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***WHAT MAKES A SUCCESSFUL  
WORKPLACE EDUCATION PROGRAM?***

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## **WHAT MAKES A SUCCESSFUL WORKPLACE EDUCATION PROGRAM?**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Although the field of workplace literacy has been developing for a few years in Canada, there still exists no long term policies. One of the reasons for this lack of attention is the fact that there is little information to draw upon as to what has worked and not worked and why in program delivery. This qualitative study sought to find some of the answers to these questions. Participants in six workplace literacy programs across the country described the major events and activities that are involved in developing and sustaining basic skills training. These program profiles are briefly sketched out here with a discussion of some of the critical factors that can lead to successful programming,

### **INTRODUCTION**

In Canada, there is a growing awareness that a large number of adults lack the basic skills necessary to function effectively in the workplace. Evidence suggests that as many as one third of Canadian workers experience some degree of difficulty applying basic reading, writing and math skills in the workplace. Rough estimates of the cost of this problem are in the billions of dollars (ABC Canada, 1993; ABC Canada, 1994; Conference Board of Canada, 1992; Taylor, Lewe, & Draper, 1991).

As part of the solution to this skills gap, new training strategies such as workplace education programs have been introduced as opportunities to learn the necessary skills required for fuller participation in work life. Generally, most initiatives to set up basic skills training have come primarily from unions, school boards, and community colleges. These demonstration projects are largely funded through the National Literacy Secretariat, Human Resources Development Canada or through provincial government incentive grants and are commonly regarded as being at the forefront in the field. Although businesses are showing signs of interest in this training activity, some employers seem to develop initiatives only when confronted with a crisis that has revealed a lack of basic skills in their workplace. In fact, fewer than 15% of employers offer some form of basic skills training.

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Because of this situation, people in the literacy field have strongly voiced the concern that business, industry, labor and education sectors have not given workplace literacy a high enough priority or embarked on long term policies. One of the reasons for this leaden response may be due to the fact that there is a paucity of information to draw upon as to what has worked and not worked in program planning and why.

In developed countries like the United States, Australia and the United Kingdom information on workplace literacy and basic skills training tends to describe exemplary projects and experiences, work reorganization, productivity and cost benefits, and calls for government action (Bassi, 1992; Berkeley Planning Associates, 1991; Frank, 1992; Long, 1989; O'Connor, 1990; U.S. Department of Education, 1992). Although these reports and surveys are useful in terms of the principles for practice, they do not suggest what factors or combination of factors need to be present in different workplace contexts in order that programs be successful. In addition, many of these reports do not include the voices of all the stakeholders involved in the program.

It was within this frame that a need arose to understand the issues, concerns and advantages of basic skills training from the perspective of the employers, the employees and the service providers. The purpose of this study was to describe all of the major factors and events that were involved in developing and sustaining basic skills training.' In other words, it was an attempt to understand what makes a successful workplace education program.

## METHODOLOGY

The design of the research was a qualitative case study. This approach seemed suitable given the sensitivity and complexity of a phenomenon such as program success. With the assistance of a National Advisory Committee, eight workplace education programs were purposely selected from the major regions of Canada. The initial selection criteria for the sample included region, program longevity, innovation, leadership, and accountability. In addition, each initiative was considered successful if it had demonstrated any two of the following qualities: (a) significant gains by the trainees in the basic skills instruction measured by anecdotal evidence or testing; (b) productivity gains or improvement in the quality of service as reported by the company supervisor; and (c) an overall positive response from all of the key program stakeholders.

Participants for the study were recruited from six different types of program stakeholders. These included the Chief Executive Officer or company resource manager, the company supervisor, the union representative, the workplace education coordinator or supervisor, the instructor and a small group of employees.

A standardized interview schedule was developed after a thorough literature review. In addition, a panel of Canadian experts provided insights into the issues and problems now facing this area of specialization. This first version of the interview schedule was then integrated with the interview protocols used by the Southport Institute for Policy Analysis (Bassi, 1992) in its investigation "Smart workers, smart work." The instrument was then piloted.

Several methods of data collection were employed. Research coordinators in each of the regions worked with the designated project, organized the field visits, and carried out the interviews with a participant from each of the categories. A focus group of trainees was also conducted from each program. Some participants did not feel comfortable with a tape recorder therefore not all interviews were taped. Interview time ranged from 30 minutes to 1 1/2 hour. Research coordinators also kept field and observation notes and collected relevant workplace documents.

