A Primer for Workplace Literacy Programs

You've been hearing for months about the lack of basic workplace skills among U.S. workers. But it's not easy to find information on exactly what your company can do to address the problem. Here's some practical advice for getting started.

By Patricia Dunn-Rankin and Drake Beil

By now, everyone has heard about the need for upgrading and enhancing the skills of the American workforce. More and more companies are addressing that need by offering "workplace literacy" or "workplace basic skills" education.

Despite the widespread publicity about such programs, practical advice is still hard to find. If you are charged with looking into such a program for your company, you probably have some basic questions:

- What are some key features of successful basic skills programs?
- How do you start such a program?
- How are successful workplace literacy curricula designed?
- What are the contents of good materials for these programs?
- How and when should assessment and evaluation take place?

A new review of the literature provides some useful recommendations.

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Key features of successful programs

Current workplace education programs are varied in their materials and goals. Some focus strictly on basic literacy. They use standard adult basic education materials such as the English Literacy Progression Series produced in 1988 by the Warren Foundation.

Others use materials tailored to the workplace. They may be designed to help employees gain the skills needed for promotion to specific jobs.

Most of the programs reported in the literature are targeted toward minority groups with minimal English-language skills. Many also offer adult basic education leading to a high-school degree equivalent, or GED.

Classes are held in conference rooms, dining rooms, employee workrooms, and basements.

Before developing and implementing a program, course designers must undertake some form of needs assessment. That can range from an informal "perceived need" by an interested manager or supervisor to an expensive "literacy audit" by a source outside the company.

The needs assessment determines several important factors:

- what the goals of the company and the employees are
- which training program would best meet those goals
- where and how a basic skills improvement program would fit into the company's overall human resources planning and development.

Despite widespread publicity about workplace literacy programs, practical advice is still hard to find.

A literacy audit is used to pinpoint workers' basic skill inadequacies. *The Bottom Line,* a comprehensive guide for conducting literacy audits, was published in 1988 and is available from the U.S. departments of labor and education.

Getting a basic skills program off the ground

In most companies, participation in workplace basic skills programs is voluntary and open to all employees. Other firms offer programs only to hourly wage workers. Some companies select participants according to assessed skill deficiencies. If program participation is voluntary, the program coordinators must decide how to let employees know about the training and how to encourage them to attend.

In many cases, low self-esteem and fear of job loss prevent workers from even admitting that they need training. Identifying and reassuring such employees may be the first step to getting them into training.

T.J. Maxx, a retailer based in Worcester, Massachusetts, announced its literacy program in five different languages. Flyers were distributed in envelopes and posted on bulletin boards. Officers of the company toured the warehouse for a day, describing the program and recruiting students.

Baystate Medical Center, also located in Massachusetts, advertised its program in an in-house newsletter, in a catalog of course offerings from the state office of education and training, and on closed-circuit TV, where a recent GED graduate talked about the program and how it had helped him and his career.

In three Massachusetts industrial laundries, the work of recruitment fell mainly to a human resource specialist. She talked individually with staff members whom she knew had limited English proficiency. The company also sent employees to an orientation program conducted by the educational provider.

The Work Connection, a non-profit organization sponsored by the International Union of Electrical Workers, conducted a computer literacy program. Three local unions publicized the course through company bulletin boards and union newsletters, and union leaders aggressively recruited individual workers.

Some companies, such as the Coco Palms Hotel on Kauai in the Hawaiian islands, advertise their programs in notices included in paycheck envelopes.

Once trainees are recruited, the initial phase of all reported programs is assessment. Most of the companies use standardized tests such as the TABE, the Stanford Diagnostic, or the EDL McGraw-Hill Reading Test. But those standardized tests may not be well-suited to the target population, making assessment a major source of concern.

One solution is to use a competency-based instructional model. In such a model, clear objectives for a module or course are presented and all testing is directly related to the objectives.

What the programs are like

Most workplace literacy programs focus on English as a Second Language instruction and on adult basic education needed for the GED. Some exemplary programs also include courses in a variety of subjects including algebra, problem solving, general science, and computer literacy. Course offerings depend on the needs of the company providing the program.

In-house programs generally meet two or three times a week for two to three hours each time. Some companies give their employees release time during work hours to attend classes; others give only a tuition refund if the course is completed.

External incentives directly affect the success of workplace education programs, at least initially. Not surprisingly, the two most effective incentives are promotion and full release time for attending classes. Other incentives currently used are partial release time and full or partial tuition refunds for approved, completed courses.

For many workers, initial success in a program provides a sense of control over their lives. That alone serves as an incentive to continue learning.

Basic skills programs use a wide range of materials, including commercial academic materials and workplace-related materials. Some companies report difficulties in using

Resources for Developing a Basic Skills Program

Most commercial adult basic education materials use general topics for instruction, rather than materials tailored to the workers' jobs and environments. But to be effective, basic skills instruction must be work-related. Therefore, many companies will have to develop specific workplace instructional materials for their basic skills programs.

