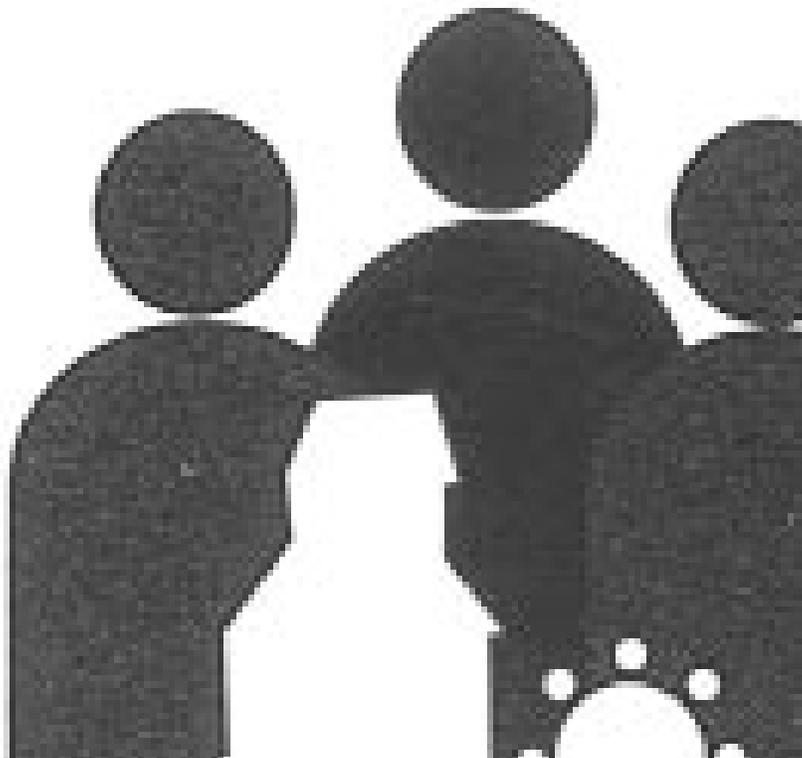


Saskatchewan Labour Force
Development Board

Literacy Needs in the **Workplace**

The Learning at Work Project

August 1999



Literacy Needs in the Workplace

a needs assessment conducted
for the Learning at Work Project

Ann Curry
Project Manager
August 1999



A [Saskatchewan Labour Force Development Board](#) Project

INDUSTRY VISION of Workplace Literacy in Saskatchewan ... 2001!

Saskatchewan has achieved and is maintaining its goal of having a fully literate workforce, meaning that everyone in a workplace takes the opportunity to develop his/her essential skills in order to function effectively at work, in the home, and in the community. These opportunities are provided through sustainable, community-based literacy initiatives which guarantee accessible training programs and which accommodate the individualized, specialized, and confidential needs of each person in his/her quest to perform well today and in the future. These literacy initiatives build on the on-going training which occurs in the workplace as a result of a continually changing world and involve the resources of the local and regional communities in a concerted effort to support the development of essential skills.

People at all levels in a workplace can receive training appropriate to their needs, be it learning how to do estimates, presentations, report-writing, or conflict resolution. Training is available from peer tutors or local instructors, through the regional colleges, union offices, or community literacy providers, and through events/workshops/seminars sponsored by regional and local organizations. Every employer and employee knows where to go and whom to see to have his/her needs assessed and appropriate training planned. Training opportunities are cooperatively planned to accommodate the personal lives of employees and the needs of business.

Literacy training providers are skilled at developing individualized training which targets the skills needing development. These training providers also give regular peer tutoring/coaching/mentoring seminars so that employers and employees wishing to can take on the responsibility of working with their colleagues to increase their essential skills development. In addition, literacy training providers can deliver the needed training in a one-on-one situation, to small groups, or to classes drawn from several small businesses. Training, if necessary, is provided in modular form, seasonally, at short notice, through distance education, on- or off-site, and in the time allowed by the necessities of business and its workers. Trainers are responsible for follow-up and are accountable to those using their services.

Local and regional organizations and institutions nominate representatives to be responsible for planning workplace literacy training. Regional co-ordination is provided by a workplace literacy officer located in each Can-Sask Centre; these officers receive support, both material and monetary, from PSEST which is the government department holding primary responsibility for workplace literacy. PSEST co-ordinates provincial workplace literacy strategy which includes supporting training institutions in their efforts, obtaining support from other relevant government departments, liaising with industry sectors to monitor needs, and providing training incentives to business and workers. In short, Saskatchewan's workplaces have improved the quality of their learning cultures.

This proposed vision statement was developed by the Learning at Work project as a result of a needs assessment reported in the document "Literacy Needs in the Workplace" 1999.

