



WORKPLACE LITERACY: THE LYNCHPIN OF CANADA'S INCLUSIVE GROWTH AGENDA

DECEMBER 2017



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Inclusive growth is a policy framework that “can create opportunities for all segments of the population and distribute the dividends of increased material prosperity fairly across society.” Achieving inclusive, sustainable growth is a policy challenge currently facing all levels of government in Canada.

Workplace literacy – defined as having the transferable and specific skills required to complete one’s job in a timely and efficient manner – in many ways underpins principles of inclusive growth that support overall policy goals to foster innovation, productivity and competitiveness. When workers and managers at all levels are supported to improve and maintain their literacy, they are more likely to see benefits in all aspects of their life, such as social engagement or participation in civic life, health, housing, education and sense of belonging to their community.

What barriers do employers face in addressing instances of low workplace literacy in Canada? Preliminary conversations with a handful of employers at the outset of this research program suggested that the root of workplace literacy issues was in many cases economic. Employers did not see the benefit of training employees if the topic was not specific, its impact difficult to quantify, and if it didn’t relate to the individual’s or to the organization’s bottom line.

Through a survey, six roundtables and approximately 30 supplemental interviews conducted from November 2015 to April 2017, a much more complex reality emerged demonstrating a number of competing issues that challenge our collective ability to address issues of low workplace literacy. They include:

- On the part of employers:
 - Lack of ability to identify employees with low workplace literacy skills;
 - Lack of appropriate skills and training to approach employees and have a constructive conversation on this topic;
 - Lack of access to funding and programs to improve workplace literacy and essential skills, especially for small and medium-sized employers.
- On the part of employees:
 - Lack of willingness and ‘safe spaces’ to admit to low workplace literacy (in any area) and request training.
- On the part of unions and labour organizations:
 - A lack of mandate – and therefore associated time, programming and funding – to address these issues for members.

Perhaps the most telling finding from this research is the stigma associated with literacy. Coordinators of this study were consistently challenged in their ability to attract the necessary number of participants for each of the six roundtables. Many employers approached by the coordinators were either not interested in learning about this issue or denied their teams may be working with low literacy levels. Low literacy levels are a reality for 48 percent of Canadian adults.¹

Contributors to this body of research have likened low literacy to mental health in the workplace before Bell Canada began its “Bell Let’s Talk” awareness campaign in September 2010. Many Canadians are suffering from low literacy, but most don’t feel safe talking about it at work. The impact of this muted crisis is contributing to an increasingly polarized job market where individuals with certain skills and abilities excel. Those who have lower, or lack, workplace literacy skills are feeling the pressure of complex technology, rapid changes in the nature and style of our work, and the compounded effects of international economic trade winds.

Ensuring inclusive economic growth for all Canadians will mean improving workplace literacy levels in Canada by:

- Reducing the stigma of low workplace literacy and essential skills levels;
- Identifying a national champion for workplace literacy;
- Expanding current labour market agreements to allow training dollars to support upskilling in the areas of workplace literacy and essential skills;
- Supporting and enabling mass access to worker-led training programs that meet the needs of the worker where, when, and how they require support, including through train-the-trainer programs.

¹ OECD, 2013. Skills Outlook: First Results from the Survey of Adult Skills, s.l.: OECD.

INTRODUCTION

According to the Office of Literacy and Essential Skills, literacy is defined by reading, writing, document use and numeracy.² Essential skills include the skills associated with literacy but also include thinking skills, oral communication, computer use/digital skills, working with others and the skills associated with continuous learning. These skills provide “the foundation for learning all other skills and enable people to better prepare for, get and keep a job, and adapt and succeed at work.”³ To function successfully in society, it is important to have strong literacy skills and high levels of essential skills.^{4,5} Research conducted over the past decade clearly demonstrates that adults with higher literacy skills earn better wages, are more likely to find and remain employed, and are less reliant on social and government supports.^{6,7,8,9}

So how does Canada fare in adult literacy? The story of adult literacy and essential skills in Canada is difficult to tell. Canada boasts that it has a reputation for a highly skilled, productive workforce. Yet employers often warn about a shortage of skilled workers. The education system is highly regarded with investments from pre-kindergarten through post-doctorate programs, but questions are often raised about the relevance of current educational models in the 21st century. Its universities place well in global rankings. Still, there is heavy competition emerging from rapidly developing countries.

The challenge of talking about adult literacy in Canada exists because there are two competing, yet equally factual, stories. Both of these stories are evident in data from many recent reports and surveys. In 2013, the OECD released results from the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), which measures three skills (literacy, numeracy and problem-solving in technology-rich environments) in 16- to 65-year-olds across many countries.

² Government of Canada, [The Office of Literacy and Essential Skills](#), Sept. 18, 2015.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Harwood, C. 2012. [State of the Literacy and Essential Skills Field](#), s.l.: Canadian Literacy and Learning Network.

⁵ Murray, S. & Shillington, R. 2011. [From poverty to prosperity: Literacy's impact on Canada's Economic Success](#), Canadian Literacy and Learning Network.

⁶ Osberg, L. 2000. *Schooling, Literacy and Individual Earnings*, Ottawa and Hull: Statistics Canada and Human Resource Development Canada.

⁷ Green, D.A. & Riddell, C. 2007. *Literacy and the Labour Market: The Generation of Literacy and its Impact on Earnings*. Ottawa: Statistics Canada and HRSDC.

