

Literacy Education and the Workforce

Bridging a Critical Gap

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This article examines literacy levels and workforce trends in the United States today, reviews the needs of the workplace, and demonstrates the relationship between literacy and the ability of the workforce to find an adequate supply of workers who are capable of performing a full spectrum of workplace tasks. It also discusses the role a JVS can play in bridging the gap between the job seeker with low literacy skills and limited proficiency in the English language and employment by providing and advocating for work-specific literacy skills training.

America is divided between those who can competently communicate and carry out the most basic tasks in the workplace, in their homes as supportive parents, and in their communities as active citizens—and those who cannot. On one side are adults who can find and keep good jobs, help their children achieve and meet the high standards in school, and play a civic role in the life of their community. On the other are those Americans who lack both basic literacy and workplace skills and are falling further behind in the knowledge economy of the 21st century.

Association of Public Television Stations
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The American economy has undergone dramatic changes in recent years, moving from one based on production and manual labor to an economy that relies on creative abilities and advanced cognitive skills. “Rapid technological change and increased competition place the spotlight on

the skills and preparation of the workforce, particularly on the ability to adapt to changing technologies and shifting product demand. Shifts in the nature of business organizations and the growing importance of knowledge-based work also favor strong, non-routine cognitive skills, such as abstract reasoning, problem-solving, communication and collaboration” (Koroly & Panis, 2004). An educated population has become a benchmark of a society in which individuals are prepared for the many challenges presented by an evolving workplace. “Of the many purposes that education serves in society, one of the most important is to prepare people for work. In today’s economy, education is important not just to help adults enter the labor market, but also to help workers remain competitive after they have done so” (Bishop, 1997).

IMPACT OF LOW LITERACY ON THE WORKPLACE

According to the National Governor’s Association Center for Best Practices “a

key factor in building a flexible and knowledgeable workforce is the integration of education, economic development and workforce development policies that provide a continuum of lifelong learning opportunities and work supports” (New Jersey Association for Lifelong Learning, 2007). Yet the statistics indicate that the literacy skills of the American workforce are not sufficient to produce the level of worker needed to support a growing and increasingly complex economy.

The International Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (IALLS), conducted in 2003 by the Educational Testing Service, found that approximately 22% of U.S. adults scored at Literacy Level One, indicating that the individual may be unable to perform such simple tasks as determining the correct amount of medicine to give a child from information printed on a package or locating the time of a meeting on a form; 32% scored at Level Two, which indicated an ability to deal only with material that is simple and clearly laid out and in which the tasks are not too complex. Level Two identifies people who may have developed coping skills to manage everyday literacy demands, but their low level of proficiency makes it difficult to face new demands, such as learning new job skills (ABC Canada Literacy Foundation, 2005). The IALLS also examined the relationship between low literacy and economic performance and found that the probability that low-literate adults would be unemployed for 6 months during the year was more than 2.5 times the probability that more literate adults would be unemployed, and the probability that low-literate adults who were unemployed would gain employment over 52 weeks was 50% in contrast to 70% for literate adults (New Jersey Association for Lifelong Learning, 2007).

Similarly, the National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL) estimates that about 44% of U.S. adults have below basic or basic levels of literacy. Such low-literate adults are more likely to be unemployed, more likely to work as laborers or assem-

blers, more likely to have been passed over for a job or promotion, more likely to work fewer hours per week, have lower median wages per week, have lower median household incomes, and are much more likely to live in poverty.

New Jersey has been experiencing the effects of a worker population whose literacy skills are not meeting the needs of the workplace. Both government and business associations recognize this mismatch. Eighty percent of New Jersey businesses responding to a survey conducted in 2000 reported difficulty hiring skilled workers (New Jersey Association for Lifelong Learning, 2007). In 2002, studies showed that the majority of jobs held by New Jersey workers required some degree of on-the-job training or some postsecondary education. According to the New Jersey Department of Labor and Workforce Development, this trend will continue.

National trends reflect the mismatch between the needs of the workplace and the literacy levels of the population of workers. Low literacy levels in the workforce erode productivity and limit the global competitiveness of U.S. firms. In a 2001 survey of the 6,000 members of the National Association of Manufacturers, 80% of respondents reported a moderate or serious shortage of qualified job candidates. A 2005 study found that 80% again reported a moderate or serious shortage of qualified job candidates, and 47% felt that over the next three years employers would need more employees with better reading, writing, and communication skills (New Jersey Association for Lifelong Learning, 2007). According to the U.S. Department of Labor Web site, nearly two-thirds of all the jobs created over the next decade will require a college degree.