SASKATCHEWAN LABOUR FORCE DEVELOPMENT BOARD

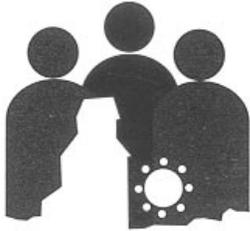


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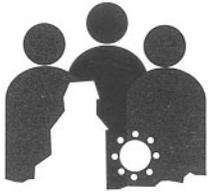
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I Introduction

One of the goals of the Learning at Work project, managed by the Saskatchewan Labour Force Development Board (SLFDB), **is to investigate the literacy needs of the Saskatchewan workplace from the point of view of industry** including both business and labour, and across the 12 sectors of energy, tourism, mining, agri-value, information technology, retail, trucking/transportation, construction, manufacturing, business services, forestry and culture. The purpose of this report is to provide details of the findings and to raise the issues which will form the basis of the industry vision of workplace literacy and of the recommendations for future initiatives to the SLMB and to the two funding agencies, the National Literacy Secretariat (NLS) and Post-Secondary Education and Skills Training (PSEST).

The investigation of the literacy needs in the Saskatchewan workplace was undertaken in two ways:

- 1 a telephone survey of 200 small-to-medium-sized businesses in Saskatchewan done by Canwest Opinion from Regina.
- 2 in-person interviews with business, labour, and industry representatives conducted province-wide by the project manager or her contracted representatives.



The rationale for the two-pronged approach was to provide both a surface picture of literacy needs through the quantifiable results of the telephone survey and a more in-depth, explanatory picture through the interviews.



The Study

Two points need to be addressed before beginning the discussion of the study. First, the Saskatchewan context in which small- to medium-sized businesses find themselves requires a

brief description. A small business in Canada can be defined as having fewer than 50 employees but, according to the Canadian Federation of Independent Business, 94% of all businesses in Saskatchewan fit this definition. A more detailed picture was necessary to capture the Saskatchewan reality. In consultation with Canwest Opinion, a small business was defined as having fewer than 20 employees, with a further distinction being made between those businesses having fewer than eight employees and those having more than eight. As well, Saskatchewan's economy is quite reliant on agriculture and natural resources, but with developments in high tech manufacturing, agri-foods and food manufacturing, and tourism. Finally, there is a large rural population, often quite sparsely settled (e.g. the North has a total population of 37,000).

The second point requiring clarification is the meaning of literacy itself. For many people, literacy means very simply the ability to read and write, but this definition does not capture the use reading and writing are put to in people's lives. The International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), published in 1995, defined literacy as

“using printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential.”

Literacy, Economy and Society; 1995; [Statistics Canada](#); p. 14.

In the workplace, however, the meaning of literacy has expanded to become those foundation skills, or basic skills, all employees need to be effective at work, including reading, writing, speaking, math, problem-solving, and basic computer skills ([ABC Canada](#)). Finally, [Human Resources Development Canada \(HRDC\)](#) has introduced National Occupational Classifications (NOC) to describe the essential skills required to function effectively in a particular job. Essential skills are defined as reading, document use, writing, numeracy oral communication, thinking skills, working with others, computer use, requirement for continuous learning, and other information (i.e. physical aspects, attitudes, and future trends affecting essential skills). In all three definitions, the idea of being able to apply skills in order to function effectively is present.

For both the telephone survey and the interviews, the following definition of literacy was used:

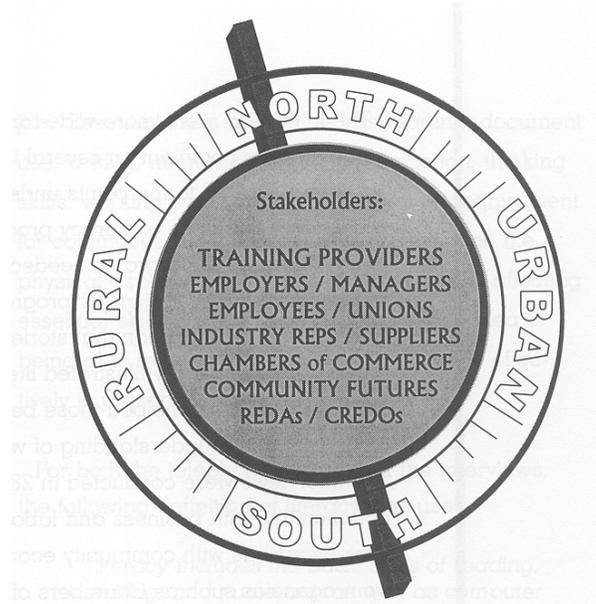
Literacy includes the basic skills of reading, writing, and numeracy as well as computer skills and the 'soft skills' of leadership, problem-solving, critical thinking, conflict resolution, and communication with co-workers and customers in the work-place.

For the purposes of the study, the telephone survey conducted by Canwest developed questions around workplace literacy skills, types of workplace literacy training, training approaches, employee assessment, and technology. Businesses surveyed were located in both urban (56%) and rural (44%) centres, and businesses were evenly divided between those employing fewer than eight people or more than eight people.

