

# Communications, Energy & Paperworkers Union of Canada “Opportunities For Tomorrow” National Learning Needs Assessment Summary Report

## Background

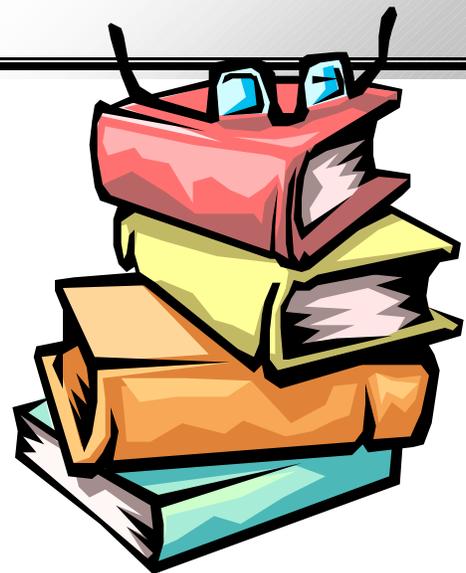
### Why CEPU decided to conduct a learning needs assessment

In 1999 the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union established the National Literacy Project to increase awareness among union members and local union officers about literacy, and to examine the literacy demands and literacy learning needs experienced by CEP members today.

Literacy skills are essential skills in today’s changing society. The introduction of sophisticated technology and the rapid pace of change both on the job and at home have meant that people today must read more, must write complex documents, must do more complex math, and must communicate with more people more often. The introduction of computers in the workplace and the home has put pressure on people to learn the basics, at least. In our fast paced world CEP members must have sound essential skills to work safely, participate in the union fully and live confidently.

### A Union Literacy Definition

“Literacy skills include; reading, writing, oral communications, numeracy and computer skills; the ability to understand, retain and utilize written and oral information; critical thinking, problem solving, conflict resolution, social and economic analysis; proficiency in the language(s) of ones community.



## The CEP Learning Needs Assessment: A Union Approach

There are many ways to conduct a learning needs assessment. This project took a two pronged approach to ensure that the assessment was both guided by union members at the regional level and yet geographically broad enough to accommodate the many members who wanted to contribute to the activity.

### Members talk to members

The first approach involved the efforts, skills and expertise of eight National Representatives from across Canada who gathered in Calgary to help plan the needs assessment.

After helping to plan the needs assessment, the National Representatives conducted Focus Group Discussions with local union officers, members and employers in their respective regions.

The representatives asked questions of members to determine their perception of literacy learning needs in the face of changes in the workplace and society. They asked questions of local union officers to understand how they saw the role that unions could play in supporting members' literacy learning. They asked questions of employers about change and the impact of that change on workers' use of skills and need to improve skills.

### Different Changes – Different Challenges

Union members and employers agreed on the key changes that affected essential skill use.

#### What workers said about the impact of change on skills:

*We need more in-depth training on the computers we now use.*

*We only now get a quick ½ hour.*

*Secondary education doesn't seem enough in the workplace.*

#### What local union officers said about the role unions could play in supporting members learning in the face of change:

*Unions should be involved in the issue because of employers' hiring practices.*

#### What employers said about the impact of change on workers' skill use:

*New processes and new products and new technology mean that employees need to take on new learning, read new manuals, write new procedures and have the skills to do all this well.*

*It used to be the manager who examined the work processes; now employees are being asked to analyze the information.*

### Technology

During the needs assessment process the related issues of technological change and computerization were identified and ranked by both workers and employers as the most significant of all change drivers.

Sometimes the change in technology involves an equipment upgrade or enhancement; other times it involves the arrival of a brand new piece of technology, the latter case being particularly so in the telecommunication industries.

In both cases the cumulative effect on workers' use of skills has been to require them to read more, write more, use math in new ways, communicate with others

more effectively and more often than ever before, and to acquire computer skills, often without formal training.

