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Would This Article

[read this article]

How upgraded workplace literacy skills can boost your safety record and the bottom line.

It's easy to overlook or fail to see the impact that low workplace literacy skills have on the bottom line. In fact, low literacy skills have a stealth-like quality. They're out there on the plant floor, unseen, often unrecognized, but nonetheless a leading factor in many injuries.

In many cases, no one, certainly not company executives, suspects a connection between low literacy skills and organizational performance until the lost-time injury rate keeps going up and plant productivity keeps going down.

"The safety record when I arrived here a few years ago was a real eye opener," says Steve Wilkie, president of Mississauga, Ontario's

Robinson Paperboard Packaging. "The number of days lost because of injuries was totally unacceptable. But after spending time on the floor I found out that a lot of the workers could either not read or not understand the manuals. But while they had various ways of hiding their low literacy skills, they could not hide the fact that those literary skills were the major—if not the only—cause for the plant's poor safety record. Pretty soon we got a teacher in here and all of the workers went through a course to upgrade their literacy skills. Now, we haven't had a lost-time injury in over a year and productivity has increased. It's had a real impact."

While low workplace literacy skills are certainly not the only cause of a poor safety record they certainly do have a major impact, not only on safety but on the bottom line. “There is a direct connection between what I call ‘comprehension deficiency’—and not only on workplace safety, but on insurance rates and other operating costs—and ultimately performance,” says Jim Pollack, communications director of ABC CANADA Literacy Foundation, the private sector’s champion for adult literacy. “Safety is definitely compromised when a worker doesn’t understand a manual, for example. In fact, 82 percent of respondents in a Conference Board of Canada 2007 study associated increased health and safety with improved workplace essential skills such as reading and writing.”

A one percent rise in literacy scores relative to the international average is associated with an eventual 2.5 percent relative rise in labour productivity

In Canada, there are good reasons for employers to be concerned, and to take action. While there are no statistics to measure literacy levels in Canadian workplaces, the most recent International Adult Literacy and Life Skills survey (IALLS) shows that 42 percent of Canadians between 16 and 65 years of age rank at the two lowest levels of literacy. (IALLS ranks international literacy levels from 1 to 5; it defines literacy as having the ability to read and understand brochures, manuals, instructions, forms such as job applications, and the ability to solve problems and handle the mathematical demands of certain situations). Not surprisingly, perhaps, the financial and personal services industries had the highest literacy levels, while transport and construction had the lowest. What’s troubling is the fact that the IALLS survey reveals that more than four out of every 10 Canadians lack the literacy skills to meet the ever-increasing demands of work and the knowledge society.

In Canada, anecdotal evidence suggests that while the rate of workplace injuries has declined over the last few years, the pace of this decline has slowed noticeably. Injuries are still a problem. In *Road To Zero*, its recently released five-year strategic plan, the Workplace Safety and

Insurance Board notes that the number of workplace fatalities rose from 2005 to 2006, suggesting that “while efforts have met with success, there is still a lot more work to be done.”

The business case for why employers should upgrade literacy levels in their workplaces is compelling. According to Statistics Canada, a one percent rise in literacy scores relative to the international average is associated with an eventual 2.5 percent relative rise in labour productivity and a 1.5 rise in Gross Domestic Product. In a 2007 report entitled *Making a Case For Health & Safety*, IAPA cites a Liberty Mutual Survey which showed that more than 60 percent of CFOs surveyed believe that every \$1 invested in injury prevention generates a return of \$2 or more. The report also cites a US Occupational Safety

and Health Administration report stating that companies can generate a return of \$4 to \$6 for every \$1 invested in health and safety programs. Finally, 79 percent of employers and employees surveyed by ABC CANADA saw a 79 percent increase in productivity after implementing programs to upgrade workers’ basic skills, such as reading, writing, speaking, and problem solving. A further 84 percent saw an improvement in the quality of people’s work, while 87 percent noticed that the upgrading had a positive impact on workers’ ability to use technology. Numerous other studies have shown that the benefits of improving workers’ literacy skills flow directly to the bottom line.

But while the business case for improving literacy skills in the workplace is compelling, employers have been slow to take up the cause. There are several reasons for this:

- employers are not aware that low literacy is a problem until they begin to address issues such as low productivity, poor safety records and high error rates, only to find that literacy levels are a major underlying cause.
- executives, pressured to produce ever greater shareholder returns, claim that they can’t measure their return on investment in literacy skills. Some

say that such programs are an additional—and unnecessary—cost item. Convincing evidence that employers do not see the connection comes in a report by the Canadian Council on Social Development, which states that “Employers rate skills upgrading as their highest priority, but they do not link low worker literacy as a potential barrier to that upgrading.”

- employers are overwhelmed by the task of finding a provider and information on starting a program (see “*Upgrading Workplace Literacy Skills: Best Practices*”).
- employers fear that an employee who has received training is more likely to be poached by a competitor.