⁸ Raudenbush, S.W., & Kasim, R.M. 2002. *Adult Literacy, Social Inequality, and the Information Economy: Findings from the National Adult Literacy Survey*. Ottawa and Hull: Statistics Canada and Human Resource Development Canada.

⁹ Statistics Canada and OECD. 2000. *Literacy skills for the knowledge society: Further results of the International Adult Literacy Survey*.

PIAAC clearly depicts these two stories:

While Canada ranks at the OECD average in literacy, it has larger proportions of its population at both the highest and lowest levels of literacy.

The story continues throughout different skills and subpopulations. Canada ranks below the OECD average numeracy, but ranks above in problem solving. There are also sizable differences in levels across provinces and ages. Unsurprisingly, the same story can be seen in the labour force. All three skills are higher among the employed versus the unemployed and those not in the labour force. Among those who are employed, workers in managerial and professional occupations show better scores than workers in other types of occupations.¹⁰

This polarization in skills in general, but especially within the workplace, is important to understanding the stories of adult literacy and its related impacts. The economic return of higher skills is playing out across the entire labour market. Many studies have argued that technological progress has contributed to wage inequality and labour market polarization.^{11,12,13} Higher skills are associated with more secure employment and higher wages and this situation has become more pronounced in recent years.

One theory as to the cause of this change is the impact of technology in the labour market. The more technology takes root in the labour market, the more it benefits higher-skilled workers and disadvantages lower-skilled workers. The simple premise for polarization works as follows: As technology automates routine and manual tasks, higher-skilled workers can shift to tasks that are more cognitive and less routine (non-routine). This increases productivity and their overall value to the organization. Lower-skilled workers may not be able to make this shift as easily. Eventually, their tasks are completely replaced by technology or they accept lower wages in order to compete with the productivity of the technology.

¹⁰ Statistics Canada. 2013. [Skills in Canada: First Results from the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies \(PIAAC\)](#). Ottawa: Statistics Canada and ESDC.

¹¹ Autor, D., Levy, F. and Murnane, R. 2003. The Skill Content of Recent Technological Change: An Empirical Exploration, *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, CXVIII, 1279–1333.

¹² Autor, D. H. and Dorn, D. 2013. The growth of low-skill service jobs and the polarization of the US labor market, *American Economic Review* 103(5): 1553–1597.

¹³ Goos, M., Manning, A. and Salomons, A. 2014. Explaining Job Polarization: Routine Biased Technological Change and Offshoring, *American Economic Review* 104(8): 2509–2526.

If we understand the labour market through this framework, automation may not cause total job loss, but it does affect the composition of aggregate employment. If this is true, then the impact of technology will lead to rising relative demand in well-paid, skilled jobs (that typically require non-routine, cognitive skills) and low-paid, least-skilled jobs (that typically require non-routine, manual skills), with a falling relative demand in the ‘middling’ jobs that have typically required routine manual and cognitive skills. This process is often called job polarization.

To break the cycle of job polarization, Canada will need to find ways to add to the skills of workers who are struggling to compete with technology in routine, manual jobs. One obvious solution is increased worker training on the job.

Workplace literacy, learning and participating fully at work throughout one’s working life is a critical economic and social issue facing Canadians today. Even though the education system in Canada is broadly recognized to be robust, adult Canadians are not performing well in international literacy and numeracy tests when compared with other developed nations.^{14,15} In fact, Canada’s literacy and numeracy levels have declined in the past decade among working adults.^{16,17} According to the 2013 OECD PIAAC survey, 49 percent of adult Canadians aged 16-65 years scored below level three¹⁸ on a five-point scale, an increase from 41 percent in 2003.¹⁹ Research shows that literacy scores have a **clear impact on economic growth and labour productivity**. Furthermore, investment in human capital yields **three times as much impact** compared to investment in physical capital.²⁰ Beyond the economic benefits of workplace literacy, studies show that **raising literacy skill levels of the population through a ‘lifelong learning’ model has many social, psychological and even health benefits.**^{21,22}

Workplace learning should not be confined to new and younger entrants to the job market. While there is much attention paid to youth entering the workforce for the first time,^{23,24} these skills shortages exist across job type and level (from entry-level to senior managers), across industry sectors and occupations, and

¹⁴ Coulombe, S. & Tremblay, J.-F., 2005. Public Investment in Skills: Are Canadian Governments Doing Enough? Toronto: C.D. Howe Institute.

¹⁵ Harwood, C., 2012.

¹⁶ TD Economics, 2013. Canada’s Literacy and Numeracy Challenge Worsens, s.l.: s.n.

¹⁷ Murray, S. & Shillington, R. 2012.

¹⁸ See the [OECD PIAAC survey](#) for more information on methods and how each level is defined and measured.

¹⁹ Lane, J. & Murray, T. S. 2015. Smarten Up Its Time to Build Essential Skills, s.l.: Canada West Foundation.

²⁰ Coulombe, S. & Tremblay, J.-F., 2005.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Gyarmati, D. et al. 2014. Upskill: A Credible Test of Workplace Literacy and Essential Skills Training, Ottawa: The Social Research and Demonstration Corporation.

²³ The Canadian Chamber of Commerce. 2013. Upskilling the Workforce: Employer-Sponsored Training and Resolving the Skills Gap.