**What workers said about technology and skill use:**

*There are more reports to read and they are so much more technical than before.*

*Ninety percent of the employees are affected by the change in the billing system – some employees learn faster, others slower.*

*Every machine has three or so books and a lot of fellows who were trained on the old machines can't be retrained on the new ones because they can't read well enough.*

*Everything is on line, versus on paper.*

**What employers said about technology and change:**

*We are very aware of the issue and understand the difficulty in job changes. The employee is being displaced by automation – so we need employees with different skills, and the company understands the difficulty and stress this causes for employees who have to change jobs. Worker mobility means more training for different skills.*

*A strong back is no longer the essential.*

Discussions about technology lead to discussions of other issues associated with the technology changes. For example, CEPU members in all industries commented that because of increased skill requirements imposed by the introduction of new technology and the improvement of existing technology, **job security** became an issue for many, and employers agreed.

**What workers said about the impact of technology on job security:**

*Many employees with 20 years or more seniority don't have the education or the skills to advance.*

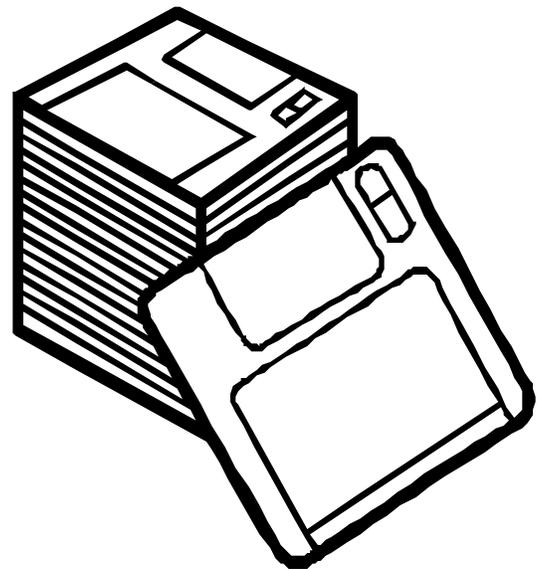
*With the changing job market you need to be educated on the new technologies.*

*Modernization is what is causing all the job cuts.*

**What employers said about the impact of technology on job security:**

*The increased growth [of technology] has meant career changes for many people who have moved into different areas of the site, where there are different skill requirements.*

*We have higher company standards for recruitment and job performance. The average employee here is not equipped to deal with the increased use of computers, unless he has learned at home or is young and newly hired.*



## Global market competition and customer demand for quality

The effect of globalization on our economy has been to raise the bar on market competition, which means that Canadian workers and workplaces must be responsive to change in order to keep pace with the increased competition.

Increased competition has in turn increased customers' demands for quality, service and product, there being a greater array of companies' services and products from which to choose. CEPU members have felt the effects of global competition and increased customer demand on their skills and jobs.

### What members said about global competition and increased customer demand:

*We know all about globalization. We are a bankrupt company because of it.*

*With the merger, we are just a number and at risk.*

### What employers said about global competition and increased customer demand:

*Customers are presenting more of a challenge – they are much better educated about the product and put pressure on us to remain competitive*

*We want it [the product] faster, higher quality and right the first time. Any wrong input is related directly to the customer. Errors are transparent and there is competition out there*

## Aging workforce

The aging of Canada's workforce was another labour market factor noted by both employers and union members alike during the focus group discussions.

The consensus was that as skill demands increase, the job security of older workers may be threatened if they do not have flexible and sound essential skills to cope with the changes.

### What members said about our aging workforce:

*Older hands have a tougher time with the computers.*

*Some of the older workers bring forms to their buddy to fill out for them.*

### What employers said about our aging workforce:

*The average employee is not equipped to deal with the increased use of computers, unless he is young and newly hired.*



## Safety and other regulatory changes

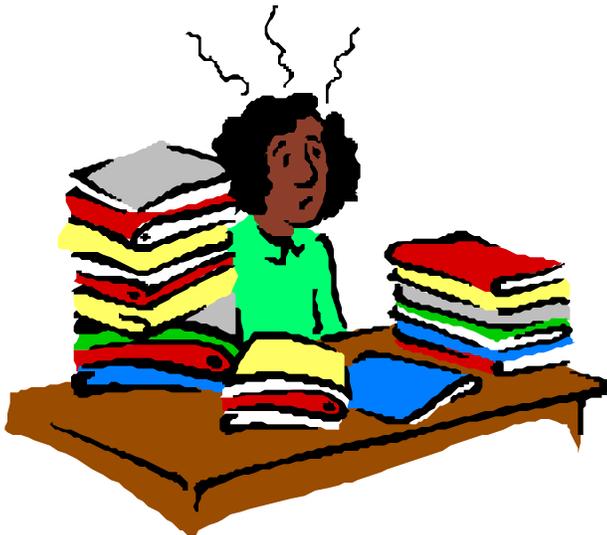
The increase in the number and complexity of safety regulations and other regulations, such as environmental regulations, was noted by both union members and employers as having an impact on workers' use of essential skills.

