

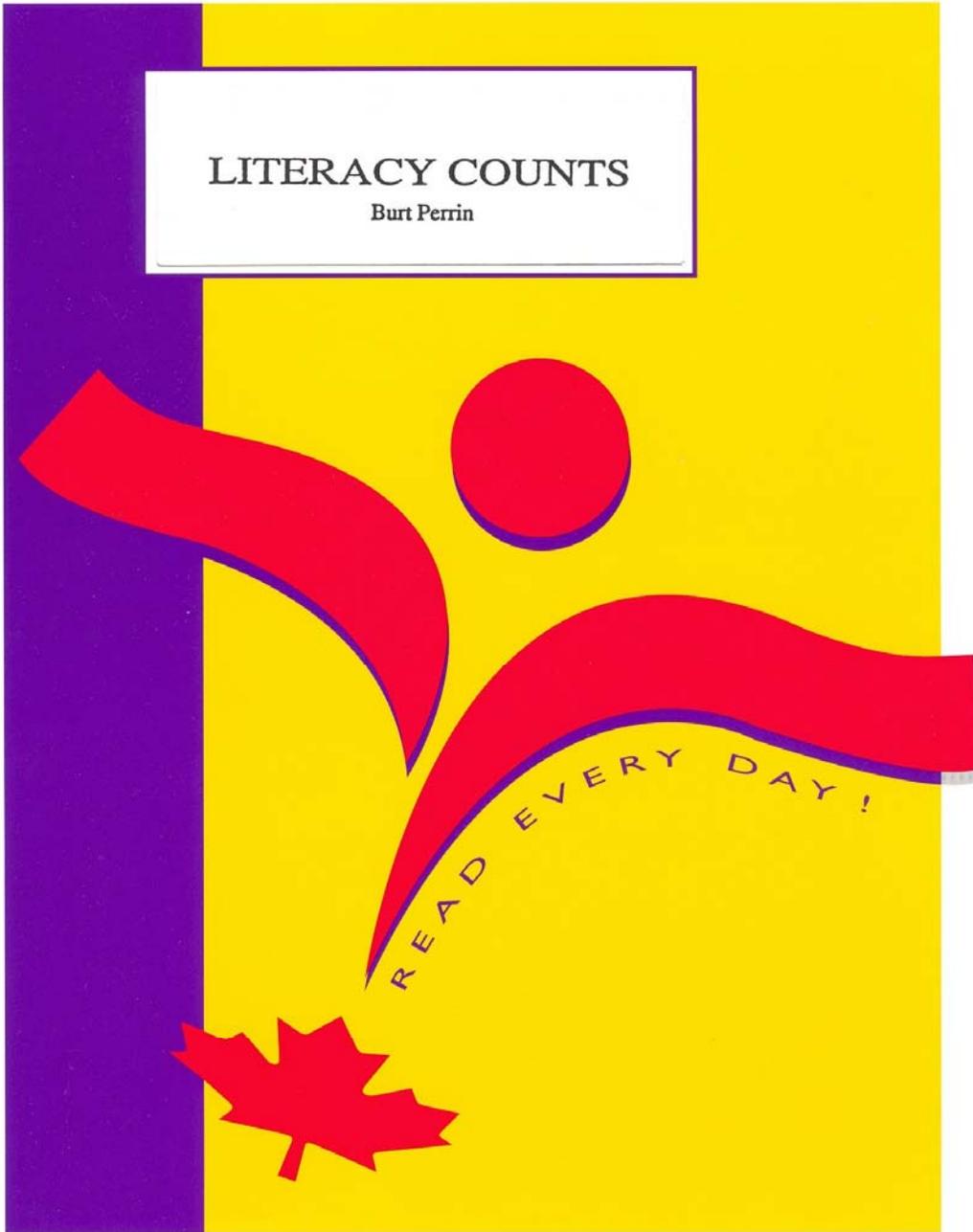


Human Resources
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LITERACY COUNTS

Burt Perrin



*National
Literacy
Secretariat*



*Le Secrétariat
national à
l'alphabétisation*

Canada

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Burt Perrin, of Toronto, undertakes consultation in the areas of management, planning, social research and evaluation.

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THE COSTS OF ILLITERACY

Can a developed country like Canada really have a problem with illiteracy? Does this really make a difference to Canada as a whole?

The simple answer is "yes." The costs of illiteracy, in economic and human terms, are striking - and business, government and society are paying for it.

How much is this costing us? It is hard to place an exact number on the cost, because so many factors are involved. But a study for the Canadian Business Task Force on Literacy in 1988 estimated the costs of illiteracy approximately as follows:

- Over \$10 billion a year - to Canadian society as a whole.
- \$4 billion - direct costs to business each year.