²⁴ McKinsey & Company, 2015. Youth in Transition: Bridging Canada’s Path from Education to Employment.

across demographic categories (including age, education level and place of birth).²⁵ Employees with low workplace literacy levels may be able to perform everyday activities, but will take longer to complete tasks than their counterparts and may find it challenging to tackle more complex tasks.²⁶ Some suggest this means “fewer Canadians have the skills needed to succeed in a modern, knowledge-based economy.”²⁷

Despite compelling evidence that demonstrates the positive social and economic outcomes for employees and employers as a result of workplace literacy training, there is still not broad uptake in Canada for a national program. Public Policy Forum (PPF), in partnership with ABC Life Literacy Canada and other stakeholders,²⁸ launched an exploratory study to understand the barriers employers face in addressing workplace literacy. The project engaged employers, educators, literacy trainers, issue leaders and human resources professionals across the country, through roundtable discussions and a survey, on the subject of workplace literacy and the barriers that exist for employers. This report presents the findings of that research and the recommendations for improving low workplace literacy levels in Canada.



²⁵ CB Insights, n.d. How Essential-Skills Training Unlocks Business Value, s.l.: CB Insights.

²⁶ Statistics Canada, 2007. *Perspectives on Labour and Income*, Ottawa: Statistics Canada.

²⁷ TD Economics. 2013. Canada's Literacy and Numeracy Challenge Worsens, p.3.

²⁸ Boeing, Canada's Building Trades Unions, Chartered Professionals in Human Resources of Alberta, Colleges and Institutes Canada, EY, Government of New Brunswick, Government of Ontario, Power Workers' Union, Saskatchewan Polytechnic, Southern Alberta Institute of Technology (SAIT), Unifor and Vancity.

WORKPLACE LITERACY FOSTERS INCLUSIVE GROWTH

‘Inclusive growth will require increasing the skills of Canadians, especially those who are now in the lower part of the skill distribution.’

Alexander Murray, Economist, Centre for the Study of Living Standards

What is inclusive growth?

Inclusive growth is a policy framework that “can create opportunities for all segments of the population and distribute the dividends of increased material prosperity fairly across society.”²⁹ One of the key challenges for economists and policy makers is how to make growth sustainable for all. Recent studies have shown that global economies are increasingly becoming unequal.³⁰ To increase growth, governments continue to pursue policies related to innovation, productivity and trade. The [2016 Inclusive Growth Commission Report](#) argues that reducing inequality and deprivation can be a driver of economic growth. This can be achieved through investments in public health, early years support, and skills and employment services. Businesses are strengthening their workforce while, at the same time, recognizing the need to provide a fair opportunity to all. **By focusing on a social-investment-driven platform, both governments and businesses can support stronger productivity growth and higher living standards.**

How does workplace literacy support inclusive growth?

Inclusive growth policies can be a framework for understanding the issue of workplace literacy.

Beyond the economic argument of productivity and economic growth (better wages, promotions, longevity, safety at work and profit improvement), workplace literacy is also an issue of inclusive growth. When workers and managers at all levels are supported in improving and maintaining their literacy, they are more likely to see benefits in all aspects of their life, such as social engagement or participation in civic life, health, housing, education and sense of belonging to their community.^{31,32,33}

²⁹ OECD. 2013.

³⁰ Inclusive Growth Commission. 2016. [Making Our Economy Grow for Everyone](#).

³¹ Coulombe, S., Tremblay, J.-F. & Marchand, S. 2004. Literacy Scores, Human Capital and Growth Across Fourteen OECD Countries, Ottawa: Statistics Canada.

³² Hartley, R. & Horne, J. 2006. Social and Economic Benefits of Improved Adult Literacy. Adelaide: Australian Government.

³³ Gyarmati, D. et al. 2014.

The issue of literacy is complex and involves stakeholders from education, employers, members of industry-specific associations, employees, human resources professionals and representatives of vocational training organizations, to name a few. According to Kania & Kramer, social issues are the result of complex factors that require the involvement of government, private and non-profit entities and therefore require a joint response.³⁴

Given the complexity of workplace literacy, the large number of inter-sectoral stakeholders involved and the limited resources available, there is a need to innovate new strategies and solutions. Innovation entails “novel applications of ideas, the ideas themselves need not necessarily be new: the process often involves novel adaptations (or re-combinations) of existing ideas and/or their application to new areas.”³⁵ Such an approach can also be applied to achieve systemic change with a view to tackling the underlying causes of social problems rather than just alleviating their symptoms.

In the context of workplace literacy, adopting such an approach can help shape unique solutions that can be scaled up to address known gaps and challenges. It can focus on both developing new or ground-breaking practices as well as generating collaborations between stakeholders that may otherwise not come together to solve this issue. Using a social innovation model also pre-supposes each sector will bring evidence, best practices and unique approaches together to address the concern jointly. The recommendations in this paper focus on generating collaboration between a broad base of actors who may or may not come together otherwise to bring about systemic, cultural change.

³⁴ Kania, J. & Kramer, M. 2011. Collective Impact. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, 9(1), 36-41.

³⁵ Policy Horizons Canada. 2010. “Social Innovation”: What Is It? Who Does It?, s.l.: Government of Canada.

OUR APPROACH

This project was designed to examine the barriers to addressing issues of workplace literacy for employers. In the early stages of the project, PPF organized roundtables that focused on a specific business sector in each province. For example, the first roundtable, held in Winnipeg (March 2016), focused on the manufacturing sector and the second, held in Toronto (April 2016), was intended to focus on the retail sector. However, it became clear during the planning phase for both roundtables that many employers were unwilling to talk about this issue, even using the Chatham House Rule.³⁶ Between the first and second roundtables, PPF moved away from business-sector themes for each roundtable and adopted a format where representatives from any business sector were welcome to attend a roundtable, provided they had experience either managing staff or providing workplace literacy training.

