses this to some extent through a small business exemption, but there remains a concern in small business organizations that thresholds based on firm size can discourage the growth of firms. In the case of the Quebec levy, which is at most 1% of

³ Part II of the *Employment Insurance Act* allows for the establishment of “Employment Benefits and Support Measures ... to assist individuals to prepare for, obtain and maintain employment.” See http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca/eng/epb/sid/cia/grants/ebsm/terms_conditions.shtml for details.

payroll, labour participants in the roundtable expressed the view that the levy is sufficiently small that it would be unlikely to have this effect.

2. Literacy and Essential Skills⁴

At all four roundtables, there was discussion about the importance of enhancing the essential skills levels of the workforce, both to improve productivity and firm performance and to improve the employability and earnings capacity of workers. Moreover, in both Halifax and Edmonton, representatives of the provincial government spoke about recent programs designed to improve essential skills.

Key issues

- Literacy and essential skills levels required on the job continue to increase, yet literacy/essential skills are low in much of the adult population, and some high school graduates lack basic skills in literacy and numeracy. Special attention should be given to improving the skills of the workforce with respect to literacy, numeracy, and, for recent immigrants, language.
- Low literacy levels create an increased risk of workplace injury.
- Workers may be too intimidated or too proud to seek training in literacy or essential skills. There is a stigma associated with having a low level of literacy skills.
- There were some concerns about using results of essential skills assessments as a screening device when hiring.

Proposed actions

- Business leaders should speak with educators about the need for graduates to have better essential skills. (B)
- Business must actively address employees' fear of stigma of participating in literacy training. (B)
- Government could take leadership in bringing different stakeholders together to promote essential skills. All sectors should work to develop a collaborative approach to promoting literacy and essential skills. "Learning Cities" is seen as a good example of such an initiative.⁵ (Ed)

⁴ The website of Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC) outlines "essential skills" as follows: "Essential Skills are the skills needed for work, learning and life. They provide the foundation for learning all other skills and enable people to evolve with their jobs and adapt to workplace change. Through extensive research, the Government of Canada and other national and international agencies have identified and validated nine Essential Skills. These skills are used in nearly every occupation and throughout daily life in different ways and at different levels of complexity" (see http://srv108.services.gc.ca/english/general/Understanding_ES_e.shtml). The nine Essential Skills are: reading text, document use, numeracy, writing, oral communication, working with others, continuous learning, thinking skills, and computer use.

⁵ See Canadian Council on Learning (2007) for a discussion of the Learning Cities initiative. A broader concept, raised at the Halifax roundtable, is that of "learning communities." The learning community model, developed by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, involves a

- Governments should be more active in communicating/marketing existing programs to labour market stakeholders. (B,G)

3. Equitable access to learning opportunities

Roundtable participants noted that, while some barriers affect people of all demographic groups, access to learning opportunities is more difficult for some than others.

Key issues

- Employers tend to invest more in learning programs for those who are already highly skilled than they do for their less-skilled employees. Yet evidence is emerging that when the less-skilled are provided with formal training, they benefit greatly from the opportunity, especially when it leads to a recognized credential.
- In addition to less-educated workers, access to workplace-based learning opportunities is more difficult for:
 - Older workers
 - Aboriginal people
 - Disabled workers
- For Aboriginal people, poverty and social exclusion contribute to barriers to learning.
- Learning needs to be viewed as developing people's potential rather than correcting deficiencies.
- New technologies, particularly information technology, present new opportunities for workers in rural and remote areas to participate in learning programs.

Proposed actions

- New programs should target disadvantaged/under-represented populations.
- Early intervention is important to help those who are struggling in high school to stay in school and complete their diploma. This will also improve their chances of participating in apprenticeship programs or other workplace-based learning.
- Programs/services should be integrated across EI-eligible and non-EI eligible clients. (G)
- Unions should put a higher priority in collective bargaining on access to learning opportunities. (L)

process at the community level in which learning is "systematically fostered in order to enable sustainable economic development, promote social inclusion and cohesion, and encourage civic and social participation." (Faris, 2007)

4. Demonstrating return on investment

Participants at all of the roundtables emphasized that, in the private sector, for employers to invest in learning programs, they must have good reason to believe that this will increase the profitability of the enterprise.

Key issues

- The decision by employers to invest in training is all about the bottom line. Some employers are investing heavily in training, but many employers question whether training will be a good investment for them. Employers will want to tie learning investments to results, and training programs must be relevant to employer needs.
- Measurement of both investment and return can be challenging:
 - For example, employers need to consider indirect costs, such as the value of the time of training participants (if the program is during work hours) as well as the direct outlays associated with training.
 - They also need to find a way to measure the intangible benefits of training that lead to gains for the firm, and not just immediate financial returns. For example, learning that is valued by employees will increase their job satisfaction. This can eventually reduce turnover and absenteeism, and improve productivity.
- Employers need information about how to assess the return on their training investment.
- Although evidence is emerging from cases of rigorous measurement of return on investment (ROI) in training that the ROI is usually quite high, the business case for training is not well known or understood by decision-makers.
- If all businesses within a sector were to invest in training, this would help prevent poaching.
- More information is needed about exemplary practices in training.

