



National Research and Development Centre  
for adult literacy and numeracy



## Learning for and in the workplace

Employability matters. Possessing and developing the skills necessary to enter employment, perform work tasks well and progress at work is critically important. It is essential for individuals if they are to improve their life chances, capabilities and livelihood. And it is vital to ensuring that the UK develops to secure its place as a world-class modern economy, based on the high calibre skills and knowledge of its workforce. Successfully developing better skills, knowledge and capabilities for all types of work means we must base vocational and occupationally-specific learning on strong foundations of literacy, numeracy and spoken communication. Skills for Life is crucial to employability.

The *Leitch Review of Skills* (HM Treasury 2006) recommends challenging new economic aspirations for the UK and sets stretching targets for improving literacy and numeracy skills in

particular. These are seen as fundamental to the UK's economic status and competitiveness. The workplace is the best site for many people to develop their literacy and numeracy skills, develop the motivation and confidence to persist with learning, and get on better at work. Workplace learning is best placed to reflect, and quickly respond to, the needs of employers, unions and employees. Many people who say they would never have gone back to learning in formal education have already benefited. There are millions more who can benefit from learning at work, and learning for work. By addressing the needs of unemployed people; young adults who are multiply disadvantaged and not in work, training or education; older people wishing to develop their skills or people in other 'hard-to-reach' groups, we can boost the skills, capabilities and confidence of the workforce. At the same time we can radically improve the quality of people's lives.

# What the research shows



Many ESOL learners regard the workplace as an important place for the practise and development of their language skills.

## The place of LLN in people's working lives

Research on learners' experience of work, (Barton *et al.* forthcoming 2007), shows that many of those with LLN needs in the workforce are in manual jobs and jobs requiring the application of soft skills in sectors such as hospitality, care, retail and sales. Due to the nature of the work, many employees experience little demand for literacy skills, although some jobs require quite sophisticated application of numeracy skills. Increasing requirements of regulation, accountability and proficiency in IT are putting more pressure on individuals in the workplace to develop their literacy skills. Those with low level skills are using a variety of strategies to cope including: avoiding work requiring LLN skills, relying on memory, increasing their use of technology to disguise skills deficiencies, and using colleagues and wider social networks to assist them.

With regard to language learning, the research shows that many ESOL learners regard the workplace as an important place for the practise and development of their language skills. Some learners however, view the demands of work as taking time away from opportunities for formal language learning in classes, and others were hampered in their learning by the lack of use of English in some working environments.

Learning at work did not always involve formal learning and much learning occurred through the social networks which people participate in during work. Many learners regarded work positively, seeing it as offering financial independence, dignity and promoting self-confidence. Learners also pointed to the intrinsic pleasures to be gained from work tasks and to the important role work plays in offering an escape from other problems and pressures in their wider family and social lives. For some however, work had more negative connotations, causing both physical and mental health problems and conflicting with the demands of other aspects of their lives. The low status of much work for those with LLN needs was also seen as a negative element.

## The place of LLN in programmes for job seekers

Conclusions from the literature review of the changing place of LLN in programmes for job seekers since the 1970s (Barton and Tusting forthcoming 2007), suggest that the development of basic skills in adulthood has little immediate impact on wages and the probability of employment. Nevertheless, possession of such

skills is seen as clearly linked to employability and life chances. The authors conclude that investment in basic skills education for the unemployed needs to be seen not as a 'magic bullet' to resolve individuals' histories of unemployment, but as part of a broader package of support which aims to meet individuals' needs and aspirations and support them in their employment goals.

## Increasing demands for literacy and numeracy in the workplace

Two key, often interrelated, processes appear particularly important in driving up the need for literacy and numeracy in the workplace:

- A tendency towards the 'flattening out' of management structures, causing lower-level employees to take on more responsibility, for example in terms of report writing.
- The rising importance of regulations and targets.