Roundtables

PPF convened roundtable discussions in Vancouver, Calgary, Saskatoon, Toronto, Winnipeg and Moncton over 13 months from March 2016 to April 2017. Each roundtable lasted between two and six hours and began with a short presentation by ABC Life Literacy Canada that provided international, national and provincial overviews of workplace literacy in Canada, drawing from PIAAC data. Following the presentations, PPF staff facilitated group conversations among stakeholders from the private industry (including representatives from small, medium and large enterprises in manufacturing, retail, transportation, management consultation, biotechnology, mining and construction), workplace literacy trainers, the non-profit sector, unions and labour organizations, industry associations, post-secondary institutions and federal, provincial and municipal governments. PPF tried but was unsuccessful at attracting any representation from the K-12 education sector to participate in the roundtables or survey. As such, the contributions from education providers at that level is noticeably absent. The facilitated group discussions focused on the industry experiences of participants as they related to the issues of workplace literacy and training.

PPF invoked the Chatham House Rule at all roundtables. While operating under the Chatham House Rule, one note taker was designated to record the themes of each roundtable discussion without attributing comments to individual participants. A list of the roundtable participants is available in [Appendix A](#). The notes from each roundtable were then analyzed for common themes. Those themes are discussed in the subsequent sections of the report, and compared and contrasted to the survey results.

³⁶ [The Chatham House rule](#) refers to a practice whereby participants in a meeting are invited to speak freely with the understanding that no comment delivered during said meeting will be attributed to the person who delivered it.

Survey

PPF designed a short online survey to understand workplace literacy issues such as the scope and prevalence of workplace literacy concerns, supports available and the barriers and challenges to addressing concerns. The survey was disseminated to all roundtable participants, approximately 250 people in managerial positions and more than 6,500 human resources professionals across Canada.

The sample

Two hundred respondents completed the survey (for a response rate of 2.85 percent) yielding a sample of which only 55.4 percent is from the private sector, and is over-representative of large firms and respondents from Alberta.

- Half of survey respondents (55.42 percent) are employed in private industry, 18.67 percent are from federal, provincial, or municipal government departments, 15.06 percent are from non-profit organizations, and 4.22 percent are from academic institutions.
- 95.2 percent of organizations represented in the survey have an internal HR function, though for 21 percent of those organizations, the human resources function is performed by one person.
- Survey respondents represented more than 18 different business sectors in the Canadian economy.
- The majority of organizations within the sample were large companies, employing more than 1,000 people (40.12 percent). Approximately 20 percent of organizations in the sample were small enterprises, with fewer than 99 employees, and the remaining 39.5 percent were medium-sized enterprises with more than 100 and fewer than 999 employees.
- Most organizations employed people primarily within Alberta (46.83 percent), followed more broadly by those within Canada (28.97 percent), then North America (12.3 percent) and outside North America (9.13 percent).

EXPLORING KEY THEMES FROM ROUNDTABLES

Literacy is a spectrum

Roundtable participants agreed unanimously: literacy is a spectrum, not binary. Every person is different; individuals have strengths and weaknesses or areas where they excel and where they may need help. Each person brings a different and unique skillset and set of competencies to their workplace. All these skills have value and can be shared with and taught to others.

Roundtable participants suggested that in order to embrace the idea that literacy is a spectrum, a broader definition of literacy is necessary. The broader definition can highlight how literacy affects different aspects of people's lives such as health, finances and the workplace. To destigmatize the conversation about literacy, roundtable participants advocated for new, inclusive language like 'spiky profiles' and 'lifelong learning'. This language detracts from the have/have not binary that rates the skills and abilities of one person against another.

To illustrate the example of the spiky profile, one roundtable participant held out her hand and listed five of her personal strengths and five areas where she is working to improve. For each strength, she touched the tip of a finger. For each area requiring improvement, she pointed to one of her interdigital folds – webbing – between her fingers. To illustrate the benefit of different profiles, the participant discussed the growing number of labour market agreements underway in the technology sector. The purpose of these agreements is to increase participation of workers who have strengths in computational mathematics that were formerly associated with autism. According to the roundtable discussants, such a shift in mindset is also reflected in the language used to refer to this group. Instead of using terms such as 'people with disabilities' that reinforce the skills polarity, roundtable participants recommended introducing the idea of 'people with diverse abilities'.

Learning is continuous

In a competitive economic context, this dynamic definition of literacy is further broadened as employees are expected to continually learn, grow, upskill and update their learning. Roundtable participants affirmed that employers and employees should invest in keeping their skills sharp and in developing new skills and competencies as technology and demands of the labour market change. New skills are not learned quickly; they require patience, investment and practice. Adopting a 'continuous learning' approach to training enables everyone to remain current, effective and productive at work. Continuous learning is also likely to

have a ‘spillover effect’ into other aspects of individuals’ lives and can benefit not only the individual but their colleagues, families and children.^{37,38,39}