Proposed actions

- Provincial governments could launch an awareness campaign about the ROI on training, targeted to employers, that includes examples of successful initiatives. (G, sector councils)
- Governments could establish a pilot project, targeted at SMEs, that would evaluate the return on investment in training programs. (B)
- Business organizations should develop a business case for training (especially, but not only, essential skills training) that outlines the ROI and the benefits that contribute to it (e.g., being a learning organization helps with attraction/recruitment, retention, engagement, innovation) and then develop communication strategies to tailor the message about the business case for training to different audiences. (B)
- Business associations could identify champions among their membership. (B)

- Business associations should share best practices with their members. (B,G)
- Governments could convene forums on a regular basis to share information on best practices and ideas to improve training programs. (L, E, G)

5. Program delivery that is adapted to the circumstances of the learner

For training to be accessible it needs to be available at times and places that are convenient for workers and employers. To be effective, learning programs have to be delivered in a way that responds to the differing learning styles of program participants.

Key issues

- For many workers (e.g., single parents, multiple-job holders), it is difficult to find the time for learning.
- Workers often need courses on evenings or weekends; educational institutions need to offer programs on a more flexible schedule.
- Training methods may need to be tailored to the participant group. In particular, training programs need to recognize generational differences in learning styles and be sensitive to the learning styles of adults. Experiential learning may be more effective for some than programs that focus on classroom lectures. Workers who are digitally literate expect e-learning options, while some workers find e-learning intimidating.
- Training programs sometimes focus too narrowly on specific skills (e.g., use of spreadsheet software) when participants need broader, basic skills (e.g., on computer literacy) before they can use the more specific ones.
- Laddered training programs are needed, starting with literacy/essential skills and then moving on to higher-level skills. Individuals need a long-term training plan with clear goals, while recognizing that they may have multiple careers over a lifetime.
- Training programs are needed not just for those out of work or entering the labour force, but for employed workers in low-skill jobs.

Proposed actions

- Government should conduct a program review, in consultation with adult learners, so that the design of learning programs matches the need of learners. Educators should champion such an approach. This means not only developing appropriate curriculum, but also providing learners with the supports they need (e.g., child care, transportation, flexible scheduling of courses) to be able to participate in learning programs, and building capacity in communities to deliver learning programs. (G, Ed, NGO)
- Training providers should develop modular curriculum that can be taken up in stages by employers. (Ed)
- Governments could consider funding programs (in addition to apprenticeship) that blend work and training, such as people working three days per week, and spending the other two in a training program. In a downturn, this could help to

both minimize the need for layoffs and raise the skill levels of the workers. (G)

- All training stakeholders could jointly develop/implement community-based initiatives, such as “learning cities.” (Ed)
- Better use could be made of interactive and social networking technology in the design of training programs for younger workers.
- All sectors should work together to provide information to employers about how to develop learning programs and what is offered by training providers in their community.

6. Standards, recognition of skills, evaluation of programs

It is important that training is carried out in a way that allows some of the skills acquired to be recognized and transferable in other workplace settings. Training programs also should be efficient and effective in meeting their objectives, and less effective programs should be modified or replaced by others.

Key issues

- More could be done to recognize the skills workers have acquired through prior learning, including informal learning.
- Existing adult upgrading courses should be formally evaluated to determine their impact. This would require agreeing on what the key measures of effectiveness should be. Simply increasing participation in training is not enough unless that training generates marketable skills.
- Some roundtable participants felt that some apprenticeship programs have become over-specialized: the scope of practice and learning has narrowed. Some participants expressed a concern that regulations concerning apprentice/ journeyperson ratios are too stringent, but others cautioned against weakening standards in this regard.
- It is no longer clear what credentials mean: there has been some “credential inflation”—some credentials no longer reflect the level of expertise they once did.
- The difficulty of assessing foreign-earned credentials has become a particularly challenging issue.

Proposed actions

- Employers and colleges should more actively make use of tools for prior learning assessment and recognition. (Ed, B) We also need continued research on and development of a broader range of tools to document/recognize skill levels. (Ed/NGO)
- Governments should ensure that trades curriculum reflects the need to value well-rounded trades and occupations. (L)
- Educational institutions should develop methods to allow credit for structured workplace learning programs (i.e., articulation between such programs and post-

secondary institutions). (Ed)

- Government could fund evaluations of training initiatives in partnership with industry and think tanks. (G)

7. Helping small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs)

While there are concerns about investment in workplace learning even in large enterprises, it has long been recognized that SMEs face particular challenges, and this was discussed at each of the roundtables.

