

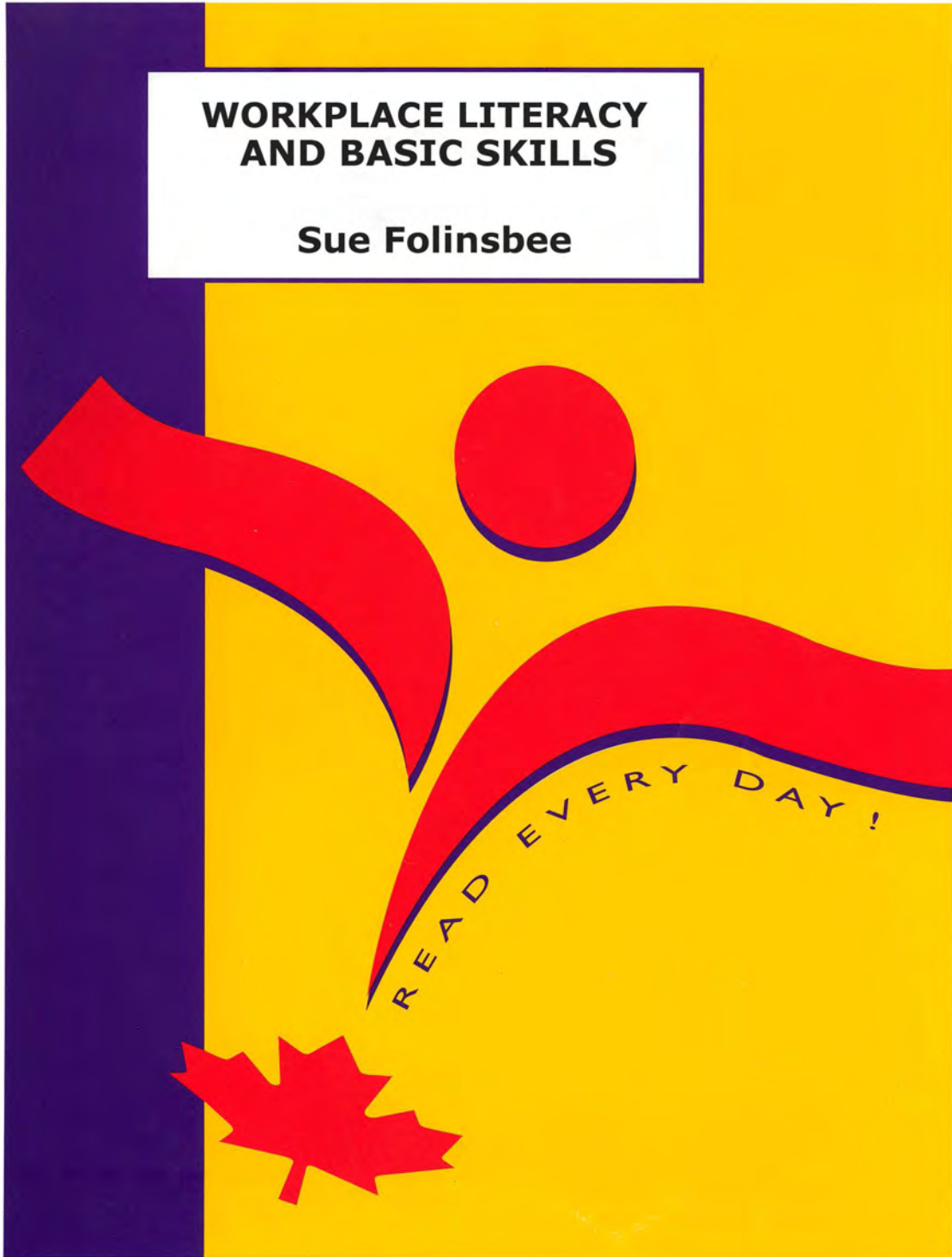


Human Resources
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WORKPLACE LITERACY AND BASIC SKILLS

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*National
Literacy
Secretariat*



*Le Secrétariat
national à
l'alphabétisation*

Canada 

Workplace Literacy and Basic Skills

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WHAT ARE WORKPLACE LITERACY AND BASIC SKILLS?

Workplace Literacy and Basic Skills generally refer to skills needed by employees at work such as:

- reading
- writing
- math
- problem-solving

These skills may be used with other important skills such as:

- listening and oral communication
- teamwork
- leadership
- self-direction and self-motivation
- computer skills

Workplace literacy and basic skills requirements are based on the needs of both workplaces and individuals. These requirements apply to a whole spectrum of employees from those in entry-level positions to those in office settings and highly skilled trades. Supervisors and managers may also be included within this spectrum.

