



Identifying effective workplace basic skills strategies for enhancing employee productivity and development

Synopsis

This is a report of the scoping and pilot studies conducted between September 2002 and June 2003 as part of a longitudinal study that aims to examine the effectiveness of workplace-linked literacy, language and numeracy programmes. We present some key findings that came out of this initial phase of the project and discuss how they inform decisions on the way the study is going to move forward in the future. The development and piloting of a variety of research instruments that are proposed were discussed in this study in this study.

Key points

- ❑ Our review of the relevant literature and our discussions in the field underlined the dearth of well-founded research in this area, and the interest of employers, providers/tutors and employees in knowing more about 'what works'.
- ❑ Our preliminary findings, based on our pilot study of a small sample of employees participating in such programmes, indicate fairly low attendance and retention rates; attendance and retention rates seem to be

related to the general learning culture in the organisation concerned, as well as more practical matters, such as the working patterns (eg shifts) of employees.

- ❑ At the same time, employees who do participate in such programmes generally have very favourable views towards them and consider them both beneficial and enjoyable. They have also on the whole expressed very positive attitudes towards their tutors or trainers. This finding can be linked to some existing evidence on employers' attitudes towards basic skills training, which are also on the whole quite positive.
- ❑ A corollary of the small research base in this area was the absence of pre-existing research instruments suitable for use in studies of workplace programmes. A major focus of the piloting process was the development and modification of instruments. Basic skills are discussed in detail in this report.

Background and rationale of research

The aim of the project is to identify when and how workplace basic skills programmes are effective in improving adults' basic language, literacy and numeracy skills, as well as examining their effects on productivity related outcomes (e.g. sickness rates, job satisfaction) and other life-course variables, such as employment stability, enrolment in further educational programmes and quality of life. A large number of adults with basic skills needs are already in the workforce and the number of workplace-linked programmes has been growing rapidly in recent years and is expected to grow further in the light of recent policy measures announced by the Government. There has, however, been almost no research which examines how far these programmes are effective and beneficial either to the employers that sponsor them or to the employees that attend them. The findings of our study are expected to provide some clear answers to the above questions.

Main elements of research

A detailed methodology for the project was developed during the period of scoping study, including selection of instruments and sampling decisions, both discussed in detail in the report. We will be using a longitudinal and mixed-methods design, collecting both quantitative and qualitative data. There will be four main data collection points for all participating learners providing for a full 24-month follow-up period and a sub-sample of learners will also be interviewed more intensively. Provider data will include data from teachers/tutors, managers and supervisors, and information on measures of organisational capital and learning/teaching approaches. Learner data will cover attainment, attitude and lifecourse variables. The types of instrument required by this methodology have been identified: in most cases it has been necessary to develop and pilot new or modified instruments which are fit for purpose, and these are described in the section on piloting of instruments.

There are no comprehensive databases of workplace basic skills programmes. Provision of such programmes is very diverse and varies considerably between regions, sectors, individual companies and training providers, and funding bodies and methods. We are therefore unable to sample schemes using a national sampling frame, and the study instead will involve an opportunity sample of programmes, built through various networks and contacts that we established during our scoping work. The initial sample will include around 40 providers and 400 learners in four sectors: health and care, food processing, transport, cleaning and environmental services.

Research team

Directors

Alison Wolf, Karen Evans

Research Officers

Katerina Ananiadou, Rachel Emslie-Henry

Consultant

Jay Derrick

References and further reading

- Ananiadou, K., Jenkins, A., & Wolf, A. (2003) **The Benefits to Employers of Raising Workforce Basic Skills: A Literature Review**. London: NRDC
- Evans, K., Hodkinson, P. & Unwin, L. (Eds) (2002). **Working to Learn: Transforming Learning in the Workplace**. London: Kogan Page.
- Hoyle, C., Wolf, A., Molyneux-Hodgson, S. & Kent, P. (2002). **Mathematical Skills in the Workplace. Final report to the Science, Technology and Mathematics Council**. London: Institute of Education, University of London.
- Sticht, T. G., & Mikulecky, L. (1984). **Job-related basic skills: cases and conclusions**. ERIC Clearinghouse on adult, career and vocational education, The National Center for Research in Vocational Education, Columbus, Ohio.

Contact for further information

Katerina Ananiadou
NRDC
Institute of Education
20 Bedford Way
London
WC1H 0AL

Telephone: 020 7612 6521
email: k.ananiadou@ioe.ac.uk



The full report will be available from March 2004 from NRDC's website at

www.nrdc.org.uk

Paper copies are available from:
Publications
NRDC,
Institute of Education,
20 Bedford Way,
London WC1H 0AL
Telephone: 020 7612 6476
email: publications@nrdc.org.uk