The interviews were more wide-ranging in that people felt free to comment on several issues only somewhat related to the points under consideration which were the types of literacy programs being offered, the types of programs needed, and the appropriate delivery mechanism for programs. As well, it was through conversation that stories or anecdotes came up which clearly illustrated literacy needs in the workplace or which helped those being interviewed come to a better understanding of workplace literacy. The interviews were conducted in 28 Saskatchewan communities with business and labour representatives as well as with community economic leaders from agencies such as Chambers of Commerce or Regional Economic Development Authorities (REDAs). In total more than 175 people were consulted.

The information collected through the telephone survey and the interviews will be presented here in descriptive form to give a picture of what is happening in workplace literacy training in Saskatchewan, where the perceived needs are, and what the issues or barriers are which hamper the meeting of these needs.

A Model



This model illustrates the two points which became overwhelmingly obvious during this investigation of workplace literacy needs in Saskatchewan. First, while the stakeholders in any workplace remain constant, the characteristics of the stakeholders vary. For example, the nature of the business, the size of the firm, or the training providers available have an impact on the type of literacy required or provided. Secondly, the environment in which the business is located - rural vs. urban, north vs. south - also affects the nature of literacy training needed. For example, an urban centre may have more options for training than a rural centre.

The message, in essence, is to see literacy as a “moving target”. The picture described in this report will not be a static one even though the definition of literacy provides a framework; rather, **the picture will show how literacy needs shift and how meeting these needs is not a "one size fits all" matter.**



II The Findings

The Question of Who?

The people involved in this investigation of workplace literacy needs include all of the stakeholders in a workplace:

- employers/managers
- employees/unions
- industry representatives, Chambers of Commerce, Regional Economic Development Authority (REDAs) and Community and Regional Economic Development Organizations (CREDOs)
- training providers
- industry suppliers

Depending on the issue under discussion, different participants are involved.

Employers/managers face three issues around training:

- 1 their attitude towards training
- 2 their own capability for training others
- 3 their own needs for training

Attitudes range from training not being the responsibility of business to having a budget line directed specifically to training. Even if employers/managers do not feel it is their responsibility to train employees, in most cases encouragement in the form of flexible hours, time off, or even financial assistance for training is given to employees who take on responsibility for their own training. Generally employers/managers favour

any job-related training, but are concerned about training employees who then leave to go to the competition, thus resulting in loss of time, effort, and money for the business. On the other hand, there are employers/ managers, whether it is their own belief or that of the company, who are dedicated to training because of the perceived benefits, both long- and short-term (benefits to be discussed later).

An issue brought up by economic development people and by several business people themselves is whether or not employers/managers are the best people to be doing training. They know their business, but they may not have the personality or the skills to train others. Combined with this issue of the capability of employers/managers as trainers is the issue of their own needs for training. Employers/managers may need the same skill development as their employees in order to work on their businesses and to develop the skill base of their employees. For example, a small business owner may need to develop excellent computer skills in order to give his/her business a professional edge and to ensure that his/her employees are computer-literate enough to support this business initiative.

"Computers are necessary in the oil industry for inventory accounting, tenders/quotes... a computer makes a small company look like a big company".

Employees have expectations of the workplace as a learning environment (i.e. someone will show them/tell them how to perform their tasks), and employers/managers expect the employees to learn what is necessary to perform their tasks productively. Both parties, therefore, have expectations around learning, but who takes the initiative? The answer is both, whether it's employers/managers bringing in industry suppliers to do workshops or employees requesting a type of training which they feel will be beneficial to their jobs. There appear to be self-imposed limits,



however, if employers/managers feel constrained by logistics such as time or cost or if employees feel satisfied with their current skill level.

As for who is involved as a training provider, the answer is all of the stakeholders. In a workplace, besides the employers/managers, all of the workers may be involved in training others, particularly new workers. Often certain workers have training as part of their job, paid or otherwise. This on-the-job-training - mentoring or shadowing - appears to be the common training element in every workplace. Other training providers could be industry suppliers, in-house trainers (usually in larger companies), or external trainers, either from the private sector or from public institutions.

“We train out of necessity ... Our managers needed help with grammar for report writing so we hired a retired teacher.”

Summary of Issues around the Question of Who?

- 1** For whom is literacy training needed?
- 2** How can a positive attitude towards training be developed for all stakeholders?
- 3** How can in-house training capabilities be increased/developed?
- 4** How can workplace expectations about learning translate into on-going training initiatives?
- 5** How is the best training provider chosen and evaluated?

The Question of What?

The discussion in this section centres on what type of literacy training is being delivered and what is perceived as needed.

The telephone survey indicates that over half of the companies have conducted some type of literacy training in the workplace, most often in the areas of computer competency, oral communication, interpersonal skills/attitude, and decision making, but also in the areas of problem-solving, math, teamwork building, and reading/writing. The interviews support this view of training activity:

- The Saskatoon Construction Association offers blue-print reading courses two - three times per year.
- Computer courses are in high demand.
- Office staff in a meat-packing plant ask for and receive customer-service training.
- Department heads in an oil industry service company ask for and receive leadership training for front-line managers.