The scope and variety of skills needed by this range of employees will vary from workplace to workplace and depend on factors such as:

- industry and sector
- job functions and tasks of employees
- management philosophy (flat vs. hierarchical)
- workplace technology
- changing job requirements

WORKPLACE LITERACY AND BASIC SKILLS: EVOLVING TERMINOLOGY

There is considerable debate with respect to what to use to refer to reading, writing, math and related upgrading within a workplace context.

LITERACY

On one hand, the word "**literacy**" has, in the past, ensured that the need to provide opportunities for working adults to upgrade their reading, writing and math skills gets the special attention it deserves...both in raising awareness about the issue and providing dollars by both the public and private sector. Using "literacy" ensures that the issue doesn't get lost under the label of other training and education conducted at the workplace by employers.

On the other hand, experience shows us that if "literacy" is used in a workplace context, employees feel the negative connotations of the word and are reluctant to get involved. People tend to associate literacy with "deficiencies" no matter how positively it might be defined. In addition, people tend to associate the word with a narrow definition that focuses on those who cannot read and write at all...a very small percentage of the population.

OTHER EMERGING DEFINITIONS

There are many other terms used to refer to programs that focus on reading, writing and math upgrading at the workplace. For example, two common ones are "**basic skills**" and "**workplace education**".

Basic skills, which is used widely to refer to reading, writing and math upgrading at the workplace also has its drawbacks. For example, basic skills have many different meanings, especially at the workplace. Moreover, it may still have a negative meaning for some. However, it seems to more acceptable to employees. "**Workplace education**" is a generic expression that educators have begun to use to refer to workplace programs that focus on reading, writing, math and related skills. One advantage of this phrase is that it has positive overtones. (Another advantage is that it infers a broader definition where literacy is seen as more than just a discrete set of narrow skills.) Unfortunately, even with careful, clear definitions, "workplace education" also has its drawbacks. Some may view it as too broad, one where foundation skills get lost among the smorgasbord of other workplace training and education.

We recognize that different terminology will be used depending on the context. In order to be respectful of context, various ways of talking about reading, writing and math upgrading have been used in this document

WHY ARE WORKPLACE LITERACY AND BASIC SKILLS IMPORTANT?

The Canadian work force needs to be highly skilled and adaptable to compete in a global economy. Issues that point to a need to upgrade the basic skills of the work force are as follows:

- it is estimated that 16% of Canadian adults are unable to deal with the majority of written material encountered in everyday life; a further 22% do not have the sufficient skills to cope with unfamiliar, more complex reading;
- 30% of adults born outside Canada have limited reading skills in either English or French;
- technological changes and quality initiatives require workers to learn new skills and take on new responsibilities;
- the shrinking labour market in many parts of the country means that employers will have to upgrade the skills of their existing work force to remain competitive;
- employment equity initiatives require employers to tap into segments of the labour market that have been underused in the past; these new entrants may require basic skills upgrading;
- the well-being of the trade union movement depends on having a highly literate membership which can have a voice in all aspects of union and workplace life;
- the move to a knowledge-based economy means that the work force will experience an increase in information requirements on the job which will require a higher level of basic skills;
- demographics are changing as a result of a shift in immigration patterns with many newcomers unable to communicate in English or French.

WHAT ARE SOME KEY FACTORS IN SETTING UP WORKPLACE EDUCATION PROGRAMS?

Workplace education is a generic term used to refer to programs that focus on basic skills. Workplace Education Programs, which are the result of strong partnerships among **business, labour, education and government**, are one way. However, a workplace education program, by itself, will not address all the communication needs of a workplace.

There may be a need to consider other activities at the same time workplace education programs are offered. For example, communication channels may require improvement, it may be necessary to rewrite company print materials in **plain language** for easier reading, or translate other materials into the languages of the workplace.

Conducting an organizational review will determine the feasibility of implementing a workplace education program and the need for other complementary activities.

WHO DELIVERS WORKPLACE EDUCATION PROGRAMS?

There are several types of service providers available to organizations interested in implementing workplace education programs and related activities in their workplaces. The appropriate service provider and the best approach to use will depend on organizational and participant needs as well as local resources available. A list of possible service providers appears below:

- community colleges
- school boards
- community literacy groups
- labour unions
- non-profit literacy organizations
- private training consultants
- trades trainers/in-house trainers

GETTING STARTED: WHAT SHOULD YOU DO FIRST?

Setting the foundation for a successful workplace basic skills initiative requires energy and commitment. It is more than calling up your closest service provider and expecting a program to be up and running two weeks later.

One of the first things you will need to do is make sure that key stakeholders are on side. A workplace initiative with a single champion who does not have other key people on side may end abruptly if the champion moves on.

