

▶ ADULT LITERACY RESEARCH

Provision and development: Exploring employers' views of literacy, numeracy and employability

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▶ THIS STUDY INVESTIGATES how employers understand the provision and the continuing development of adult literacy, numeracy and employability skills for their workplaces. It draws on focus groups and interviews with employer representatives from: community services and health; local government; manufacturing; and group training companies.

While recognising the importance of the initial provision of these skills, these employers see their ongoing development as demanding equal attention from training systems and employers.

▶ Issues of provision

While concerned about the initial provision of literacy, numeracy and employability skills and looking for continuing improvements in the training system, these employers have realistic expectations about the extent to which the system will ever be able to meet their needs for a timely supply of 'job ready' applicants or new employees.

The relationships these employers have with the training sector are, in general, strong, ongoing and based on value for money. They believe that the adult and vocational education sector is attempting to address resource issues and support services.

▶ Issues of development

The employers in the study take responsibility themselves for the literacy, numeracy and employability skills in their workplaces. They do so for important operational and ethical reasons.

Operationally, they believe that literacy, numeracy and employability skills are best learned as integrated aspects of whole-work tasks that are unique to their particular processes. Consequently, stand-alone or non-contextualised

literacy, numeracy and employability skills programs are avoided. For the same reasons of 'uniqueness' they recognise that training and education systems will have difficulty providing ready-made workers on demand.

Ethically, these employers demonstrate:

- a commitment to values of inclusiveness, lifelong learning and building learning organisations
- a focus on organisational development and continuous improvement, linked to performance and feedback from employees
- learning programs that are targeted, contextualised and well supported
- a focus on learners developing self-confidence and trust in the organisation and vice versa. Effective support and confidence-building are provided in mentoring arrangements where trainers or supervisors create time to enable learners to perform work functions competently.

These developmental activities are not considered to be a drain on the bottom line, nor do they compromise quality or productivity. However, the expertise available to support literacy, numeracy and employability skills development in workplaces is lacking in some areas. In particular this study notes that:

- the consultancy, analysis, and educational design skills required to provide effective support to employers or workplaces on these issues are not the same as the teaching skills required for the conventional 'delivery' of these skills
- educators and trainers also need the ability to provide appropriate educational support to employers and worker-learners beyond certificate II level.



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► Sectoral findings

Community services and health

This sector, particularly the aged and community care industry, employs an ageing workforce, with many having few educational qualifications. The challenges of addressing adult literacy and numeracy issues, as well as 'rusty' study skills, are seen as 'part of the territory'.

The skills profile of this workforce is biased towards caring; however, as a consequence of the demands of compliance regimes and new technologies, language, literacy and numeracy are assuming greater importance. Much of the professional development provided internally is at certificate III and IV levels, requiring advanced language, literacy and numeracy skills.

Local government

With changing systems of work and technological changes (for example, email, digital reporting formats), many workers need different workplace literacy and communication skills. This is true not only of 'blue collar' workers (for example, those working in gardens, and maintenance and garbage collection staff), but also of some professional workers, particularly those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Councils with dedicated organisational development personnel report better take-up of programs and a more effective transfer of skills into workplace performance. This is due to thorough and consistent monitoring, communication and rapport-building at all levels of the organisation.

Manufacturing

Employer representatives were critical of the education and training systems, which they believe are not producing recruits with adequate literacy and numeracy abilities. Despite their criticisms, however, employers were taking responsibility for the development of the particular literacy, numeracy and employability skills needed in their own workplaces.

In some cases learning programs result from exhaustive efforts to establish a partnership with the right training provider. In others it is a case of 'go it alone'. This is because:

- training providers and their practitioners are seen to lack up-to-date technical knowledge and resources
- providers appear unable to develop flexible and creative educational designs to implement training packages within workplace contexts.

Group training companies

Group training companies must market their apprentice and trainee employees, as well as meet the needs of host employers, without whom the group training system would collapse. Consequently, group training companies without a mandate to work with the less skilled and disadvantaged tend to screen out those who do not have the expected literacy and numeracy skills or a satisfactory school record. However, there are exceptions. Where skill shortages exist, some group training companies will promote trainees who, while lacking literacy and numeracy skills, nevertheless demonstrate passion and interest in the job. Anecdotal evidence suggests that these trainees are usually successful, which presents an apparent contradiction.

Group training companies contract training services for their trainee/apprentice employees from other training providers in the area. The local availability of services, coupled with the finite funds available per trainee, shapes the level of assistance possible, including literacy and numeracy support.

There are challenges in resourcing and in tapping into other providers in order to offer literacy and numeracy support that is appropriately geared to the apprentice or trainee.

► Conclusions

- Both effective provision and continuing development are absolutely necessary for these essential skills. Informed employers believe they must take responsibility for their continuing development for the sake of their businesses and their employees.
- Organisations leading the way in the development of literacy and numeracy skills in the workplace have informed leadership and an attitude to match.
- Literacy, numeracy, and employability skills development must be aligned to workplace goals and activities to guarantee employer commitment.
- Notwithstanding the positive role of Workplace English Language and Literacy (WELL) programs, those labelled 'adult literacy' are generally poorly supported by employees, who still see these as threatening or stigmatising.
- Investment in industry partnerships and the professional development of practitioners must continue to ensure that provision remains relevant.

Provision and development: Exploring employers' views of literacy, numeracy and employability by Ray Townsend and Peter Waterhouse can be downloaded from the NCVER website at <<http://www.ncver.edu.au>>.

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