

Workplace Learning

Bridging Employer and Employee Needs in BC's Capital Region

Phase 1 Report

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Executive Summary

The READ Society's Workplace Learning project, Phase 1, sought to explore and understand the issues that employers in BC's Capital Region were having regarding hiring, retaining and promoting employees with lower literacy skills. The project aimed to:

- increase awareness and understanding of employers and employees about workplace literacy and its relationship to business success
- identify employer and employee workplace literacy needs in sectors that were experiencing labour shortages
- identify workplace literacy best practices, model programs and practical solutions for employers who wish to implement workplace literacy programs.

Using a community-based, appreciative inquiry approach, we interviewed 15 employers and 15 employees from five sectors that were experiencing labour shortages: accommodation, construction, retail sales, food service and health care.

We found a convergence of employer and employee opinion on four points:

- There are literacy issues in their workplaces and these have a negative impact on safety, productivity, recruitment and retention.
- Most employees like to learn new things at work. They are more loyal to employers that offer training opportunities. Employers know this and try to provide a variety of learning options, which is to their advantage as well.
- A number of factors make it hard for employees to access training, such as childcare, scheduling, tuition costs, lost income and transportation. Employers are aware of these barriers. In order to minimize them, both groups are interested in ways to blend basic skills education with existing on-the-job training.
- Integrating basic skills education into existing workplace-based job training is an attractive training model.

At the time of our interviews, most employers agreed that literacy is important for business success. When they noticed employees having difficulty with basic skills,

they often made adaptations to their work, provided extra coaching or offered to pay for off-site classes. They realized that employees rarely disclose basic skills gaps to managers; they would therefore like more information about tools to assess basic skill levels.

If there is concrete evidence of need, they would consider implementing workplace literacy programs, especially if financial and technical assistance can be provided. Detailed guidelines for employers who wish to implement programs are given in the full report.

A literature review was conducted concurrently with this research, and has been published separately (READ, 2009). One outcome of that review was a list of workplace literacy best practices (Appendix J in this report).

Based on the research and the literature review, a number of recommendations were formulated. These include:

- Continue to communicate with employers to raise their awareness about workplace literacy and the options for assisting workers with lower levels of skills.
- Undertake further research to study sectors in more depth and validate the findings with a larger sample size. Continue to use solution-oriented, appreciative inquiry methods to uncover workplace literacy success stories.
- Encourage sectoral collaboration, because most businesses in BC's Capital Region are small.

Terms and Definitions

Literacy is defined by the International Adult Literacy Surveys as “using printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one’s goals, and to develop one’s knowledge potential.” This includes:

- **Document literacy:** The knowledge and skills required to locate and use information contained in various formats, including job applications, payroll forms, transportation schedules, maps, tables and charts.
- **Numeracy:** The knowledge and skills required to effectively manage the mathematical demands of diverse situations.
- **Problem-solving:** Involves goal-directed thinking and action in situations for which no routine solution procedure is available. The problem-solver has a more or less well-defined goal, but does not immediately know how to reach it. The understanding of the problem situation and its step-by-step transformation based on planning and reasoning constitute the process of problem-solving.
- **Prose literacy:** The knowledge and skills needed to understand and use information from texts, including editorials, news stories, brochures and instruction manuals. (ABC CANADA Literacy Foundation, 2005).

Employability Skills 2000+: “The skills you need to enter, stay in and progress in the world of work – whether you work on your own or as part of a team...Employability Skills 2000+ include communication, problem solving, positive attitudes and behaviours, adaptability, working with others, and science, technology and mathematics skills” (Conference Board of Canada, 2000).

Essential Skills: Essential Skills are the skills that people need for work, learning and life. They provide the foundation for learning all other skills and enable people to evolve with their jobs and adapt to workplace change. There are nine Essential Skills: reading, document use, numeracy, writing, oral communication, working with others, thinking, computer use, and continuous learning. (Office of Literacy and Essential Skills, 2008).

Workplace basic skills: These are the core skills that employees need to do their jobs successfully. They include literacy and other important skills, attitudes and behaviours that are essential to workplace success. (Conference Board of Canada, n.d.).

1. Background

The Canadian economy has shifted from reliance on manufacturing and natural resources to a knowledge-based economy. Global competition and rapid changes in technology require continuous learning and adaptation. The literacy levels of 40 per cent of working-age British Columbians (ages 16–65) are below those needed for jobs being created by the current economy (Brink, 2005). Most employees can read and write, but they may struggle to complete forms, comprehend written instructions, accurately calculate numbers or use computers. Their skill gaps hurt business and create hidden barriers to successful employment. Companies experience lower productivity, high staff turnover and increased costs due to health and safety violations. For employees, low skill levels translate into lower earnings, fewer work days and longer periods of unemployment over the course of their career.

Basic skills include reading text, document use, numeracy, writing, oral communication, and problem-solving. These skills can be developed at increasing levels of complexity throughout life. They provide the foundation for all other learning and enable people to adapt as their jobs change.

The READ Society's Workplace Learning project sought to explore and understand the issues employers in BC's Capital Region were having regarding hiring, retaining and promoting employees with limited literacy skills. Early in the project, the team prepared a project description and issues background (Appendices A and B) that presented the context for the study.

Employers and employees informally commented on how education and language limitations adversely affect job opportunities. They saw a connection between literacy and job success, echoing what workplace literacy researcher Allison Campbell (2003, p. 1) says: "Workplace literacy skills enable people to speak, write prose, and make better use of numbers and documents, so that they can work responsibly, alone or in teams." This study sought to understand the issues in more depth, and to seek practical solutions.

1.1 Environmental scan

At the time of the study, in the summer of 2008, the unemployment rate in British Columbia's Capital Region was at 3.1 per cent (Capital Regional District

[CRD], 2007). With low unemployment, employers were facing increasing recruitment and retention pressures. They were recruiting from a labour pool that included individuals with less education, and in some instances, limited English language skills.

A 2007 environmental scan of Greater Victoria's labour market found that the largest industry in the region was retail and wholesale trade (Harrison, 2008). In 2006, employment opportunities had increased in the Vancouver Island region in service industries (retail and wholesale trade) and the construction, health care, professional, scientific and technical areas (Service Canada, 2006). These six sectors employed 56 per cent of the workforce in the Victoria Census Metropolitan Area and are sectors that traditionally have lower literacy levels, with the exception of the scientific and technical sectors. The construction sector had an 89 per cent increase, making it the sector with the largest employment growth between 2002 and 2007 (Harrison, 2008).

Brink's 2007 environmental scan indicated that 64 per cent of BC adults with low literacy were concentrated in the following sectors: trade, finance, insurance, real estate and leasing; manufacturing; construction; accommodation and food services; and health care and social assistance (Brink, 2007). BC industries with the highest projected number of openings through 2011 (in order from most to least) were:

- 1 Health care and social assistance
 - 2 Retail trade
 - 3 Construction
 - 4 Educational services
 - 5 Accommodation and food services
 - 6 Transportation and warehousing
 - 7 Finance, insurance, real estate and leasing
 - 8 Management, administrative and other support
 - 9 Information, culture and recreation
- (Harrison, 2008, slide 17)

Based on this information, the Workplace Learning project concentrated on five sectors experiencing the greatest labour shortages in 2007: accommodation, food service, retail sales, construction and health care.

Seventy-five per cent of businesses in BC's Capital Region employ five or fewer employees (CRD, 2001). This makes the task of addressing literacy in the workforce difficult, as small businesses find it hard to dedicate time and money to improve workers' basic skills through workplace learning programs.

1.2 Economic changes

Significant changes occurred in the economy during the one-year research project. At the beginning of 2008 and throughout the summer months, both the Capital Region and the rest of the country enjoyed a strong economy. The interviews and initial employer survey were conducted in these summer months, when local employers continued to grapple with one of the lowest unemployment rates in the country.

By late 2008, the local economy began to slow down, reflecting the effects of international financial problems. Though Statistics Canada information confirms that Victoria still has a worker shortage, it remains to be seen how Capital Region employers will react and whether anxiety over the economy will affect their willingness to invest in training.

1.3 Regional awareness of workplace literacy issues

At the beginning of the project, there was little regional awareness of workplace learning and literacy, and virtually no awareness of READ's project. A series of articles on labour shortages and poor customer service in two local newspapers in May 2008 demonstrated that this lack of awareness is not limited to employers. Though some of the stories touched on inadequate training as a problem, the reporters did not include any mention of literacy skills training. A subsequent editorial in a daily newspaper also failed to make any connection between literacy skills and recruitment and retention problems. The daily newspaper subsequently published a letter to the editor from READ on the link between basic skills and recruitment and retention (Appendix C).

2. Research Methodology

2.1 Research style, partnerships and steering group

We used collaborative, community-based, appreciative inquiry research methods to elicit success stories, recommendations and concerns from local employers. A literature review was conducted concurrently to provide perspective on the workplace learning research and to determine best practices.