Here are some guidelines for getting started:

1. Senior management and union representatives (where there is a union) will need to decide whether this is an area where they can work together and whether there is "organizational readiness" to tackle such an issue.
2. Key stakeholders will need to discuss their perceptions of the need and how the need is connected to other workplace issues and concerns.
3. They will need to come up with a concept of basic skills upgrading that is positive and respectful; that everyone can live with.
4. They will have to figure out what other employees or groups need to be on side for the initiative and how to get their support.
5. They should sketch out the process they will follow to get started; for example, will there be a planning committee, how will needs be determined, what will communications with the work force about needs assessments and resulting programs look like?
6. Key stakeholders will need to determine what kind of educational providers will be suitable to help conduct needs assessments, set up and delivery programs, etc. They will need to make a list of possible providers in their area and decide how to make a selection that represents the best fit. They will have to look at other alternatives if there is nobody in their area with experience in workplace education.

Once these steps are completed, then it will be possible to plan and conduct a workplace needs assessment, make recommendations and develop a short and long term strategy to deal with identified needs.

WHAT ARE SOME DIFFERENT WAYS WORKPLACE BASIC SKILLS NEEDS CAN BE ADDRESSED?

There are **many different ways** to respond to workplace basic skills needs. Depending on the needs, several ways may be used at the same time. However, there is no substitute for a workplace education program.

- The most common way is to set up separate workplace programs with a trained adult educator or peer trainer who works with a group of participants. Programs are designed based on individual and/or workplace needs. These programs may be offered on or off-site.
- Participants may also upgrade their skills by working one-on-one. This can happen in several ways. An individual may work regularly with a tutor who is a co-worker or a tutor who is from outside the workplace. In contrast, in organizations that have learning centres, instructors may provide help to individuals on specific, discrete tasks or problems.
- Another way of responding to basic skills is to incorporate them into existing training. This strategy has been used both in trades training and in-house company training. Instructors/trainers pay attention to ensuring their materials are clearly written, they respond to a variety of learning styles and they incorporate some basic skills instruction right into the program. In addition, they ensure that course participants can feel comfortable approaching them about specific programs or asking about referrals to community programs.
- Organizations are now offering clear language workshops to their employees who are responsible for writing. Clear language is a way of making written materials more accessible to every one. Although clear writing cannot and should not replace workplace programs, it can provide a useful complement to workplace education programs.
- Organizations that are concerned about client service have begun to train their staff in recognizing clients with basic skills needs and offering sensitive assistance.

Here are some answers to the most common questions about workplace literacy and basic skills:

1. As an employer, why should I invest in a workplace education program?

Workplace education, like other training, is an investment. A highly skilled, trained and informed work force can enhance an organization's competitive edge and ability to compete in a global economy.

Before you decide whether or not to invest in workplace education, it will be important to undertake an organizational review to see whether or not you need a workplace education program. By talking to people throughout your organization and looking at how jobs have changed, you'll have a good idea of your needs. Organizations that are adopting total quality, implementing new technology or new training programs, usually find that basic skills upgrading is an important component of an overall training and education strategy.

2. Do workplace education programs need to be custom-designed?

Absolutely! The key to successful workplace education programs is ensuring that they are tailored to individual, organizational and job-related needs. Your workplace will have unique needs depending on job functions, composition of the work force, workplace culture, management style and equipment used.

A thorough organizational review along with the assessment of job and course participants' needs will provide the necessary information from which you can tailor your programs.

3. Many of our union members did not experience success in the formal school system. How can we ensure that people will feel comfortable in a learning situation?

You can increase the comfort of your members by ensuring that you survey their needs, fears and concerns before programs are designed and implemented. Workplace education programs should focus on building on what people can do already so they can experience success in learning new skills.

Ensuring that your members are actively involved in every stage of designing a workplace education program will go a long way in gaining their confidence and ensuring their commitment to a program.

Your members will also want to know that any progress reports will remain confidential.

4. How do you get employees to self-identify as needing to upgrade their basic skills?

Employees will be more likely to get involved in upgrading their basic skills if you have created a safe, supportive environment. This kind of environment is created when you ask for employee input and allow employees to be involved in the planning process. Programs should be voluntary and never single people out

In addition, workplace education programs should be promoted on a wide basis to reach every possible participant and to build support from co-workers, supervisors and managers.

Employees will want assurance that their dignity and job security will not be threatened as a result of their attending a workplace education program.

5. What is the difference between English/French as a Second Language (ESL/FSL) Programs at the workplace and workplace basic skills programs?

Employees whose mother tongue is not English or French may be literate in their own language but have a need to improve both their oral/aural communication and reading and writing skills in English/French. Some employees may not be able to read or write in their own language and, therefore, would have different needs.

While ESL/FSL and literacy participants may come from different starting points, both need the opportunity to upgrade their skills. Once second language speakers are fluent, they can join basic skills programs with first language speakers of English/French.