Key issues

- Employers, especially SMEs, do not have the capacity/resources to identify training needs. Moreover, owners of small business often lack training in the management of human resources.
- While much informal learning may occur in SMEs, it is difficult for SMEs to invest in structured learning programs. The key barriers faced by SMEs include:
 - An inability to realize economies of scale;
 - The cost of investing when profit margins are thin; and
 - The difficulties in replacing staff while they are on a training program.
- Sector councils may be useful vehicles for helping members find collective solutions to training issues. However, some SMEs are reluctant to collaborate because of the risks associated with aiding competitors.

Proposed action

- Government should provide financial incentives to employers to invest in training, especially for SMEs. (B)

8. Partnerships/collaboration

The opportunity for more extensive partnerships among stakeholders in workplace-based learning was emphasized at every roundtable. Partnerships were seen as potential levers to facilitate more investment in training as well as to improve the effectiveness of existing learning programs. Many forms of collaboration were mentioned, including multipartite (government, business, labour, educators) collaboration at the provincial level; collaboration across departments within government and across levels of government; provinces sharing information about best practices with other provinces; sector councils at the national and/or provincial level; regional/community clusters, involving information-sharing and the development of learning programs at the community level; articulation arrangements across education/training providers; and partnerships at the workplace level among employers, unions, and educational institutions.

Key issues

- Greater collaboration among stakeholders and government is needed to build a more coordinated, cohesive learning system.
- Partnerships/collaboration can facilitate information sharing, pooling of risk, and economies of scale (e.g., more cost-effective development of training curriculum). In particular, small and medium sized enterprises could provide more training if they collaborated and shared resources. Sector councils (and in some provinces, regional or local labour market bodies) offer existing vehicles for such pooling.
- Government/industry/communities/labour could partner to offer pre-employment training opportunities as well as more workplace-based training.
- There is capacity for more delivery of training programs by the not-for-profit sector and for more partnerships between NGOs and Aboriginal organizations.
- In order to partner effectively, organizations need good information about available programs and resources and about emerging workplace trends and skill needs.

Proposed actions

- Provincial governments should convene forums at the provincial level to promote workplace training and establish partnerships with training providers, business, and labour. Models used in provinces with existing multipartite collaboration structures (such as Saskatchewan, Quebec, and Newfoundland and Labrador) could be examined as a first step.
- There should be federal funding for organizations that bring stakeholders together from across Canada to share knowledge about training policies and practices. (G)
- Employers and unions should develop joint learning programs. (L)
- Colleges and NGOs could partner to develop/deliver workplace based training. (Ed/NGO)
- Educational institutions should work towards better articulation among different learning paths. (Ed)
- Individual employers could promote co-op programs and internships in partnership with schools, colleges, and universities. "Take your teacher to work" days might be helpful in developing more support for vocational programs in high schools. (B)

9. Developing a culture of learning

In most of the roundtables, participants expressed the view that attitudes about workplace learning needed to change in order to make progress. In some cases, this was articulated as a need to develop a new culture of learning.

Key issues

- There are many training opportunities available. Often the main barrier is lack of motivation on the part of employers or employees.
- Too many employers and employees are complacent about learning issues, so investment in learning is not a high priority.
 - Some employers take the attitude that if the job is not being done well, they can just replace the employee rather than provide training to improve their skills.
 - Some employees just want to do their jobs and are either not interested in or are fearful of training programs.
 - Some owner-operators of small businesses do not have high levels of literacy themselves and are reluctant to see literacy/essential skills as an issue in the workplace.
- However, global competition puts pressure on employers to improve productivity. Also, declining labour force growth (as the baby boomers approach retirement age) will make it harder to simply replace workers who do not have high skill levels. These developments may force a change in attitudes. But it would help to have leadership from within the employer and labour communities: those who are investing and getting good returns from that investment could act as champions; unions could play a stronger role in promoting the value of training to workers.
- Some participants noted that promoting the value of workplace learning should be situated within a broader societal effort to foster a culture of life-long learning.

Proposed actions

- Develop and implement a communication strategy to promote lifelong learning and improve awareness of learning opportunities. This can occur in multiple ways: a campaign for the general public led by government as well as the promotion of a learning culture within organizations.
- Unions should work together to develop language for the promotion of workplace learning in collective agreements, and should continue to promote the value of training to both workers and employers.

