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Overview

Canadian business is in a race with other countries to:

- Maintain international competitiveness
- Improve international competitiveness
- Retain markets at home
- Retain markets abroad
- Increase markets at home
- Increase markets abroad

The world has quickly shifted towards an information-based industrialized economy. These changes are threatening the success and, in some cases, the very survival of Canadian manufacturers. We must develop the ability to win in the very tough markets of the 21st century.

The skills and productivity of our employees are a key factor in our ability to win. Employees today are expected to play a broader, more responsible and self-directed role than ever before in the production system. To do this, they need new and more varied skills than was considered necessary in the past.

More than ever, most employees must be able to:

- Understand written materials
- Complete reports
- Have a good grasp of math
- Operate equipment
- Operate computers
- Have good logical abilities
- Have good problem-solving abilities
- Communicate with fellow team members

Rapid advances in product, material, production, and information technologies around the world are putting pressure on companies to keep up and strive for breakthroughs of their own.

Managers need greater awareness of global competitive and market developments. They have to become comfortable in doing business in new countries, often in foreign languages. They must be innovative, and stretch their skills in marketing, finance, and business structure.

Are Your Employees Ready?

Traditionally, literacy has been defined as “the ability to read and write”. Today, the definition of literacy also includes the ability to understand and use written information.

Sadly, although a high percentage of the population can meet the traditional definition of literacy—they can read and write—almost one half lack the skills to understand and be able to use written information necessary in today’s world.

According to the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), nearly 25% of all adult Canadians have serious problems dealing with printed material. A further 25% can only deal with simple reading tasks.

The unemployed and “those out of the workforce” (e.g. those not looking for work) have lower literacy levels than those employed. Still, of those employed in manufacturing, about 20% have serious difficulties. A further 12%–20% can only cope with simple reading tasks. All age groups are affected, although a significantly larger percentage of persons over the age of 45 have literacy problems than those younger.

You may not be fully aware of the issues in your workplace. People develop remarkable coping skills to overcome their literacy problems. They have developed the means to carry out their current jobs. However, they have difficulty in adapting to new or changing conditions. They have difficulty growing in their jobs. They are more likely to resist change. They are less likely to be able to cope with change. Many of these are valued employees with good skills in their current jobs—but ill-prepared for the future.

Part of the problem, of course, can be attributed to new immigrants to Canada for whom English, or French, in the case of Quebec, is a second language. Citizenship and Immigration Canada recently noted that 47% speak neither English nor French. Employers in areas with a major immigrant population are well aware of the challenges of adding persons into the workplace who do not understand the language. However, our future success depends on rapid and effective mixing, so that all employees have the skills to maximize their contribution to their organization.

The Purpose of This Guidebook

This guidebook is designed to:

- Raise awareness of the potential for employee literacy issues to impact an organization’s productivity, and ability to change and adapt
- Help organizations understand why addressing and improving employee literacy can lead to shareholder value, improved operations, and better bottom line results
- Allow organizations to evaluate where they are now
- Allow organizations to identify the business benefits of improving employee literacy levels
- Provide guidance and tools with which employers and others can conduct self assessments to identify current literacy levels and needed improvements

- Assist organizations in the development of action plans to help and encourage employees to improve their literacy levels in a way that adds to improved business results

This guidebook is about improving business results and ensuring a successful future. The world of tomorrow will see strong demand for technological know-how. There will be little demand for unskilled labour. Employees will need to be skilled, and able to learn and adapt to new and continually changing processes. A commitment to lifelong learning will be vital. The workforce will need to be literate and technologically advanced. Are your employees ready?

Definition of literacy

Three types of literacy were tested by the IALS:

- (a) *Prose literacy* refers to the knowledge and skills needed to understand and use information from texts including editorials, news stories, poems, and fiction.
- (b) *Document literacy* refers to the knowledge and skills required to locate and use information contained in various formats, including job applications, payroll forms, transportation schedules, maps, tables, and graphics.
- (c) *Quantitative literacy* refers to the knowledge and skills required to apply arithmetic operations, either alone or sequentially, to numbers embedded in printed materials, such as balancing a chequebook, figuring out a tip, completing an order form, or determining the amount of interest on a loan from an advertisement.

In each of the three literacy domains, tasks of varying difficulty were placed on a scale from 0–500. The range of scores corresponding to each level are as follows: Level 1 (0–225); Level 2 (226–275); Level 3 (276–325); Level 4 (326–375); and Level 5 (376–500).

The literacy tests covered the three domains of literacy—prose, document, and quantitative.

- **Prose literacy** required participants to read, understand, and use information from written texts such as stories and editorials.
- **Document literacy** required participants to locate and use information from texts such as job applications, transportation schedules, and maps.
- **Quantitative literacy** required the ability to find, understand, and use mathematical operations embedded in texts—weather charts found in the newspaper, for instance, or loan and interest calculation charts.

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