While there is little or no stigma attached to learning English or French as another language, first language speakers of English or French who want/need to upgrade their basic skills may be reluctant to disclose their needs. Doing so may be seen as an admission of failure in a society that expects people to be able to read or write in their own language. People may also fear negative consequences for disclosure such as losing their jobs or being ridiculed by co-workers.

In culturally diverse workplaces, other strategies will need to be implemented at the same time as basic skills and ESL/FSL programs to improve communications at the workplace. Supervisors and managers may need skills to communicate more effectively with a changing work force and workplace policies and procedures may need to be adapted to address the needs of the work force.

6. Should a workplace education program focus only on the basic skills related to a person's job?

Programs should be based on needs identified by all stakeholders. Generally workplace education programs combine job-specific, job-related and other needs as identified by program participants, employers and other stakeholders.

A program that deals only with basic skills related to the present job may be short-sighted in an environment where jobs are changing and people are aspiring to lateral and vertical promotions.

Even if part of a program focuses on participant needs that are not job-related, the employer will still benefit. A program that is designed without employee input and incorporates basic skills related only to people's present jobs may not be viewed favourably by potential participants.

7. How should you choose a source for delivering basic skills and workplace literacy?

It is important for any organization considering a program to invite several individuals to make presentations on their programs and services. Some of the characteristics to look for are:

- experience in working with adults in a learning situation;
- understanding of workplace issues including management/labour relations;
- ability to relate to and gain the confidence of management, unions and employees;
- capacity to design tailor-made programs based on identified needs;
- ability to be flexible in terms of program design, time schedules for programs and where they are delivered, i.e., on site.

8. Should we conduct an analysis of the basic skills needed for different jobs in order to set up our program?

A basic skills task analysis assesses the reading, writing, math and other skills needed for particular jobs. It can be one of many useful tools to assist you in setting up your program.

However, it is not a substitute for an organizational/workplace review in which employees at all levels give their input around basic skills needs vis à vis other workplace issues. Nor is it a substitute for building stakeholder support and commitment for an initiative.

An organizational review should clearly determine whether or not it would be useful to conduct a literacy task analysis as well as specific areas to focus on. The decision to conduct a task analysis will clearly depend on company and employee goals.

A task analysis can be beneficial in workplaces or in industries where jobs are changing because of new technology or work reorganization. It may be useful to assess the basic skills needed in the past compared to those needed in the future or to compare basic skills needed from job to job.

A word of caution is in order. A basic skills initiative which uses only a literacy task analysis as a method of assessment and does not build support through collaboration with all stakeholders is bound to cause disappointment.

IMPORTANT THINGS TO DO WHEN SETTING UP A WORKPLACE EDUCATION PROGRAM:

DO forge strong partnerships with other key workplace players at the beginning of the process of setting up a program. In a unionized workplace, both management and labour **will need** to have a strong investment and ownership in the successful implementation of such a program.

DO conduct a thorough organizational review by soliciting the views of a sampling of all levels of the work force to determine a real need for basic skills training and to gather support for future programs.

DO assure participants confidentiality at all times both in the needs assessment and the program.

DO budget for a replacement while an employee is attending a program.

DO plan a comprehensive evaluation strategy before programs start to ensure your initiative is on track and to identify outcomes.

WHAT TO AVOID WHEN SETTING UP A WORKPLACE EDUCATION PROGRAM:

DON'T single employees out in terms of their need to upgrade basic skills.

DON'T use language like "literacy" or "basic skills" in your oral or written descriptions of programs. Similarly, avoid terminology which is pejorative and suggests deficiency such as "illiterate". Terms such as "Communication Skills Upgrading", or "Skills Enhancement", etc. will be more suitable.

DON'T promise promotions or job security on the basis of individual results from a program.

DON'T judge the success of programs on productivity gains and accident decreases; these depend on many other variables than just upgrading the literacy skills of the work force.

DON'T assume that programs alone will meet all your basic skills needs.

What are the Benefits of a Workplace Literacy and Basic Skills Program?

For the Employer:

- a work force which is able to meet the challenges of new skills requirements;
- a more adaptable work force in terms of cross-transfers and promotions;
- a safer work force;
- less supervisory time spent correcting mistakes;
- better communications among all levels of the work force.

For the Union:

- greater empowerment of workers to have a voice in workplace issues;
- greater ability of workers to achieve personal goals within their community;
- workers who can take a more active role within their locals and the labour movement;
- better understanding of the collective agreement on the part of union members;
- a larger pool of workers available for union-sponsored training programs.

For Employees:

- enhanced self-esteem
- greater chance for promotion and cross-transfers;
- enhanced opportunity to achieve goals in their personal lives and community;
- increased participation in all workplace activities;
- access to training they otherwise might not have had.

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These statistics and others on this page are taken from: **Survey of Literacy Skills Used in Daily Activities**, Statistics Canada, 1989.