

**Brief to House of Commons Standing Committee
On Human Resources, Social Development and the Status of Persons
with Disabilities**

Re: The Employability Issue of Workplace Literacy

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Submitted by:

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Executive Summary

The National Adult Literacy Database Inc. (NALD) is an on-line library providing a bilingual, single-source, comprehensive, up-to-date and easily accessible database of adult literacy programs, resources, services and activities across Canada. For almost twenty years, NALD has worked to level the playing field in the often resource-poor adult education community.

In recent years workplace literacy has garnered increasing attention from a wide range of stakeholders including employers, unions, all levels of government and educators. Labour markets across Canada are tightening and shortages of appropriately skilled workers is a growing problem in all parts of the country. At the same time, many Canadians lack the essential skills and literacy levels needed to allow them to enter the workforce and to adapt to the changing needs of the workplace. Enhanced initiatives to address workplace and workforce literacy and essential skills are needed to address this dichotomy of skill shortages and unacceptable levels of unemployment.

At the same time, it is important that all stakeholders, including funding agencies, view workplace literacy not only as an economic and business necessity, but also as a part of the overall social fabric of literacy in our society. Workplace literacy is needed to improve the ability of people to do their jobs and to learn new skills to help them meet the changing requirements of their jobs and advance at work if they so choose. Workplace literacy programs need to be broad enough to lead to enhanced literacy skills in other aspects of workers' lives, in their homes, with their families, in society, and as contributors to the social and cultural communities in which they live. It is critical that these programs are planned jointly by workers and managers. In the same vein, people whose literacy levels improve in their off-work lives will show enhanced skills on the job as well.

As more and more work is done in this field, it becomes increasingly important that program materials, resources, research, contacts and activities be easily accessible to the people who need them. When stakeholders are required to invest scarce resources to find what is available in their field, or when they develop materials and research that already exist, they are not able to use their resources to impact their clients through direct service delivery. A comprehensive source of information on workplace literacy which also places it in the larger literacy context, is required. The model developed by NALD over the years is a good example of this type of coordinated, comprehensive, easily accessible information source.

Introduction

We want to thank the House of Commons Standing Committee on Human Resources, Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities for inviting Canadians to share their experience and knowledge on the important issue of employability. Employability covers a wide range of specific concerns, many of which this Committee is exploring. The specific issue which the National Adult Literacy Database Inc. will address in this brief is that of workplace literacy. Our comments will focus on three areas: the need for literacy and essential skills to enable people to participate in the labour market, workplace literacy in the broader context of literacy, and the need for coordination of information and resources.

We will first introduce our organization to show how our experience provides us with a unique perspective on these issues.

The National Adult Literacy Database Inc. (NALD) is a federally incorporated, non-profit service organization which fills the crucial need for a bilingual single-source, comprehensive, up-to-date and easily accessible database of adult literacy programs, resources, services and activities across Canada. NALD is an award-winning service that provides access to its on-line library through the World Wide Web, to people in all parts of Canada, and indeed around the world. By this means, NALD's services are available to anyone, anywhere, at anytime, at no cost, in both French and English. NALD connects with major literacy organizations and advocacy groups in communities, schools and local government departments across Canada. It also links with other services and databases in North America and overseas. These major partners help to extend the NALD network more efficiently to smaller, more specialized service groups and program deliverers in both remote and urban areas. NALD's information is gleaned from across Canada, and, as technology permits, the world. In this way, NALD levels the playing field in an often resource-poor adult education environment. The NALD website can be found at www.nald.ca.

NALD was established in 1989 to serve French and English literacy communities across Canada. It has existed in its current model, as a World Wide Web-based information and resource distribution system, since 1995. The organization has had a steady growth in both the depth and breadth of services provided and in user following and activity.

In the fiscal year ended March 31, 2001, 1,005,621 users accessed the site, viewed 7,027,192 pages and downloaded 100,529 documents in PDF format. These numbers have increased significantly over the years. In the fiscal year ending March 31, 2006 there were 9,151,477 visits to the site by people who viewed 32,776,599 pages of information and who downloaded 4,418,195 documents in PDF format.

Literacy and Essential Skills for Labour Market Participation

The International Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (ALLS) released by Statistics Canada in 2005 showed that literacy continues to be a serious challenge in every province and territory. It shows that four in ten working age Canadians (nine million adults) do not have the literacy skills to meet the ever-increasing demands of work and an information-based society. These results indicate an immediate and critical need to address the skills upgrading and learning needs of working age adults.

Individuals must have a firm foundation of literacy and essential skills in order to participate fully in the labour market and in a democratic society. Literacy and essential skills provide the foundation for learning all other skills and enable people to evolve with their jobs and adapt to workplace changes. A firm grounding in literacy and essential skills also allows people to continue their learning over their lifetime, so that they can adapt to new technologies, with new skills and knowledge in the years to come.