So important are these regulations that 100% of the employers indicated that they provide regulatory training, usually health and safety training, and 62% of local union officers indicated that their local offered this training to members.

Sometimes the training takes place on the shop floor. One employer noted. “At the beginning of every shift employees at a workcentre prepare a lesson and orally present it to fellow workers, for example perhaps to improve lockout skills or maintenance skills. These are our one-minute lessons.”

The consensus during discussions was that as the number of regulations increase and the complexity of regulatory material increases, workers need to have good reading and communication skills to work safely. As one discussion participant commented: “I have to read something over and over again to understand it and by the time I get to the second part I forget what the first part said.” Another participant confirmed the frustration that some workers feel when asked to read, comprehend and remember written information:

“Reading technical language is a challenge -- and there is more of it and it is more sophisticated than ever.”



## Reorganization of work

The reorganization of work was yet another change that discussion participants noted throughout the needs assessment. The central point made about the reorganization of work was that it requires workers to take on more responsibility, which in turn requires that these workers have sound and flexible essential skills to cope with the new and broader responsibilities.

More than simply requiring multi-tasking, the reorganization of work involved increased decision making, accountability and reporting on the part of the worker. Most of the workers who discussed the effect of reorganization of work expressed concern rather than satisfaction with this trend.

## A second approach to getting ideas about learning needs

While the focus group discussions and interviews produced rich narrative information, this approach to gathering information limits the collection of information because of the travel, time and logistical constraints of gathering people together to talk. Consequently, a supplemental questionnaire was developed for mail out to all of the local unions across the country to solicit more information from union members, local union officers and employers. The remainder of this document reports findings from both focus group discussions and questionnaire returns.

## Needs Assessment Participation

### Participation rate

|                      |     |
|----------------------|-----|
| Union members        | 293 |
| Local union officers | 138 |
| Employers            | 54  |

**Union locals which participated (87)**

|      |       |       |      |      |
|------|-------|-------|------|------|
| 1-S  | 63-0  | 176   | 603  | 1120 |
| 4N   | 74    | 181   | 630  | 1123 |
| 6    | 76    | 210   | 649  | 1132 |
| 7    | 77    | 251   | 650  | 1207 |
| 8-1  | 77-Q  | 305   | 677  | 1403 |
| 20   | 79-M  | 341   | 681  | 1492 |
| 26   | 80-0  | 401   | 697  | 1532 |
| 28   | 84    | 404   | 707  | 1990 |
| 29   | 85    | 410   | 728  | 1997 |
| 30   | 85-M  | 434   | 773  | 2000 |
| 31X  | 98    | 437   | 777  | 2001 |
| 37   | 112-N | 446   | 823  |      |
| 39   | 123   | 514   | 826M |      |
| 40   | 132   | 515   | 830  |      |
| 43   | 132-Q | 523-N | 907  |      |
| 52-A | 141   | 550   | 914  |      |
| 53-0 | 153   | 561   | 1093 |      |
| 55   | 155   | 576   | 1118 |      |
| 60-N | 159   | 592   | 1119 |      |

**Some occupations represented in the needs assessment discussions:**

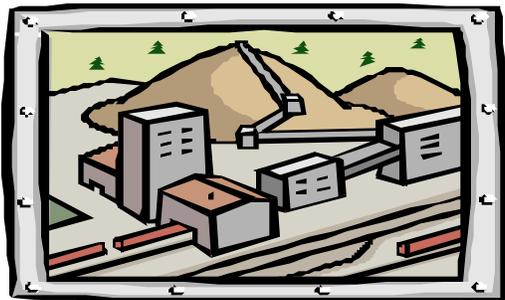
- Front Desk
- Clerk/Millwright
- Waitress
- Equipment Operator
- Logger
- Tally Packer
- Welder
- Stock Runner
- Security Guard
- Press Operator
- Truck Driver
- Quality Controller
- Service technician