There is no doubt that a lot of training occurs in the workplace, be it the shadowing/mentoring mentioned earlier, the industry suppliers offering training about new products or processes, or the type of training falling under the definition of literacy. Unfortunately urban businesses and those with a higher number of employees are more likely to have staff involved in literacy training, a situation which will be discussed in a later section.

The interviews reflect common needs for training being expressed across the industry sectors. Most often heard are requests for training in the 'soft skills':

- A REDA representative emphasizes the need for employers/managers to improve their presentation and oral communication skills to be able to sell their products as well as improving their leadership and customer service skills to be able to train their employees and build their businesses.
- The office manager in a seed processing company feels that team-building and conflict resolution training are essential to stop their high turnover rate.

- A Chamber of Commerce representative wonders why there is a de-emphasis on the soft skills since communication skills are crucial for future employment.
- The owner of a manufacturing company says communication is the biggest problem in the workplace, that knowing how to effectively communicate in an adult, rational way reduces the level of anger and frustration in workplace interactions.
- The owner of a Radio Shack franchise says problem-solving is essential. For example, staff need to know what to do if someone comes in with \$500 to spend on stereo equipment.

Certainly as indicated in the telephone survey, training in other areas of literacy skills is also needed:

READING

Reading is identified by many as a critical skill that forms the basis for all training (e.g. safety upgrading GED or apprenticeship).

- “Everyone has some administrative work now, even if it's just filling out time cards.”
- “Everyone needs to be familiar with documentation of some sort.”
- “Our workers need to be able to read well in order to source supplies for clients.”

WRITING

- “People don't want to take minutes at meetings or take on union posts because they can't write.”
- “After a promotion, someone may need to write administrative reports.”
- “Writing orders correctly is essential; we have to keep working with people 'til they can do it properly.”
- The interviewer watches an office assistant struggling to write something by hand and, then, hears the comment to a colleague, “I'm supposed to make this letter sound professional, and I'm not sure how to do it.”

MATH

- “People don't realize how important correct calculations are in manufacturing.”

- “Staff needs to know how to figure out special deals for certain customers, like the ones who stay long-term.”
- “I’m the only one who knows how to do estimating in my business.”
- “People need to be able to tell when a figure is wrong, maybe because they pushed the wrong button on a calculator.”

COMPUTERS

- “We use computers for everything ... inventory control, accounting...”
- “In manufacturing, computer literacy is essential.”
- “We have a specialized computer software program here, but if you're familiar with Windows, you can catch on quickly.”

The need for literacy training is apparent in many businesses requiring staff to have a variety of skills:

- “There are no assistants anymore; foresters have to be able to use computers, write reports, and give presentations at conferences.”
- “In a small business like ours, everyone has to be able to take telephone orders, find supplies for clients, put together orders, and ship them out.”
- “In the trucking business, the drivers are often the front-line workers with customers.”

At the other extreme, businesses can be so specialized that what is available in the way of training is inappropriate, staff can have particular needs not covered in basic courses, or there can be an insufficient number of participants to mount the type of training requested due to the costs involved.

- “Even in retail, the commonalities only go so far; then we have to have more specialized training.”
- “With a small business, you might only have 2-3 people who need training, so where do you go to get them trained?”

A final concern is accountability when external training is provided. After the training, there is usually no follow-up nor any way for businesses to indicate the success/failure of the training

- “Consultants just disappear.”
- “We discovered the trainers were from Newfoundland and knew nothing about our community.”

Summary of Issues around the Question of What?

- 1 How do smaller businesses and those located in rural areas get training?
- 2 How do the 'soft skills' of literacy gain more of an emphasis in training programs?
- 3 If reading is a base skill for all training, how can it be ensured that people have access to the different kinds of reading training needed?
- 4 How can cross-training in literacy skills be developed?
- 5 How can literacy training be developed so that it is specialized and individualized?

The Question of Where?

Discussion in this section will focus on where training is being delivered and where it is needed.

As mentioned previously urban businesses and those with a higher number of employees are more likely to have staff who have received training, a point underlined in the interviews and consultations when discussions focus on regional concerns and accessibility to training. Small- to medium-sized businesses located in rural areas, and especially in the north, experience difficulty accessing training.

Reasons given include:

- No training available locally, so additional costs and time are incurred having to bring in trainers or send people away for training.
- Small numbers of employees means there is not the 'critical mass' necessary to put on training programs
- The nature of small towns and rural communities means that people are embarrassed to ask for training (especially basic reading, writing, and math) because the whole community would know
- In the north, cultural differences need to be dealt with
- **In rural areas, there is often the feeling that 'the brightest and the best' have left,** so businesses have to 'make do' with those who remain as potential employees
- People are not willing to participate in training away from their communities

On the positive side, regional colleges are seen as essential services in rural areas, easy to approach and open to community needs. Other regional services are also positively viewed: REDAs, CREDOs, and local Chambers of Commerce and economic development people. The message is always the same: regional organizations/institutions are more likely to be able to respond to local needs. As a result, people are looking for ways to overcome some of the barriers to accessible training such as 'critical mass', distance between rural centres, and rural 'embarrassment' over literacy needs.