We established partnerships with representatives from five sectors experiencing the most acute labour shortages and from organizations with knowledge and experience in community-based research and employment readiness. Our four initial partners were from the hotel industry, the information technology sector, a job placement agency, and a community-based research agency.

The project began with the creation of a steering group to guide the work. People who could provide advice, insight and feedback on our work and on the pertinent sectors were recruited. One member was an adult learner who works in the construction industry. Other members were the initial partners, as well as representatives from health, retail, and immigrant services. The steering group met five times during the project, gave input on key decisions, made referrals, and contributed incentive prizes and meeting space.

One of the first decisions the steering group helped shape was which five sectors the project should investigate. Based on the environmental scan of the region, industries with the highest demand for workers were chosen: accommodation, construction, food service, health and retail sales.

2.2 Terminology

Literacy versus learning

Two months into the project, we changed the name from the Workplace *Literacy* project to the Workplace *Learning* project. This was subsequently changed on our project description (Appendix A). The change from “literacy” to “learning” reflected our growing awareness that, in order to keep up with changes that occur as a result of technology and the economy, people at all

levels of employment must continue learning. It also reflected our understanding that literacy is not simply either low or high: it is measured across a continuum, and all employees fit somewhere on that scale. The term “learning” conveys a more inclusive concept: it includes everyone.

Several outside factors also influenced our perspective. Members of the steering group raised concerns about the use of the word “literacy,” suggesting that the general public does not have an accurate understanding of the term. People often mistake it to mean “illiteracy” – not being able to read at all. The group also agreed that employers do not believe they have hired someone with low literacy, and employees do not want to admit that they have low literacy levels.

Literacy, basic skills and Essential Skills

As we began to write the first project descriptions, we started to substitute the term “essential skills” for “literacy.” The federal government’s work in this area was very helpful in clearly defining terminology that was acceptable and understandable to employers and employees. Human Resource and Social Development Canada (HRSDC) identified nine fundamental skills necessary for success in all types of work. They coined the term “essential skills” after finding that “literacy” was not well-received by employers and employees.

To avoid confusing our work with that of the federal government, however, we finally decided to use the term “basic skills” in our work. We defined basic skills as reading, writing text, document use, numeracy, oral communication, problem-solving and computer skills. A more detailed discussion of literacy terms and definitions is provided in the literature review produced by this project (READ, 2009, pp. 7–9).

Employer and employee

For the purposes of this report, the employer is not always the owner of the company. In some cases, the person interviewed as the “employer” was a manager, human resources manager or recruiter. The employees interviewed were sometimes managers who had an employer and were also responsible for hiring and supervising employees.

2.3 Surveys and interviews

In determining how to uncover the most useful information, the steering group and project team debated conducting a large-scale survey and holding public meetings. We chose instead to conduct face-to-face interviews that would allow for open-ended conversation with both employers and employees. This decision was partly based on information gleaned from the Community Council's research showing that personal contact was one of the most effective ways to engage employers (Community Social Planning Council of Victoria [Community Council], 2007a, p. 6).

Surveys

Two small surveys were designed for the 15 employers who were interviewed (Appendices E and F). The baseline survey was completed by employers before they were interviewed. It primarily established preliminary data on employers' knowledge of workplace literacy issues. A follow-up survey was conducted by e-mail at the end of the project to ascertain whether there was increased awareness among employers about workplace literacy issues.

Employees were not surveyed.

Interviews

We conducted interviews with 15 employees, 15 employers and one training institute manager. One of the employer interviews was a group interview that included five people in top management positions from the same company.

All interviews were confidential, in order to encourage open and honest dialogue. Participants were assured that their names and companies would not be made public at any time without their express permission. To further ensure confidentiality, employers and employees from the same company were not deliberately recruited, though in a few instances this did occur serendipitously.

The interviews included people from all five business sectors identified for this study and all geographic areas in the Capital Region, including Victoria (which includes the four core municipalities of Victoria, Saanich, Oak Bay, and Esquimalt), the West Shore (including Sooke), and the Saanich Peninsula. We aimed to include a balance of men and women from all age groups. However, in some sectors, such as construction and

health, we were only able to interview either men or women because of the demographics of those occupations.

Employers were recruited by referral or cold calls made after consulting yellow pages, business directories and websites. Prior to phoning an employer, background research about the company was done to understand the business and identify the appropriate person to speak with. During the initial call, staff explained the purpose of READ's project, and requested an interview at the employer's location. Most employers agreed. Subsequently, an email confirmation of their appointment was sent, along with background information about the project, and an explanation of what to expect during the interview. In some cases appointments were set several months in advance, due to employers' busy schedules. In all cases, a reminder e-mail was sent several days prior to the appointment.

In consideration of employers' busy schedules, our appointments were kept to an hour or less. For efficiency's sake, the initial survey and interview were done sequentially at the same appointment. At the end of the appointment, the employer was given a brief overview of workplace literacy and some resource materials relevant to their business sector. They were also asked for referrals to other employers.

It proved to be more difficult than expected to recruit employees to interview, even though we did not limit the interviews to employees with known or suspected literacy challenges. We realized the difficulty of finding people willing to admit to low literacy or skills gaps. Instead, the team appealed to the general public by creating a web page on the READ Society's website and wrote letters to the editors of two newspapers inviting people to contact us. When this yielded no response, a local non-profit organization distributed an e-mail to their list, offering "free chocolate and a one in 15 chance to win a night for two at The Fairmont Empress" in exchange for a one-hour interview. Despite this incentive, the e-mail did not generate any results. Subsequently, all of the employees were recruited through direct requests to known individuals in our personal networks and referrals they made. Personal contact was the best recruiting tool.

In order to convince employees to give up an hour of their time, the interviewer agreed to meet them at any location of their choice at any time convenient for them. This meant that some interviews were conducted on

weekend evenings, and a few were conducted in the interviewer's own home, with her husband and children providing childcare (and snacks and entertainment) for the employee's children. Some employees initially agreed to interviews but later failed to respond to phone calls and e-mails, and in one case simply did not show up for a scheduled interview.

We divided the task of interviewing between the researcher and the communications associate: the researcher conducted all the employer interviews, and the communications associate interviewed all the employees. This decision was based partly on practicalities (the researcher had already made several contacts by attending business organization meetings), but also on the need to give both team members perspective on all five sectors.

We created interview guides for employers and employees (Appendices G and H). Rather than requiring the interviewer to stick to the script of a formal interview, the interview guides enabled her to follow tangents of the conversation and then come back to the guide when appropriate. The questions were chosen after reviewing other workplace literacy surveys and studies, and with input from the steering group. The interview guide included a confidentiality agreement and a checklist to ensure that all steps in the interview process were completed consistently.

The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed, eventually producing over 1,000 pages of material. Employee interviews took about 45 minutes on average, while employer interviews averaged about one hour. Each interview was assigned a code number to protect interviewees' confidentiality, and all files are stored in a secure location.

2.4 Data analysis

To analyze the interview data, we transcribed all of the recordings verbatim and then compiled the answers to each question. Responses were counted and grouped, where the questions lent themselves to this approach. Once that was done, general themes and trends were extracted and put into separate spreadsheets for employers and employees.

The sample size varied for the different questions and tools used. Fifteen employees and 15 employers were interviewed, as well as one training institute coordinator. There were 20 respondents to the first employer survey

and 10 to the follow-up survey. Not all questions were answered by each respondent. Because of these variations and the small sample size, the data is being reported as the number of responses out of the total responses (e.g., 15 of 20). We chose not to convert these numbers to percentages because it could give a false impression that the trends we cite are more reliable than our small sample size can indicate.

We also analyzed employers' readiness to implement workplace basic skills. According to a New Zealand study of 441 companies, no single factor drove the decision to invest in such programming; rather, it was a convergence of needs and incentives that drove the decision. Implementation of workplace literacy training was influenced by a cluster of factors, including the economy, understanding the "business case" for training, having internal organizational champions, availability of financial resources and access to programming expertise. The study categorized employers along a four-stage continuum of readiness.

We felt that this developmental approach would be useful to help us understand how best to assist each employer. Therefore, we created a four-point continuum of readiness similar to the New Zealand study's continuum, adapted to fit the objectives of our study. The categories were:

- Stage 1 (Unaware/Unready) – unaware of basic skills issues in their workforce and unready to take any action about it
- Stage 2 (Somewhat Aware/Unready) – somewhat aware of basic skills issues, but unready to consider action
- Stage 3 (Aware/Ready) – aware of basic skills issues and possibly ready to take action
- Stage 4 (Taking Action) – providing basic skills education in the workplace.

A further explanation of these categories and the ratings of employers in this study is included in Appendix I. Employers were categorized through a content analysis of their interview as well as their responses to the initial survey.

2.5 Communications

Our preliminary research indicated that only a very small number of employers were aware of this project, and that even fewer employers could make the link between low literacy/numeracy and job performance. We therefore

created a communications plan for the project. The plan identified specific target audiences, key messages and tactics. The main audience was employers. Objectives included:

- creating awareness and credibility for the Workplace Learning project among employers in the five sectors
- raising employer awareness and understanding that 1) low literacy is widespread in the workforce, 2) low literacy is linked to high turnover and a reduced bottom line, 3) there are affordable ways to upgrade basic skills in the workplace, and 4) upgrading basic skills benefits both employers and employees
- engaging project champions in three sectors who would make their colleagues aware of the project and our key messages.