- Warehouse
- Sales Associate
- Millworker
- Machinist
- Housekeeping Staff
- Electrician
- Operator Assistant
- Printer Operator
- Janitor

**Employer participation in the needs assessment**

- Abitibi Consolidated
- Aimtronics Corporation
- ABT Canada
- Basell Canada Inc.
- Bowater Mercy
- Bowater Pulp & Paper
- Canadian Broadcasting Corporation
- Canadian Salt
- Centre de conversion et distribution Rolland
- CKF
- Corporation Flexia
- CTV Television
- Domtar
- Entourage Solutions Technologies
- Fraser Papers Inc.
- GATX
- General Electric Canada
- Husky Energy
- IKO Industries
- International Wallcoverings Company
- Island Tel
- J.D. Irving Ltd.
- Nadeau Shermag
- Newtel Communications

- Nexen Chemicals
- Northern Telephone
- Owens-Corning
- Pacifica Papers
- Radisson Hotel Saskatoon
- Sask Energy
- Sasktel
- Shermag Inc.
- Sifto Canada
- South Shore Community Service Association
- Suncor Energy
- Unibeton



## Union Members Talk About Learning Needs

### Ranking of Preference

Members ranked their essential skill learning needs in terms of preference, number one indicating highest priority, number 5 indicating lower priority:

| Priority Learning Need | % of members |
|------------------------|--------------|
| Oral Communication     | 43%          |
| Computer Skills        | 35%          |
| Reading Comprehension  | 19%          |
| Writing                | 2%           |
| Math                   | 1%           |

## Oral Communication as a learning preference

Oral Communication emerged as the number one learning preference for 43% of members surveyed. Members talked about oral communications situations that they find challenging and which create a need to improve skills.

### Oral Communication Challenges Cited

|      |   |
|------|---|
| 31 % | Conflict with co-workers                    |
| 30   | Any public speaking                         |
| 27   | Speaking up at shop or union meetings       |
| 22   | Talking to management about issues          |
| 21   | Dealing with difficult customers            |
| 14   | Giving instructions for how to do something |

Employers too attached great value to oral communication skills. Questionnaire results show that 77% indicated that there will be an increased need for good oral communication skills and interpersonal skills. But despite the weight and value that employers attach to the development of this skill, only 27% of employers surveyed indicated that they currently offered oral communication skill training.

Of the union locals surveyed, 16% indicated that they offer public speaking or communications as a course available to members. There is clearly a gap between employees' communication skill learning needs and the training being offered by either the employer or the union local to address those needs.

**What members said about oral communication challenges:**

*Union meetings are difficult situations – making motions, asking questions.*

*I find union-management meetings difficult.*

*At staff meetings it is always the same people who talk and the same people who don't talk because of a lack of confidence – nervousness.*

*Employees may ask another to carry a message for them, for fear of speaking.*

*Talking to irate customers face-to-face or on the phone is a challenge.*

*Higher educated management people are trained to intimidate. When you speak up you are quickly shot down.*

*It is hard to get the point across when trying to instruct or train*

**What members said about computer use challenges:**

*Most employers limit their computer training to job tasks – so workers are unsure of how to deal with anything out of the ordinary.*

*We are only trained to use the computer to the extent it is used on the job, but I would like to be able to use the computer at home and practice with the kids and grandkids.*

*There is no time (nor computers) throughout the day to use what we already know, and what we have learned on our own time.*

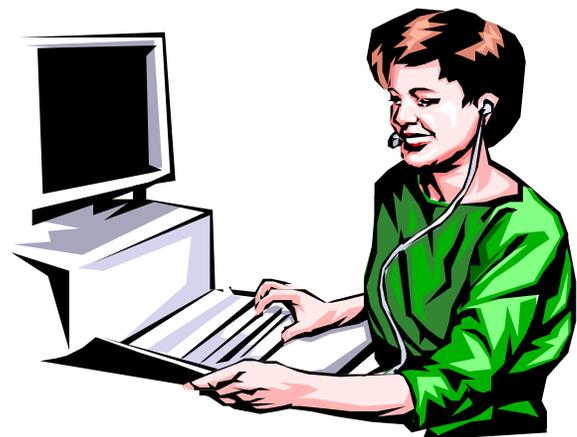
Employers acknowledged the pervasive use of computers. As many as 90% of those surveyed cited it as a trend that would continue into the future. Employers are also relatively responsive to this trend; 63% provide basic computer training and 43% provide software training.

