



Report on a Major Workplace Literacy Study

New Zealand Department of Labour (2010)

Upskilling Partnership Programme: Evaluation Report.

Wellington, New Zealand: New Zealand Department of Labour

Online report available at <http://www.dol.govt.nz/publications/research/upskilling-evaluation/index.asp>

Background

From 2006–2009, the Upskilling Partnership Programme (UPP) established by the New Zealand Department of Labour attempted “to increase the engagement of employers in workplace literacy programmes and to evaluate the impact of these programmes.” The Programme set up 15 partnerships with companies representing “a range of industries, locations, programme types, and learners.” Eighteen different courses were piloted across the sites and delivered by external education providers. These courses varied in content, length (20 to 200 hours), and methodology, although all were customized to needs identified by the companies. Instruction was provided to nearly 500 learners (both native English speakers and English language learners representing various ethnic groups and job titles) in a variety of skill and knowledge areas required in the participating workplaces.

This report presents the purpose, methodology, findings, and recommendations of an evaluation carried out by the Partnership Office. The evaluation report is posted in a very well organized, succinct, clear, and accessible format on the Department of Labour’s website.

Lessons Learned About Workplace Education Programs and Evaluation

The UPP’s *Evaluation Report* provides useful information about four interrelated topics: (a) a model of a national workplace education demonstration project, (b) the potential content and benefits of workplace basic education programs, (c) guidelines for effective programs, and (d) the potential content, methodology, and benefits of well-designed workplace education program evaluation.

A model of a national workplace education demonstration project

The UPP is a promising example of a thoughtful government initiative that developed a national infrastructure for the integration of worker basic education into workforce and economic development. The three-year Programme served as a petri dish in which the following resources were grown: clarity about which basic skills were needed for various jobs, industries, and worker populations; new customized curricula to help workers develop those skills; appropriate tools for evaluating worker education

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programs; new partnerships between employers and education providers; a cadre of experienced workplace education professionals; and new strategies that employers can use to build workplace basic skills into company human resource and training strategies.

The potential content and benefits of workplace basic education programs

The report shows the range of workforce skill and knowledge areas (e.g., reading, writing, oral communications, numeracy, problem solving, teamwork, and technical knowledge and skills) that employers are concerned about. It also summarizes the positive improvements that worker education can produce in other areas such as paperwork, oral communications, confidence and attitude about the job, teamwork, and willingness to take on new tasks. The report concludes that the literacy, language, and numeracy [LLN] courses generally had positive impacts on all of these areas, though the program benefitted certain populations and skill areas more than others. As a result of participating in this initiative, many companies also gained understanding of the role that basic skills play in organizational culture and performance and of the need to factor basic skills into company strategies (e.g., to improve communication of technical and health and safety information to workers, and to use LLN courses to improve organizational productivity).

Guidelines for effective programs

Components of effective worker basic skills programs—as identified by learners, employers, and education providers—include:

- ✦ clearly stated goals and roles that all stakeholders (workers, employers, education providers) understand;
- ✦ effective curricula (taught by well-prepared educators) that challenge and engage learners, allow them to see progress, respond to learner needs at and outside of work, and respect learners as adults;
- ✦ a safe, inclusive, enjoyable environment that supports learning for adults who may be hesitant about re-engaging with education;
- ✦ a flexible schedule that respects the changing conditions in workplaces;
- ✦ active employer participation (at both supervisory and higher management levels) in planning and supporting education activities; and
- ✦ a continuous improvement approach that takes account of stakeholder feedback and adjusts content and activities accordingly.

The potential content, methodology, and benefits of well designed workplace-education program evaluation

The evaluation used a number of data gathering methods and sources (e.g., pre- and post-tests, interviews, and questionnaires for various stakeholders) to identify the

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courses' impacts on learner LLN skills. It looked at whether and how learners were applying those skills in their workplaces, the impacts of the courses on the work organizations, and whether and how the programs were impacting learners' lives outside the workplace. This is a rare example of an ambitious evaluation that tried to examine the fuller range of workplace training outcomes identified by Kirkpatrick.¹ The report identifies the challenges of implementing such an evaluation in the dynamic world of busy, dispersed workplaces, each with its own particular needs. It also shows the potential benefits of investing in such evaluations, in that a good evaluation can help multiple stakeholders inform and improve practice and policy.

Recommendations

This document is an important addition to the interrelated fields of adult basic education, worker training, and workforce and economic development. For U.S. audiences, it helps fill the gap in the literature on worker basic education that has emerged over the past decade as investment in such programs here has been put on hold. It is particularly useful now, given the new interest in basic skills education as a component of career pathway programs designed to help lower-skilled workers succeed in various industries. The report helps clarify what types of basic skills employers are looking for (including oral communication, numeracy, and others as well as reading and writing) and suggests useful ways of thinking about skills assessment and program evaluation. Follow-up studies might clarify educational and organizational practices relevant for particular learners, skills, and jobs.

While the report is issued by the Programme itself, it is balanced in its presentation of strengths and limitations of both the Programme and the evaluation. New Zealand's Department of Labour should be thanked for investing in this important work and for sharing what it learned with the rest of us.²

Note: Those interested in creating effective work-related basic education programs should also look at workplace basic education program and evaluation models already developed in other countries.

END NOTES

¹ Kirkpatrick, D. (1994). *Evaluating training programs: The four levels*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler.

² In 2007, the New Zealand Department of Labour issued a series of "International Workforce Literacy Reviews" profiling initiatives in the six English-speaking countries. Also see Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy. (2007). *Workplace education: Twenty state perspectives*. New York, NY: Author.