To reach employers, a web page for the project was added to the READ website. It included a way to sign up for a mailing list. Letters to the editor were sent in response to news stories on the worker shortage. This led to several articles in local newspapers (Appendices C and D). The Community Council published an article in *The Employer CHALLENGE* e-newsletter featuring one of the employers we had interviewed and information about our research. This was emailed to approximately 1,400 employers in the region. We also created a project description and a backgrounder that included frequently asked questions. Other tactics included networking at business meetings and conventions, face-to-face discussions with employers and contacting sector representatives.

3. Research Findings

The findings reported here are based on input from employers and employees. The employer findings come from the initial survey, the follow-up survey and the interviews. The employee findings come from interview data. Because of the small sample size, the findings should be considered a snapshot of conditions at the time of the study. They indicate trends that may warrant further inquiry.

One of the project objectives was to look for trends within sectors. We interviewed a small, medium and large enterprise in each sector, which led to a basic understanding of the issues within each field. Additional interviews would be needed to determine whether there are sector-specific literacy issues.

3.1 The labour market

Our research validated what we had heard anecdotally about the local labour market. Twelve of 15 employers confirmed that Victoria's low unemployment rate was affecting their business. They indicated that they had far fewer job applicants than in the past and that they were considering hiring people they would not have hired before, including people with lower levels of literacy. An exception was three employers who reported that they were temporarily protected from worker shortages because they were an "employer of choice," because this is a desirable region to work in, or because business was slower than usual.

"You used to have piles and piles of resumés that you could thumb through. Now there are one or two and you're not quite as choosy. It's an employees' market right now." [ER #10, July 2008]

During the interview period, in the summer of 2008, labour market shortages were felt in all five sectors and attention was paid to recruiting workers. Employers specifically cited critical shortages of cooks, bakers, housekeeping attendants, dietary aides, trained apprentices in all fields, skilled tradesmen in construction, food service associates, home support workers, residential care aides and retail clerks. In the health care sector there were labour shortages at every level, and most departments had vacancies. In retail

sales, employers said they have trouble filling day shifts, as well as weekends. "I always work the weekends because we have no staff," one business owner said [ER #12, July 2008]. She felt certain that she would lose employees if she required them to share weekend shifts. One food service employer [ER #5, July 2008] said, "We need 340 full-time people and right now we only have 300." A hotel administrator admitted that the hotel had to turn away business because housekeeping attendants were not available. A construction employer said the company had to turn down projects because they did not have a large enough workforce.

Employers used many methods to recruit employees, with varying results. The most successful was word-of-mouth and employee referral programs. Other solutions included hosting practicum students, tapping into under-utilized labour pools through human service agencies and online classifieds such as Craig's List.

Employers told us that retention was also a definite challenge. People knew they could find another job anytime. Several employers mentioned that employees left immediately if they were offered 50 cents per hour more somewhere else. But others pointed out that

Hiring lower-skilled employees pays off in loyalty

The fast food industry is known for its high staff turnover, but one local employer's unique hiring strategy of welcoming workers with lower literacy skills has boosted his retention rates [ER #5, July 2008].

"People will rise to their ability, and I train them to reach that level," he says. The result is employees who feel like they have found a home, and show great loyalty. "I have people working for me for 30 years," he adds.

Rather than looking for experience or specific skills, this employer makes hiring decisions based on a worker's potential and personality. He also routinely hires people with mental or physical challenges. "Start looking out of the box for hiring," he advises, "rather than putting people in a column and making sure the numbers add up."

offering more money and perks did not necessarily retain employees. Workers wanted a balanced lifestyle, a predictable schedule with enough flexibility to accommodate their personal life, and the opportunity to be involved in work that interests them.

Employers are aware that there will always be significant turnover in some jobs and sectors. One food service employer [ER #5, July 2008] explained, “The industry itself is a stepping stone. Eighty per cent of people that go into food services don’t end up there...Most restaurants in Victoria have 60 per cent turnover of first-year people.” He added, “My problem is... I’ve lost 90 per cent of young males because they have gone to construction. With no skills at all you could be a drywaller for \$19 per hour or a counter person in a fast food restaurant for \$10 per hour. Gee, it doesn’t take long for a young man to say, ‘Don’t be silly,’ and he is off to drywalling.” But employers in the construction sector told us they also struggle to retain employees. There is stiff competition for workers, the turnover rate is high and there is not much loyalty, especially to non-union companies. When workers are offered slightly higher pay, they switch employers quickly.

Employers have developed many creative strategies to improve retention. The strategy mentioned most consistently was creating a positive organizational culture, one characterized by caring, trust, good humour, respect, encouragement, positive focus, safety and opportunities for continuous learning and advancement. Employers also offer flexible work schedules, job sharing, cross-training and benefits.

3.2 Employers: What we learned

Employers were generally interested in knowing more about how literacy might be affecting the achievement of their business objectives, particularly their ability to recruit and retain employees. They were surprised to hear that 40 per cent of workers in BC have literacy levels below what is necessary to succeed in the workplace (Statistics Canada, 2005). In the process of participating in our research, employers began to think about whether any of their own employees might have such problems and how productivity was affected. There was some resistance to the idea that there were literacy issues in their particular workforce. When the interviews were scheduled, for example, some expressed skepticism that they could offer any worthwhile information, as they did not feel they had literacy issues. Yet on the initial

survey, 12 of 20 employers agreed that there were literacy issues in their workforce. And 10 out of 20 expressed an interest in “a workplace needs assessment to see how basic skills issues may be affecting my business.”

Comments at the start of the interviews indicated that employers were not sure what we meant by “literacy.” Their thoughts mirrored pan-Canadian studies that show that the term “literacy” carries a stigma, is not well understood and is often taken to mean illiteracy. Other terms, such as “basic skills,” “essential skills” or “fundamental skills” have been substituted at times, but they are not totally synonymous, which has created confusion.¹

Employers retrain good employees rather than lose them

When a good employee grew tired of waitressing, one hospitality employer [ER #1, June 2008] says that rather than losing her, he looked at her entire skill set to find a new position.

After the company accountant reported that the waitress’s daily remittance was always accurate, the employer knew he had found a fit: “She went into accounting.”

Her people skills from her waitressing days still come in handy too. “When she is calling people who owe us money she can be forceful, but nice,” he adds.

Some employers assumed that having certain credentials implies an assured level of literacy. Employers require a driver’s licence, for example, or a high school diploma, or various professional and trades credentials, and feel that these indicate achievement of the necessary literacy levels. But other employers pointed out that having a credential is no guarantee of having basic skills at the level needed.

In the initial survey, employers indicated that some of their employees had trouble filling out forms and reports accurately (14 of 20), understanding or giving oral instructions (13 of 20), and calculating quantities accurately (12 of 20); caused wastage, error or redoing of work (13 of 20); had low self-confidence (12 of 20) or poor

¹ See READ (2009) for a further discussion of this topic.

interpersonal skills (12 of 20); demonstrated absenteeism (12 of 20); and displayed reticence to learn new things (11 of 20). During the interviews, employers shared numerous examples of workers with low levels of literacy.

Also in the initial survey, 16 of 20 employers considered workers' basic skills extremely important for their business success. However, in the follow-up survey, this same question was asked and only 1 of 10 employers answered "extremely important," while 7 of 10 said "very important." Employers gave basic skills less importance at the time of the second survey, but there was no opportunity to elaborate on their reasons, so it is not possible to interpret this result.

When employers saw that basic skills were low, they tried to support employees in a variety of ways. Support usually took the form of informal peer mentoring or one-on-one coaching. Other solutions included adapting the job to fit the abilities of the worker, changing how things are done, spending extra time with the worker, switching the worker to another job or assigning some of the worker's tasks to managers. No employers said they would fire a person because of poor basic skills, but three did say they try to screen out people with low basic skills when hiring.

Employer adapts workplace to help meet employee needs

In a bakery, the ability to correctly convert imperial to metric measurement can make the difference between a delicious product and one that ends up in the garbage can.

When one bakery owner [ER #10, July 2008] realized that her employee didn't know that one kilogram equals 1,000 grams, she helped her do the calculations and encouraged her to write the numerals in brackets beside the recipe to simplify things. "We try to figure things out that are going to work to make them successful," she says, "but at the same time help them learn."

Even so, some employees have to be reminded that the scale doesn't say three kilos, it says 3,000 grams. "It can be frustrating, and sometimes we will have someone else do that skill for a while," she says.

In addition to supporting individual employees, employers made an effort to create a learning culture within their organizations. Formal and informal learning opportunities were identified in many of the workplaces we explored. Five employers were already using informal, one-on-one methods to provide basic skills education. In the initial survey, one employer said he provides reading, math or writing training at work, and three said they provide English language training. Other examples of existing activities included cross-training, focusing on positive encouragement, using peers as instructors, supporting a career ladder, linking training success to increased pay and being available to answer questions. Eleven of 20 said they pay for continuing education.