In addition, other costs are incalculable, such as the human and social costs of illiteracy and what this means for Canada's future international competitiveness.

Costs to Canadian Society

The costs of illiteracy to Canadian society as a whole, estimated at exceeding \$10 billion a year, were identified by the Business Task Force as including:

- Lost earnings of persons with limited literacy skills - which in turn represent economic costs in terms of reduced purchasing power, fewer taxes paid to all levels of government, and increased demands on government-funded assistance programs;
- Costs of unemployment, as well as of literacy-related training expenditures of employers;
- Costs arising from the disproportionate number of persons in federal prisons who are lacking in literacy skills.

There are still further costs for Canadian society which, while hard to put into exact numbers, include:

- Higher consumer prices resulting from lost productivity and mistakes of workers with insufficient literacy skills;
- Tuition fees of persons, who, due to insufficient basic literacy skills, are unable to complete government-funded training programs;
- Costs to municipal and provincial governments, for example, for increased expenditures on social assistance for persons who, due to limited literacy skills, are unable to find employment;
- Expenditures on adult education and literacy training programs by all levels of government.

Human Costs

The financial costs of illiteracy are huge. Yet the biggest costs, which are beyond estimate, are those borne by people with limited literacy abilities.

Stress and Self-Esteem

For someone who cannot read, to attempt to function in a world where the ability to read is taken for granted is extremely trying and stressful. For example, here are comments of some people about what it is like being unable to read and write:

- *You want to experience what illiteracy is like? Go into a restaurant and ask a waitress to read the menu to you. ... That will give you some ideas. But you can never feel the frustration, the anxiety.*
- *I was ashamed I couldn't read and I couldn't spell.*
- *All the people I've let down. It's just one lie after another.*
- *If any promotions come up in the factory, you just give your notice and the boss wonders why you left.*
- *I drove my truck for the company all through my memory.*
- *Both my children know I don't read or write. They know I'm a dummy.*

Health

Virtually all aspects of health are worse for people with limited literacy skills.

For example, a study carried out in 1989 for the Ontario Public Health Association and Frontier College found that people with limited literacy skills are sick more often, have a reduced lifespan, and have more accidents - not only at the workplace but also at home and in the community. Literacy, directly or indirectly, has a greater impact on health than almost any other factor.

Much of the information about health and safety is available only in written form, frequently in materials which are complex and hard to understand. For example, as one person said:

- *I'd like to be able to read some of the books about asthma. My youngest has asthma. ... My husband got these books from the doctor but the words are too hard for me. I keep them on the shelf.*

For this and other reasons, persons with limited skills in literacy are also less likely to be aware of the importance of healthy lifestyle practices. For example, they are more likely to smoke. They may also have difficulty following directions for proper use of medications, as well as in taking proper safety precautions at work and at home.

Income and Poverty

There is a direct relationship between an individual's literacy ability and income. For example, the Southam News Literacy in Canada survey found that persons with limited literacy ability had, on average, just two-thirds the annual income of other adult Canadians.

While of course other factors are also involved, there is a strong link between limited literacy skills and poverty. People with limited literacy skills, if they are employed at all, are most likely to be working in low paying, low skilled jobs. Most people receiving social assistance support have limited literacy skills. And given that most jobs require greater literacy skills than ever before, it is more and more difficult for people with a limited ability to read and write to find work for which they qualify, or even to qualify for entry to many training programs.

Social and Community Life

Adults cannot participate fully in mainstream Canadian social and cultural life if they cannot read and write.

For example, literacy skills are helpful in learning about community recreational and cultural opportunities. The ability to read and write is necessary in order for adults to understand communications from their children's schools, from businesses and governments, and to use basic resources properly, such as the Yellow Pages, information about how to use consumer products, and so on.

Skills in reading and writing can enable people to acquire needed information to make informed choices about all aspects of their lives. People who cannot read and write well enough to read and understand notices or to fill out important forms and to write letters may feel cut off from society and from other people. For example:

- *No one knows the anger that people who can't read go through. You can't pick up a paper and learn the latest news. You can't carry on a conversation because you don't know what's going on in the world. You're left in the dark. You just try to carry on the best you can. We're living in a different world than other people who can read.*

Literacy and education also appear to be important to central concepts of equality and diversity. For example, one study has found that people with very limited literacy skills tend to have the highest levels of prejudice and to be the least tolerant of such widely accepted Canadian concepts as bilingualism and multiculturalism.