Individuals need to be able to handle workplace challenges so that they can obtain and also retain a job and move up the career ladder. This career mobility is essential if workers are to be able to provide adequate financial support for themselves and their families. It is becoming more and

more difficult for individuals with low literacy to earn a living wage. Between 1979 and 1996, for example, the median earnings of 25- to 34-year-old male high-school drop-outs fell by 30%; the corresponding decline for females was 21%. Over the same time period, the earnings differential between low-literate workers and college graduates increased from 60% to 133%. The primary explanation for this increased earnings gap is that the demand for unskilled workers declined relative to the demand for skilled workers (Tyler, Murname, & Willett, 2005). Individuals with lower literacy levels tend to work fewer weeks of the year than those with higher literacy levels, which may be attributed to the types of jobs available to low-skilled workers as well as to their ability to hold a job. In addition, faster growing occupations have higher literacy requirements and therefore, over time, may raise the overall average workforce literacy skill requirements (State Employment and Training Commission, 2001).

What low-literate workers earn when they enter the workforce is pretty much what they earn when they retire. A new employee who enters a job at a minimum wage level may be on a par with others in the same business or industry, but as those who are better educated make progress both in job title and salary, individuals who are limited in literacy skills will remain at a low level. For this reason, as time progresses, people in Literacy Level One make only about two-thirds as much money as the people in Level Three, and only about one-third as much money as the people in the highest level of literacy, Level Five.

It is very difficult for New Jersey families to achieve economic self-sufficiency if the chief wage earner lacks a high-school degree. The unemployment rate for adults in New Jersey who did not graduate from high school is twice that of adults who graduated from high school and nearly six times that of adults who hold bachelors degrees. Adults who lack high school are much less likely to have jobs with benefits. Finally, adults who do not speak English well earn

less than adults who do speak English well, and the discrepancy in earnings increases as the level of education and English language proficiency increase. Learning to speak English appears to significantly affect earning levels and consistency. Lack of English skills is not only associated with wasted potential, but also with poverty and marginalization (New Jersey Association for Lifelong Learning, 2007).

Problems for low-literate individuals arise when, in this dislocating economy in which people often lose their jobs and companies move and reorganize, those who have developed adaptive behaviors are forced to find new jobs. In many companies, workers who do not speak English, for example, have been working with an entire workforce of people who speak the same language that they do and with supervisors who may be either bilingual or conversant in the second language. After these individuals are dislocated, the need for a better facility with the English language comes to the fore and makes job procurement difficult, and job retention tenuous at best.

Companies in a shifting economy are similarly affected. When a firm is shifting from one market segment to another one or adding a new product mix, literacy deficits among workers assume greater importance, and both the workers and the company are at risk (Bosworth, 2007).

CREATING A SKILLED AND EDUCATED WORKFORCE

Clearly, there is a need for an educated and skilled labor force, which can be created and maintained in a variety of ways. First, individuals may invest in their own education and training in the hope that they will learn the skills to achieve economic success. Second, organizations may invest in training their employees so that they will be able to develop a more skilled workforce and remain competitive in the labor market (New Jersey Association for Lifelong Learning, 2007). Third, many employers develop strategies to deal with the literacy

deficits of their workforce. Tasks that require higher level reading, writing, or math skills, for example, may be performed by first-level supervisors instead of line workers. Technology also can in some instances make it easier for low-literate employees to do their jobs. Fast food restaurants, for example, may have a picture instead of a number on the key of a register. This use of technology enables companies to maintain relatively high levels of productivity and competitiveness when faced with significant literacy deficits among their workers. However, it does not remedy those deficits (Bosworth, 2007)

To find a remedy, it is important to identify the skills that employers feel that workers need to succeed and to enable companies remain competitive. In New Jersey, adult literacy education is heavily oriented to teaching basic skills. At the beginner levels of Adult Basic Education (ABE), instruction focuses on reading, writing, and mathematics, whereas at the intermediate and advanced levels, instruction focuses either on the knowledge learners need to pass the GED Test (Beder & Medina, 2000) or on the core curriculum of the adult high school. English as a second language instruction focuses on teaching oral English. Obviously these skills are extremely necessary to ensure a fully productive workforce. As necessary as they are, however, they are insufficient (New Jersey Association for Lifelong Learning, 2007).

Most employers say that the basic skills that they require go beyond reading and writing, and they are as concerned or even more concerned about other workplace basic skills as they are about traditional measures of literacy. In addition to the skills traditionally taught in adult education programs, additional competencies are essential to workplace success. Technology skills or computer literacy is increasingly important to all employers. Employers identify these critical basic skills as well: thinking critically, acting logically and solving problems, finding and using information, knowing when to ask a question, knowing when

you do not have the right information to answer that question, and knowing where to go to get that information. In addition, they identify the importance of teamwork, the ability to work in groups with others cooperatively, social skills, attendance, timeliness, and a good work ethic as essential skills (Bosworth, 2007)

How do we enable individuals to attain the necessary literacy skills and workforce skills that will help them succeed in this new economy?

First, we can advocate that the K-12 educational system not only strengthen the basics for its students but also go beyond them so students become proficient in computers and technology, learn essential workplace skills and behaviors, and gain the higher level critical thinking and lifelong learning skills that will enable them to go beyond high school to better jobs and advanced degrees.