Both assertions by roundtable participants about the value of lifelong learning – to keep skills sharp and develop new ones – are supported by research that demonstrates the underutilization of skills may cause employees to lose them over time.⁴⁰ According to Green & Riddell, an average Canadian loses one school grade level in literacy over their lifetime, beginning at age 25 and dropping over 40 years of age.⁴¹ People belonging to the lower socio-economic strata are most likely to experience this loss in literacy,⁴² contributing to a steadily increasing gap between high-literacy and low-literacy employees.^{43,44,45}

According to roundtable participants, lifelong learning is not yet a widely accepted approach in many workplaces. Enculturing such an approach will require significant investment of resources and time. This idea is supported by the survey findings: only 28 percent of the respondents felt literacy training would be beneficial to all employees, while 46 percent of survey respondents indicated it would benefit select employees only. Roundtable participants shared examples of workplaces where training is considered an indication of poor performance and a threat to one’s job. To encourage positive and constructive attitudes towards lifelong learning, roundtable participants suggested developing programs to reward employers and employees in these settings. For example, participants suggested the creation of a credit or badge system where individuals can take courses and receive recognition for their achievements.

Overall, the study points to the importance of revisiting the definition of literacy and broadening this understanding among both employers and the workforce. Study participants also highlighted that if stakeholders adopted a ‘lifelong learning approach’, literacy concerns would be destigmatized, offering opportunities for individuals to constantly strengthen their skills.⁴⁶

³⁷ Hartley, R. & Horne, J. 2006.

³⁸ Murray, S. & Shillington, R. 2012b. [Understanding the link between literacy, health literacy and health](#), Data Angel.

³⁹ Murray, S. & Shillington, R. 2009. [Addressing Canada’s Literacy Challenge: A Cost/Benefit Analysis](#), Data Angel.

⁴⁰ Lane, J. & Murray, T. S. 2015. *Smarten Up Its Time to Build Essential Skills*, s.l.: Canada West Foundation.

⁴¹ Green, D.A. & Riddell, C. 2007.

⁴² Harwood, C. 2012.

⁴³ Heisz, A., Notten, G. & Situ, J. 2016. *The Association Between Skills and Low Income*, s.l.: Minister of Industry.

⁴⁴ Green, D.A. & Riddell, C., 2007.

⁴⁵ Osberg, L.. 2000.

⁴⁶ Stakeholders shared examples of such continuous learning: among some trade union systems, training is offered to employees on a continuous basis in multiple formats that may include distance courses and evening or weekend classes. Unions that employ this training structure work to stay informed of future needs arising within their industry, while promoting the benefits of training. This proactive approach creates an expectation around training built right into the union’s culture and is instilled into new members upon their orientation into the union.



Poor literacy carries a stigma

Roundtable participants took part in extended discussions about the stigma associated with admitting to a professional weakness and asking for help. Many roundtable participants shared that for people of any age who don't excel in the traditional classroom environment, discussions about training and literacy can be contentious and threatening. However, for employees in the work context, this stigma is greatly increased.

Roundtable participants agreed that the role and responsibility of all actors – employers, federal, provincial and municipal governments, unions, the education sector and NGOs and literacy trainers – is to first and foremost destigmatize the issue. While survey participants did not speak to de-stigmatization, they placed importance on literacy and skills training. Roundtable participants shared that employees who were considered 'not good at school' and who preferred to work in professions where reading, writing and arithmetic were not a daily requirement, historically had found a home in the trades. However, roundtable participants noted that trade occupations are undergoing significant change. Increasingly, these trades rely on the use of digital technology to manage complex machinery; fewer employees can count on working with their hands. These employees now need advanced levels of literacy to succeed.

Tool terminology: An example of a new literacy challenge

Tool terminology is not identified in the nine core literacy levels. It does present a literacy challenge among the trades. Low tool terminology equates to lower production and higher risks associated with health and safety. This example is a reminder of the consistently changing curriculum and the need for ongoing funding to support these changes. While there is no standardized system for trades training across Canada, roundtable respondents identified Alberta as employing a strategic and effective training strategy. Trade union members within the province receive free training and education related to their selected occupation. An initial exam upon joining their respective union is used to determine the individual's literacy skills and will help guide them into appropriate training and educational programs. Providing these free education opportunities gives the union a competitive edge in the economy by having skilled and trained workers. For those employed in non-unionized trades, literacy expectations and educational opportunities tend to be more limited.

These jobs are changing faster than the employees' skillset. Men and women who have difficulty with reading, reading comprehension, the practical application of written material or learning how to use new technology are struggling to keep up.

Roundtable participants highlighted that such employees recognize their skills need updating, but do not speak up or seek support for fear that vocalizing their challenges and admitting their literacy needs will cost them their job. Participants also shared that it can be degrading for people at work to admit they struggle with reading and reading comprehension; this is especially true for older adults. The stigma and embarrassment associated with low skills in these areas may prevent employees from keeping up with the pace of change at their workplace.

Continuous learning, according to roundtable participants, would help to reduce the stigma⁴⁷ associated with workplace literacy concerns if all workers or employees are encouraged to learn and grow continuously, rather than singling out a few for additional supports or upskilling. Continuous learning would also create awareness of the issue of low literacy.

⁴⁷ While the concept of a stigma associated with low workplace literacy skills was raised in all roundtables by participants in different geographic regions, different business sectors, and in reference to employees with a range of ages and socioeconomic status, further research is required to determine if there is a link between people at work who are stigmatized and those who aren't.