To be even more concrete about where training takes place, both the telephone survey and the interviews showed that on-site and off-site training are used. In the interviews, however, where the training takes place depends on the nature of the business, the space available, and the attitude of the employer/manager.

- “When people are at work, they are supposed to be working. Taking time out of the 8 hours affects the bottom line, and we have to be careful about that.”
- “We tried to have a training session in the coffee room, but we kept getting interrupted.”

- “Our equipment is very expensive. We can't afford to have people training on-site in case any damage is done. Who would pay for the repairs?”

Certainly there is a consensus that training needs to be accessible locally in order to achieve the highest level of benefit for small- to medium-sized businesses and their employees. Specific locations, however, would have to be determined according to the circumstances of the businesses even though the telephone survey shows that employers/managers are most likely to provide workplace training on-site during work hours.

Summary of Issues around the Question of Where?

- 1 How can training be provided locally in rural Saskatchewan?
- 2 How can 'rural embarrassment' be overcome in providing literacy training in rural areas?
- 3 How can a combination of on-site and off-site training be developed to accommodate the needs of particular businesses?
- 4 How can the variety of regional resources already in place and positively perceived be used in improving the accessibility of literacy training?

The Question of When?

Discussion in this section will centre on when literacy training is being delivered and when it is needed.

According to the telephone survey, if training is provided at the workplace, it is more likely to be delivered during regular working hours. The interviews and consultations, on the other hand, paint a slightly different picture. Certain industries (e.g. construction) find

it difficult to accommodate training during high season (May - November), but even during high season, employers/managers can compress the work shifts into fewer days to allow more time for their employees to participate in training on their own time.

Other industries (e.g. energy or manufacturing) may not be able to predict a 'high season', so they will have to take advantage of work when they can do so, often leaving little time available for training until a down-turn in the industry when money for training becomes scarce. External training providers, too, struggle with being able to provide training when it is needed (e.g. evenings, weekends, on short notice).

- “The college offered a series of workshops on conflict resolution and team-building, but they were on Saturdays when stores were open.”
- “November - February is the only time available for training in our industry.”
- “Some sensitivity about program start-up dates needs to occur when institutions know about out high seasons.”

As for the employees, they too, have constraints on when training is accessible. People with families often do not want to or cannot use their own time for training, especially if it is not local and additional factors like childcare and transportation have to be taken into account. As well, having less down-time from the job because of associated training can add to the stress in an individual's life, making on-the-job training more appealing to employees. Even with these constraints, employees are motivated to take part in training programs, especially if a collaborative approach to training between the employer/manager and the employee occurs (e.g. commitments from both parties for time and costs.)

Summary of Issues around the Question of When?

- 1 How can training be developed that takes into account an industry's particular time constraints?
- 2 How can a more flexible approach to training be developed to accommodate the needs of a small business?
- 3 How can employees access training at a time convenient to them?
- 4 How can collaborative approaches to training be encouraged so that both employers and employees feel their needs are being met?

The Question of Why?

The discussion in this section centres on why or why not people participate in training.

According to the telephone survey, the perceived major benefits of improving basic work skills among employees are more skilled or qualified employees, better customer service, and improved productivity. Also mentioned as benefits are greater efficiency, increased revenues, improved communications, and more teamwork. The interviews, too, reflect the positive results of basic skill training:

- “I thought I'd get a lot of flock over requiring employees to get their GED, but I was surprised at the co-operation even though they had to do it evenings and weekends. They started with fear, but ended with pride and gratification which spilled over into the workplace.”
- “The money for training was well spent ... the training brought staff together as a team. I hadn't realized the PR benefits of training ... my business gets lots of recognition for taking the time to train employees.”
- “The simplest task is monumental if it's new, so training is vital.”

- “Our employees become proud ... they have better family relations, they can help their kids. They take part in staff meetings and do a better job of reporting. Our site managers tell us this, and they insist we keep the basic skill training going.”

On the other hand, the survey indicates 12% of businesses are uncertain as to benefits resulting from basic skill training or felt there are none. In addition, perceived barriers to training are the feeling there is no need, the costs, and the time employees are away from work. The interviews also reflect a negative view of training on the part of some employers/managers due to the costs and time involved as well as the fear that a better trained employee would leave and go to the competition. In addition, the benefits of some training are not obvious; for example, if a business sends one person to an expensive workshop, how does that one person have an impact on the business and/or other staff?

- “When do we train? When we're busy, we have no time; when we're not busy, we have no money!”
- “It is not a reasonable assumption that business has an obligation to provide training. We can facilitate; not deliver.”
- “Where's the loyalty? If we train, will they just go off and get a better job?”