The raw data was then aggregated, organized and classified into units in preparation for the case study write-up. Validity was enhanced by having all participants who were interviewed verify the information that was given. Content analysis using a constant comparative technique was employed to determine the factors of success in the eight workplace literacy programs.

## PROGRAM PROFILES

In this section of the article only six program sketches are discussed. Each profile outlines such program features as funding, operations, structure, curriculum, methodology, impacts, and success factors. These sketches are taken from programs in companies and sectors such as the Saskatchewan Wheat Pool, the Fishery Products International, Canadian Pacific Express and Transport, the British Columbia Construction Industry, Dominion Bridge and Seagull Pewter and Silversmiths Ltd. [For a more detailed account of the eight case studies see Taylor (1993).] The reader will find that these profiles serve as a foundation for the discussion of some of the critical factors that can lead to successful programming which follows this section.

Workers Education For Skills Training Program (WEST), Saskatchewan Wheat Pool,  
Swift Current, Saskatchewan

WEST is a trade union education program developed to meet the needs of union employees throughout the province of Saskatchewan, The Saskatchewan Wheat Pool (SWP) in conjunction with the Grain Services Union (GSU) and the Saskatchewan Federation of Labor (SFL) piloted the first program through their Employment Equity program in 1990. The purpose of the program is to increase the basic literacy and technological capabilities of employees and improve employee customer orientation, communication, and decision making due to restructuring.

The National Literacy Secretariat (NLS) provided the funding for the development of the pilot projects in 1989-1991 and for development of program materials in 1991-1992. Saskatchewan Department of Education and the Saskatchewan Crown Investments Corporation provided program funding in 1992-1993. Presently the SFL maintains responsibility for forming new programs at specific work sites and for providing training and support to new course leaders who are fellow volunteer union members.

Classes are conducted throughout the year for 4 hours on Friday mornings. Because Friday is not a work day for SWP employees, those taking part in the WEST Program use their free time to attend. SWP pays participants at their regular work rate for half the instruction time and participants pay for the other half of the time. Employees volunteer to attend the classes and make arrangements through their respective supervisors or managers. Course leaders volunteer time to plan and facilitate courses while SWP pays for 2.5 weeks of leadership training through SFU, The West Program does not have a standardized curriculum or instruction methodology. The course leader and individual participants work together to design a study plan that meets the personalized learning goals of each individual. This plan is also reflective of the worker's daily life. The curricula focuses on the development of basic academic skills and includes basic reading, writing, arithmetic, decision making, critical thinking, technological readiness, and English as a second language (ESL).

While some participants completed their General Educational Development (GED) during the program, almost all participants experienced increased self-confidence, self-esteem, basic skill levels, and competence when performing team work. Participants also noted new interest in other educational topics and improved ability to help children with homework. As well, course leaders experienced recognition by the union and employer which resulted in employment mobility.

Factors Contributing to Success. One success factor was the availability of funding through the NLS for the pilot project which acted as a catalyst in getting the program launched. In addition, financial assistance provided by the province of Saskatchewan and Saskatchewan Crown Investments Corporation has made the program more attractive and less costly. A second major factor contributing to the success of WEST involved the dedication, charisma and tenacity of the program organizers. Coupled with this was the highly functional and collaborative partnership between the union and management which greatly facilitated the implementation of the program. A third factor was the active and ongoing involvement of SFL as the centralized coordinator of WEST programs. This feature has increased program credibility, reduced maintenance costs and provided training and support for course leaders.

Catalina Workplace Education Program,  
The Fishery Products International, Catalina, Newfoundland

The Catalina Workplace Education Program was initiated in 1989 and has been in operation for three and a half years at the Catalina fish processing plant of the Fishery Products International (FPI) Corporation in Newfoundland. Due to changes in organization, certification requirements and new technology, employees at the plant experienced difficulties with mathematics, problem solving, reading, writing, and oral communication with supervisors.

