

HIDDEN TREASURES

TWO DECADES OF WORKPLACE BASIC SKILLS EFFORTS IN THE UNITED STATES

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ABSTRACT

This article describes two decades of workplace basic skills efforts in the United States (mid-1980s to early 2000s). Private- and public-sector groups defined the problem of inadequate basic skills in the incumbent workforce. They raised awareness of this problem as it affected various segments of the workforce and diverse industries. They generated resources, created services to strengthen workers' basic skills, and evaluated and learned from those efforts. The article summarizes components of effective workplace basic skills programs and the supports that programs require. It recommends that U.S. decision makers now adapt lessons from these earlier workplace basic skills efforts when they consider how to build a new workforce basic skills development system. This new system would support both incumbent workers and unemployed job seekers to succeed in family-sustaining employment. It would also help our economy transition to one that is more equitable, efficient, and environmentally sustainable.

Keywords: adult education, workplace literacy, basic skills, worker, employee, incumbent, employer, union, BCEL, NWLP, EFF

BACKGROUND, PURPOSE, AND CONTENT

Much good work has been done in the past two decades in the United States to provide supports (e.g., career pathways, educational technologies, basic education integrated with technical training and other career services) to job seekers with basic-skills-related challenges. These challenges include a lack of secondary and postsecondary educational credentials and limitations to the oral and written English, numeracy, digital, problem-solving, teamwork, and research skills adults need for work, family, civic, and academic roles.

Current and future initiatives to help both job seekers and incumbent workers with basic skills limitations to improve their economic security can benefit from an earlier wave of workplace basic skills efforts. These began in the mid-1980s and lasted until the early 2000s. They focused on strengthening incumbent worker skills through activities conducted in workplace settings by partnerships among educators, employers, labor unions, government agencies, and other stakeholders. Many current career pathways initiatives for job seekers grow directly out of those earlier "workplace literacy" programs (Parker, 2007).

Drawing on a document review (Jurmo, March 2020), this article describes what those earlier efforts identified as components of effective workplace basic skills programs. It proposes that stakeholders incorporate lessons from those earlier efforts into the planning of new

workforce education systems that ensure the productivity and economic security of both employed workers and unemployed job seekers, while building a new economy that is more equitable, efficient, and environmentally sustainable.

HIGHLIGHTS OF TWO DECADES OF WORKPLACE BASIC SKILLS EFFORTS

Initial Adult Basic Skills Awareness-Raising, Advocacy, and Coalition-Building

Beginning in the mid-1980s, there was a major growth in the U.S. in awareness and efforts related to the problems of “adult illiteracy” in general and “workplace illiteracy” more specifically. These inter-woven activities grew from leadership and investment by many individuals and institutions in the private and public sectors.

In the mid-1970s, the Adult Performance Level Study (conducted by the University of Texas at Austin with funding from the U.S. Department of Education) defined the problem of functional illiteracy in the U.S. (University of Texas, 1977). *Adult Illiteracy in the United States: A Report to the Ford Foundation* (Hunter & Harman, 1979) further defined the problem, described efforts to alleviate it, and recommended actions to strengthen and expand those efforts. These two documents became key resources guiding subsequent awareness raising and policy development.

In the early 1980s, Barbara Bush (wife of then Vice President and later President George H.W. Bush) made adult literacy the theme of her public service work. Working with other groups (described below), she called on federal agencies, Congresspersons, governors and their spouses, business leaders, and others to take action. (She eventually created the Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy in 1989.) (Business Council for Effective Literacy [BCEL], April 1989).

In 1984, influenced by Mrs. Bush and the Ford Foundation study, McGraw-Hill CEO, Harold W. McGraw Jr. chose adult literacy as the focus of what became the first 10 years of his retirement. With a major personal donation, he formed the Business Council for Effective Literacy (BCEL), a nonprofit foundation that under Gail Spangenberg’s direction quickly became the go-to source on the issue. Its widely-circulated newsletter and other publications guided public- and private-sector decision-makers who wanted to do something about a problem that BCEL saw as having major social and economic implications (BCEL, September 1984).

In 1986, building on an earlier national awareness campaign of the Coalition for Literacy and Ad Council, the Public Broadcasting Service and the American Broadcasting Company launched “Project Literacy U.S.” (commonly called “The PLUS Campaign”). For several years, this partnership—using television and other media (radio, newspapers, and magazines in coordination with corresponding trade associations), local- and state-level “PLUS Task Forces,” and a national Literacy Hotline—worked to raise awareness, coordinate services, and recruit students and resources for local literacy programs. National leaders (including President Ronald Reagan and Secretary of Labor William Brock) and organizations (e.g., faith-based groups, Urban Leagues, women’s clubs) encouraged community-level action (BCEL, July 1986).