Thus literacy skills and abilities are important for leisure and citizenship as well as for work. As the National Advisory Board on Science and Technology has indicated: "The full development of Canadian economic and social strengths depends on the well-being and full participation of each and every Canadian in our social and economic life." Accordingly, illiteracy, because it reduces an individual's capacity for participation, is a serious threat to the health of Canadian society as we near the twenty-first century.

Costs to Canadian Business

The Canadian Business Task Force estimated that the direct costs to business each year, as a result of insufficient reading, writing and numbers skills of employees, approximate \$4 billion. These include expenses associated with lost productivity, literacy-related accident and safety costs, and the costs of basic remedial training provided by employers.

In addition, it is impossible to calculate the exact costs of other literacy-related factors which nevertheless affect business. These factors identified by the Business Task Force include: excessive supervisory time, poor product quality, difficulty in being able to train and promote workers, and problems associated with poor employee morale and self-esteem. For example:

- One bank had to interview 40 applicants to find one who can be successfully trained as a teller.
- As many as one out of four factory workers spend their entire working day fixing the mistakes of other workers.
- Pictorial instruction material in one worksite demonstrating "how not to" carry out a task was interpreted as a "how to" instruction and the result was an increase in accidents.

The impact of low literacy skills on business is reinforced by a recent study of the Conference Board of Canada, which contacted a wide range of medium and large businesses across Canada and found that:

- 70 per cent of the firms surveyed reported facing varying problems with limited literacy skills among their employees;
- About one-third of the employers contacted reported that limitations in employees' literacy skills have resulted in problems in product quality, productivity, and errors in completing work;
- About 40 per cent of the employers indicated that their employees with limited literacy skills face difficulties in taking on new assignments and in accepting promotions or transfers to new positions;
- Over one-quarter of businesses contacted indicated that lack of literacy skills among their employees limits their ability to introduce new technology, to train their employees, and to acquire new or advanced skills.

Canada's Reduced International Competitiveness

Technological advances, global competition and other factors are changing Canada's labour market more than ever before. And it is clear that the rapid rate of technological change requires increasingly higher reading, writing and numerical skills for virtually all types and levels of jobs. This is just as true of work on the factory floor as in offices. For example, one study has found that blue-collar workers are now reading an average of 97 minutes daily on the job.

Literacy skills which were adequate a decade ago are no longer sufficient to meet the challenges required by the jobs of today - and literacy skills which may do for now will be inadequate for tomorrow. There are fewer and fewer jobs available for persons without literacy skills. Many current jobs are being replaced by new jobs - but these new jobs increasingly require higher levels of ability to read, write and use numbers.

There is a greater need now for persons with basic skills and with the flexibility to be trained to perform the changing requirements of both existing and newly created jobs. Individuals with limited literacy skills will have fewer opportunities for promotion and will have increasing difficulty in maintaining their current employment as most jobs will require higher and higher skill levels. As the Economic Council of Canada has recently indicated: "The ability to learn will be the premium skill of the future."

Lack of literacy skills and difficulty in meeting the demands of the new technology for increased skill levels is not only limiting future prospects of individuals, but is also limiting the future prosperity of the Canadian economy as a whole. Indeed, the Economic Council of Canada stated recently that: "In order to increase productivity, competitiveness, incomes and employment, all Canadians must openly embrace the new technologies. There is no alternative: failure to do so would entail a loss of prosperity and jobs. ... A well trained, flexible and committed workforce is important."

But as we have seen, for example, from the results of the Conference Board study reported above, it would appear that a third of Canada's larger businesses consider that insufficient literacy skills among their employees limit their ability to be trained for new jobs. This is limiting the ability of Canadian business to adapt to technological changes and innovation and to compete with other countries.

Thus Canada's future economic competitiveness in an increasingly global economy will depend upon a highly skilled, flexible and adaptive workforce. Sufficient literacy skills are essential to keep us from slipping behind in international competitiveness and productivity - and to maintain our current standard of living.

HOW LITERATE ARE CANADIANS?

It is hard for many people to believe that in a country like Canada, the reading and writing skills of millions of adults - mainly ordinary Canadians who were born in Canada - are so limited as to restrict their own potential, that of their families, and that of Canada as a whole. For example, a survey by Westmount Research Consultants in 1987 for the Canadian Business Task Force on Literacy found that only about one-third of Canadians had any idea of how many adults in Canada have major difficulties in reading and writing.

How many Canadian adults are limited in their ability to read, write and use numbers? Who are they? Before addressing these questions, it would be helpful first to take a brief look at what we mean by literacy.

