

Fact Sheet 1

Myths and facts about Workplace Literacy and Essential Skills

There are many myths about Workplace Literacy and Essential Skills. Some are repeated so often that they have become urban legends. Let's debunk some of them and understand the facts instead!

<i>Myth</i>	<i>Facts that debunk this myth</i>
<p>Literacy is the simple ability to read and write.</p>	<p>Fact: The International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS, 1996) defines literacy as the ability to understand and use printed information “in daily activities, at home, at work and in the community—to achieve one’s goals, and to develop one’s knowledge and potential.”</p> <p>Fact: The Government of Canada recognizes nine Essential Skills that are used in daily life and in almost every job.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Reading text 2. Document use 3. Numeracy 4. Writing 5. Oral communication 6. Working with others 7. Continuous learning 8. Thinking skills 9. Computer use <p>Awareness of the term Essential Skills seems high among employers in Canada. Nearly four in 10 say they are very familiar with the term. However, a large majority of employers familiar with the term believe that the most accurate definition is <i>the minimum skill set needed to do a certain job</i>. In fact, Essential Skills are more than the bare minimum—they are keys to doing any job well.</p>

“These workplace programs have had a tremendous impact on CUPE members. I have seen firsthand the positive transformations.”
–Paul Moist, National President, Canadian Union of Public Employees



<i>Myth</i>	<i>Facts that debunk this myth</i>
If workers have low literacy skills, it is their own fault.	Fact: There are many reasons why people do not learn to read and write well. Poverty, special learning needs, geographic location, and family demands can all have an impact on how well someone learns. The ability to access education programs is another important factor.
Hiring employees with Grade 12 or the equivalent guarantees that a worker will have the range of skills needed by a municipality and guarantees a good base in literacy and Essential Skills.	<p>Fact: The most common place that people practice and improve their literacy skills is at work. The chance to use literacy skills on the job can actually help people maintain and enhance Essential Skills long after they have finished their formal education.</p> <p>Fact: When people in the workplace do not regularly read or write at work, they may find that their skills get weaker or are lost.</p> <p>Fact: Growth industries require high levels of literacy; jobs that require lower skills are declining.</p>
Lower productivity in Canada can be blamed only on a skills shortage.	Fact: According to a 2005 study by the Work and Learning Knowledge Centre (WLKC) of the Canadian Council on Learning, one of Canada's weakest links in labour productivity is upgrading the skills of our adult workforce.
The high level of immigration to Canada is the cause of our literacy problem.	Fact: Most newcomers are literate in their own language and have math skills. As new Canadians, they may need help to learn and adjust to the two official languages in Canada. Workplace Literacy and Essential Skills programs are two of the solutions.
Training is a "soft" business activity that cannot be measured and should therefore be considered a discretionary cost. It is unlikely to contribute "hard" business benefits.	<p>Fact: Introducing and adopting training programs that can be measured and evaluated has sparked a re-examination of training's contribution to business success.</p> <p>In a recent study by the Conference Board of Canada, 82 percent of employers surveyed said that increased health and safety was linked to an Essential Skills program in their workplace. (Source: <i>The Economic Benefits of Improving Literacy Skills in the Workplace</i>, Conference Board of Canada, 2007)</p>



This series of fact sheets is produced by the Canadian Association of Municipal Administrators. To learn more about our work in support of Workplace Literacy and Essential Skills programs, visit our website:

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