Over the past years Canadian employers have experienced increasing difficulty in finding people with the skills needed by the workplace. Growing skill shortages mean the loss of opportunities to expand business and to participate fully in the global economy. It also means increased costs to recruit and train workers. At the same time, too many Canadians are unemployed, lacking the literacy and essential skills they need to enter the labour market, to get and keep good jobs and to build upon their skills as they adapt to the changing needs of the workplace.

The costs of this are borne by the employer, by the unemployed individual and by all Canadians as Governments must provide social services and income support for our people who are not able to secure jobs so they can support themselves and their families. Everyone loses in this situation. Without major efforts to raise the literacy and essential skill levels of the unemployed, as well as of those in the workforce, the standard of living enjoyed by Canadians will decline. Our businesses must have the skilled workers needed to grow and compete internationally and our people who lack the basic skills to participate in the workforce must receive the programming and support they need to develop the workplace literacy and essential skills they require.

Innovative programming is needed, offered where and in ways that people can readily access. Programming needs to recognize and offer means to overcome the barriers and challenges faced by people with low levels of literacy and essential skills. These challenges make it hard for people to seek help to improve their situation, and to devote the time and energy required to succeed in the learning situation. Thus, programming must be offered in concert with assistance with child care, transportation, housing, health issues and other realities of daily life.

Workplace Literacy in the Broader Context of Literacy

Historically, the term “literacy” in the community and workplace has been understood to mean reading, writing, and math, with computer skills integrated as a tool for learning. In the Essential Skills framework, which has been developed by HRSD and its partners through the Essential Skills Research Project (ESRP), literacy skills are identified as reading, text, numeracy, writing and computer use.

There are several different approaches to workplace literacy and skills upgrading, including:

- Labour initiatives focusing on the need for literacy upgrading for workers in terms of their participation at the workplace, in their unions, with their families and as citizens in a democratic society;
- Labour initiatives on Clear Language to enhance access to information;
- General Educational Development (GED) Programs;
- Adult Basic Education (ABE) Programs;
- Other adult high school equivalency programs; and
- One to one or small group tutoring in community programs focusing on workplace skills.

It is clear from the range of initiatives addressing workplace literacy that many stakeholders have recognized the reality that workplace literacy cannot be separated from the full range of literacy. The need to offer opportunities to enhance literacy skills in the workplace are strongly connected to the same need to enhance literacy skills at home, in the community and in the pursuit of day to day activities such as banking, completing forms, reading newspapers and shopping. At the same time, improvement of workplace literacy skills through broad-based programming means improvements in one’s self-sufficiency in other aspects of life, and an enhanced ability to contribute to the social and cultural life of the community.

In order for the challenge of low literacy levels to be properly addressed, all stakeholders, including funding agencies, must view workplace literacy as more than an economic and business necessity. It is part of the overall fabric of literacy, which touches every aspect of life.

It is a known fact that often developmental opportunities are more apt to be provided to higher level employees, those whose skills are already at an advanced level. But today, especially as labour markets tighten due to demographic trends including stagnant or declining population growth in some areas and the aging workforce, employers are more often faced with the need to address the literacy and essential skill needs of their workers. Another impact of tightening labour markets is the concern of employers that once their employees have improved their skill level, they will be attracted by competitors who are seeking trained, experienced workers to meet their own staffing needs. However, employers who provide training for their workers, whether it is literacy or other skill

training, can inspire in their employees an enhanced level of commitment, especially when the training is seen as a partnership between employer and workers.

If workplace literacy programs are restricted to learners whose potential to advance in training is seen as being significant so that the return on the investment in training meets business goals, and if too many restrictions are placed on the scope and subject matter of the training, then large numbers of citizens will be left behind. For people who are fortunate enough to have employment, it may be difficult to find time between work and family responsibilities to undertake literacy training on their own, separate from work. The workplace is an important venue for literacy and basic skills programming. For many people, literacy upgrading programs that are offered in the workplace, supported by the employer through all or partially paid time, can be the only way by which they will be able to improve their literacy levels.

Whether training programs are provided in the workplace or off-site, during working hours, during non-work hours or a combination of both, employers need assistance in identifying and accessing appropriate programs to meet their needs. They need access to programs that are flexible, often modular based, to fit the time frames available to workers and employers. These programs need to respond to the special learning needs and styles of adults, including those whose experience with the traditional formal education system may not have been a positive and rewarding one.

It has also been shown that children who see their parents pursuing learning opportunities often develop a more serious attitude about their own education and become better students themselves. Thus the entire family, and the next generation, can benefit from workplace literacy and skills training programs.