"Basic illiteracy" is a total inability to read or write. Only a small proportion of Canadian adults fit into this category. A more useful definition, however, is "functional literacy" - the ability to use the printed materials which people come across at work, at home and in the community.

Different ways have been used to determine the literacy skills of Canadian adults. Let's look at three of these methods.

Schooling

Completion of grade nine is commonly accepted as a minimum indicator of functional literacy. Nearly three and one half million persons 15 years and older - 18 per cent of Canadian adults - have less than nine years of schooling.

Most newly created jobs, however, now require at least high school graduation. Nearly one out of three Canadian students - our youth of today - currently are leaving high school before grade 12. This has been described by the Canadian Labour Market and Productivity Centre as "one of the highest dropout rates in the industrialized world."

The Southam Literacy Survey

Years of schooling reflect, at best, an approximation of a person's actual ability to use written and printed materials. What do we know about the actual literacy skills of Canadians?

The Southam News Literacy in Canada survey is one of the first direct measures of literacy skills. It assessed how well people read, write and handle numbers using examples from daily life.

A "jury" of 25 Canadians - drawn from across the country and from all walks of life - selected a number of items from the survey which they felt were essential to describe someone as functionally literate, as able to address the literacy demands one encounters in everyday life. For example, these key items included the ability to:

- Read and understand the right dosage from an ordinary bottle of cough syrup
(ten per cent of adult Canadians can't);
- From six road signs, pick out which one warns of a traffic light ahead
(13 percent can't);
- Figure out the change from three dollars if you ordered a soup and sandwich
(33 per cent can't);
- Sign your name in the correct spot on a social insurance card
(11 per cent can't);
- Circle the long distance charges on a telephone bill
(29 per cent can't).

Persons who could answer at least eight of the ten key items, all of which were considered by the jury as fundamental to daily life, were considered functionally literate.

Southam found that 24 per cent - nearly one in four or 4.5 million adult Canadians are not functionally literate.

Statistics Canada Survey of Literacy Skills Used in Daily Activities

Statistics Canada has recently completed a national adult literacy survey, which included directly assessing the ability of Canadians to carry out a variety of reading tasks, in English or in French, encountered in everyday life. This survey used real-life examples - such as a copy of an actual medicine label, a form letter sent from a school to parents, a supermarket ad, a classified ad from a newspaper, the yellow pages, an order form from a catalogue, and the like. In order to determine different degrees of literacy along a continuum, examples were at varying levels of difficulty.

The survey found that the reading skills of 16 per cent (2.9 million) of Canadian adults are too limited to allow them to deal with the majority of written material encountered in everyday life. For example, most people at this level:

- Could not determine the correct aspirin dose for a seven-year-old from a copy of an actual medicine label;
- Could not correctly complete a bank deposit slip;
- Had difficulty using a schedule for a public swimming pool, for example in determining the hours for family swim;
- Could not tell which meat cost the least per kilogram by reading three grocery labels.

In addition, a further 22 per cent (4.0 million) of Canadian adults can only use reading materials to carry out simple reading tasks within familiar contexts with materials that are clearly laid out. People at this level, because they can succeed at some reading tasks, are unlikely to identify themselves as having a reading problem. For example, most can pick out grocery items on sale from a supermarket ad.

However, people at this level tend to avoid most situations that might require reading, and cannot cope with more complex reading texts. For example, most:

- Could not transfer information from a catalogue page to an order form;
- Had difficulty finding all the apartments in a group of classified ads that met certain requirements;
- Could not tell from a school board brochure how to find out what hours schools are open;
- Had difficulty using maps and charts.

What does this mean? In total, 38 per cent or 6.9 million Canadian adults avoid situations requiring reading and cannot use many reading materials encountered in everyday life. Well over one in three Canadians are unable to deal consistently with everyday reading requirements.

Who Have Low Literacy Skills?

Adults with limited literacy skills are ordinary Canadians. They are both men and women of all ages who come from all walks of life, from all parts of the country and from diverse backgrounds. They are mainly persons who were born in Canada.

To be sure, there are variations. For example, reading skills are generally highest in the West and lowest in Atlantic Canada. There tend to be lower rates of literacy skills among special populations such as older adults, native people, and persons born outside Canada.

But for the most part it is mainly people who think of themselves as ordinary Canadians, young as well as old, who were born in Canada, who have limited literacy skills. For example, even if we do not take into account any immigrants, nearly five million or one-third of all Canadian adults are still unable to meet everyday reading demands.

How Do We Stack Up?

How does literacy in Canada compare to the literacy levels of our major trading partners - countries with which Canada must be economically competitive?