The most current and valid guidelines for developing work-related curriculum materials are found in Thomas Sticht's *Functional Context Education: Workshop Resource Notebook.* Sticht uses a cognitive science framework that emphasizes human learning as an active, information-seeking process rather than an automatic response process based on memorization or rote-learning.

The text, workbook, and teacher's guide developed by Sticht and his associates for an electronics technician's course are exemplary models of work-related educational materials. They incorporate and interrelate problem solving, mental models, basic electricity and electronics, reading, writing, mathematics, and world knowledge.

Another valuable resource for material development is *The Handbook for Trade-Related Curriculum Development,* by Mimi Felton of the Planters Employee Training Program. This handbook contains details about how to identify specific trade skills and incorporate them into adult education programs.

The American Newspaper Publishers Association encourages the use of newspapers as a text, and provides examples of successful literacy programs. *Read Today* by Hunter and McNearney is a ten-lesson model for using various sections of the newspaper for instruction. The Literacy Volunteers of America have a 1984 publication called *Read All About It,* which is a tutor handbook for use with newspapers.

work-related materials at first, because of students' low reading levels.

Many types of commercial instructional materials are available for teaching general basic skills to adults. Many printed materials also have accompanying audio tapes.

Programs provide instruction in various ways. Instructors may be hired from local educational institutions or from within the company. Some companies use volunteer tutors or coaches, who are recruited and directed by curriculum supervisors. In some cases, employees are merely encouraged to attend classes offered by local adult education centers or technical and community colleges.

Computer-assisted tutoring such as the IBM PALS system affords flexible, individualized training set-ups. The successful Job Skills Education Program (JSEP), a computer-based basic skills program created for the U.S. Army, has been adapted for civilian use and is being piloted at four locations. (For a detailed description of JSEP, see "An On-Line Prescription for Basic Skills" by Lois S. Wilson, *Training & Development Journal,* April 1990.)

Enthusiasts claim that Interactive videodisc (IVD) as an instructional method can increase retention while reducing learning time by 30 percent or more. This state-of-the-art instructional method uses a computer program, videodiscs, and accompanying written and audiotaped materials. IVD requires a large initial investment, but may be far less expensive in the long run than other instructional methods.

Problem areas

Measurement of success is a problem area for many companies that offer literacy programs. Most program evaluation appears to be informal. Surveys from students and supervisors are the most popular avenues for providing feedback. Tests given by the instructor and GED completion rates are two other reported forms of evaluation.

Several other barriers keep employees from participating in basic skills programs, especially if the workers are expected to attend on their own time. Many people who need skill enhancement have second jobs. Transportation and child care problems may prevent flexibility in their discretionary "off-the-job" hours. Some entry-level workers are satisfied with their work status and have no motivation for further learning.

Some cultures frown on upward mobility for women. Because immigrants make up a large part of the targeted group, diverse cultural norms are important considerations when planning literacy training.

Personal problems strongly affect workers' ability to concentrate on self-improvement. For example, workers who have problems with depression or alcoholism are not good candidates for consistent class attendance. Their personal problems may have to be addressed before training in workplace skills can be effective.

Recommendations for effective programs

Successful workplace skills programs follow many of the teaching practices that are commonly recommended for adults:

- Program goals and objectives are clearly defined.
- Teaching materials are relevant to student needs.
- Trainees receive frequent feedback.
- Programs use evaluation methods to improve effectiveness.

Adults need to see immediate, practical value in what they are learning. Therefore, designers should make sure that assessments and curricula for workplace basic skills programs include materials and tasks that apply to workers' actual jobs. Employees need to learn to integrate skills in reading, writing, math, and problem solving with other skills.

In general, a basic skills curriculum should meet the following standards:

- It should be organized by job tasks.
- It should build on employees' knowledge of job content.
- It should give employees an opportunity to work together and learn from each other.
- It should link the goals of the company with the goals of participating employees.

Program evaluation

It is crucial that program evaluation be carefully planned before a workplace education program is begun. *The Bottom Line* identifies four kinds of evaluations: student reaction, student learning, student performance, and organization results.

In our experience, organizational results can be evaluated in three categories: personnel, customer service, and sales management.

- Personnel measures include absenteeism, performance reviews, productivity measures, promotion of trainees, turnover, and supervisor appraisals.
- Customer service measures include compliments, complaints, referrals, ratio of new accounts to old accounts, and quality measures.
- Sales management measures include average sale size, commissions, cross-selling, items per order, new accounts, product mix, and sales volume.

Evaluation should include provisions for pre- and post-testing based on simulations of actual job tasks, and interviews with employees and supervisors. For both initial assessment and post-testing, the competency-based model seems to offer the most valid measurement device. It allows clear objectives to be readily quantified and it allows hands-on performance to be used effectively as an evaluation tool.

Beyond expectations

Successful workplace literacy programs are as diverse as the workplace itself. One clear commonality is that management needs to be heavily involved and committed. With that important support, carefully planned and executed programs are likely to produce organizational dividends far beyond expectations. ■

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