"We create a culture of encouragement. If we see potential in a worker, we encourage that worker to move on and learn other things." [ER #11, July 2008]

Within the sphere of literacy and basic skills, employers felt that employees need further training in the areas of document use, computer use and writing. Seven offer computer training to their employees, three offer English language instruction, and one offers systematic help with reading, math or writing in the workplace. Safety training is the most prevalent type of workplace training (18 of 20), with orientation and task-specific training close seconds (each 17 of 20).

In addition, employers recognized that employees, for the most part, welcome the opportunity to learn new things and shared stories of employees who excelled at on-the-job learning. There was a clear awareness among employers that the barriers to participation in training included childcare, time, money, family responsibilities, scheduling and location. This understanding aligned completely with the comments made by employees when they discussed learning opportunities.

Employers identified these barriers as one reason they would be attracted to the idea of blending basic skills

"If we integrate it into the work they're already doing, it is less of a choke point and it doesn't look like a test. It's just part of the training." [ER #10, July 2008]

education with on-the-job training in the workplace. They would seriously consider starting more basic skills programs in their workplace if it would help with profitability (12 of 20), recruitment and retention (12 of 20), health and safety (13 of 20), morale and loyalty (13 of 20), and reducing errors and wastage (11 of 20). One employer, however, indicated that nothing would cause her to consider a workplace learning program.

When we began the project, 15 of 20 employers did not feel they had enough information to start a workplace basic skills program, and four said they had the information they needed to start a program. In the initial survey, employers indicated that they needed more information about the following, in priority order: tests to assess workers' basic skills before and during employment (15 of 20), how to blend basic skills education with on-the-job training (14 of 20), short-delivery courses (11 of 20), how to conduct a workplace needs assessment (10 of 20), and job profiling (8 of 20). Only two indicated an interest in writing workplace documents in plain language.

At the end of the research period, we surveyed the employers again. While the question was worded slightly differently, we learned that 6 of 10 respondents felt they needed more information before starting a workplace basic skills program. In the follow-up survey there was less interest in assessments for employees' basic skills (5 of 10), short-delivery courses (2 of 10), integrating basic skills education with on-the-job training (4 of 10), and organizational needs assessment (3 of 10). Interest increased in plain language documentation (4 of 10) and job profiling (5 of 10). This shift in thinking may be attributed to the small number of respondents or to the way the question was framed.

When asked what would motivate them to start a workplace basic skills program, employers said they would need to see evidence of need in their particular workforce (6 of 10) and funding to set up a program (7 of 10).

One of the project objectives was to increase understanding about the connection between literacy, basic skills and human resources needs. Upon completion, 7 of 10 employers felt their awareness of literacy issues in the workforce was raised as a result of this project. When surveyed at the end of the project, employers were aware that there is a connection between literacy and business objectives such as recruitment and retention (8 of 10) and profitability (9 of 10). Employers

realized that basic skills gaps are sometimes related to workplace challenges, including accuracy in filling out forms (9 of 10) and calculating quantities (8 of 10); they also saw a correlation between low basic skill levels and wastage and errors (8 of 10), and poor interpersonal communication (8 of 10).

3.3 Employees: What we learned

We found it unexpectedly challenging to get employees to agree to be interviewed, even with the prospect of various incentives. One factor was that interviews were conducted during the summer months, when people would rather be outdoors.

In addition, we found it difficult to identify people with basic skills gaps, for two reasons: they cope and adapt so well that they don't feel they have any challenges, or when they are aware of a need, there is fear of disclosing it to employers and shame in disclosing it to others. What worked was asking employees about their observations about others who had literacy issues and how that affected the workplace.

As the project was not focused on measuring literacy levels, we do not know if there is a correlation between literacy levels and attitudes expressed in the interviews.

Employee's mistakes lead to reprimand

Reporting concerns about another employees' skill level doesn't always improve the situation, one health care worker found out [EE #6, August 2008].

When the residential care aid realized her co-worker was routinely lax in his documentation of medicine dosages, she felt compelled to report it to her boss. "I didn't want to tell on him but I had to say something because it weighs on my shoulders," she says. "People can end up in hospital."

But the employers' response didn't address the problem. "They didn't focus on the fact that the person needs help," she says, recalling that her co-worker was reprimanded for being disorganized. Instead of getting a chance to take a medicine administration course, "he basically got into trouble. It was like, 'Don't screw up, or you will get in trouble.'"

Fourteen of 15 employees have noticed someone at work who is struggling with reading, writing or making themselves understood. A construction worker [EE #11, August 2008] recalled having to teach a fellow employee how to read a measuring tape. "I made him a little exercise chart. I said okay, measure those and just write down your answers beside those lines and tell me what is there." Only one employee shared her observations or concerns with her employer.

Almost all employees (14 of 15) said they "like" or "love" learning new things on the job. Several specifically said it is a factor in deciding to stay with an employer or not. This attitude might be different among those who have literacy challenges, but this project was not focused on measuring literacy levels. In fact, one person in our study said she felt learning was hard for her.

*"I have to keep learning new things. Otherwise I'd die inside."
[EE #1, June 2008]*

"I love learning. If they don't give it, I may leave." [EE #5, July 2008]

All 15 employees said they would be interested in more training if it were paid for by employers, provided during regular work hours (or with time off in lieu) and offered on the job site. Thirteen said they would consider off-site programs as well. Nine indicated that childcare would be needed.

A majority of employees feel their basic skills are just fine, above average or excellent. The exception was computer skills, where eight said their skills were not as strong as they would like.

Employees are more comfortable asking peers for information and help than managers.

Ten of 15 confirmed that they had sometimes been asked to do something they didn't know how to do. In that case, 12 of 15 asked another employee for help, eight said they tried to figure it out on their own and 11 sometimes asked a manager or boss for help. Several said they were reluctant to ask a boss for fear of being reprimanded.

Based on these interviews, the optimum workplace learning program, would be flexible, include mentoring or coaching, be paid for or free, be voluntary, be delivered in small bits, be done at work, and include lots of positive feedback and hands-on learning.

4. Conclusions

There was a convergence of employer and employee opinions on four points:

- There are literacy issues in their workplaces and these have a negative impact on safety, productivity, recruitment and retention.
- Most employees like to learn new things at work. They are more loyal to employers that offer training opportunities. Employers know this and try to provide a variety of learning options, which is to their advantage as well.
- A number of factors make it hard for employees to access training, such as childcare, scheduling, tuition costs, lost income and transportation. Employers are aware of these barriers. In order to minimize them, both groups are interested in ways to blend basic skills education into existing on-the-job training.
- Integrating basic skills education with existing workplace-based job training is an attractive training model.

Employers almost universally agreed that literacy is important for business success. Not all employers, however, were convinced that there were literacy issues in their particular workforce. They wanted to know how to determine that. They realized that employees rarely disclose basic skills gaps (their own or their co-workers') to managers. They are interested in knowing more about the tools that can help them assess basic skills and plan appropriate training.

Employees in this study considered their skills “just fine” or better, with the exception of computer skills. Sometimes when there are changes in job requirements,

they have realized they have a problem. But most of the time, when they do not know how to do something, they ask a co-worker or just figure it out on their own. Sometimes employees are hesitant to ask managers for help because some managers reprimand them when they do.

The employers in this study were sympathetic towards employees who needed assistance with basic skills. Employers gave examples of how they have addressed basic skills gaps using informal solutions such as one-on-one coaching or mentoring, assigning a job with the literacy level appropriate to that employee or delegating tasks to other employees.

Employers began to understand how literacy programs would benefit their business and their employees. In practice, however, employers found it hard to dedicate the necessary time and money to offer basic skills training programs, because 75 per cent of businesses in BC's Capital Region have five or fewer employees. Based on what we learned from this research, the development of workplace literacy programs would move forward if there were:

- assessment tools that measure literacy needs in a company
- financial assistance for start-up costs, and
- succinct communications materials that show the benefits of basic skills training for businesses and employees.

5. Recommendations

Our recommendations come from a synthesis of the two parts of the Workplace Learning project: the community-based research and the literature review.

The framework for our recommendations comes from the project objectives, which were:

- to increase awareness and understanding within employer and employee populations about workplace literacy issues
- to identify employer and employee workplace literacy needs in up to five key sectors in the Capital Region
- to identify, review and analyze workplace literacy best practices with a focus on options and approaches appropriate to up to five employment sectors in the Capital Region.

5.1 Communication and engagement

As a result of Phase 1 of the Workplace Learning project, awareness and understanding of workplace literacy issues is beginning to penetrate the Capital Region. We recommend that an expanded, more strategic communication campaign be undertaken that will continue to convey key messages and best practices.