The development of new sector-based delivery models for literacy training over the last six or seven years is a strong example of continuous learning approaches. Notably, the notion of embedding learning activities for literacy within an occupational context and customizing them to not only the learner's skills but to their specific job performance gaps allows literacy training to be redefined as training for job performance. This facilitates not only less stigma but higher levels of engagement and more effective training.⁴⁸

Roundtable participants agree that workplace literacy can be significantly reduced by creating awareness of the issue. They discussed how Canada needs a new public conversation about literacy; one that creates an opportunity for constructive discussion about the need for lifelong learning for Canadians. All Canadians can contribute to the de-stigmatization of workplace literacy and improve Canada's literacy rates by talking openly about the number of Canadians living with low literacy, creating an understanding of the issue and mobilizing action around the topic.

The symptoms of low workplace literacy

According to roundtable participants, workplace literacy is an issue that remains hidden in plain sight. They shared examples of how employees hid or masked those skills that required training. Such coping mechanisms included asking colleagues to share or trade tasks or read their mail, or moving jobs in an organization rather than learning new skills or technology.

Hiding or masking low literacy levels can have negative consequences. For example, one roundtable participant talked about the importance of reading labels and understanding the warnings on chemical packaging. Mixing the wrong materials could result in an explosion, injuring or even killing others. The same participant described an incident where an employee masked his inability to read the warning notices on a piece of machinery and, as a result, gave himself third-degree burns on his hands. These types of workplace accidents are a threat to the safety of all employees on a job site. They result in delayed progress of a project, reduced productivity and lower morale among employees. In each case, these accidents and their results could have been avoided if employees were encouraged to speak up and ask for help from supervisors or other colleagues.

Contrary to the roundtable discussions – where the majority of respondents were employers or literacy trainers – the majority of survey respondents (48 percent) indicated literacy was not an issue within their organization. Only 23 percent felt it was an issue, with 29 percent stating they were unsure. In addition, most respondents (60 percent) felt literacy was not an issue that was negatively affecting their organization's employees, 28 percent indicated it was an issue, and 12 percent stated they were not sure.

⁴⁸ Gyarmati, D. et al. 2014.

When survey respondents were asked if employees could improve their performance through literacy and essential skills training, 55 percent agreed and 35 percent were unsure. The difference in recognition of the impact of low workplace literacy between the roundtable participants (primarily employers and workplace literacy trainers) and survey respondents (primarily human resources professionals) is very interesting. The findings could be pointing to a number of issues relevant to internal communications or internal information sharing, in which case further research is required to understand the disconnect between employers, trainers and human resources professionals. The findings could also point to a difference in the severity of the skills gap and the degree to which those gaps compromise job performance and business outcomes. The latter scenario is, according to Gyarmati et al., exactly where an effective workplace literacy program should focus: targeting and improving those skills that positively impact business outcomes.⁴⁹

These incongruous results are not contradictions, but rather a result of differences in the severity of skills gaps and the degree to which these gaps compromise job performance and business outcomes. Not all skills gaps will compromise performance and business outcomes. This is one of the critical dimensions of the complexity of this issue – and which not many observers talk about. One must understand not only the literacy skills challenges that workers have, but the relationship between skills and job performance, and how performance suffers as a result of a gap. It's not that employers are contradictory or are minimizing or ignoring the literacy challenge, it is that they either have insufficient information about how literacy compromises performance in their industry/organization, or they have adequate information and know that it does not compromise it sufficiently to warrant the training investment.

While there are several implications to this, a key one emphasized here is that it's not enough to say literacy and essential skills are in demand and they need to be addressed. What is required for an effective workplace literacy and essential skills (WLES) training strategy is well-designed needs assessments that determine not only the skills gaps, but also the most critical job performance gaps and business needs. Helping employers understand which of those skills gaps will lead to performance gains is key – and then designing and delivering literacy and essential skills training (LES) training solutions that are customized to achieve alignment with those performance areas – that is the magic sauce.

Without well-designed needs assessments (both for a sector and for individual organizations) it's very difficult for employers and even skilled LES practitioners to cut through that complexity and really understand where the training should be focused to warrant the investments. Again, these issues are touched on by Gyarmati et al. and, indeed, several recommendations from the UPSKILL study revolve around these points.

⁴⁹ Gyarmati, D. et al. 2014.

As a knowledge-based economy, job growth is occurring in areas where there is high demand for people who already engage in their work with a higher level of workplace literacy and essential skills than in the past,⁵⁰ especially as jobs are disappearing to automation.⁵¹ In the face of increasing automation, employers, government, unions and post-secondary institutions have an opportunity to work together to leverage rich learning opportunities already present in the workplace to create a more highly engaged workforce. Collectively, all working Canadians are either learning or losing our abilities. A nuanced understanding – and strategy – that enables every organization to address workplace literacy through a spectrum of associated skills will lay the foundation for a sustainable, competitive Canadian workforce.

Supporting workplace literacy

Roundtable participants further indicated that employers and unions should work to create a safe space to voice concerns related to workplace literacy. Most organizations felt essential skills training would be beneficial for their employees (44 percent, with an additional 40 percent indicating some employees would benefit). Most survey respondents (58 percent) also indicated they would encourage employees to take advantage of the literacy training if it was available.



Despite this support for workplace literacy, only 22 percent indicated their organization would give employees time off work with pay to complete literacy training. About 34 percent stated such support only under special circumstances, while approximately 19 percent felt it should be available only for certain employees and about 16 percent stated no. Also, when asked if they had previously supported an employee in receiving literacy training, most survey respondents indicated they had not (approximately 77 percent). Only 24 percent had previously supported an employee in receiving training. Gyarmati et al. suggest the lack of uptake on or investment in workplace literacy training is due to uncertainty about job performance gains and associated returns each firm

⁵⁰ Harwood, C. 2012.