A partnership among the FPI, National Literacy Secretariat, and Provincial Department of Education shared program funding for feasibility work, initial project development and development of curriculum at various plant sites. The union provided space for the delivery of the program as well as technical assistance which included the pretesting of participants. Staff from the Eastern Community College worked with management, the union and a Learning Action Committee to set up the work-related educational program. College staff also took responsibility for conducting a needs assessment; providing liaison, counselling and tutoring services; designing aspects of a customized curriculum; implementing the program; and monitoring and evaluating the program.

Classes at the Catalina Workplace Education Program are offered three or four times a week at the Workplace Education Resource Center situated at the work site. Employees volunteered to attend classes on their own time after work and were involved in setting up the goals, curriculum, and teaching methodologies of the program. Tutor volunteers within and outside the company also helped deliver the program services. The curriculum focuses on the development of reading, writing, and mathematics skills with participants working individually and in groups.

All partners have indicated that the program is having a positive impact on employee performance in the workplace. Participants have noted an increase in their abilities to read, write, compute, and problem solve. This in turn has enabled employees to contribute more effectively to work operations such as applying new technologies in performing their jobs, to working in teams and applying worker safety on the job. This has led to increased employee confidence at work, increased self-esteem, and improved career planning. All these improvements have had a significant impact on the company and its products.

Factors Contributing to Success. One of the most important factors of success was the Learning Action Committee (LAC) whose membership included all the major stakeholders ranging from workers to senior management. This created a sense of ownership for the program. The LAC met on a regular basis and was actively involved in making decisions regarding all aspects of the program. As a result, the program received visible ongoing support from senior management, the union and the workers. A second factor was that government partnership funding successfully sustained the program through the first stage of membership acceptance. In addition, implementing a curriculum which was self-paced, job related, and used plant materials clearly created the conditions for a successful learning experience.

Learning in the Workplace Program,  
Canadian Pacific Express and Transport, Toronto, Ontario

Learning in the Workplace Program (LWP) was piloted by the clerical departments of two Toronto terminals of Canadian Pacific Express and Transport (CPET) in 1990. The program was designed to help staff integrate total quality management initiatives into the daily work, cope with technological change and reduce errors and waste. Employees had previously experienced difficulties working in teams, problem solving, reading, oral communications, and solving mathematics related problems. In addition, many employees do not speak English as their first language.

The program is funded solely by CPET who worked with Frontier College in conducting a needs assessment of the company. Each CPET work site has its own committee which administers the program. Inhouse staff, private consultants and private nonprofit organizations have delivered services at various times in the program's history with the most effective model being company staff trained as program tutors . Each program is offered for a 3-month interval with classes scheduled 1 to 2 hours a week. Participants attend classes on the work site during company time (50%) and on their own time (50%) and receive a certificate of participation upon completion of the 3-month training session, The curriculum is determined jointly by the tutor and learner based on the identified needs of the learner. Subjects offered include ESL, other languages, reading, writing, mathematics, computer skills, and specific workplace skills. Instructional materials and assignments are site specific and tutors use a variety of delivery techniques.

To date, the program has had a very positive impact within the company's workplace. The completion rate for the 3-month program was found to be more than 90%. Improvements were noted in the ability of staff to communicate, work in teams, work in a self-directed manner, use new technology, apply worker safety, read, and problem solve. Participants also learned about other company operations and gained a better sense of company goals. This all resulted in the trainees being able to deliver better service to clients. The program is now expanding to other occupational groups in the company.

Factors Contributing to Success. Positive support of employee training by management, union, supervisors, and employees greatly contributed to the success of the program. A second factor of success was that the curriculum reflected the goals of staff, management, and each individual learner. This made learning specific to the work site, the employee's job, and the learner. Extensive marketing of the program within the company was another factor contributing to its success. The organizing committee at each work site marketed the program by speaking individually with each staff person to encourage participation. Posters were designed and hung strategically throughout the terminal and a newsletter developed to help program visibility.

Basic Skills Upgrading Program of Skillplan, British Columbia  
Construction Industry, Burnaby, British Columbia

SkillPlan, which is a cost-shared project of management and labor in the organized construction industry of British Columbia and Yukon, developed the Basic Skills Upgrading Program in the late 1980s. It was designed to meet the industry-wide and individualized training needs of construction workers in the areas of basic literacy, ESL, advanced technical skills and management skills,

The funding for needs assessment, course development and instruction costs for the upgrading program is granted by both federal and provincial governments. The project itself provides the leadership, developmental expertise, and an adult education specialist. In addition the Open Learning Agency (OLA) provides a classroom and learning lab at the Training Centre in Burnaby as well as the instructors to deliver the program. A steering committee comprised of representatives from labor, industry, and the OLA makes all joint decisions about the operations of the program.

