

Literacy is more than reading and writing. It is about people's ability to participate in daily activities like banking, shopping and taking care of their health. At work, good literacy skills are even more important. Being able to read and understand a safety manual or technical workbook, fill out employee forms and keep or change jobs depends on solid literacy skills.

Consider the facts:

- Just a 1% increase in average literacy rates would yield a 1.5%, or \$18 billion, permanent increase in the GDP¹ and a 2.5% increase in productivity.²
- Education, training and creativity will be the new currency of the global economy and industry partnerships will play an increasingly crucial role in the expansion of training programs in technical institutions in the next 10-20 years.³
- Calgary Chamber of Commerce members cited "a shortage of skilled workers is the number one issue."⁴
- By the year 2020, the Canadian shortage of skilled workers is forecast to be about 1 million workers. "One of the real keys to our future economic progress will be our willingness to address the looming skills shortage."⁵
- The Canadian Business Task Force on Literacy (1988) estimated low literacy levels cost businesses 4.1 billion annually—\$1.6 billion in lost time due to workplace accidents and \$2.5 billion in lost productivity. These figures will undoubtedly be higher now as our literacy rates have not improved.
- The proportion of adults with low literacy skills remains virtually unchanged from when the IALSS survey was last done in 1994.⁶
- People with literacy challenges often develop other ways to manage their work even though their skills may need improvement. Therefore, low literacy may go undetected or unnoticed in the workplace.
- Low literacy can lead to more accidents on the job, increased sickness and absenteeism, and difficulty learning new and advanced technologies that are becoming more common in the workplace.
- Today in Alberta 30% of our youth drop out of high school. Thirty six percent of our population age 16 – 25 has literacy levels below those required. A high school diploma no longer guarantees future work opportunities.

Create opportunities:

Literacy is everyone's concern and we all have a part to play. There are many ways you can help bring skills to your workforce and keep your business competitive in the 21st century.

¹ Coloumbe, Tremblay and Marchand, 2004

² Columbe and Tremblay, 2005, C.D. Howe Institute

³ Coming Up Next: the Transformation of Western Canada's Economy, Canada West Foundation, February 2006

⁴ Calgary Herald, Heather Douglas, president and CEO of Calgary Chamber of Commerce, February 2006

⁵ Business Edge, Eric Newell, former CEO of Syncrude, March 2006

⁶ 2003 International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey, Statistics Canada

- **Observe your staff.** Do they understand what is being asked of them? Can they manage the tasks required? Maybe there is a stumbling block that is keeping them from moving forward.
- **Foster a learning culture and set a good example.** Encourage your staff to have a say in educational opportunities offered by your company, and create a safe environment so that workers will want to participate. Offer a learning program that enhances essential skills. If the CEO considers learning important, so with the employees.
- **Use clear instruction.** Keep your language, both oral and written, plain and straightforward so that there are no misunderstandings in communication.
- **Respect your employees.** Trust that your staff will use the knowledge they gain to benefit the company. Show your commitment to their learning plans by scheduling some sessions on company time. Your investment in them may pay off in many ways including personal job satisfaction, increased loyalty and safety on the job, and higher production.
- **Offer cultural awareness training.** Our workforce is changing and becoming more global. Help your staff to understand each other's differences, as well as similarities, to help create a positive work environment that is both tolerant and inclusive.
- **Be prepared for change.** Change is inevitable. Will you need to provide new technical training as a result of changes in your company? If so, plan now to include basic skills training to help prepare your employees to successfully complete future technical training. People with higher skills are four times more likely to benefit from training than those in the lower levels. It is time to "invest in the rest."

Investing in literacy works...

...works for you, for your staff, and for future economic success.

For information on literacy programs, or to donate your time, money and other resources, contact:

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