1. Undertake a strategic communication plan that includes:

- communication via e-newsletters and the Internet, employers' preferred methods of contact
- engaging employers in focused, one-on-one conversations, to explain how literacy is related to their business objectives, including profitability, recruitment, retention, productivity and safety, and suggest resources that are low cost (or free) and easy to implement
- asking project champions to make presentations to business organizations to which they belong
- publicly recognizing employers who are implementing successful workplace literacy practices (Appendix K)

- conducting further research to identify what terminology best conveys literacy and basic skills concepts to employers and employees.

5.2 Needs of employers and employees

The Workplace Learning project involved a small sample of employers and employees – three in each of five sectors. The findings about needs are therefore a preliminary assessment of trends.

2. Undertake further research to:

- validate our findings with a larger sample size
- make a more comprehensive study of two to three sectors, from among those that were included in the first study
- find ways to identify and interview lower-literacy workers
- identify specific skills requiring upgrading
- address generational differences with respect to workplace literacy needs, an issue that spontaneously came up enough times to warrant further inquiry.

3. Continue to use solution-oriented, appreciative inquiry methods to search for workplace literacy success stories. Use research assistants who have overcome their own literacy challenges, if suitable candidates can be identified, to help recruit and interview employees and lead focus groups.

5.3 Best practices, options and approaches

Two lists of best practices for promoting literacy in the workplace were generated from READ's literature review (2009), and are included with this report in Appendix J. Those findings are incorporated into the following recommendations.

Sector collaboration

Seventy-five per cent of businesses in BC's Capital Region have five or fewer employees (CRD, 2001). We found small business owners are particularly hard-pressed for any time and money to implement workplace literacy programs.

4. Use a collaborative, sectoral approach, with collaboration ideally facilitated through existing organizations, such as sector councils, Chambers of Commerce or other business organizations. Informal consortiums could also be developed, if resources for coordinating the effort were made available. There are successful Canadian models of sectoral collaboration to draw upon.

Partnerships

The literature shows that partnerships, with as many stakeholder groups as possible, lead to the most sustainable and meaningful programs.

5. Include as many stakeholder groups as possible during planning and development – management, employees, labour, service providers, government and funders.

Workplace needs assessment

6. Start with a workplace needs assessment to determine if there are basic skills gaps in the workforce. There are excellent, no-cost tools at http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca/eng/workplaceskills/essential_skills/general/toolkit.shtml.

Current success and a learning culture

Being able to constantly learn new things is a benefit that employees value.

7. Recognize and support workplace literacy education that is already taking place, including informal coaching and buddy systems, and then find ways to extend that help to others.
8. Consider cross-training, positive encouragement, job sharing, contests, career laddering and linking training success to increased pay.

Integrated, flexible design and delivery

Off-the-shelf programs may initially appear to be cost-effective and quick to set up, but they do not always meet the needs of the employee or the workplace. Effective programs choose from a variety of delivery options – classroom training, individual tutoring, on-site workshops, self-study, e-learning, mentoring and apprenticeships – and whenever possible, offer services at a variety of times and locations.

One of the most effective approaches is to integrate basic skills education with on-the-job training. The more seamless literacy education is, the more likely it will succeed. Integrated approaches reduce barriers to participation, avoid the stigma of being separated out, and are cost-effective.

Explore ways to integrate basic skills training into job-specific training. Tools for employers and employees can be found at <http://measureup.towes.com/english/workbooks.asp>

9. Explore ways to integrate basic skills training into job-specific training. Tools for employers and employees can be found at <http://measureup.towes.com/english/workbooks.asp>
10. Consider the needs of employees, as well as business objectives, when designing programs.
11. Develop programs that are flexible and custom-designed.

Professional service providers

The task of delivering workplace literacy services is complex. It requires competency in collaborating with management, unions and workers; conducting needs assessments; customizing curricula; assessing individual skill levels; developing learning plans and delivering contextualized instruction.

12. Have workplace literacy services delivered by professional adult educators who have specialized training in workplace education. Volunteer peer tutors can supplement the work of these professionals, when given adequate training and supervision.

Evaluation of learner success

13. Let employees set their own literacy goals and determine when they have succeeded. Use portfolios and self-tests to measure progress. Use formal testing sparingly. Keep test results confidential between the teacher and student.

Evaluation and dissemination of program success

Measuring the impact of workplace literacy programs is difficult and expensive – often beyond the means of small businesses.

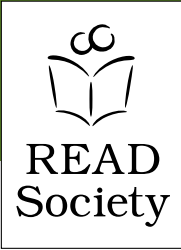
14. Accept survey results and positive examples as evidence of success.
15. Disseminate best practices among employers, to increase awareness and encourage other employers to address literacy needs in the workplace.

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Appendix A: Project Description

Workplace Learning – Bridging Employer and Employee Needs in BC's Capital Region

In Victoria's tight labour market, it's tough to recruit and retain qualified employees. One proven solution is to strengthen workplace learning programs. Employers who invest in their workers' education find they are able to recruit, retain and promote the best employees – invaluable in a region challenged by one of the lowest unemployment rates in the country. Victoria READ Society's *Workplace Learning Project* is exploring affordable ways to help employers provide training for workers at all levels. In today's rapidly changing economy, creating a climate of continuous learning is important for developing a competitive workforce and sustaining a healthy bottom line.

Industry sectors struggling with the greatest labour shortages are being addressed first – construction, retail sales, accommodation, food service, and healthcare. A steering group has been formed, with the intention of having local representatives from each sector, is guiding the work.

The initial phase of the project involves confidential interviews with employers and employees to understand the particular challenges employers and workers face. We're gathering advice, insights, success stories and concerns around workplace learning. Simultaneously, an international literature review is being conducted to uncover best practices in workplace education. The result will be options for sustainable, affordable workplace education programs, tailored specifically to Greater Victoria's labour market and small business climate. Project findings will be published in early 2009.

Why Workplace Learning?

The Canadian economy has shifted from reliance on manufacturing and natural resources to a knowledge-based economy. Global competition and rapid

changes in technology require continuous learning and adaptation.

There is an especially critical need to help workers with low literacy. The skill levels of 42 per cent of working-age Canadians (16–65) are below what's needed for jobs being created by our current economy. Most employees can read and write, but they may struggle to complete forms, comprehend written instructions, accurately calculate numbers or use computers.

Skill gaps hurt business and create hidden barriers to successful employment. Companies get hit with lower productivity, high staff turnover and increased costs due to health and safety violations. For employees, low skill levels translate into lower earnings, fewer work days and longer periods of unemployment over the course of their career.

Promising Practices

Basic skills are indispensable in order for Canadians to keep pace with the continuous change of today's world of work. Basic skills include reading text, document use, numeracy, writing, oral communication, and problem solving. These skills can be developed at increasing levels of complexity throughout life. They provide the foundation for all other learning and enable people to adapt as their jobs change.

Basic skills education takes place informally in most workplaces, with people helping each other as needed. Workplace learning programs make this process more systematic and effective. Some of the most successful programs blend basic skills education with job training. In those programs, workplace learning specialists create lessons, using real workplace documents such as forms, safety manuals, charts and other materials specific to each job.

Many employers are understandably concerned about the time and expense of implementing a workplace learning program. And employees usually find it

intimidating to admit they need help on basic skills. When they do, it's rare that they can manage to attend extra classes while holding down a job. This project is uncovering options that address those concerns.

Benefits for Employers

Canadian businesses that have addressed the need for workplace learning report:

- Increased productivity
- Improved health and safety (fewer injuries and Worker's Compensation claims)
- Reduced product defects
- Becoming an "employer of choice," able to recruit the most valuable employees
- Greater employee loyalty and retention
- Ability to promote from within
- Improved morale and labour-management relations
- Employees who:
 - Are confident, willing to adapt to changes and participate in ongoing training
 - Have better team-building and problem-solving skills

Benefits for Employees

Employees who have participated in workplace learning report:

- More opportunities for advancement
- Higher earnings over the course of their career
- Increased confidence and ability to adapt to workplace changes
- An increase in transferable skills
- Better relationships on the job and better problem-solving skills
- Improved job satisfaction and overall quality of life

How You Can Participate in This Project

- Confidential Interviews
 - If you are an employer or worker in construction, retail sales, accommodation, food service, or healthcare, call us to schedule a confidential interview.
- Community Presentations
 - Contact us for free information, resources and presentations on workplace learning.



Appendix B: Issues Backgrounder – Questions and Answers

Q. Why do Capital Region employers need to know about workplace learning programs?

A. Employers struggling to cope with the one of the lowest unemployment rates in the country are looking for ways to improve their recruitment and retention strategies, however:

- Though workplace learning programs are a proven strategy for addressing these labour market issues, Capital Region employers don't have enough information about how to improve their employees' basic skills, according to a recent Community Council (2007) study.
- Currently, employers say they are addressing basic skills gaps using stop-gap measures such as one-on-one coaching or mentoring, assigning a job adequate for the literacy level of the person, and delegating tasks to other employees.
- The small business climate in Victoria – 75 per cent of businesses have five or fewer employees – makes the task of improving the workforce's basic skills particularly challenging as employers find it hard to dedicate the necessary time and money to improve their worker's basic skills through workplace learning programs.