Low-literate adult Americans and immigrants who have finished school have two options. The first is adult education offered through the public school system or through agencies and organizations whose mission is to improve the literacy and lifelong learning skills of individuals. There are several problems with this solution, however. First, adult education funding is at an all-time low, both on the federal and state levels. This limits both the scope and intensity of these programs and the numbers of students who can be accommodated. In New Jersey, for example, only 4.91% of the population in need of adult literacy education is served by its publicly funded adult literacy education system per year. Second, the adult education system itself is not a cohesive system. It lacks standards, direction, appropriate professional development, and government support. Third, students within the system have limited time and resources and face many barriers to their attainment of higher educational levels.

Yet, nonprofit organizations, including those in the Jewish Vocational Service network, have proved effective in providing adult education through the publicly funded

system. JVS MetroWest, for example, has organized a program that links the job readiness needs of the individual to the language and culture of the workforce. It also connects learning basic skills to obtaining and retaining employment as well as to the life-skill needs of the learner. As the lead agency for the past seven years of the largest adult education consortium in the State of New Jersey, JVS MetroWest has been instrumental in working with other organizations to serve thousands of students per year, and to assure that the learning that is offered is directed toward substantive, in-context material. Nevertheless, although learners gain literacy skills, competencies, and jobs, limited funding and time negatively affect the ability of the agency to do all that needs to be done to serve those who need instruction. These constraints prevent the creation of a program that runs for enough time to enable students to achieve those advanced thinking skills that will not only help them get a job, but to get a good job that will lead to true financial independence.

The second option for those who need remediation in literacy and essential work skills is education offered through businesses themselves. New Jersey has invested in such a program that offers customized training opportunities through funding from the Department of Labor and Workforce Development (LWD) in a competitive grant process. JVS MetroWest and other training providers meet with companies, identify their employees' and the company's training needs, and deliver on-site adult education and specific skills training customized to specific work and business requirements. This investment by LWD not only enhances the company's productivity and competitive position today but also strengthens New Jersey's business and the literacy skills of its workers, creating a more highly educated workforce for tomorrow.

A few states have evaluated similar programs by examining their impact on the wages of individuals who received basic skills training on the job with employer sup-

port. These states have found consistently high increases in the wage rates of individuals as a result of this kind of training. Workplace instructional programs tend to be effective and show results for a number of reasons. First, the skills and training offered correspond to the skills that employers and employees identify as ones that are necessary for success and/or advancement. The employer is involved in the design and delivery of the instructional programs, and classes are offered in a location that is both familiar and convenient. They are employer-driven, with employer buy-in either in the form of financing for the classes or in work-release time offered to employees. The basic skills offered are in a workplace context, which makes learning more relevant and meaningful.

For the individual who is low literate and unemployed, however, workplace training is not an option; these individuals must rely on the publicly funded adult education programs offered throughout the country. The challenge then is to move adult education programs away from their strictly traditional emphasis on literacy skill basics and toward the adult competencies that are seen as necessary for success and advancement. Such competencies are reflected, for example, in frameworks, such as Equipped for the Future (EFF), which was developed by the National Institute for Literacy and includes a set of content standards designed to provide the skills that adults need to succeed as family members, workers, and citizens. Curricula that develop these EFF skills are now mandatory requirements of adult education grant submissions in New Jersey. EFF skills include developing the ability of learners to assess their own knowledge in relation to their personal career goals so that they can shape a course that will better prepare them for the future. In addition, programs must be responsive to the needs of the workplace, must train teachers to incorporate those needs into their programs and classes, and must provide a continuum of opportunities for adults to learn the skills necessary for workplace

success (New Jersey Association for Lifelong Learning, 2007).

In New Jersey, recognition of the need to improve the adult education system as a whole and an understanding of the impact of an improved education system on the workforce and the state economy have led adult literacy providers throughout the state to look to the New Jersey Association of Lifelong Learning (NJALL) to identify and advocate for the needs of adult learners. This organization is comprised of leaders in the adult education field, including program directors, academic experts, representatives from both community colleges and the university system, and representatives of the workforce development system.

JVS MetroWest has long been involved in this statewide organization and in other policymaking bodies that work to shape the direction of adult education in New Jersey. It is incumbent on JVS agencies in other states to similarly become involved in their states' organizations so they can help bridge the gap between the worker, the educational system and the workplace. JVS agencies can also work with county and state organizations and with workforce boards to link education and work and to assure that the educational providers are adapting to the changing needs of the workforce.

Our adult education system must provide opportunities for learners to develop skills that will enable them to compete and to advance. Only then will learners enter the path to lifelong learning that will benefit themselves and the workforce as a whole. New skills, new directions, new goals—and the desire to change—will enable us to bridge the literacy gap and lead us to a future of economic success.

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