From the point of view of the employees, what does the picture look like? The survey indicates that 39% of employees have expressed interest in upgrading their education and/or enhancing skills, primarily in the areas of computer training, accounting, administration, and high school equivalency, but these employees are usually from urban centres or from firms with a larger number of staff. As for other employees, the interviews reflect again the issues of embarrassment over literacy needs, time away from families, fear of demotion or being fired if literacy needs are known, the costs of training, and the added stress involved when participating in training. On the positive side, collaborative approaches to training are appreciated and, if conditions improving accessibility are met, employees are motivated to participate in training because they are willing to invest in their livelihoods.

Summary of Issues around the Question of Why? (Why Not?)

- 1** How can the awareness of the benefits of training be raised for all stakeholders?
- 2** How can employers/managers be supported in providing training initiatives so that the barriers to training are reduced?
- 3** How can employees, especially in rural areas and from smaller companies, be supported in training programs?
- 4** How can collaborative approaches to training be developed and encouraged?

The Question of How?

Discussion in this section focuses on how training is delivered and how it is needed.

The telephone survey indicates employer/manager preferences for how training is delivered: If employers/managers were to provide workplace training, they prefer on-site training during working hours (satellite distance education was the least preferred). Employers/managers are more likely to provide time off for the employee and space for training than to contribute dollars or participate in the delivery of training.

- If external training is provided, employers/managers prefer it after business hours rather than during work hours.
- Employers/managers prefer training of a short duration.

The interviews and consultations confirm these preferences, but there are additional factors to be considered in how training needs to be delivered.

The first point to be considered revolves around who is doing the training. If the training is done in-house (i.e. not by external trainers), the question of capability arises. The person doing the training may not have the time, the inclination, the personality, or the skills to do a good job. Taking the best worker and trying to make him/her a trainer does not always work out, and there is the concern that people could just pick up another's bad habits. Few 'train the trainer' programs appear to be available and, considering the common element of on-the-job training - shadowing, mentoring - these programs are needed. As for external trainers, concerns arise over the applicability of training, timing, follow-up, and accountability as already discussed in previous sections.

The second point to be considered centres on how material is presented. One concern expressed is for more modular presentations so workers wouldn't lose money and time from work especially in industries with high seasons. Another concern is for more one-on-one training so that particular needs could be met, thus wasting less time and being more beneficial for the employee and the business. A third concern is for the development of more 'high tech' delivery mechanisms for those industries and for those regions that can make use of them. Finally there is concern for developing delivery mechanisms that would take into account the embarrassment around literacy and that would accommodate low numbers of clients.

The third factor needing consideration is incentives to encourage participation in training. If cost, loss of work time, stress, fear, accessibility, losing trained workers, and cultural differences are barriers to training, then appropriate incentives to encourage training need to be developed, with primary consideration given to making them low in administrative effort so that small- to medium-sized businesses and individual workers can participate.

- “We've tried some on-line stuff with individuals who can access it from their work stations ... we get specific needs met rather than a general class situation ... multi-media appeals because of our people and needs.”

- “Perhaps a private trainer can be more flexible ... we can pick the skills we need and get very targeted training so there's no waste of time.”
- “Northern people are very willing/motivated to take training if funding is available and the training is local.”

Summary of Issues around the Question of How?

- 1 How can more train-the-trainer programs be developed/delivered to take advantage of the common element in workplace learning -shadowing/mentoring?
- 2 How can external training providers and their institutions develop more applicable, timely, and accountable training programs?
- 3 How can variety and flexibility of training approaches be developed to meet individual, special, and regional needs?
- 4 How can administratively simple incentives to promote training be developed?

III Special Issues

While all industries could claim special circumstances as could various regions, the goal of this study was to assess common needs in workplace literacy. Having done that, it is worthwhile to comment on the special circumstances of the culture and agriculture sectors and the northern region of Saskatchewan.

Cultural workers face many of the same issues around workplace literacy but they are complicated by these facts: most cultural workers are self-employed and well-educated. Because cultural workers are self-employed, they must take on the burden of finding appropriate training and paying for it themselves on their own time. Even though cultural workers are well-educated, because they are self-employed, they must perform all the

tasks inherent in a business: marketing, accounting, selling a product, advertising, and customer relations. As a result, cultural workers must develop a variety of basic skills in addition to the skills needed to produce their work. An additional challenge in the culture sector is that many cultural institutions and events depend on a volunteer workforce. These volunteers, however, are still workers who require basic skills training and, in a sector that is often not-for-profit, funding to train a volunteer workforce is hard to find. Finally, **the informal training taking place in the culture sector is enormous, but not recognized**, which further limits workers' access to jobs.

As for the agriculture sector, certain comments are needed for farm-based workers. Since farmers are both employer and employee, questions arise around how to access training and funding. With farmers undertaking more custom-based activities (e.g. spraying, calving, trucking, seeding), the variety of basic skill development needed increases. In addition, a focus on 'soft skill' development, in particular conflict resolution, is essential to help farmers and families cope in high crisis times. Finally given the nature of is very hard to come by for farm farming, time for training families, making accessibility of training an important consideration. In fact, AIMS (Agriculture Institute of Management of Saskatchewan) is the only organization which develops training specifically for farmers, but it does not do programming in basic skills.