Q. What's being done in the Capital Region to improve the workforce's basic skills?

A. The Victoria READ Society's Workplace Learning Project is conducting a community-based research project to find out and offer employers affordable options for basic skills learning:

- Community-based research, through in-person interviews with employers and employees will be conducted between June and September.
- Stakeholders in the five sectors most affected by the labour shortage – construction, retail sales,

accommodation, food services and healthcare – are being addressed first.

- In early 2009, research findings will be shared and employers interested in implementing workplace learning initiatives identified.
- Findings will also be available on the Victoria READ Society's website, on the workplace learning page.

Q. Is this a problem outside of the Capital Region?

A. Yes – basic skills levels in the workforce are a broad concern:

- Provincially one million residents have literacy levels below what's considered necessary to function in a modern society (ABC Canada, 2005). Even though their basic skills are lacking, these people are employed in major industries such as commerce, construction, accommodation, food service, health care and social services.
- Employers increasingly note symptoms of low literacy amongst workers, such as: difficulty completing everyday documents (production logs, leave forms, machine breakdown reports); misunderstanding oral instructions; limited participation during team meetings; regular mistakes when making calculations; poor health and safety compliance and difficulty understanding the company goals and objectives.
- As Canada's economy is shifting from reliance on manufacturing and natural resources to a knowledge-based economy, it is becoming increasingly necessary to have all workers continually upgrade their skills.
- The new job market requires higher literacy and technical skills, but much of the available labour pool does not have skills that are adequate to

meet the demand.

- The literacy skills of 48 per cent of working-age Canadians are below the level needed for the jobs created by the Canadian economy (Rubenson, Desjardins and Yoon, 2007).
- People who are able to read and write adequately often need training in practical applications, such as how to decipher a bus schedule, complete forms, or read a chart.
- Even highly skilled workers find they need continuous training, as computerized systems are implemented and upgraded.

Q. What evidence is there that basic skills training is effective?

A. Improvement in basic skills training can increase a company's ability to recruit and retain staff while also improving productivity, profitability and jobsite safety:

- An increase of just one per cent in literacy scores relative to the international average is associated with an estimated boost to national productivity of 2.5 per cent – worth \$18 billion per year to Canadian Gross Domestic Product (ABC Canada, n.d.).
- The costs of not addressing these issues can be high. Truck drivers with level one (lowest) reading skill, for example, are 176 per cent more likely to be involved in a workplace incident, such as accidents and spills, than those at reading levels three to five (MacLeod, 2004). Lower skilled adults tend to work fewer weeks, experience more and longer periods of unemployment, and earn lower wages.
- At the Northern Alberta Institute of Technology, the pass rate in the first-year carpentry program jumped from 73 to 100 per cent with the introduction of the basic skill intervention (Northern Alberta Institute of Technology, n.d.). Each student was given a Test of Workplace Essential Skills (TOWES) to assess their skills in reading, document use, and numeracy. Upgrading was offered within the program where, traditionally, only technical training was available.

Q. How are workplace learning programs usually implemented?

A. The most successful programs require voluntary buy-in from both employer and employee, are custom-designed and incorporated into the employee's regular tasks:

- Training programs can be offered in-house, either through training an employee to deliver programs, or by bringing a professional educator in. Sometimes employees are sent out to learn basic skills through post-secondary educational institutions.
- Documents and manuals used in the workforce form the basis for each lesson, so the training is extremely relevant to each job.
- The Canadian Government has developed an Essential Skills framework to help employers implement workplace learning programs (Human Resources and Social Development Canada, n.d.): http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca/en/workplaceskills/essential_skills/index.shtml

Q. What is the Victoria READ Society?

A. The Victoria READ Society is a non-profit organization providing literacy and numeracy programs for children, youth and adults by professional educators:

- The READ Society was founded October 1976 with a mandate to provide basic instruction in reading, writing, math and study skills to children who were struggling to learn.
- In subsequent years, programs were added for adults needing basic skills upgrading.
- In 1990, READ expanded to offer English as a Second Language programs for immigrant and refugee adults.
- This project reflects the society's growing awareness of workplace learning issues and the organization's commitment to developing programs that meet learners' needs.
- READ serves learners at four locations in the Capital Region. The Workplace Learning Project is based at 201-2631 Quadra Street, Victoria, BC.

TIMES COLONIST

LETTERS

“ It’s tough to recruit and retain qualified employees

Training can close service gap

For some time, employers have been telling me that it’s hard to find and keep good employees. On the other hand, employees say it’s hard to find good jobs. Victoria READ Society is conducting a regional study funded by Service Canada to see how we can bridge the gap.

Your “Satisfaction Not Guaranteed” series points to a regional issue.

In Victoria’s tight labour market, it’s tough to recruit and retain qualified employees.

One proven solution is to strengthen workplace learning programs. Employers who invest in their workers’ education find they

are able to recruit, retain and promote the best employees.

Our workplace learning project is finding ways to help employers provide essential skills training for workers at all levels. Industry sectors struggling with the greatest labour shortages are being addressed first — construction, retail sales, accommodation, food service and health care. A steering group with local sector representatives is guiding the work.

The project’s initial phase involves confidential interviews with employers and employees to understand our particular challenges. We’re gathering advice,

insights, success stories and concerns. Simultaneously, our international literature review is uncovering best practices in workplace education.

The result will be options for sustainable, affordable workplace education programs tailored to Greater Victoria’s small-business climate.

We invite people in the above-mentioned sectors to participate. Employers and workers can contact researcher Nancy Watters to schedule a confidential interview at nwatters@readsociety.bc.ca.

Claire Rettie
Victoria READ Society

Appendix D: Study focuses on retaining employees

Victoria News

Tuesday, June 03 2008

Page 0005

By Rebecca Aldous, raldous@vicnews.com

Learning to retain.

That's the focus of a Greater Victoria study aiming to find ways employers can attract and keep staff in the volatile labour market.

"There is a huge body of literature out there around work place education," said Claire Rettie, Victoria READ Society's executive director.

"What it shows is if an employer provides workplace education opportunities, they end up with fewer accidents and employees that stay and advance within."

The study pinpoints the construction, retail sales, accommodation, food service and health-care industries, as research suggest those fields have the highest rate of turnover.

The organization is interviewing business and employees to adapt worldwide findings to South Island needs.

Many of Greater Victoria companies are considered small to mid-size, employing five to 15 people. Workplace learning programs that succeed for these business models are different from ones applied to mega-companies, Rettie said.

"Rather than saying this is a prescription for you to do these kind of things, (the study) is looking at what their needs are first," she said.

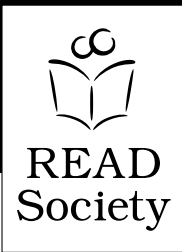
Maureen Young, chairwoman of the Quality of Life Challenge, said the organization is constantly hearing from both employers and employees about the benefits of providing such services.

With the cost of living increasing in Greater Victoria., employers are finding it tough to attract and keep employees on the Island.

In-house classes not only provide opportunities for pay increases, but also save companies from having to hire and train new employees, Young said.

Victoria READ Society is looking for companies and employees wishing to take part in the regional study. All interviews are confidential. Employers and workers can contact researchers Nancy Watters at 896-2143 or nwatters@readsociety.bc.ca.

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Appendix E: Baseline Employer Survey

DATE

EMPLOYER NO.

Thank you for completing this short survey. Your answers will be kept confidential. Your name and company will not be identified in any future publications without your specific permission.

1. Are there literacy issues in your workforce? Yes No Not sure

2. Do your employees have the following basic skills, at the level needed to perform their jobs?

	Yes	No	Not sure
Reading text			
Document use			
Numeracy			
Writing			
Oral Communication			
Problem solving			
Computer use			

3. How do you screen workers' basic skills at the time of hiring (check all that apply):

By talking to them at an interview or over the phone	
Getting them to fill out an application form	
Tests for basic skills or knowledge	
Checking their references	
Checking their credentials	
We don't screen for basic skills when hiring	
Other (specify)	

4. What types of workforce education do you currently provide? (circle all that apply)

Orientation	Management	Cultural awareness	Computer use
Task specific training	Customer service	Safe work practices	English Language
Equipment operation	Team Work	Reading, Writing, Math	Other (specify)

5. Do your employees ever have problems with (check all that apply):

Filling out forms/reports accurately	
Understanding or giving oral instructions	
Calculating quantities accurately	
Compliance with health and safety regulations	
Participation in team meetings	
Wastage, errors or redoing work	
Customer service complaints	
Willingness to learn new things	
Low self-confidence	
Absenteeism	
Poor interpersonal skills	

6. What would make you seriously consider including basic skills education with current training?

Showing how it will help my business grow (return on investment)	
The need to recruit and retain employees	
Knowing how to set up a program	
Funding to do it	
Concerns about productivity—wastage, errors and rework	
Concerns about health and safety compliance	
Changes in technology, equipment or customer requirements	
Problems with employees completing written work accurately	
ISO or other industry requirements	
Desire to boost morale and loyalty	
Other (specify)	