Coordination of Information and Resources

A wide range of materials and tools has been developed by the various fields of practice involved in workplace literacy and these need to be made accessible to workplace / workforce programs. Other resources related to the field of workplace skills upgrading such as organizational needs assessments, program evaluation methodologies, practitioner training materials and models, marketing, promotional and awareness approaches, materials and tools, as well as specific industry resources and various types of research also must be accessible to stakeholders.

Since workplace literacy and essential skills became an important issue in Canada in the late 1980s, a multitude of national programs, partnerships and workplace initiatives have been developed to address the need for literacy and essential skills. These programs and initiatives have facilitated or provided training and upgrading in this area to people in the workforce. Stakeholders include people from a wide range of institutions and organizations as well as individuals. They include employers and labour unions, educators, trainers, academics, practitioners, professional and trade organizations, employer organizations, federal, provincial/ territorial and municipal governments,

community groups, learners, incumbent workers, people transitioning to the workforce and others with employment goals. They also include organizations concerned with success in employment for persons with disabilities, persons re-entering the workforce after injury, youth, Aboriginal groups and immigrant and multicultural groups. All of these groups have an interest in ensuring that people have the basic skills they need to participate successfully in the labour market.

It is important to note too that the breadth of stakeholders across the spectrum of learning, research and community concerns illustrates further the fact that workplace literacy must be viewed as an integral part of overall literacy, and not as an isolated sub-specialty.

All these, along with other stakeholders, perform a number of functions in the field of workplace literacy and skills upgrading. They facilitate, develop and deliver training initiatives and programs. They instruct and counsel learners, as well as training other trainers. They develop training curricula, resource material and tools. These materials, geared to increasing workplace literacy and skills, are used primarily in the workplace and in pre-employment programs and increasingly, in community programs for learners with employment goals. Stakeholders provide support – material and moral support – for their members, employees and clients to build literacy and essential skills needed in the workplace. They carry out research so that more can be learned about what is needed, what works and what does not work to raise the level of workplace literacy and essential skills among Canadians. They also carry out research to contribute to good practice and future policy development in the area of literacy and work.

There is a robust and growing Canadian and international knowledge base on workplace literacy and skills upgrading. Stakeholders have expressed to Human Resources and Social Development the urgent need for an efficient way to access all the material, information, resources and research on workplace skills upgrading, and to link with other people in the field. Currently these resources are, for the most part, ‘held’ by the developers of the materials, who undertake limited distribution depending on their resources. An increasing number of stakeholders are initiating programs to enhance workplace skills for their members, employees, and clients. Many more would like to do so, but do not have the experience or resources to develop the program models and tools for these initiatives. They need to build linkages with other stakeholders who have developed and refined material for use in this field, and benefit from the experience and expertise that exists.

It is becoming increasingly difficult to identify what is available and who is working in the field, so that stakeholders can take advantage of successful practices, materials and experience that already exist. The volume of information available can in fact impede progress in the field. The organizations and learners who suffer the most in this kind of situation are those with fewer resources to undertake significant searches to identify and access available material. Everyone suffers from the inefficiencies of “reinventing the wheel”. Efficiencies of scale, time, volume and scope cannot be realized. As work continues in the field, this situation only becomes more serious.

In the field of adult literacy, the need to build linkages between stakeholders, including practitioners, learners and researchers was recognized early on. At the same time, the need to provide all these stakeholders with easy, affordable, efficient access to resources, program materials, research and to each other was also recognized. The National Adult Literacy Database Inc. provided the means for that access and linkage through its on-line library. NALD has become a central pillar of support for adult literacy organizations, learners, practitioners and researchers in all parts of Canada. By providing access to resources, program materials and research, NALD enables literacy stakeholders to devote their often scarce resources to direct service delivery to the people who need to upgrade their literacy skills, rather than spending time, money and talent to seek out the materials and contacts they need to provide those important services. The field of workplace literacy needs similar ease of access to the specific types of resources, program materials, research and contacts which it needs.

Summary of Recommendations

The National Adult Literacy Database Inc. recommends that:

1. Canadians who are not in the labour force must be given appropriate support and training to develop workplace literacy and essential skill levels so they can compete in the labour market and obtain good jobs. This also meets the needs of employers who are facing skills shortages.
2. Workplace literacy must not be considered in isolation but as part of the overall fabric of literacy in a social, economic and cultural context. All deliberations and actions coming from them must be based on this frame of reference.
3. The growing volume of research, program materials, resources and stakeholder contacts requires coordination and ease of accessibility by all stakeholders. This is required to avoid duplication and to enable stakeholders to dedicate their resources to direct program delivery rather than to overly complex research to identify and access the material they need.

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