The upgrading program is an innovative, computer-based training opportunity which operates on an open entry/open exit basis. Employees volunteer to participate in the program and take part in setting their own personal learning goals on program entry. Based on the learning goals established by each learner, the computerized system at the Burnaby OLA Training Centre drafts individualized learning plans which include the appropriate curriculum content, instruction and progression speed. Learning takes place at the OLA Drop-In Centre on the participant's free time. Instruction is completely individualized and approximately 50% computer-based. Subjects used in participant programs include reading, writing, numeracy comprehension and oral communication skills. Software is also used to upgrade basic skills for apprenticeship students, health and safety, courses and other work-related programs or ESL-related goals. When a common need is identified, some small group instruction is utilized in the program,

The program is a highly successful industry wide project. A proximately 65% of the employees participating in the program have successfully completed their preestablished learning goals. Some employees have also successfully completed the GED exam at the conclusion of their training. Learners involved in the program experienced improved views of themselves and their world and increased self-esteem and flexibility. This program also showed the positive impact that can occur when partners work well together.

Factors Contributing to Success. Philosophical underpinnings which provided the foundation for program policy contributed greatly to the success of this innovative program approach. By selecting a broad definition of literacy and basic skills, it was possible to create an industry-wide program which could address the needs of a larger number of individuals across a broader spectrum of skills training. The collaborative partnership of industry, labor, government, and education in the development of a variety of individual learning opportunities for workers in the construction industry also played a major role in the success of this program. The long range planning undertaken by all those involved with the program was thorough with widespread input. Another major factor which contributed to the success of the program was the willingness of all those involved to be innovative and use current technology to develop unique counselling and instructional modes which were adult oriented and self-paced.

Basic Education in the Workplace Program,  
Dominion Bridge, Winnipeg, Manitoba

This program was implemented as part of the Employee Development Program at the Dominion Bridge steel fabricating plant in Winnipeg, Manitoba. Due to organizational and procedural changes, employees were required to assume increased responsibility and decision making and to job share within work teams. As a result, there a need to develop specific job description manuals for employees within the plant and appropriate training. The workplace program implemented to improve the literacy and basic skills of workers areas of communication, decision making, print based learning, reading, team work and worker safety.

Program funding was provided through several sources: the National Literacy Secretariat, The National Literacy Partnerships Strategy for program development, and Employment and Immigration Canada for instruction. Management and labor from Dominion Bridge worked with a committee to address the adult literacy needs identified by business and industry in Manitoba. They later contacted a workplace literacy consultant to develop pilot training manuals for three specific jobs in order to enhance cross-training and company efficiency. The Manitoba Literacy Office provided quality instructors, technical expertise, and supervisory staff to operate the program.

Classes are offered twice weekly for 2 hours per session over a 20 week period. Space is provided at the plant for classroom based instruction. Each employee attends classes on 2 hours of company time and 2 hours of personal time per week. The program offers three class options: training in mathematics alone, communications and mathematics, and/or ESL literacy. The learning needs of employees who volunteer to participate in the program are self- identified. The curriculum is individualized, self-paced, and job specific; a portion of each class is a group activity directed at a common issue. There has been a general consensus that the program has enhanced management-labor communication and cooperation. As well, the program is seen as a positive, proactive beginning which is essential to plant survival.

Factors Contributing to Success. Close collaboration and cooperation of management and labor working in partnership has greatly contributed to the success of the program. The awareness of the linkage between competitiveness and skills upgrading on the part of management and labor provided the direction to develop training for real jobs. In addition, the willingness of the industry, the union and the governments to work as honest and innovative partners has been a critical success factor for the program. Provincial leadership provided by the Manitoba Literacy Office, through the provision of their ongoing support, expertise and enthusiasm, has also been extremely important. And finally, the National Literacy Secretariat provided funding for the development of procedures for literacy task analysis and organizational needs assessment which served as a catalyst and a success factor in getting the program started.