The rate of illiteracy in Japan has been estimated at less than one per cent. Adult illiteracy in West Germany is four per cent. Given the importance of literacy skills in today's world, it is probably no coincidence that these countries are ahead of Canada in competitiveness and are among the world's most economically successful. Other northern European countries are also somewhat ahead of Canada in standards of basic adult educational achievement.

Differences between literacy rates in Canada and the United States, our closest neighbour, are not quite so extreme. Nevertheless there is a disturbing trend. In a literacy test of youth, aged 21 to 25, carried out in both Canada and the United States, young Americans performed better than Canadians on more than two-thirds of the questions. In particular, the Americans clearly outperformed the Canadians both in general reading proficiency and in using everyday documents such as bus schedules and the Yellow Pages. As Dr. Paul Nesbitt, the research director of the Southam literacy survey, has indicated: "This contradicts any illusions we may have of Canadian educational superiority. The supposedly brightest age group of Canadians is significantly below Americans in reading proficiency. I have no reason to believe that is not true for the entire population."

As our world continues to grow more complex, there is a need for increasing levels of literacy. There is a greater and greater need for more advanced skills among all Canadians in reading, writing and using numbers. For example, it is estimated that two-thirds of all jobs which will be created during the 1990s will require a minimum of grade 12 education.

Canada needs higher levels of literacy just to maintain its current economic standing, let alone to avoid slipping further behind.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

What Can You Do?

There are many steps which one can take, as an individual, to promote literacy. Here are but a few examples:

- Read to children. Early childhood experience at home with books and with reading is more important than almost any other factor to a child's future success in reading and in school. Read to and with your children (or with someone else's child), take them to the library, give them books as gifts. Make use of every opportunity to pass along tips about written language to children - for instance pointing out their names on signs.
- Encourage teens to stay in school. Give your children encouragement, as well as whatever assistance they may require, to remain in school. If they are having trouble at school, try to find out why. Do not permit your children to spend so much time working at outside jobs that it interferes with their schoolwork.
- Be aware of the importance of reading and writing in your own life. Read yourself as much as possible. Take time to think about how important reading and writing are to your daily life.
- Encourage high quality education. Many Canadians have been asking questions about the quality of basic education in our schools. Get involved yourself. For example, ask questions of your local school board. Support initiatives which will lead students to acquire the level of skills they will need in order to survive in tomorrow's world.
- Help other adults learn to read. Encourage others to improve their literacy skills. Community literacy groups, community colleges and schools frequently provide adult literacy training. Try to find out what is available in your community and direct interested persons to these programs.
- Help community literacy programs. Volunteering as a tutor is one way, but there are also other ways to help.

- Workplace literacy. Employers can find out about how to introduce workplace literacy training. Union members can encourage their union to make available literacy training and to place more emphasis on adult education in contract bargaining.
- Plain language. If you or your organization produces written materials of any type, use plain language to express your points. Many people who have difficulty reading complex texts can understand material which is written simply and is well organized.

Increasing Attention and Awareness

As this booklet indicates, there is a need in Canada for increased attention to literacy. While much more needs to be done, considerable activity is already under way.

For example, numerous voluntary organizations, at the community, provincial and national levels, are active in literacy. Many community-based groups provide literacy training for interested adults, using a variety of approaches. These include one-on-one tutoring using peer volunteers, small groups, as well as more formal educational approaches. Many community programs, rather than taking a traditional approach to learning, will help the learner work towards his or her own goals, for example to help a child with schoolwork or to write a letter to a friend.

Business and labour are also increasingly aware of the importance of literacy - to the worker as well as to the employer. Many businesses and labour unions have developed workplace literacy programs so workers can learn directly at the job site.

In addition, all provincial and territorial governments have literacy initiatives under way. As part of its commitment to literacy, the federal government, through the National Literacy Program, supports various projects and activities developed in partnership with provincial and territorial governments, volunteer organizations, business and labour.

CONCLUSION

Literacy is important - to individuals, in order for them to cope with the demands of everyday life in the workplace, home and community - as well as for the country as a whole.

Indeed our future economic prosperity and standard of living are dependent upon our ability as a country to improve our levels of literacy. As our society gets more complex, even higher standards of literacy are essential for individuals and for Canada in order to remain competitive in the global marketplace.

Sixteen per cent of Canadian adults can only read well enough to find a familiar word in a simple text. In total, 38 per cent are not able to deal consistently with everyday reading demands. And nearly one out of three of our youth fail to complete high school.

Many people are now aware of the importance of literacy, and many initiatives are under way. But much more remains to be done if we are going to become a more literate society. And there is much that individuals can do to help work towards this goal.