**Computer skills as a learning preference**

When asked to identify a number one learning preference, 35% of the union members surveyed selected computer skill development. They also identified and described the challenges they currently face around computer use.

**Computer Skill Challenges Cited**

- 53 % Having time to practice/extend skills
- 40 Using software for word processing or spreadsheets.
- 36 Knowing how it functions inside when I press buttons on equipment at work
- 24 Using email



**Reading comprehension as a learning preference**

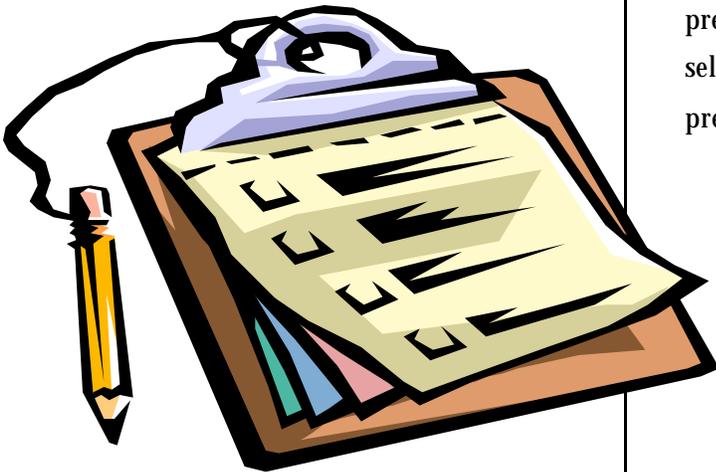
When asked to identify a number one learning preference, 19% of the union members surveyed selected reading comprehension skill development.

They also identified specific materials that they found difficult to comprehend or to read and remember.

### Reading Materials and Situations Cited

|     |   |
|-----|---|
| 43% | Collective Agreement                            |
| 33  | Procedures in manuals                           |
| 33  | Union bylaws                                    |
| 31  | Reading to learn and remember                   |
| 31  | Regulations                                     |
| 30  | Memos and reports sent by management, engineers |
| 30  | Technical reading material                      |
| 30  | Legal material                                  |
| 29  | Materials, supplies & equipment information     |
| 29  | Safety instructions and regulations             |

The discussion groups and questionnaire responses tended to reveal that reading is not a “black and white” issue, that it is not a matter of “can read/can’t read”. Rather, focus group discussion participants’ and questionnaire respondents’ comments indicate that reading well means having flexible reading skills that allow a reader to comprehend a range of materials in any number of contexts.



### What members said about challenging reading materials and situations:

*I can't fix the new equipment. I must read the manual. But it takes me so long to read the manual, and I get frustrated because they want it back in the Operations Dept., but I can't fix the equipment until I read the manual.*

*There is no one to explain the meaning when I read something difficult.*

*Most of the material that I get I read, but find either boring or not easily understandable or confusing – especially procedures in manuals.*

*There is too much information and I don't have time to read it.*

*The information is so thick and we have to sit at our desks to read it, and yet still answer phones.*

*The requirement is to read all the information that comes in our daily life, and we need to read it quickly and digest it and understand it.*

### Writing skills as a learning preference

When asked to identify a number one learning preference, only 2% of the union members surveyed selected improvement of writing skills as a learning preference.

The information collected during the needs assessment suggests that the low interest in improving writing skills may be related to an infrequent need to use writing on the job, and any difficulty they encounter is a result of disuse and lack of practice.

**What members said about writing on the job:**

*The job doesn't require me to write letters so I am out of practice  
I haven't used writing skills in a long time, so everything to do with writing is a challenge.*

When people did identify issues around writing they tended to suggest that composing and mechanics were the key issues and that writing specific formats, like notes or instructions, were not as challenging:

**Writing Skill Challenges Cited**

- 37% Getting ideas down on paper from my head
- 30% Using good grammar and punctuation
- 29% Reports
- 27% Procedures
- 23% Notes at meetings
- 21% Instructions and manuals
- 14% Proposals to Shop Steward/Bargaining Committee and Customers
- 13% Notes explaining things to co-workers

However, during the needs assessment one of the changes noted by union members was an increasing need to write, and so while current use of these skills may not be great the need to use may soon escalate:

**Impact of change on skill use:**

- 70% Increased need to read – procedures, documentation, union information, job information.
- 67% Increased need to use these skills for email, documentation, forms.