⁵¹ Coulombe, S. & Tremblay, J.-F. 2005.

can expect and, more broadly, a lack of sector-specific labour market information on returns from this type of investment in people at work.⁵²

Providing training and allocation of budgets

Workplace literacy training can support employees in continually building their capacities and growing in their role. Ninety-two per cent of survey respondents shared that their organizations took an active role in providing training for staff, with 52 percent indicating their employees have individual learning plans. However, this training does not necessarily focus on literacy or match the employees' abilities by including support for diverse starting places and pace-of-learning work content.

Participants also spoke about the relationship between learning styles, diverse abilities and literacy. They indicated that to prepare people to learn necessitates an understanding of their diverse abilities to design appropriate training, but that many organizations identify a person to provide training who has no knowledge on the subject matter. Considerably less attention is paid to the ability of the individual to effectively communicate knowledge and skills, and their ability to assess whether participants understand and can apply the material.

Identifying training needs

Many roundtable participants indicated they are not equipped to have discussions about training and learning plans with their employees, citing a lack of managerial training. Managers are often promoted based on records of good performance related to their subject matter expertise, and are not prepared for the team-managing challenges that accompany their new role. As a result, managers lack the skillset to effectively navigate conversations on sensitive topics that can become awkward or even confrontational. Select roundtable participants admitted to avoiding these conversations with employees due to discomfort with the subject matter and insufficient training to approach the subject in a constructive manner that puts the employee at ease. This was confirmed by the survey respondents as well: 27 percent of survey respondents indicated they were unsure how to even identify if an employee needed training. Further, 12 percent of respondents indicated they are unsure how to approach the subject of workplace literacy and barriers with employees. When survey respondents were asked about the process through which training needs were identified, only about seven percent were employee-identified. The majority (85 percent) of training needs are identified both by the employer and the employee together. Roundtable participants suggested employers and unions can make people at work feel more comfortable discussing and confronting concerns and challenges related to workplace training if opportunities for workplace training are embedded in the regular work life.

⁵² Gyarmati, D. et al. 2014.

Other barriers to workplace literacy training

Cost and financial barriers were also commonly cited as a critical barrier for workplace training (26 percent). Without employer support, workplace literacy may continue to be a challenge for employees. In contrast to this, however, when survey respondents were asked about whether there were barriers preventing their organizations from engaging employees in literacy training, most respondents indicated no (58.84 percent) as opposed to yes (45.16 percent), once again highlighting the ‘masking’ of workplace literacy concerns.

Overall, the study underscores the importance of workplace literacy and the role employers can play in shaping employee skills and competencies. Simultaneously, however, the data show that often employers fall short when it comes to providing operational or financial support to employees to upskill or strengthen their literacy.

LES training in the workplace – strategies

Many roundtable discussions benefitted from the presence of workplace literacy trainers – from a variety of backgrounds and sectors – who shared the insights gained throughout their careers. These individuals offered a few important insights about the effective design, delivery and uptake of workplace training programs. The most important lesson is *to meet each person where he or she is at in their individual learning journey*. Namely, embed literacy training within the current work context so that it is seamless for the learner. This type of approach demonstrates higher level of engagement and more effective training.

Literacy trainers and employers from rural communities suggested the solution can be as simple as ensuring the delivery of workplace literacy training at a time and place that is convenient for the learner. Adults juggle many demands on their time, not the least of which is keeping jobs and keeping families fed and clothed. Enabling people to participate in workplace literacy training on site and during or adjacent to regular work hours increases participation and uptake.

A number of employers also called for a train-the-trainer program, which some regarded as similar to an apprenticeship model. In communities where literacy trainers are not available regularly, or in organizations where the workplace literacy context is particularly specific, an external trainer is not a viable model. Employers would instead allocate resources to have one person on staff trained to in turn provide training to other employees. This model would allow the on-site staff to personalize the curriculum for the specific context, and would enable the organization to provide the training on site, even embedded in the regular work day context.

Providing workplace literacy training requires a specific skillset; few supervisors and managers have that skillset. In addition, many managers are often unable to find adequate resources or external support and are left to train employees themselves. Many roundtable participants who were literacy trainers indicated their own firsthand experience in providing literacy and essential skills training to companies. These participants

shared successful tips and strategies while outlining the various stages of the training process, beginning with the initial conversation about training benefits all the way to indicators of success.

From a trainer's perspective, employers typically respond in one of two ways as it relates to literacy training. The first is to focus on the employee and individual benefits. The second is to focus on the business bottom line, a cost vs. benefit scenario. Literacy trainer roundtable participants shared that employers who believe investment will deliver results will typically respond to a business case that outlines the intrinsic and public goods associated with literacy training. This is also known as the spillover effect. They believe literacy training will not only improve the ability of the individual to successfully do their job, but can also impact their ability to help their children with homework, negotiate a mortgage or build skills to develop and stick to a budget.

Employers who focus on the bottom line will respond to the ability of literacy training to improve their bottom line and their overall productivity – including reductions in workplace injury, improvements to turnover and even improved morale.