Workplace Upgrading Program, Seagull Pewter and  
Silversmiths Ltd., Pugwash, Nova Scotia

The workplace program at the Seagull Pewter and SilverSmith manufacturing company was implemented in 1989. Workers identified the need for a training program to address difficulties in reading, writing, mathematics, oral communication, working in teams, and solving work related problems. In addition, the company was in a continual state of change and required production workers to work with more complex products. The majority of workers at the company worked in production.

The company and the provincial government share funding for the program. While the Human Resource Manager of the company ministers the program services, she was also involved in the identification of learning needs of the workers and training needs of the workplace. The regional literacy facilitator helped conduct the needs assessment, design the program, and find the college instructor. The in-house tutor and the instructor worked together to develop the curriculum, deliver, monitor, and evaluate the program.

Employees volunteer to participate in the program which is offered for a 4 to 6 month period. Classes are conducted at the work site, once a week for 1 to 2 hours during the work day at shift change. Participants attend classes partially on company time and partially on their own time. Tutoring services are also available to participants. Upon completion of the program, participants attend a graduation ceremony. The first program offering provided instruction at an intermediate level (grades 6 to 9) with content that was work related. The second program offering prepared employees for GED tests. This program is more job integrated with a curriculum customized to meet the Particular needs of the workplace. Subjects include reading, writing, and mathematics. Classes are small and interactive.

The program has had a significant positive impact within the company. Employees have increased their abilities to read, compute, communicate, problem solve and work independently. In addition, employers have noted a higher quality of worker interaction along with increased employee confidence and self-esteem. Some employees have been able to advance in their job and some are now able to help their children with homework.

Factors Contributing to Success. Management support for the program demonstrated the company's commitment to promote a training culture. This dedication and continual support greatly contributed to the program's success. The expertise of the regional literacy facilitator in conducting the needs assessment, and designing the program as also a factor in the success of the program. Classes that were tailored to the particular needs of the workplace using materials from the appropriate sections of the company and the constant or ongoing assessment done by the in-house and college instructors were also factors.

## AN ANALYSIS OF THE CASE STUDIES

### What Makes a Successful Workplace Education Program?

As part of the interviewing process, program participants were to talk about the factors that contributed to the success of their workplace literacy program. Over 75 responses were collected and as previously mentioned, a content analysis using a constant comparative technique was employed. Based on the results of the analysis seven factors emerged and are presented in [Figure 1](#).

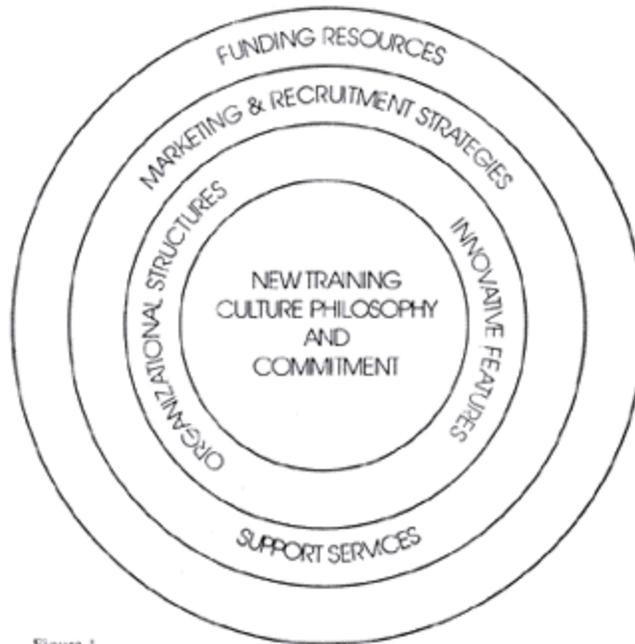


Figure 1

These factors involve a new training culture philosophy, a high level of commitment, organizational structures that are dynamic and flexible, and program components that are innovative. Just as important are the marketing and recruitment strategies, the support services, and the funding resources which help fuel the initiative. In the following section each factor and its importance in the "formula success" is discussed.

#### What's at the heart of a program?

Two factors seem to be at the core of a successful program: a no training culture philosophy and commitment from all stakeholders. Successful programs tend to perceive education and learning in holistically, viewing basic education in the workplace within a broader socioeconomic and political context. Such programs are sometimes seen as a basic human right, with skills upgrading as more than an essential ingredient in adapting to increased trade competition. Individual needs within and beyond the workplace are combined with corporate needs, integrating these with basic and technical skills for workers. In other words, this new training culture philosophy bridges the broader intent of education with the specific focus of training.