For northern communities, prime consideration has to be given to the differences in culture between aboriginal peoples and non-aboriginal peoples. In addition, the education levels needed for certain main industries in the north may mean extensive basic skill training is needed to develop the pool of workers required. Finally, creative delivery mechanisms need to be developed because the region is sparsely populated and the people prefer to receive training in their own geographical areas.

Again, it must be noted that these comments are in addition to the common needs for workplace literacy already described.

IV Scenarios

1. A Painting Company (10 - 12 employees)

The employer wants people who are willing to learn a trade and who want to work; he has no time for losers (those who don't show up for work, are late, or who have no work ethic). He's satisfied with his current workers, but he sees a need for leadership training, basic writing skills for things like purchase orders and time cards, and estimating (he's the only one in the business who can do this at the moment). His dilemma is that he and other senior workers have no time to do training (nor should they be expected to, he says, as they often don't have the patience), and he needs incentives to do training because it is costly. He needs skilled workers, and he can't find them.

2. A Safety Supply Company

The employer believes that even a small company has to invest in training, both with time and money. When people apply to work in the business, she asks for a hand-written cover letter in order to assess legibility and style. Given that taking telephone orders is the focus of the business, reading and writing are prime skills. She doesn't believe in letting people go because of poor reading and writing skills; she keeps working with them until they can cope. Because it is a small business, everyone has to learn all the tasks involved. Since everyone can cover for each other, she can send more than one worker for training so that the impact of that training is increased when workers return to work because it doesn't pay in spin-offs to send only one. Employees are encouraged to upgrade themselves, with the company paying part of the costs if they pass and if the training is job-related. She doesn't mind if employees go off to work elsewhere because they have already given a lot back to the company and they talk well of the company to other people. She sees a need for training in the areas of leadership, motivation, problem-solving, and critical-thinking. Her turnover rate is extremely low.

3. Seed Processing Company (30 - 35 people)

The supervisor mentioned that there's not much to the work here, just basic labour involving weighing seeds, sewing up bags, and loading trucks (very repetitive tasks). Workers just have to pay attention and work quickly. She sees a need for training in motivation, morale building, conflict resolution, and public relations. She commented on the high turnover rate at the plant.

4. A Computer Training Company (3 full-time, 1 part-time)

This company goes into other companies and does computer upgrading courses. The staff takes every thing with them: computers and manuals. They make do with the time limits imposed by the company they have been hired to serve, but the staff feels learning would be greater if more time as well as time off between training sessions were allowed.

The owner wants to expand, meaning hiring more technicians and opening a training room. The technicians will have to be multi-skilled: good reading and writing skills, public relations, logical thinking, problem solving, presentation and telephone skills, and ability to do accounting and reporting. The owner would like to work out a co-operative program with the regional colleges because their training is so out-of date, but who would help pay the costs if he took on their students as apprentices?

5. A Northern Outfitter

This employer trains young aboriginal people to be guides, and he faces serious challenges in this task. Many of the young people are high school dropouts with poor attitudes and a lack of knowledge of the traditional ways. Straightforward communication is essential in the bush, so training should be on the land, not in a classroom, yet courses now are too short to be useful and are classroom-based. There is no funding available to train young people with traditional resource users as teachers, and traditional issues must be a part of the training for guides to be effective.

6. A Manufacturing Company

The supervisor talked about the wide variety of labour currently in the plant, from not so literate to highly specialized. Increasingly manufacturing is requiring a higher skill

level from employees: blue-print reading, computer literacy problem-solving, report -writing, GED level or higher. The company does some in-house training or sends people away for training, but it is so costly. Companies need incentives to offset the financial loss involved in training, especially if trained employees leave. Companies always look at the profit margin and what affects that, so it's not good to try to put all training on industry's back. **Because of the specialized, expensive equipment used in manufacturing today, one mistake can cost a company \$1 million. Who pays for training mistakes?**

7. A Nursery/Greenhouse Business

This employer believes if people want good employees, they have to have a hand in creating good employees; education is part of doing business. He wonders, however, why he should bother with people who need training/support if he doesn't get some incentive/recognition that he's doing something good. He believes that evaluation is needed, though, to protect employees so they're not just cheap labour. He likes to go the extra mile for good workers, including helping people get better jobs; even if workers leave, they are one's best advertisement. Part of an employer's job is to evaluate, but **employers need to remember that employees evaluate, too**. He hires a lot of people with disabilities, and one of his frustrations is that if he can't get support for them, where are they to go? Agencies need to co-ordinate and not spend all the money on their own staff; agencies often don't understand business and its need for a quick response.

8. XYZ Construction Company

To work for xyz, a person must have Grade 12 or his/her GED. XYZ is looking for people who are ready to work, to put out an effort; who have had some exposure to documentation (e.g. forms, procedures) because they have to be able to assemble information; and who have basic computer skills. Because of the demographics of the region, XYZ is often faced with hiring from a labour pool which has no work experience, perhaps for generations. As a result, XYZ overlooks some deficiencies if a person's trade skills are good, and the company keeps working with the person until he/she comes around.