For example, in one local authority estate, caretakers were increasingly expected to provide written documentation of cases of crime, vandalism and general disrepair, demanding higher literacy skills. In the words of the course tutor: caretakers are 'finding that they're having to write a little bit more information on forms, and I think that does worry some of them because they all say "well my spelling's terrible"'. A bus company in the Midlands ran a compulsory 'customer service and literacy' course for 400 employees, as part of a response to new requirements for drivers to fill in incident report forms, a requirement which was itself partly shaped by company fears over litigation from customers. Just as literacy and numeracy are becoming more important, so are computers. Research looking at workplace needs found that the proportion of workers for whom computers are an essential part of work rose from 31 per cent to 40 per cent between 1997 and 2001, with the number for whom they were not important at all falling from 31 per cent to 21 per cent (Wolf 2005).

## What motivates employees to engage in workplace basic skills learning?

Workplace learning can be particularly valuable to those who have had negative experiences in school-based education, and who associate school-based settings such as colleges with failure and stress. For many workers without basic skills, the idea of going to college can be too daunting. As one learner says: 'I would love to go to college but I think that's what really puts me off ... I just think,

well, school was that bad, it would be the same.’ Workplace learning offers an alternative. For example, when one learner said he was worried about being slower than everyone else in his collaborative learning group, another learner told him, ‘No, it’s different here. It’s not like school.’ Being ‘not like school’ is only one of the advantages learners see in workplace learning. In recent research, the overriding majority of learners cited accessibility, convenience and familiarity as key advantages to workplace learning.

When researchers asked a large sample of workplace learners what they expected to get out of their course, they found that the most common expectations were: learning new skills (45 per cent), doing their current job better (28 per cent), improving their chances of getting a better job (26 per cent), and improving their chances of getting a promotion (22 per cent).

### **Benefits to employees of workplace learning**

Following their basic skills course, more workplace learners than expected found that their ability to do their current job had improved. In one-third of cases, people who said that they were doing their job better said it was because the course had improved their self-confidence. This provides evidence against arguments that workers in low-skilled jobs do not need basic skills training because that training is not directly relevant to how they do their job.

Looking more fully at workers’ expectations and what they actually got out of their course, it is fair to say that people did not get what they expected – but also did not expect what they got. On the whole, expectations of increased wages, chances of promotion and better jobs were not met. On the other hand, while only 12 per cent of people said before the course that they thought taking it would make their job more interesting, after the course about 25 per cent said that it had. Nearly 30 per cent said their course had helped them meet new people. Sixty-six per cent said they were more confident at work than before their basic skills training, and 59 per cent said they were more confident outside of work (Wolf *et al.* 2006). And nearly 80 per cent of people said that workplace learning had changed their attitude to learning and education.

It is clear that low levels of basic skills hinder workers’ economic chances. For example, research has found that, between the ages of 23 and 37, almost two-thirds of men and three-quarters of women with very low literacy skills had never been promoted, compared to less than one-third of men and two-fifths of women with good literacy skills. That is, men with very low literacy skills were half as likely to get promoted as men with good literacy skills (Ananiadou *et al.* 2003). For women, the ratio

drops somewhat, but is still very significant. There were smaller but still very significant differences between groups with respect to numeracy skills. We also know that poor literacy and numeracy skills reduce earnings and the likelihood of being in employment, even when individuals have good formal qualifications.

It is also clear that workplace training (which tends to be concentrated on those with the highest skills) is associated with higher wages for employees. However, due to limited research, we do not yet know if basic skills training leads to higher wages (Ananiadou *et al.* 2003).

### **Benefits to employers of workplace training**

Almost all of the research in this field has looked at the benefits of workplace training in general, rather than workplace basic skills training. For the former, the research evidence suggests that workforce training is associated with improvements in productivity, higher levels of innovation, and better financial performance. Despite business’s fears of more highly trained staff being poached by competitors, the evidence points in the opposite direction: individuals who receive workplace training tend to be less likely to leave, reducing staff turnover. Though there is as yet little UK research on the benefits to employers of workplace basic skills training, international evidence suggests that it can increase productivity, improve the use of new technology in the workplace, save time and reduce costs (Ananiadou *et al.* 2003).