Another characteristic of this training culture is that programs are developed with an understanding of the basic principles of the adult learning process. Programs that adhere to this philosophy are never just teaching subject matter and content, nor just skills. They also impart values and attitudes, and allow the process of the learning the process of the learning journey to be meaningful. This process and the product complement each other as illustrated in the program profiles

Coupled with this new training culture philosophy is the ingredient of commitment from all people involved. It is not enough that one up within the company be committed to the workplace literacy gram. It is important that all parties are committed to all aspects of the program. This includes the different levels of management, work, union, as well as those outside of the organization who are in anyway supporting the program. Common to all case studies was the fact that each party actually felt some ownership of the program, advocated on its behalf, and guaranteed a consistency of support.

The commitment is on action and the implementation of the service to the learner. All parties become cooperative partners in the learning process thus helping to provide credibility to the program. The key to commitment is participation; this is achieved within successful programs by (a) genuinely inviting people to express their suggestions and viewpoints, (b) open communication, (c) wide-spread input, (d) being flexible, and (e) reasonable feelings of equality.

#### What makes the program tick?

Along with a company's philosophy and a sense of commitment, are other components which make a program tick. Two additional success factors which emerged from the analysis were the types of organizational structures that enabled dynamic programs and the innovativeness of various program features. These factors seem to be linked together.

In many different ways, the profiles emphasized that successful programs depend on an effective organization. All the structures, whether functional or collaborative, were intended to improve the coordination of activities, further enhance the feeling of ownership, solve problems, and overcome barriers to commitment and participation. These same structures also provided visibility and credibility to the program, helped locate resources, provided professional advice, and sustained a climate for learning.

Such organizational structures frequently go beyond the actual plant or industry where the educational program is offered. They may also involve others such as local training councils, or local school boards, especially if these agencies are providing support services to the program. Generally speaking, these structures do not incidentally come into existence, but are seen as part of the program from the beginning and evolve accordingly and rationally.

Program innovativeness seems to be connected to the company's organizational structures. For example, the type of needs assessment conducted is directly related to the accessibility of all potential stakeholders. Participating in these assessments and establishing program goals can enhance commitment to the program and a feeling of satisfaction. Key features which characterize innovative programs include: flexibility, relevancy, self-paced learning, interaction, scheduling and location which accommodates workers, continuity, varied methodologies and evaluations, an overall expression of collective goals, and a tailor-made curriculum in terms of assignments and instructional materials. As well, there must also be an overall sensitivity to the progress made by individual workers so as to prevent people from being discouraged or dropping out.

What other factors make a program work?

Marketing promotion, and recruitment strategies are important factors in a successful workplace education program. By the results of the analysis, these should be done on a person contact basis, such as recruiting workers at the worksite for the program. Many examples from the program profiles also emphasize the need to use several modes of communication for promotion such as word-of-mouth, newsletters, creative posters placed in strategic places, or annual reports. These same means can be used to inform other company employees of the program's progress. A healthy team approach not only acknowledges others' opinions but also their accomplishments.

Many examples were recorded from participant interviews of the need for appropriate and varied support services to sustain all aspects of the basic skills program. These included the production of teaching materials, the training of people to perform specific tasks, the use of learning technologies, counselling services and childcare services for working mothers. These varied services were usually built into the program and obtained from both within or outside the workplace environment.

#### What fuels a program?

Funding workplace programs is a resource that is essential. A common factor that emerged from the interviews was the various forms of financial assistance that was available for program funding. As described in the sketches, most programs included multiple sources of funding, usually comprising the local industry itself, as well as municipal, provincial and federal contributions. Incentive grants, partnership funding and the joint partnership of industry, labor, education, and government were examples of government leadership. The issue is not just the amount of money which is available but how wisely and effectively these resources are being used. To return to the earlier question posed in the study, one final message to conclude this discussion might be that underlying all of the different factors contributing to the success of a program is a partnership approach to training. Effective workplace literacy programs recognize that people need to know that their roles are important and valued. Only through a true partnership -- one that has progressed to the level of trust -- will workers admit to a need or seek assistance.

#### END NOTE

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