But while there are challenges to implementing literacy upgrading programs, there are also opportunities. Employers are likely to have a workforce that is more confident, has more self-esteem, and is more committed to remaining with the current employer. In fact, observers point to increased employee retention as one benefit of literacy upgrading, as well as a better recognition and tolerance of co-workers. In the end, employee relations are much smoother and trust and credibility are increased. Moreover, as more companies go green and become more socially responsible and responsive, having a workforce that is literate and numerate will certainly enhance a company’s perception.

While setting up a literacy skills program can be overwhelming for some, it can seem practically impossible for others, such as small businesses and older employers. “Most of the businesses in Newfoundland employ fewer than 50 workers and they just can’t afford the costs to upgrade workplace literacy,” says Margie Hancock, the literacy coordinator for the province’s labour federation. “Sure there’s a need for upgrading, but a small company with 20 people can’t do it alone. They can’t pay a trainer for 8 or 12 months. They need government help and there isn’t any right now. It’s also a big problem in re-training workers for a different type of work. For example, you’re going to offer job re-training to a 58-year-old logger. All those years that worker has been hiding the fact that he can’t read. How do you suppose he’s going to understand the training materials?”

The fact that many workers hide their

Case study: Robinson Paperboard Packaging

Steve Wilkie knew he had a problem shortly after he joined Mississauga, Ontario's Robinson Paperboard Packaging as the company's president. "As I walked around the plant, I noticed that there were a lot of lapses. People weren't doing things in the right and safe way. For example, I saw people asking co-workers for help in operating certain machines. I thought that was strange since it was all there in the manual. But as I found out, most of these people had low literacy skills," says Wilkie, who has been working in manufacturing plants for 25 years. "The company already had an unacceptable number of days lost to injuries in the past year, and when I added it all up I knew that something had to be done."

Acting quickly, Robinson contacted Ontario's Ministry of Training and Skills Development. He hoped to get guidance and financial assistance for starting a workplace literacy program. "Instead of getting help I got an education in how difficult and cumbersome it is to get help. I got flipped from agency to agency. After about a month of trying I decided that we'd do it ourselves. I asked around if anyone knew of a certified teacher who could also teach basic English."

Wilkie soon found a teacher who could design and deliver English as second language training (ESL) to Robinson's mostly South Asian, Sri Lankan and Eastern European

employees. The initial class consisted of 20 employees who were taught for two hours, four days a week in a room at the Robinson plant. Working with the teacher, Wilkie set out the program's goals, which were to increase English verbal and written skills, improve workplace morale and performance, and improve problem-solving skills.

The program focused on health and safety procedures, and the Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System (WHMIS). Each employee donated one hour of time while the company paid for the other hour. (The cost-sharing arrangement is a common one). The first session lasted two months, and then 20 more employees began the program.

"We've gone over a year without any kind of workplace lost-time injury, all because people can now read and understand the manuals," says Wilkie. "Most of our employees are new Canadians. They really want to improve themselves, so getting their buy-in wasn't tough at all. There's also been a major improvement in people's attitudes. They're more positive and confident. It's even changed the way all of us interact. When I walk around the plant now, there's a feeling that that we're in this together. There's no line dividing management and workers. But the bottom line is that we have not had a lost-time injury in more than a year. The difference that the program has made is just amazing."



Web Directory

Below is a partial list of organizations whose web sites may be helpful in setting and delivering workplace literacy programs.

- www.naldatwork.ca: National Adult Literacy Database (NALD). A comprehensive resource for adult literacy programs, resources, services and activities across Canada.
- www.conferenceboard.ca/workplaceliteracy/default.asp: the Conference Board of Canada's dedicated workplace literacy site, Workplace Literacy Central, has just about everything you need to know about the topic, including the challenges and solutions faced by businesses of all sizes, mini case studies of successful programs, and resources that will help in all phases of a literacy program.
- www.conferenceboard.ca/education/best_practices/case-studies.htm: a good range of case studies based on the experiences of small, medium and large Canadian companies in setting up workplace literacy programs.
- www.hrsdc-rhdcc.gc.ca/essentialskills: HRSDC Canada's site. Various ways to assess levels of essential skills in a workforce, and a list of tools and profiles that can help develop a business case and implement workplace literacy programs.
- www.hrsdc.gc.ca/en/hip/ld/nls/Publications/A/worklit-a.shtml: frequently asked questions (and their answers) to setting up and delivering workplace literacy skills programs.
- www.work-basedlearning.org: American organization's site that provides, among other things, tools for analyzing and evaluating workplace skills programs, as well as a business case for implementing programs, and a forum for an online discussion.
- www.abc-canada.org/: ABC CANADA Literacy Foundation, Canada's private-sector voice for championing adult literacy. The national charity works with business, labour and government to drive meaningful change in workplace literacy policy. The site has referrals to program providers.
- www.ccl-cca.ca: the Canadian Council on Learning, a national agency that supports research in learning, including workplace literacy development. The site has several research papers that describe the connection between literacy and good workplace performance.
- www.frontiercollege.ca: Frontier College, the 108-year-old national, volunteer organization that has helped many organizations and individuals upgrade workplace literacy skills, especially new Canadians.