



TRAINING MATTERS:

A Small Investment for A Major Return

There is growing recognition that good essential workplace skills are critical factors in the success of any company. They improve productivity for employers, and expedite career advancement for employees. So, while investing in new technology is important, it can all be for naught without a complementary stake in human capital. From a business case standpoint, the human investment is faster, easier and far less expensive. And, unlike machinery and equipment, the value of your workforce will continue to appreciate over time. >>



DIGITAL LITERACY: E-MAIL PROFICIENCY IMPROVES PRODUCTIVITY

A multi-generation workforce is an ideal scenario for most companies. Different skill sets and levels of experience combine to form an effective, cohesive unit. But it also makes for a wide range of digital competency. That's a big reason why the Government of Canada has identified computer use as one of nine essential skills in the workplace.

The last 10 years has seen e-mail supplant phone and face-to-face communication as the most common form of workplace interaction. Virtually every employee uses it, but few have ever been trained to use it effectively. In fact, many employers cite e-mail as the leading culprit of workplace miscommunication.

"It's difficult to impart tone in an e-mail – that's the big difference," says Sandra Folk, business communications expert, and founder and director of The Language Lab. "Facial expressions and tone of voice play a significant role in the way messages are conveyed during in-person exchanges. E-mail can't do that, and emoticons and multi-exclamation points are not the answer."

The Language Lab employs the principles of adult learning to design Internet learning programs, including an online writing program. "Online labs offer more flexibility to companies and employees," notes Folk. "It removes the time commitment required to attend seminars or workshops, though blended or face-to-face programs are also available."

Online labs are often ideal for larger companies like Freedom 55 Financial, a subsidiary of the London Life Insurance Company.

"I envision rolling out this program for all the people in our office," says Dennis Lamarre, new advisor training manager at Freedom 55, and a graduate of the program himself. "I learned a great deal from the exercises, and I see the value for our more senior advisors in polishing their e-mail writing skills."

Lack of a descriptive subject line is a frequent e-mail error. Time-wasting enters the equation when trying to track down old exchanges.

"E-mail proficiency isn't just about grammar and sentence structure," explains Folk. "It's

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SIGNS YOUR COMPANY COULD BENEFIT FROM ESSENTIAL SKILLS TRAINING

- Low employee participation in meetings
- Frequent errors or omissions in forms and documentation
- Inaccuracies in data recording
- Spoken instructions not followed correctly
- Avoidance of graphs, charts, SOPs or other printed materials
- Poor estimation or planning skills

about expressing ideas effectively because it impacts the bottom line."

So while one employee spending five minutes to locate a miss-titled e-mail doesn't seem like much, multiply several occurrences per week by the total number of employees in your organization and the impact on productivity is considerable.

The Cost of Social Media Speak

Younger employees may be digitally literate but risk using "social media speak" in their professional business communications. Workers with strong read/write skills may be lacking in "digital lingo" and basic digital skills, like how to embed a text link or insert an image in an e-mail. That means they're higher paid but less productive in a relatively basic area.

Over the last three years, commercial real estate company CB Richard Ellis Limited has put more than 70 sales associates through the Language Lab online writing program.

"Since I began managing, I have been repeatedly disappointed by the inability of our sales professionals to write coherent letters," says executive vice-president and executive managing director Andrew Wright. "They all have undergraduate degrees and many have graduate degrees, yet they cannot express themselves effectively. The Language Lab provides efficient and effective training, and I now have every one of our new sales professionals take the course."

The list of e-mail protocols is long, and each has the potential to positively or negatively impact communication and, by extension, productivity. But perhaps the most important skill of all is the ability to know when an e-mail simply will not suffice. Sometimes, it's still just better to pick up the phone or knock on someone's door.



ESL TRAINING: GROWING THE VALUE OF YOUR WORKFORCE

There's a perception that improving communications skills is a language issue restricted to immigrants. The reality is that many native English speakers have language barriers, too. They affect morale and productivity within the company, and can impact customer relations in a negative way. But regardless of origin, a good employee is a valuable commodity.

"An ESL worker may be excellent in their field but limited by a lower level of literacy," says Donna McLean, Manager of Language and Skills Development at the Economic Integration Branch of ISIS. "Upgrading their language skills makes more sense than trying to replace their advanced job-specific skills with someone else."

ISIS is the largest settlement agency in Atlantic Canada. One of its many programs, English in the Workplace, is a workplace-based training program in Atlantic Canada that offers free services. Its English in the Workplace program was an ideal fit for IT services firm Keane Canada.

"It's a customized program," says Lianne Landry, senior human resources manager. "It does what we require, it meets our needs, it meets the employees' needs, and it meets the needs of our customers."

Most programs run 10 to 13 weeks, with two 90-minute sessions per week. Employees are grouped according to their language proficiency level and the nature of their work. Online "live"

training is also available via computer, using webcam with shared visuals.

"We worked with ISIS to create specific learning plans," says Carol Logan, director of human resources at the Prince George Hotel in Halifax. "Each plan is tailored to fit a specific position, and adjusted to match each employee's needs."