Bringing a new person up to speed involves orientations to company policies and safety training (e.g. interactive CD ROM which requires computer and reading comprehension skills) before putting the person with an experienced partner (i.e. pair training is sort of a given in the construction business). The new person is also put on a crew of six to eight people, and everyone above the newcomer in seniority is a "trainer". As skills progress, job responsibilities increase.

Gaps in basic education and skill training identified by XYZ are:

- train the trainer programs
- basic analysis/technical reading
- writing (e.g. taking minutes at safety meetings)
- administrative reading and writing (e.g. filling out time cards, safety forms, applications)
- advanced life skills (e.g. money management for seasonal workers)
- substance abuse programs
- “soft” skill training (e.g. leadership, cross-cultural communication, motivation, showing initiative, good work ethic, teamwork)
- safety training
- math (e.g. GED students short on math skills for business)

The delivery of basic education and skills training needs to take into consideration the major factor influencing the construction industry: it is seasonal (May to November). Because of this, programs must be flexible; for example, programs could be delivered in modules so that people could interrupt their studies for work reasons. Electronic, interactive, individualized programs would be useful. Certain incentives need to be in place in order for people to take advantage of training; for example, people should be paid for training (i.e. either wages are subsidized directly, or the employer is subsidized for replacement worker costs). Employers could condense hours into three to four days, so employees could take Friday and Saturday programs. Finally, some areas could be

standardized, or companies could partner in training initiatives to cut costs because there is too much duplication in some areas (e.g. safety training), and money is being wasted. Unfortunately turf wars among competitors make this difficult. There are certain other barriers to training for employees. People with families are often not keen to take on training in their limited spare time. Also, in a seasonal industry like construction, no one is willing to take time off for training in high season and lose money, so workers often do not take apprenticeship programs which run at this time.

Any kind of training must take into account the nature of the business/industry involved.

V Conclusion

This report of a needs assessment for workplace literacy training in Saskatchewan has had three aims:

- to provide a picture of what is happening
- to outline what is needed
- to identify the issues which prevent the meeting of these needs.

The point of view taken has been that of business and labour.

A model has been developed to illustrate the variables affecting basic skill training for the workplace, and the message from the needs assessment has been to consider literacy a 'moving target'. Further, the workplace has been identified as a place of learning, with expectations on the part of all stake-holders. Finally, the common element of workplace training, that of shadowing/mentoring/one-on-one in formal training, has been identified.

The discussion related to the aims of this report has centred on questions:

- who is involved in training? (should be?)
- what kind of training is there? (should there be?)
- where is training taking place? (should take place?)
- when is training taking place? (should take place?)
- why is training happening? (why not?)
- how is training happening? (should happen?)

Issues raised by the discussion have been summarized at the end of each question section.

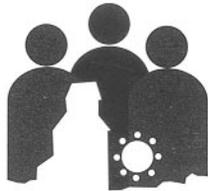
The quotations and scenarios have been intended to deepen the understanding of the issues involved and to act as a reminder of the people involved.

This report, then, will be the basis for the industry vision of workplace literacy in Saskatchewan and for the recommendations which will make that vision real. The vision and the recommendations will be developed in consultation with SLFDB members, and will include action strategies and descriptions of the roles and responsibilities of the stakeholders.

Notes

OTHER SLFDB REPORTS:

- **Challenges in a Changing Workforce: Suggestions for Change**, Community Forum Analysis - 1995-96 SLFDB Strategic Plan, April 1995
- **Training Needs Assessment Saskatchewan Export Manufacturers**, SLFDB August 1996
- **Challenges in a Changing Workforce Suggestions for Change**, Working Together Towards a Saskatchewan Training Strategy, SLFDB April 1997
- **Community Based Organizations**, A Profile of Employment Training Programs and Services in Saskatchewan, SLFDB April 1998
- **SLFDB - CLFDB Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition**, learning has no boundaries 1998
- **Saskatchewan's New Provincial Training Allowance**, Women's Reference Group, March 1998
- **Assessment and Recognition of Foreign Qualifications and Credentials**, (A Racialized Canadian's Perspective) March 1998
- **1998 Youth Summary**, SLFDB April 1998
- **Why Not Our Kids, Too?** If Developing Students' Career Competencies is Expensive just Consider the Alternative!, August 1998
- **Community-Based Organizations Directory**, September 1999
- **Youth Unemployment and Skills Shortages in Saskatchewan**, September 1999



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Established in 1994, the Saskatchewan Labour Force Development Board (SLFDB) is a non-profit organization that brings together the diverse perspectives of its constituent groups: Business, Labour, Government, Education and Training Providers, First Nations, Métis, Women, Persons with Disabilities, Racialized Canadians, Agriculture, Youth and Low Income People. Co-chaired by Business and Labour, the SLFDB works to produce new partnerships, dialogue and consensus that leads to positive changes in training systems and the workplace.

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