

Skills Shortages: Is Workplace Literacy Part of the Problem?

“The many small and medium-sized enterprises that participated (in our forums and survey) are very interested in the skill shortages issue, and most expect this to become a larger problem unless proactive measures that stimulate change are taken ... Lifelong learning, improving the image of non-university careers, improved literacy programs, and more workplace education were some of the themes from the Chamber forums.”

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

“Existing workers who we seek to retrain for other jobs may lack the requisite basic skills; unless we upgrade those skills, retraining may not be effective ... We assume that whatever basic skills we once learned are with us forever. They’re not. The skills we don’t use are the skills we lose.”

-- The Basics of Skills Shortages, Learning Curves, August 2001

“The labour force is aging and increasing more slowly. In fact, more than one-half of the people who will be in the labour force in 2015 are already in it. Hence, many of today’s workers will have to supply tomorrow’s skill requirements ... More than 40% of working-age Canadians lack the necessary basic literacy skills required for successful participation in our rapidly changing labour market.”

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

“Lack of qualified workers is a continuing concern; half of the current apprentices do not complete their training to become qualified in a trade.”

-- A New Model for Industry Training in British Columbia, BC Ministry of Advanced Education, December 2002

“Among the key challenges facing BC vis a vis the looming skills crisis include is the need to increase workplace literacy strategies ... Governments, industries, communities and educators need to develop and utilize more re-employment strategies to move unemployed workers into new jobs.”

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

“Consider how the current skills shortages compel us to look beyond the existing workforce to the unemployed and to those who have traditionally been underrepresented in the labour force: women, youth, visible minorities, people with disabilities, and First Nations. More than ever before, we need to find effective ways of recruiting and training them for available jobs. The reality is that many of these people may need to upgrade their basic or “soft” skills – if for no other reason than their lack of recent work experience. The reality also is that traditional paths for upgrading such as college or school district ABE programs simply may not be ones that lead these people to success – for all kinds of reasons.”

-- The Basics of Skills Shortages, Learning Curves, August 2001

Some of the key themes from the forums in terms of taking action around this issue include:

- Upgrading the skill sets of all workers to meet future skill needs is critical. Therefore, the working population should be encouraged to embrace lifelong learning.
- Lower skilled jobs are disappearing, as more jobs become knowledge-based, requiring stronger basic skills and education; literacy in the workforce needs to be expanded.

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