Participants agreed that companies that introduce literacy training as a blanket program for all employees see greater success than those who target individuals. When **literacy training is provided on-site, whether that is through coaching or mentoring programs or train-the-trainer model**, it results in a number of positive outcomes, including:

- Strong relationships and trust among employees;
- Removal of barriers (time, distance and access) for employees;
- Meeting the learner where they are at;
- Content-specific material related to the individual's employment; and
- Destigmatizing the concept of training by integrating learning in the workplace.

Literacy trainer participants could suggest and discuss many successful examples of on-site workplace literacy training and see this as a best practice in introducing, implementing and creating impactful company-driven literacy training.

RECOMMENDATIONS

A renewed emphasis on workplace literacy is both timely and critical. This report examined the complexity and scope of the problem in Canada and points to the need of a multi-dimensional approach to successfully address this crucial issue. The roundtable participants offered many ideas and solutions to contribute to improved workplace literacy. This section includes a summary and discussion of the recommendations.

A CULTURE OF LEARNING

The participants of this study spoke at length about the need to move away from a binary understanding of literacy and to instead expand the definition to include a spectrum of learning levels, styles and capacities. Through such a model of literacy, individuals are less likely to be labeled or stigmatized because of their literacy needs. Every individual has different capacities and strengths and their learning levels are but one aspect of this. This model also opens the possibility of nurturing people’s innate curiosity so they are eager to learn and absorb throughout their lives. Learning spills over beyond the formal classroom or education systems and emerges in every context of daily life. With such an approach, learners are forever open to the possibility of adapting, growing and evolving. This perspective of learning as a lifelong event has particular benefits for the current labour market or employment context, where the pace of change for operations, technology, research and development is rapid. Even beyond the context of the workplace, such a lifelong learning approach opens individuals to constantly renewing and reimagining aspects of their personal, civic, social and political lives. **All levels of government, employers, unions and university programs for**

human resources professionals have an opportunity to work together to create awareness of the importance of lifelong learning as a means to destigmatize the topic and encourage all Canadians to speak up, act, and invest in themselves.

NATURAL EDUCATION

“You have a problem or an inspiration, you ask someone who knows, they show you how, you do it. You fail, with no consequence except you didn’t achieve what you desperately wanted to achieve. The failure spurs you to seek more information. You do, and you learn it. With the new information, you can do it better, maybe succeed. From that success, you envision the next step. And so on.”

Osbourne, D., 2017.

LIFELONG LEARNING SUPPORT FOR EMPLOYEES AND EMPLOYERS

An important factor to support lifelong learning is creating policy and service structures that encourage both employers and employees to continually sharpen their skillset and strengthen their capacities. Study participants recognized that employers are faced with tough financial decisions every year regarding the number of individuals they employ and to whom they provide training. Canada's aging population and shrinking workforce has created a demographic crunch, putting a strain on public resources and threatening overall quality of life. There is a need to develop more efficient and effective ways to deliver services and programs for all Canadians. **An opportunity exists for the federal and provincial governments to work together to redefine labour market training programs – such as through the Canada Job Grant program – to include allowances for literacy and numeracy programs. In partnership with industry associations and trade-sector unions, federal and provincial governments can work together to identify the most effective delivery and funding models for each sector.**

CONTEXTUALIZED LITERACY AND ESSENTIAL SKILLS TRAINING

In adult education, contextualized training includes assessment, instruction and learning practices focused on developing the skills and knowledge needed to perform specific tasks or respond to specific situations. Rather than focus only on the possession of basic skills and knowledge, contextualized training focuses on the active application of those skills and that knowledge in a context, while being as authentic as possible. Both employers and employees identify these practices as currently important and meaningful in their everyday work. Employers are able to see the applicability of training within their business performance needs.

Contextualized Essential Skills training should be as customized as possible to a given business or sector. Sectors should band together to explore clustered training, where workers with similar job descriptions across firms train together. This is especially beneficial to small and medium-sized business that cannot afford to have all workers at training all at once.

NATIONAL CHAMPION FOR WORKPLACE LITERACY

The issue of literacy is wide in scope but also deeply stigmatized. This report shows that even though stakeholders are aware of workplace literacy and believe in the mandate, they often remain unsure how to address it within their own organization or are unable to provide adequate supports to those who need it. **Canada requires a national champion for workplace literacy to lead a culture of change on this deeply masked issue, to create cross-sectoral collaborations and develop innovative solutions that are sustainable. Such a champion could help to raise funds for research and partner with a coalition of workplace literacy trainers to develop a toolbox of resources for employers, managers and human resources professionals that focuses on identification and assessment of employees with low workplace literacy.**

LEARNER-CENTERED PROGRAMMING

One of the key lessons highlighted through the study was that literacy training needs to be customized to meet learner needs. For individuals who struggled in the traditional classroom setting, re-creating that setting with a standard approach to training can have negative consequences. In many cases, employees respond better when the training is relevant for their current work and when the teaching approach reflects their experience, knowledge and capacities. Developing a modular approach to learning that can be driven by the learner, both in terms of pace and capacity, can be helpful. Additionally, offering considerations around timing, location and medium (face-to-face or using technology) can encourage learners across the literacy spectrum.

As a component of government-sponsored training programs, individuals will have access to literacy mentors or programs that offer customized training solutions for learners of all levels and in formats that resonate with the learner, such as mentorships, apprenticeships or peer-supported learning models. These models focus on learning by doing and learning through observation of someone with greater skill and experience, and on fostering a culture of shared learning where employees can learn in a stigma-free and inclusive work culture.

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