- 66% Increased need to use these skills for operating computerized equipment.
- 55% Need to learn job skills because of doing more tasks on the job.
- 50% Increased need to write reports and documentation.**
- 48% Increased need to make more decisions.
- 43% Increased need to communicate verbally with more people.
- 22% Less need to communicate verbally because of email.
- 15% Less need to write.
- 10% Increased need to use more sophisticated math.



**Math as a learning preference**

The above chart suggests that change has had less of an effect on members' use of math skills than on their use of other skills. When asked to identify a number one learning preference 1% of members surveyed selected math skill development as a learning preference. Moreover, 52% ranked math skill development last as a learning preference. Like writing, the low ranking as a preference may have to do with a perceived lack of

need to use the skill and may be compounded by a dislike of math:

**What members said about math:**

*I do not do math at work.*

*Math is challenging because I don't do it enough.*

*Math was never my strong suite, language skills are.*

*I am not strong in any area of math – we mainly use mathematics for daily practical matters, for example groceries, bill payments.*

*Though math is required by my job occasionally. I hate numbers!*

In addition, members did not discriminate greatly between the challenges associated with different types of math tasks:

**Math Skills Challenges**

- 29% Imperial – Metric Conversion
- 28% Trigonometry
- 24% Checking pay cheque deductions
- 23% Percentages.
- 23% Basic calculations, using division, multiplication
- 21% Problem solving using math.
- 18% Fractions.
- 17% Budget math.

**Current Provision of Essential Skill Training**

The National Needs Assessment not only examined change, its impact on use of skills and members' learning preferences, it also examined the current provision of essential skill training by employers and local unions.

**Education and Training Offered by Employers**

- 100 % Safety training
- 83 Technical training on equipment
- 83 Orientation for new hires
- 80 Task specific training
- 63 Basic computer training
- 53 Pension and benefits workshops
- 53 Leadership training
- 43 Computer software package training
- 27 Apprenticeships
- 27 Communication skills
- 17 Career planning
- 13 GED 13
- Writing skills
- 10 Computer Assisted Design (CAD)
- 10 Reading comprehension
- 7 Math courses
- 3 E-business training



Essential skills are noticeably lower on the frequency of offering scale than other areas. When asked on the questionnaire why this is so, employers indicated these reasons:

### Reasons Why Employers Do Not Offer Essential Skills Training

- 23% Lack of staff to fill in for people taking this training
- 20% Uncertain of essential skills learning needs of employees
- 20% Not a company priority
- 13% Employees do not require this training
- 10% Lack of money to do this training
- 3% No return on investment for company for this kind of training

They also commented on their lack of training in this area.

#### What employers said about the lack of essential skills training on the agenda:

*It is necessary to do an internal needs analysis before developing a program..*

*There is no lack of awareness, nor a lack of training dollars; it is a matter of not being sure of where the needs lie*

*We would need to do an assessment to see where the staff is at.*

*This would be a starting point to determine what level people are at, and what help they need to move forward.*



Many comments revealed that employers were simply unfamiliar with this training need, yet 53% of employers surveyed said that they were “very aware” of essential skills as a training issue. That contradiction might warrant exploration.

#### Other comments revealed that this kind of training is simply not a company priority

*The jobs are being done and it is not perceived as necessary.*

*Some things have to get done before others.*

*It is up to the individual to identify his or her own lacking*

Whether a lack of awareness is the issue, or whether it is simply not a priority training issue, there was at least a willingness to engage in discussion about essential skills during the National Needs Assessment and this opens the door for local unions to have further discussions with these employers.