Issues specific to particular regions

While most issues raised in the series of four roundtables were similar across regions, some were rooted in the specific context of the provincial or territorial labour market. For example, in Toronto, the issue of layoffs in the manufacturing sector (even before the current financial and economic crisis) was a particular concern. In Nova Scotia, the establishment of a new provincial Department of Labour and Workforce Development, as well as the negotiation of a new Labour Market Development Agreement with the federal government were seen as providing the opportunity to for new initiatives and new partnerships within the province. However, regional context was most clearly evident at the roundtables in Yellowknife and Edmonton.

In Yellowknife, the large Aboriginal population, and the unique geography of the Northwest Territories (NWT), with only one large, urban centre, led to much discussion of social, cultural, and geographic issues related to workplace training (and, of course, wider societal concerns). Among the specific issues raised in these areas were the following:

- Social issues may affect what kind of training is needed by the community (not just the individual) and which training methods are likely to be effective. Culturally-appropriate training is needed.⁶ “Southern” models may not be suitable.
- Aboriginal youth may be torn between participating in the wage economy and following a traditional lifestyle.
- The “school” as an institution/place comes with baggage: many NWT residents associate “school” with failure or other negative experiences.
- The shift work that is prevalent in some industries sometimes brings with it higher rates of problem behaviours such as drug addiction.
- People in rural communities have less access to learning (including training) and employment opportunities than those in Yellowknife. It is costly to offer services across the NWT because of the distance involved and the remoteness of NWT communities. This contributes to disparity between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal access to opportunities.

In Edmonton, the macroeconomic context, which is heavily influenced by the cycle of investment in the oil and gas industry, led to much discussion of the effects of this cycle on investment in training. Typically, in boom periods, both employers and workers have difficulty finding the time for training, while in downturns it is difficult to find the funds. Specifically, participants at the Edmonton roundtable noted that:

⁶ The need for culturally appropriate and community-oriented training for Aboriginal people was explicitly raised in Halifax as well, and in Edmonton, some participants advocated that employers need to offer programs to help people work in a culturally diverse workplace (in relation to both Aboriginal peoples and immigrants).

- In boom times, the immediacy of the need for workers gets in the way of longer-term thinking, such as investing in skill development;
- It is difficult to participate in training when people are working very long hours;
- In a “hot” economy, employers find it particularly difficult to justify the time for mentoring of apprentices, and concerns about poaching are heightened;
- In a downturn, investment in training is not seen as a top priority, so when employers look to trim costs, they often disproportionately reduce training expenditures.

Participants in the roundtable also expressed concern that high school students who drop out to take advantage of well-paid jobs in the oil patch during boom times are not well-equipped for the labour market if they lose those jobs.

Participants in Edmonton emphasized the importance of finding a way out of this “Catch-22.” They argued that we need to re-think strategies when the economic environment changes, and that a more far-sighted approach would recognize that downturns are a good time to renew skills, both for the employed and for those who are laid-off. In their view, taking advantage of the downturn will require leadership from government, but the other sectors can be partners in looking for innovative solutions.

Conclusion

The series of regional roundtables on employer investment in workplace learning reinforced findings from earlier research and dialogue that there is much that can and should be done in Canada to improve participation in workplace-based learning activities and to enhance the quality of training programs. It also revealed new findings with respect to key points of agreement and divergence among the workplace learning stakeholder groups involved, and in some cases the very local or regional characteristics that skills and labour market development issues can take. Action is needed, in particular, to:

- Provide financial incentives, particularly with regard to investment in the development of highly portable skills, such as literacy skills,
- Strengthen the essential skill levels of Canadian workers,
- Improve access to learning opportunities for workers from disadvantaged groups,
- Demonstrate to employers that investment in learning activities usually generates a high return,
- Deliver learning programs that are adapted to the circumstances of the learner,
- Improve the recognition of prior learning,
- Evaluate training programs,
- Help small- and medium-sized enterprises participate in structured learning programs,

- Foster learning partnerships/collaboration among all labour market stakeholders, and,
- Develop a culture of life-long learning.

Many ideas were provided to move forward in each of these areas. Each stakeholder group represented at the roundtables—government, business, labour, education/training institutions, NGOs—indicated that there were steps they could take to address these challenges and opportunities. All recognized the importance of taking leadership to act on the ideas put forward. Many were passionate about the opportunities to raise skill levels and improve outcomes for individual workers, their employers, and their communities. Many also expressed an interest in working together to develop new strategies and build or strengthen collaborative mechanisms.

The discussion at the roundtables and the commitment of the participants provides some ground for optimism about the future of workplace learning in Canada. However, there is also reason to be concerned that, with the downturn that we are seeing as a result of the financial crisis, employer investment in learning will suffer. One lesson from that crisis is the importance of basing investment decisions on long-term rather than short-term considerations. Will that lesson be applied to investment in workplace learning? Will governments help employers do what needs to be done to sustain our longer-term competitiveness?

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