The 2010 Miner Report, People Without Jobs, Jobs Without People, explores the reasons companies cite for not implementing workplace training programs. Lack of government assistance figures prominently, as does difficulty in calculating the return on investment. But free or minimal-investment programs do exist.

A good example is the targeted Wage Subsidy Program at ISIS. It offers an incentive to employers to hire unemployed immigrants who they would not hire in the absence of the subsidy. This includes prospective immigrant employees who have skills or knowledge gaps that could be readily addressed through short-term, worksite-based training.

There is a need to implement this in the workplace. Many workers may not have outside time to take ESL classes. So a program like this makes the company extremely attractive to potential employees. "Language training is like any other professional development, such as computer training, and offering professional development promotes employee satisfaction," says McLean.

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ESL Success Story

American Express Canada already has a diverse workplace, but some new employees still struggled to maximize their skills, and some managers struggled to understand other cultures and help staff succeed. The situation came to the attention of Nancy Steele, director, American Express Technologies (AET).

"We wanted to formalize a recruitment strategy for skilled immigrants," says Steele. "So we worked with TRIEC (Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council) to form a relationship with Seneca College."

Established in 2003, TRIEC's primary mission is to create solutions to integrate skilled immigrants into the Greater Toronto Region labour market. Its membership includes representatives from employers, labour, occupational regulatory bodies, post-secondary institutions, assessment service providers, community organizations, and all three levels of government.

"TRIEC's BUILD I.T. program is a big part of our strategy, starting with cross-cultural and leadership training for our managers," notes >>

CELEBRATE ESSENTIAL SKILLS DAY

Essential Skills Day will take place on Sept. 23 during Learn@Work Week to shine a spotlight on the nine essential skills as defined by the Government of Canada.

Essential Skills Day is the perfect opportunity to celebrate the importance of workplace essential skills and address the skills of employees. For helpful tools and resources, visit www.EssentialSkillsDay.ca.



Steele. “We also hold hiring events that connect our recruiters with pre-screened candidates. In less than two years we’ve hired 11 skilled immigrants through the program - fully 10 per cent of hires in the technology division. And our success is demonstrated in our improved retention rates.”

Managers in other departments are also taking cross-cultural competency and leadership training

to mitigate any potential challenges around cultural differences. Courses generally run six weeks, and include a written and oral component.

“In the last two years, so much has changed at American Express Canada,” says Steele. “What makes me most proud is the feedback I get directly from our new skilled immigrant hires. They thank me for the opportunity to work here and grow their career with the company.” ■

RESOURCES & FUNDING

The benefits of workplace training far outweigh the effort involved in implementing a program. The most successful workplace education programs are built on good partnerships: they help to lower costs, facilitate the sharing of knowledge, and provide access to helpful resources. Partners can come from government, industry associations and sector councils, unions, colleges, essential skills organizations and literacy groups.

Visit www.workplaceeducation.ca for a list of resources and case studies on successful workplace education programs.

ABC Life Literacy Canada is a non-profit organization that inspires Canadians to increase their literacy skills. They connect and mobilize business, unions, government, communities and individuals to support lifelong learning and achieve its goals through leadership in programs, communications and partnerships. ABC Life Literacy Canada envisions a Canada where everyone has the skills they need to live a fully engaged life.

Visit www.abclifeliteracy.ca to learn more.



ESSENTIAL SKILLS PROMOTE OVERALL COMPETENCY

The Government of Canada has identified nine essential skills for the workplace. These are the skills that provide the foundation for learning other skills and enable people to evolve with their jobs and adapt to workplace change:

- Reading
- Writing
- Thinking
- Document use
- Computer use
- Numeracy
- Working with others
- Continuous learning
- Oral communication

Curiously enough, it’s a soft skill first encountered in grade school that continues to pose challenges in the workplace. Working with others - the ability to carry out tasks as part of a team - is crucial to productivity and a stepping stone to supervisory or leadership roles in a company. Failure at this level can lead to more serious issues, like workplace bullying.

Ben Hume, Chairman at Alco Ventures in Langley, B.C. has first-hand experience. “We had one team lead that was short-fused. Whenever he saw an employee doing something wrong, he was ready to charge across the floor and chew him up,” says Hume. “But after picking up people skills he began to take a moment to analyze the situation, to ask himself what his goals were in speaking to a worker, and how he could turn the incident to the benefit of shop-floor processes.”

A 2010 survey by the Workplace Bullying Institute and Zogby International reveals that 35 per cent of workers have experienced bullying first-hand, and the vast majority is perpetrated by managers and supervisors. This leads to higher rates of absenteeism, and higher rates of attrition.

“The more systematic, rational approach pays immediate dividends,” Hume says. “If you have an arbitrary boss who’s unpredictable, you don’t know what to do. People stop trying to do anything.”

Fear and low morale among employees can also have a direct impact on your company’s bottom line. Hume offers up one example. “Imagine your boss throwing a hissy fit. You may do what he asks, but you spend the next 20 minutes fuming,” says Hume. “In those 20 minutes, productivity is down, and the odds of errors being made are up.”

For essential skills tools, tips and case studies, visit www.hrsdc.gc.ca/essentialskills