7. How important do you consider workers' basic skills to be for the future success of your business? (check one)

Extremely important	
Very Important	
Quite important	
Not that important	
Not at all important	

8. Do you feel you have the information you need to start a workplace basic skills program, if you wanted to?
(circle one) YES NO

9. Which of these would you like to know more about? (check all that apply)

Tests to assess workers' basic skills (before and during employment)

A workplace needs assessment, to see how basic skills issues may be affecting my business

Job profiling – identifying basic skills needed for specific jobs

Writing workplace documents in plain language

Blending basic skills education with on-the-job training

Short-delivery courses, customized for my workforce, by professional educators

10. How do you prefer to receive information about workplace learning? (Check all that apply)

An e-newsletter

A web site

A copy of your findings, listing workplace learning options

A presentation at a community or business meeting

A regional discussion forum with interested stakeholders

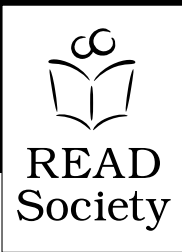
A workshop

Personal discussion (in person or on the phone)

TV or radio

Newspaper

Other (specify)



Appendix F: Follow-up Survey – Employers’ Perspectives on Workplace Learning

Thank you for completing this ten-minute survey. Please reply by email, or by fax to 250-388-8330. Your answers will be kept confidential. Your name and company will not be identified in any future publications without your specific permission.

In this survey, **“basic skills” means** reading text, document use, numeracy, writing, oral communication, problem solving and computer use **at a level needed to be successful in your workplace.**

1. What do you think about the following statements (X **one** box for each)

	Agree	Disagree	Unsure
Basic skill gaps are widespread in BC’s workforce			
Addressing basic skills gaps in the workplace helps employers recruit and retain workers.			
Addressing basic skills gaps improves business profitability			
My awareness of basic skills issues in the workplace has increased since I was interviewed last summer			

2. How important do you consider workers’ basic skills to be for the future success of your business?
(Put an X in **one** box)

Extremely important	
Very important	
Quite important	
Not that important	
Not at all important	

3. In your experience, which of these workplace problems are sometimes related to the need to improve basic skills?
(Put an X in all that apply)

Filling out forms/reports accurately	
Understanding or giving oral instructions	
Calculating quantities accurately	
Compliance with health and safety regulations	
Participation in team meetings	
Wastage, errors or redoing work	

- Customer service complaints
- Unwillingness to learn new things
- Low self-confidence
- Absenteeism
- Poor interpersonal skills

4. Do you think there are people in your workplace could benefit from improving their basic skills?
 Yes No Maybe

5. How do you manage when employees have basic skill gaps? (X all that apply)

- Offer training workshops and short classes at work
- Offer one-on-one coaching/tutoring at work
- Integrate basic skills education with on-the-job training
- Refer them to community courses or tutoring
- Bring a tutor on-site
- Change how things are done, so that they can do it (e.g. communicate orally rather than in writing)
- Assign tasks to others who have the skill (e.g. managers)
- Buddy system – have someone else work with them until they can do it alone
- Slow down and give them more time to finish
- Switch them to another job
- Screen out people with basic skills gaps when hiring
- Let them go and hire someone else
- Other:

6. Do you feel you have the information you need to start a workplace basic skills program, if you wanted to?
 Yes No

7. Which of these would you like to know more about? (X all that apply)

- Assessments for employees' basic skills (before and during employment)
- An organizational needs assessment, to see how basic skill gaps may be affecting my business
- Job profiling – identifying the basic skills needed for specific jobs
- Writing workplace documents in plain language
- Integrating basic skills education with on-the-job training
- Short-delivery courses, customized for my workforce, by professional educators
- Other:

8. What support would you need to start a workplace basic skills program? (X all that apply)

Business rationale (how it would help my business)

Evidence that there are basic skills needs in my company

Funding for start-up costs

Funding for ongoing costs

Experienced workplace educators

Program coordinator

More information (specify):

Other:

9. Are you interested in starting a workplace basic skills program?

Yes No

Please explain:



Appendix G: Interview Guide – Employers’ Perspectives on Workplace Learning

INTERVIEWER’S NAME	
DATE	PHONE NUMBER
EMPLOYER NO.	
INTERVIEW DURATION	
START TIME	FINISH TIME

INTRODUCTION

Thank you for taking time to help us understand issues related to workplace learning. The information you share will help us understand current conditions in the Capital Region. The interview will take about 60 minutes. It has three parts:

1. A quick survey – 10 questions
2. A semi-structured discussion covering basic information about your business, recruitment and retention strategies that you are using, and workforce training.
3. An opportunity for you to ask questions and request further information about workplace learning.

When the project is near completion in early 2009, we’ll ask you to complete another ten minute survey.

I would like your permission to record this interview, so that we are sure to accurately reflect what you’ve said. Whatever you tell us will be kept completely anonymous and confidential. Later, if we want to share success stories or quotes, we’ll ask specific permission. Is that okay with you? [Sign confidentiality form]

BUSINESS DEMOGRAPHICS

First of all, please give me an idea of the nature and scope of your business . . .

- 1) What is your specific business activity? (e.g. restaurant, retail grocery, construction contractor, home health care, hotel, etc. . .)
- 2) How many locations do you have in the Capital Region? _____
- 3) Where are you located? (Check all that apply)

Peninsula (Central Saanich, North Saanich, Sidney)	
West Shore (Colwood, Langford, Highlands, Metchosin, Sooke)	
Victoria Core (Saanich, Oak Bay, Victoria, Esquimalt, View Royal)	
Other (specify)	

4) Approximately how many workers are employed by your business?

Full time_____ Part time_____

5) Does this number fluctuate? If so, why?

6) What are the job titles for some of your main workers

7) Approximately what percentage of your workers are unionized?

8) Which industry and business organizations do you belong to, if any?

- Better Business Bureau
- Chamber of Commerce _____
- Values Based Business Network
- Women's Business Network
- BC HR Management Association
- Sector council _____
- Others

RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION STRATEGIES

9) We know there's a large labour shortage in [sector]. How has this affected your business?

10) What strategies are you using to deal with that shortage?

11) What's been most successful?

12) Do you have any formal education requirements when hiring? Any certification requirements?

WORKPLACE LEARNING

13) Do workers welcome the opportunity to learn new things?

14) Are they comfortable asking questions?

15) Do they adapt to changes?

16) Lots of informal learning happens at work, such as mentoring, coaching, buddy systems, etc. What sorts of informal learning happens here?

17) What do you do to encourage learning and create a culture of learning? (eg. orientation, workshops, training certificates, recognition, incentives, open door policy)

18) Can you give me an example of an employee who has excelled at on-the-job learning?

19) Who is responsible for making decisions about your workplace learning programs (mentioned in question six of the survey)?

20) How do you handle it if you see that basic skills are lacking (refer to survey question 4)?

21) Can you give me an example of a how you were able to help someone who lacked basic skills?

22) Does your company pay for, or subsidize, continuing education?

- 23) Do any of your employees currently attend work-related continuing education courses? [specify]
- 24) Do you participate in work-related continuing education courses or workshops? [specify]
- 25) What things prevent people from accessing further education or training?

FOLLOW UP

Review their answers to question 12 on the survey, and give further information.

- 26) Do you have any questions for me? Final comments?
- 27) Are there other companies you recommend I talk to?
- 28) If the media would like to talk to someone about this, would you be willing?
- 29) If I have other questions later, may I contact you again?
- 30) Would you like to be on our e-mail list?



Appendix H: Interview Guide – Employees’ Perspectives on Workplace Learning

INTERVIEWER’S NAME	
DATE	PHONE NUMBER
EMPLOYER NO.	
INTERVIEW DURATION	
START TIME	FINISH TIME

INTRODUCTION

Thank you for taking time to help us understand issues related to workplace learning. The information you share will help us understand current conditions in the Capital Region. The interview will take about 60 minutes. It has two parts:

1. Questions about your work experiences, any training you have done, and a discussion about your skills and learning experiences
2. An opportunity for you to ask questions.

I would like your permission to record this interview, so that we are sure to accurately reflect what you’ve said. Whatever you tell us will be kept anonymous and confidential. Later, if we want to share success stories or quotes, we’ll ask specific permission. Is that okay with you? [Sign confidentiality form]

WORK EXPERIENCE

- 1) In which part of the Capital Region do you work?
- 2) What is your job now? Please tell me a little about your responsibilities.
- 3) How many hours a week do you work?
- 4) Do you need any special certification or education for this job?
- 5) Is it a unionized job?
- 6) Approximately how many employees are there at your workplace?
- 7) What jobs have you had in the past? What education was needed?
- 8) Thinking of your current job, can you give me some examples of things you read or write? (such as company newsletter, emails, forms, memos, paycheque)
- 9) Can you give me some examples of ways you use numbers at work to measure or calculate?