### **Apprenticeships**

There is evidence of unsatisfactory achievement in literacy, numeracy and other key skills within apprenticeships, with many centres regarding basic skills as a chore and leaving them for late in the programme. Learners often feel antipathetic to basic skills provision, regarding it as ‘too much like school’ and unrelated to their craft. In an evaluation of a development project designed to improve basic skills provision in apprenticeships, NRDC found that skilled teachers were especially important in the battle to engage learners (Cramner *et al.* 2004). Particularly among youngsters who had done poorly at school, it was important to consistently promote literacy, numeracy and other key skills as relevant to their future jobs. The evaluation also noted that most vocational teachers were teaching literacy and numeracy without appropriate training. With the *Leitch Review of Skills* (HM Treasury 2006) calling for an increase in the number of apprenticeships to 500,000 per year, these are issues that need to be addressed.

### **Train to Gain**

Despite findings of a ‘deadweight’ effect (i.e. paying companies to do training they would have done anyway), evaluation of the Employer Training Pilots showed evidence of success, and Train to Gain,

**Individuals who receive workplace training tend to be less likely to leave, reducing staff turnover despite employers’ fears to the contrary.**

which has grown out of those pilots, is one of the linchpins of the *Leitch Review's* proposals to convert adult learning into a demand-led system. Briefly, Train to Gain is designed to promote both vocational and basic skills development and offers employers free training for employees to achieve Level 2 qualifications (or Skills for Life qualifications) if they have not already attained Level 2. The training would be accessed through a skills broker who offers free advice, including skills analysis, to businesses. It is still too early to judge the success of Train to Gain. Early assessment suggests that it will be successful with large firms but that engaging medium and small firms will be a greater challenge.

### Engaging learners

The Skills for Life focus on hard-to-reach priority groups – including unemployed people, disadvantaged young people, benefit claimants, prisoners and those supervised in the community, and other groups at risk of social exclusion – has led to an increase in the number of settings in which LLN programmes are delivered. It also demands a much fuller understanding of learner motivations and experiences, particularly for those who are outside of employment. To further this understanding, the NRDC has researched engagement and participation of learners in a variety of different settings, including: a drug and alcohol support centre, a shelter for young homeless people and a domestic violence support group (Barton *et al.* 2006). Findings include:

- The majority of people had had very negative experiences of education and authority figures.
- Social circumstances meant that many people led turbulent, unpredictable lives.
- While many people spoke of seeing themselves as outside a world of 'normality', they shared the common range of aspirations associated with 'normal' lives: wanting a safe, settled life; a good home; good family relationships; good work and good health.
- People needed to feel it was the 'right time' for them to engage in learning and change their lives, and this right time was something they had to identify for themselves.

### Embedded approaches to LLN in vocational programmes

Evidence suggests that embedded LLN promotes learners' progress and achievements on vocational programmes. Embedding LLN learning in a vocational context is particularly important for learners who do not immediately recognise their own need to develop LLN. Interlinking basic skills with what the learner sees as practical, job-centred goals can open doors and accelerates both LLN and vocational learning.

Embedding requires time and effort. Vocational and LLN teachers need to plan and work together and share responsibility for the course and the learner experience.

Where one teacher took responsibility for both vocational and LLN material, learners were twice as likely to fail (Casey *et al.* 2006). The research shows that a collaborative team, made up of teachers with complementary skills and expertise, is the most effective model.

The way in which teachers introduce LLN is crucial to the attitudes of learners towards basic skill development, particularly among low-achieving young adults. It is particularly important for vocational teachers to be seen to give status and recognition to LLN teachers and to constantly promote LLN to learners as relevant to the workplace and as essential to their vocational training and future employment.

### What does the future hold for workplace learning?

Voluntaristic approaches to workplace learning have not tended to serve the low skilled well. Instead, employers have adapted the old adage: 'For whoever has, to him more shall be given, and he will have an abundance'. The least skilled have lost out, with employers slow to see the benefits of providing education to those lacking in basic skills. In part this has been because little research has been done on the economic advantages of workplace learning targeted at the low skilled. What research has been done has shown ambiguous results. But a good business case is not solely based on economics. Workplace learning has been shown to offer numerous other benefits to employers, including lower staff turnover and higher commitment to the job.

It is particularly important to get this message out to small and medium-sized businesses, most of whom have been reluctant to engage in workplace learning. For some, this reluctance is because they do not see how improving basic skills will benefit their bottom line. Others fear that employees with new skills will be poached by competitors or will find it easier to leave for better jobs. As discussed above, the evidence does not bear out this fear.

