

Is Workplace Literacy Really an Issue?

“22% of adult Canadians have serious difficulty with reading, writing and math (level 1), and another 26% do not have the literacy skills necessary to prosper in the knowledge-based economy (level 2).”

-- *Literacy, Economy, and Society, International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS)*, OECD, 1995

“The 1994 International Adult Literacy Survey clearly demonstrated that Canada has a serious low literacy skill problem: it found that an estimated eight million individuals 16 years of age and older lacked the necessary literacy skills to participate fully in Canadian society. This situation entails significant economic and social costs for those with low literacy levels and also for the country as a whole, since it is well known that low literacy skills adversely affect employment, earnings, health, social interaction and civil participation, to name just a few critical aspects of everyday life.”

-- *Raising Adult Literacy Skills: The Need for a Pan-Canadian Response*, Human Resources Development Canada, June 2003

“Research shows that improved literacy pays off not only in labour market productivity, but also in better outcomes for children; Aboriginal development; better integration of newcomers; lower healthcare costs; safe and more cohesive communities; more successful rehabilitation of offenders; greater civic participation; and more. Improving literacy not only improves outcomes for individuals, families and communities; it alleviates the economic strain that many social problems pose on our society as a whole.”

-- *Strengthening Our Literacy Foundation is Key to Canada's Future*, Movement for Canadian Literacy, April 2003

“The prevalence of low literacy skills in Canada continues to be a nationwide problem ... Without these foundation skills, individuals are extremely limited not only in terms of their ability to learn, but also in their ability to function fully in society.”

-- *Raising Adult Literacy Skills: The Need for a Pan-Canadian Response*, Human Resources Development Canada, June 2003

“The concept of ‘lifelong learning’ is not new but in practice, it remains an ideal. The upgrading of basic skills and literacy will better assure individuals of an improved quality of life. This is increasingly important as technology continually raises the literacy threshold. For example, grade 12 completion is no longer a proxy for literacy, entry into employment, or post-secondary education.”

-- *Closing the Skills Gap: A Report of the British Columbia Chamber of Commerce Skill Shortages Initiative*, April 2002

“It is estimated that by 2004 more than 70% of all new jobs created in this country will require some form of post-secondary education. This trend does not bode well for low-skilled/low literacy individuals in the labour market, as evidenced by the high proportion and rate of unemployment among the least educated segments of the labour force.”

-- *Raising Adult Literacy Skills: The Need for a Pan-Canadian Response*, Human Resources Development Canada, June 2003

“Although individuals aged 25 to 34 are on the whole better educated than any previous generation, a significant number of them have not completed high school. In 2001, about 15% did not have a high school diploma. More young men than women had not completed high school, 17% compared with 13%. However, the proportion without a high school diploma declined considerably in the past decade. In 1991, it stood at 25% for men aged 25 to 34, and 21% for their female counterparts.”

“The census counted nearly one million young adults aged 20 to 34 who had not completed high school. These individuals accounted for 16% of the total population in this age group... Incomplete high school entails several risks. The International Adult Literacy Survey, as reported in the OECD publication, *Literacy in the Information Age*, showed that Canadians with less than high school tend to perform more poorly on simple daily literacy tasks than their counterparts in other countries. Census data on employment income in the companion report to this education release indicate that the earning power for this population is particularly limited.”

“Less than 44% of British Columbia’s working-age population had high school education or less in 2001, down substantially from almost 53% in 1991.”

-- *Education in Canada: Raising the Standard* – 2001 Census: analysis series, Ministry of Industry, 2003

“The economic and social dividends to be gained from strengthening the literacy skills of Canadians are huge. Yet despite the clear benefits of action, the existing literacy system is woefully inadequate to handle the need. The lack of consistent and adequate funding, vision, strategy, and coordination has meant that literacy needs have tended to ‘fall through the cracks’. Less than 10% of Canadians who could benefit from literacy programs are receiving training. Of those who do enroll, over 30% drop out due mainly to socio-economic factors like job-related pressures, money problems, and family responsibilities.”

-- *Strengthening Our Literacy Foundation is Key to Canada’s Future*, Movement for Canadian Literacy, April 2003

“Despite the best efforts of groups like Literacy BC, basic reading, writing, numeracy and other ‘foundation’ skills are lacking in a significant portion of the workforce, both young and old. More emphasis needs to be placed on business-education-community partnerships, workplace literacy models, and best practices by stakeholders.

-- Closing the Skills Gap: A Report of the British Columbia Chamber of Commerce Skill Shortages Initiative, April 2002

“The use of new technologies in everyday life, changing demands in the labour market, and participation in the globalization process are exerting a major influence on employment and workforce skills. This involves a shift in labour demand away from workers with lower skills levels to those with higher skill levels ... “Because of these changes, individuals are increasingly required not only to have higher levels of education, but also the capacity to adapt, learn and master changes quickly and efficiently. This requires broad foundation skills that must be regularly updated and complemented with specific skills through training and lifelong learning processes. Literacy skills are critical in this context.”

“Even within occupational categories, evidence indicates there has been an increase in job complexity and greater use of communication, social and problem solving skills. Changes in workplace organization point in the same direction, as the growing number of firms using flexible workplace practices (such as team work and multi-skilling) tend to have more highly skilled and better educated workforces than firms organized along more traditional lines. Given the shift in demand towards highly skilled labour, the employment prospects for workers with lower levels of skill have deteriorated. This is evident in rising unemployment rates, lower levels of labour force participation and declines in real wages.”

-- Highlights from Literacy in the Information Age, OECD, May 2000

“All Canadian employees face challenges to ongoing employment ... These challenges stem largely from technology and technological change, which is revolutionizing the workplace, making work more complex, and demanding higher skill levels, even in entry-level positions.”

-- Heather Dickson, Assistant Deputy Minister, Employment, Government of BC, Employability Skills Forum, October 2002

“A fully engaged, participant citizenry is key to social and economic strength and vitality. But to participate fully in civic life, citizens must have the skills necessary to access and to act upon information. Whether casting a ballot in an election, participating in a community forum, accessing programs and services, defending their civic or human rights, or advocating for needed change, an effective democracy requires its citizens to be informed and engaged. Unfortunately, poor literacy skills effectively bar a large percentage of our population, both Canadian-born and newcomers, from participating in civic life. Literacy training provides people with the skills they need as a foundation for their full participation as citizens.”

-- Strengthening Our Literacy Foundation is Key to Canada’s Future, Movement for Canadian Literacy, April 2003