WORKPLACE LEARNING

- 10) How do you feel about learning new things?
- 11) What's the best learning experience you have had at work? What made it good?
- 12) What kind of training has your employer offered at work?
- 13) What was that like for you? (Fun, scary, boring)
- 14) How do you learn best on the job? (e.g.: attending workshops, reading a manual, being shown by a co-worker, using the Internet)
- 15) Have you ever been asked to do tasks on the job that you didn't know how to do?
- 16 a) How do you handle it when you don't know how to do a task? (Check all that apply)

Do the best I can and try to figure it out on my own

Ask another employee for help

Ask manager or boss for help

Avoid the task

Miss work/call in sick

Refuse to do the job

Quit the job*

Other (specify)

*16b) If checked: Did you let your employer know you were quitting because of a lack of training?

16 c) If you told them, how did they respond?

17) Does your employer pay for work-related training or education?

18) Would you be interested in more training if . . . (Read out and check those that apply)

The course was paid for by your employer

Training was provided during regular work hours

Training was provided outside of regular work hours with time off in lieu

Training was offered on the job site

Training was offered off the job site

Childcare was provided

Rewards were offered (cash/gifts)

Recognition was offered (certificate, name in newsletter, announcement at staff meeting)

Other

SKILLS SELF-ASSESSMENT

19) How do you rate your abilities in the following areas, with:

- 1 = not as strong as I would like
- 2 = just fine
- 3 = above average
- 4 = excellent

SKILL	1	2	3	4
Reading Text				
Using documents				
Writing				
Using numbers				
Speaking				
Problem solving				
Computer skills				

20) What are you doing to improve in any area you feel lacking?

21) Has your employer suggested that improving any of your skills would help you at work?
(Help you get promoted, for example)

22) Have you ever asked your employer for help improving those basic skills?
What do you think would happen if you did?

23) Do you participate in staff meetings by speaking up and sharing your opinions? Why or why not?

24) Have you ever noticed anyone else at work having trouble with reading, writing or making themselves understood on the job?

25) How did it affect your work?

26) Did you tell share your concerns with your employer?

27) If yes, what was your employer's response?

EMPLOYEE DEMOGRAPHICS (Optional)

28) Gender (circle): M F

29) Date of birth:

30) Mother tongue:

31) Other languages spoken:

OTHER THOUGHTS

32) Do you have any questions for me? Final comments?

33) Would you be willing to share your story with the media?

34) Would it be okay if I contacted you again as our work unfolds?



Appendix I: Stages of Readiness to Implement Workplace Basic Skills Programming

Employers' readiness to implement workplace basic skills¹ programming is influenced by a cluster of factors including the economy, understanding the "business case" for training, having internal organizational champions, availability of financial resources and access to programming expertise. A New Zealand study of 441 companies (Schick, 2005) found that no single factor drove the decision to invest in such programming. Rather, it was a convergence of needs and incentives. The study categorized employers along a four-stage continuum of readiness.

We felt this developmental approach would be useful to help us understand how best to assist each employer. Therefore, we created a similar four-point continuum of readiness that fit the objectives of this study. Employers were categorized by doing a content analysis of their interview and examining their responses to the initial survey. At time of initial survey and interview, July/August 2008, the fifteen employers were classified as follows:

Three at **Stage One—Unaware/Unready**: unaware of basic skills issues in their workforce and unready to take any action about it.

Three at **Stage Two—Somewhat aware/Unready**: somewhat aware of basic skills issues, but unready to consider action.

Four at **Stage Three—Aware/Ready**: aware of basic skills issues and may be ready to take action.

Five at **Stage Four—Taking Action**: providing basic skills education in the workplace.

All employers in Stage Four were providing basic skills education informally through mentoring, coaching and mini-tutorials as needed. They may not have considered themselves to be implementing a basic skills education program, but they were definitely responding to the needs of their workforce in this area. Informal methods are equally as valid as formal, and sometimes even more effective because they blend seamlessly with other on-the-job training.

¹ Basic skills include reading, document use, numeracy, writing, oral communication and computer use.



Appendix J: Best Practices in Workplace Literacy

Best Practices in Workplace Literacy Management

- Create an overall learning culture in the workplace (Wiebe 2001).
- Partner: develop programs collaboratively with input from all stakeholders including management, labour, employees, employers, educators, service providers and funders.
- Address business objectives, as well as employees' individual learning goals.
- Clearly communicate program assumptions, intended benefits and standards for measuring success at the start.
- Conduct an organizational needs assessment (ONA) prior to program implementation.
- Make participation voluntary. (Employers may need to require participation in training programs in order to meet business objectives.)
- Make participation open to all. (This is not always feasible due to limited resources.)
- Avoid mandatory testing. (This is sometimes required by outside funders. If standardized testing is required, use reliable, valid assessment tools.)
- Ensure confidentiality for participants, particularly regarding the results of assessments and progress reports. (Test results may be pooled for purposes of program evaluation.)
- Share the cost of training between employers and employees. (This does not exclude other arrangements that may be better suited to particular circumstances.)
- Provide incentives for successful learners, such as certification, opportunities for advancement, college credit, stipends, bonuses or other recognition.
- Hire well-trained professional educators to deliver instruction and coordinate programs.
- When using peer tutors provide adequate

training and supervision by professional educators.

- Give instructors the opportunity to talk with and observe workers so that they understand the context for needed skills.
- Make provision for ongoing professional development for all instructors and tutors.
- Write workplace documents in clear, plain language to accommodate lower literacy levels.

Best Practices for Workplace Literacy Programs

- Use recognized adult education principles as the foundation for good teaching practice.
- Flexibility: offer a variety of training techniques and delivery models to accommodate various learning styles, interests and needs of individuals and organizations.
- Treat all participants with respect, appreciating diversity of gender, race, ethnicity and culture. Focus on assets and avoid language such as "illiterate," "low-level" or "lacking."
- Recognize that learning is a social process. Make every effort to create a comfortable atmosphere and develop positive student-teacher relationships. Small groups and low student-teacher ratios facilitate this.
- Create individualized learning plans, with student input, based on the student's prior knowledge, experience, interests and assessments. Develop clear goals that meet personal and employer needs. Refine learning plans regularly.
- Measure success by attainment of learning objectives, not by the amount of time spent in training or by standardized tests.
- Ensure that learning materials are appropriate for adults and relevant to the work setting.
- Provide flexible scheduling, or consider using

self-paced, modular curricula.

- Be aware of community services and make sensitive referrals to programs that support learner success, including employment, childcare, transportation, counseling, health care, housing and income assistance.

Appendix K: The Employer CHALLENGE

the employer CHALLENGE

A Human Resources Newsletter from Employer to Employer



Quality of Life
CHALLENGE

Issue 75 | December 2008

Training investment keeps wind in marine sector's sails

Giving employees a reason to stick with you beyond their need for a pay cheque is critical in a tight labour market. For boat builders in the Capital Region, investment in training keeps staff on board.



*Second-year apprentice Candace Walmsley installs a new sail track on a refurbished mast section with the help of Campbell Black, owner of Blackline Marine.
Photo by Blackline Marine*

Boat builders and repair shops on southern Vancouver Island came together in the mid-'90s to address their recruitment and retention issues. Their highly specialized, technical industry desperately needed skilled workers.

Today, marine businesses sponsor employees to train as apprentices and attend Quadrant Marine Institute in Sidney. The four-year program combines on-the-job skill-building, work-based assessments and after-hours classroom time.

It's a solution that has helped keep Blackline Marine afloat, says owner Campbell Black. "It's been the most significant factor for my company's success. Training is not simply a 'must do,' it's a business strategy. If you're not training, you're out of the game."

Campbell helped rally boatyard owners to take charge of their industry's need for trained workers, convinced that employees needed to see a career path. Eight business owners formed an industry association to train their employees. In 1998, it became Quadrant Marine Institute and was recognized as a private post-secondary trades training facility. Currently, about 45 apprentice-employees are working toward certification.

Having a group of employers in the same field take a united approach to resolving training challenges is just one of the best practices identified in the field of workplace learning, says Claire Rettie, executive director of the Victoria READ Society. The non-profit literacy and learning organization is finishing up a year-long study of workplace learning strategies in Greater Victoria.



Employer Quote

"Training is not simply a 'must do,' it's a business strategy. If you're not training, you're out of the game."

- Campbell Black,
Owner, Blackline Marine



Employer Resources

Employers can find more workplace learning tips, tools and resources on the READ Society's website at www.readsociety.bc.ca.

The READ Society's full report on workplace learning strategies will be released in February.

Read about another innovative group of employers who are collaborating and partnering with Camosun College to develop a free training program for employees in this [past issue of the employer CHALLENGE](#)

[CHALLENGE](#)

Collaboration with Business for Social Transformation -

a resource for multisectoral collaborations who are working to improve their communities' capacity to bring about social change

[Click here to view this resource](#)

Guide to employing individuals in recovery from addictions:

[Addiction, Recovery and the Workplace: an employer information guide.](#)

For more **HR options** and local business examples, read the [HR](#)



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