The *Leitch Review* develops the voluntaristic tradition further by recommending a 'Skills Pledge', whereby employers would commit to helping employees with poor basic skills to improve those skills. The evidence to date indicates that some employers will take up this challenge, but many will not. In Wales, which has had a Skills Pledge for several years, 10 per cent of all employees are covered by it. Reaching the other 90 per cent will prove to be a tremendous challenge without compulsion, an idea that Leitch suggests might be reviewed as an option in 2010.

The research shows that a collaborative team, made up of teachers with complementary skills and expertise, is the most effective model.





## Scope of the paper

This paper is based primarily on a range of research and development projects undertaken by NRDC. The main focus is literacy, language and numeracy (LLN) learning in the workplace and vocational settings.

Two forthcoming reports on learners' experiences of work, and a review of the place of LLN in programmes for job seekers since the 1970s, provide important data on the value of LLN in people's lives, both at work and in programmes designed to get people into work.

Recent NRDC research shows that a lack of LLN skills can have clear adverse economic consequences (Bynner and Parsons 2006). Raising LLN levels can play a key role in improving employment opportunities and progression in the workplace.

The Adult Basic Skills and Workplace Learning project is a five-year longitudinal project, conducted between 2003 and 2008, funded by ESRC and NRDC. It aims to assess the effects on individuals and organisations of engagement in workplace literacy, numeracy and ESOL programmes.

In 2007-8, NRDC will inform and support planning following the Leitch Report. We will also focus on key aspects of employability and workplace learning:

- Developing young adults' employability through speaking and listening.
- Writing for work: what are the requirements for writing skills at work and how can providers help to equip learners to practise writing effectively at work?

The benefits to employers of raising workforce basic skills (Ananiadou *et al.* 2003) is a review of literature that suggests that individuals benefit significantly from improving their levels of literacy and numeracy. The evidence on the benefits to employers of investing in basic skills training is limited at present, although some studies have already indicated that such benefits may include increases in productivity, reduction in costs and enhanced customer satisfaction. NRDC research on embedding has explored the impact of embedded approaches to LLN within vocational programmes with over 2000 learners. The research showed that learners on embedded courses had better staying-on rates and higher success rates than those on non-embedded courses. These findings chime with those from related work with young adults and with offenders.

Another NRDC project, Adult Learners' Lives, sheds light on learner perspectives on employability and work.

- How can we break negative relationships between low levels of literacy, language, numeracy and ICT and employability? A UK/USA comparative study will build on the engagement of employers and unions, use the evidence that embedding literacy and numeracy have a positive impact, and help to maximise the potential of Skills for Life to support workplace programmes such as Train to Gain.

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# Learning for and in the workplace

## Place of LLN learning in people's working lives

- Many LLN learners experience little demand for literacy skills in the workplace due to the nature of their employment.
- Learners develop a range of coping strategies to disguise their lack of LLN skills including relying on memory, increasing their use of technology and seeking support from their colleagues and wider social networks.
- Many LLN learners regard work positively, although some experience negative connotations caused by work-related physical and mental health problems and the low status of much work for those with low level LLN skills.

## Place of LLN in programmes for job seekers

- Investment in basic skills education should not be seen as a magic bullet to resolve individual's histories of unemployment, but as part of a broader package of support designed to meet individuals' needs and aspirations and support them in their employment goals.

## Increasing demands for LLN in the workplace

- Increased demands for literacy and numeracy in the workplace are being driven by the tendency towards flatter management structures causing lower level employees to take on more responsibility, and by the rising importance of regulations and targets in the workplace.

## What motivates employees to engage in workplace learning?

- Employees are motivated by the more informal setting of the workplace and the chance to learn new skills, do their job better, and improve their chances of getting a better job and improving promotion opportunities.

## Benefits to employees

- Benefits following workplace LLN training included increased self-confidence at work and outside of work, making the job more interesting and development of a more positive attitude to learning and education.

## Benefits to employers

- International evidence suggests workplace LLN learning can increase productivity, improve the use of new technology in the workplace, save time and reduce costs.

## Engaging learners

- Embedded LLN learning promotes learners' progress and achievements on vocational programmes.
- It is particularly important to constructively promote LLN learning to learners as relevant to the workplace and essential to their vocational training and future employment.

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