



## Factsheet #12

### Literacy and the Workforce

*Employees with higher literacy skills earn more income, are less likely to be unemployed, have greater opportunities for job mobility, are more likely to find full-time work, and are more likely to receive further training. They also report higher self-esteem and fewer occupational injuries.*

-  **People with low literacy skills have much higher rates of unemployment.** People with low literacy skills are more likely to lose their jobs and less likely to find new employment. The unemployment rate for people at the lowest literacy level is 26%, compared with 4% for those at the highest literacy levels. These figures don't include "discouraged workers" who are no longer actively looking for work. As literacy is one factor in determining a person's employability, literacy development must be included in the range of policies and programs aimed at building a productive and competitive economy.
-  **The labour market demands higher levels of skills than in the past.** There is increasing demand for higher literacy skills in the workplace, even for entry into positions where the skills are underused. Jobs that do not require much reading and writing are disappearing (e.g., in resource-based industries such as fishing, mining, forestry). Well-paying, secure jobs require higher levels of skills and credentials.
-  **Literacy skills are essential in all job-related training.** Lack of basic education is a barrier not only to employment, but to the job training necessary to gain employment. Usually rules for Employment Insurance and Social Assistance do not allow people to access the necessary literacy training. Less literate adults require sufficient time to build their literacy skills and make the progress that will ensure they are employable in jobs other than those that are low-paying, without benefits and that keep people below the poverty line.
-  **Everyone wins in a society that ensures that all Canadians can prepare for, get and keep decent paying, quality jobs.** Canada is one of the few industrialized countries without a co-ordinated national system of adult basic education. The involvement of a full range of partners at the national, provincial, regional, local, and organizational levels is necessary in developing a strategy that values the country's human assets. Partners could include but are not limited to government, business, labour, education, community groups, and learners.

## What can be done?

Workforce education programs are one solution. Workplace literacy programs are most successful when jointly developed with all the stakeholders. Workers, management, unions, community agencies, literacy organizations and governments can be involved in developing and delivering a wide variety of programs that meet their needs. These may include employment preparation, welfare-to-work initiatives, onsite tutoring, and special jobsites where workers can ‘earn and learn.’

- Programs that are developed in a respectful way, through a joint process with all the interest groups are the ones that are most likely to create a "win-win" situation where there is buy-in on all sides and each group's needs are met. Successful workforce education projects recognize and build on the range of skills and knowledge that participants already possess.
- According to recent reports by ABC CANADA, the Conference Board of Canada and the Canadian Association of Municipal Administrators, benefits of workplace literacy programs include greater employee self-confidence, improved literacy skills, increased participation in other training, better problem solving skills, better team-building skills, increased ability to use technology, increased health and safety and improved labour-management relations.

## Suggested *Literacy and the Workforce* Resources

- ✓ **Movement for Canadian Literacy** – Check our website at [www.literacy.ca](http://www.literacy.ca) for the *Literacy and the Canadian Workforce* briefing paper, as well as the Winter 2002 newsletter on *Workforce Literacy* and many other resources.
- ✓ **ABC Canada** – Contact 1-800-303-1004 or website at: [www.abc-canada.org](http://www.abc-canada.org)
- ✓ **The Canadian Association of Municipal Administrators (CAMA)** – Literate Cities Project. Contact Patricia Nutter, Project Director, at 613-726-9532 or, [pnutter@sympatico.ca](mailto:pnutter@sympatico.ca) or check the website at [www.camacam.ca](http://www.camacam.ca).
- ✓ **Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) – Workplace Literacy Project.** Contact 613-521-3400, (extension 437), or check the website at [www.clc-ctc.ca](http://www.clc-ctc.ca). You can also contact the CLC Training Advisor in your region (Atlantic: 506-858-9350, Ontario: 416-441-3710, Prairie: 403-448-2057, Pacific: 604-524-0391).
- ✓ **The Canadian Policy Research Networks (CPRN)** – The Work Network explores the cutting edge of labour market and workplace changes in order to create public debate on social and economic issues. Call 613-567-7500 or check the website at [www.cprn.org](http://www.cprn.org)
- ✓ **The Conference Board of Canada** – Contact 613-526-3280 or [www.conferenceboard.ca](http://www.conferenceboard.ca).