#### Local union officers talk about essential skills training

Local union officers were more conservative in gauging their level of awareness of essential skills as an issue. In fact, 34% assessed their awareness as “high”. When asked about the initiatives they have undertaken around essential skill training they said:

- 46% None as yet
- 26% Promoting skills development among the members
- 9% One-to-one peer tutoring program
- 7% High school or adult upgrading
- 3% Drop-in learning centre for members

The comments made by local union officers reveal the reasons for their uncertainty about this type of training:

**What local union officers said about their concerns about members' essential skills:**

*It isn't talked about that much; ten years ago it was a bigger issue*

*We know there is a need, but when we survey the members there are always more immediate needs expressed.*

*Members don't see a role for the union to play on this issue.*

*Among the executive the awareness is very high, but not among the membership. Many of the members have put themselves in jobs that do not demand reading or writing so they don't perceive a need for more education.*



However local union officers also acknowledged the benefits of sound essential skills for the union, most agreeing that if members felt confident about their ability to read, write do math and communicate either orally or by computer they would be better able and more confident about contributing to union activities.

They cited:

**Benefits of Essential Skills Development for Local Unions**

- 59 % Increased confidence among members
- 57 Greater understanding of the Union by members
- 57 Better understanding of the contract with employer
- 55 Increased participation and activism by members in union business
- 51 Increased job advancement opportunities for members
- 49 Increased job security for members

Local union officers were also quite clear about what they needed to advance awareness about essential skill development among their membership.

What local union officers said about what resources they need:

**Support Unions Require to Forward Essential Skills Development**

- 51 % Financial support and partnership with employer
- 41 Awareness Kit to bring to Local meetings
- 3 A needs assessment to help decide people's learning needs
- 38 On-going information about the issue, newsletters and such
- 26 Visit to union-sponsored essential skills program
- 20 Guidance to help set up a learning centre or essential skills program

**And they commented:**

*Send us awareness kits and make presentations at local membership meetings.*

*It is not something that is always talked about, but we need to get the information so that we can begin talking about and talking constructively – make a plan.*

*We need someone to give us a kick to get us started and on the way.*

However, local union officers also believe that they have some resources that position them to undertake or contribute to a partnership with an employer to provide essential skills development:

**Local Unions’ Resources Toward Essential Skill Development Initiatives**

- 42 % Ability to negotiate and bargain for education and training with the employer
- 29 Interested members who could be trained to tutor other members
- 28 Contact with the National CEPU Literacy project
- 26 Promotional vehicles like newsletter, web page
- 25 Facilities for learning
- 12 Partnerships with community agencies

The Local Unions’ resources are a rather convenient fit with the resources that employers say they require to implement essential skill development. When asked what they needed to move essential skills training forward in their organization 53% of the employers cited Local Union support, and 63% cited “a clear understanding of need areas among employees in order

to justify investment”. Add to that fact that 42% of local union officers feel that they would engage in discussions with employers to negotiate for essential skills education and there appears to be ground for forward movement and future development.



**The Last Word**

At the end of the day adult learning relies upon motivation – motivation to take the time to learn, to grow and to advance both personally and professionally. CEPU members talked about barriers to learning, things that inhibited their motivation, and they cited:

**Barriers to participating in learning**

- 57 % Lack of time if not done on company time
- 50 Staff to cover when someone is out on training
- 38 Shiftwork
- 37 Lack of money if not done on company dollars
- 31 Travel to out of town training too costly in terms of time and money
- 23 No company or union budget for training
- 21 Managers select favorites only

These barriers need to be resolved. But in the meantime, it is clear that CEPU members are not reluctant learners. For one thing, they participated actively in this learning needs assessment. For another, they were clear about why they wanted to be lifelong, life-wide learners:

**Reasons Why CEPU Members Want to Learn**

- 71 % To feel a sense of personal growth
- 64 To perform the job better
- 49 To feel more confident in my life
- 42 To improve job security
- 40 To get a better job or to advance



Communications, Energy & Paperworkers Union members take learning personally. That nearly ¾ of those surveyed cited personal growth as the key motivation for learning says that they are lifelong, life-wide learners. And their comments throughout the needs assessment add a richness to this data:

**What union members are saying about the key motivation for learning:**

*If this job goes down then I will have some skill to look for other well paid jobs.*

*Knowledge is power.*

*If I have more confidence in myself, I become more fulfilled and I accomplish my work better. I am less anxious, and a barrier then has fallen.*

**The Learning Needs Assessment  
National Representatives**

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