From 1987 to 1990, the Gannett Foundation supported 20 states and Puerto Rico to strengthen the planning and coordination of their adult basic skills services (Sibbison, 1992). In 1990, the National Governors Association—with Gannett and MacArthur Foundation funding—conducted a survey which helped states strengthen their adult literacy services through improved policies, professional development, and technical assistance (BCEL, July 1990).

The Association for Community Based Education (Association for Community Based Education, 1983; BCEL, April 1986) and the Urban Literacy Network (funded by B. Dalton Bookseller, Gannett Foundation, and other sources and later renamed the Literacy Network) advocated for literacy services customized to the needs of low-income adults and their communities (BCEL, July 1989).

Research and Evolving Perspectives on “Workplace Literacy”

By the later 1980s and early 1990s, adult literacy efforts focused heavily on the more-specific topic of “workplace literacy” (also called “workplace basic skills” or “employee basic skills”). Advocates emphasized the need for a well-prepared workforce to ensure the competitiveness of U.S. businesses and the employability of workers in a changing international economy (Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce, 1990). This message was especially targeted to public policy makers and employers to encourage their investment.

Research studies and position papers describing the basic skills that U.S. workers needed flowed from organizations like the Hudson Institute (Johnston & Packer, 1987), American Society for Training and Development (Carnevale, Gainer, & Meltzer, 1990), U.S. Congress’ Office of Technology Assessment (Office of Technology Assessment, 1990), Ford Foundation (Berlin & Sum, 1988), and U.S. Labor Secretary’s Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (U.S. Department of Labor, 1991).

Individual researchers (Sticht & Mikulecky, 1984) proposed “functional context” instruction that integrated development of relevant basic skills and technical knowledge and skills to help workers strengthen their abilities to carry out particular work-related basic skills tasks. Several guidebooks were published (BCEL, 1987; Mikulecky & Lloyd, 1985; Philippi, 1991) to help educators and employers reduce gaps in employees’ job-related basic skills. Other guidebooks emphasized workplace education services supporting workers’ more general personal development (Soifer, Irwin, Crumrine, Honzaki, Simmons, & Young, 1990) or their ability to participate in a labor union (Sarmiento & Kay, 1990) or otherwise analyze and solve workplace problems (Auerbach & Wallerstein, 1987).

Mechanisms were developed to disseminate workplace basic skills resources to adult educators and other stakeholders. These included BCEL’s quarterly newsletters and other publications and new on-line technologies including the ERIC-ACVE clearinghouse at Ohio State University and—starting in the mid-1990s—a workforce education listserv and resource collection of the National Institute for Literacy (NIFL). The U.S. Department of Education and other governmental and nongovernmental sources supported state, national, and international conferences on workplace literacy education. (These included a series

of conferences in the later 1990s and early 2000s—in Milwaukee, Chicago, and Detroit—supported by the National Workplace Literacy Program and other partners that attracted attendees from the U.S., Canada, and other countries.)

The U.S. Department of Education brought major support to the development of workplace basic skills models through its National Workplace Literacy Program (described below). From the mid-1990s to early 2000s, NIFL funded research on workplace literacy state policy (Jurmo, 1996), evaluation (Jurmo, 1994; Sperazi and Jurmo, 1994), and skills standards (Askov, 1996). NIFL's Equipped for the Future basic skills reform initiative created guidelines and other resources for adult basic skills programs nationally, with a number of projects supporting curricula, assessments, and partnerships to upgrade the basic skills of employees in selected industries (i.e., healthcare and retail; Equipped for the Future, 2005).

Diverse perspectives emerged on the purposes, content, and organization of workplace basic skills programs. Purposes included helping employers (and the nation) remain competitive, helping workers retain rewarding employment, ensuring employee safety and health, enabling employees to manage personal responsibilities that can impact their employability and general well-being, helping workers transition to new jobs or retirement, and empowering employees to understand and protect their rights as workers (Imel, 1989; Jurmo, 2004).

Investments in Workplace Basic Skills Initiatives

These awareness-raising, advocacy, coalition-building, and research efforts led to new investments in workplace literacy programs by federal, state, employer, and labor stakeholders. Programs were promoted as benefitting incumbent workers, employers, labor unions, communities, and states—and as effective uses of public and private resources. Examples included:

Federal Efforts

From 1988 to 1996, the U.S. Department of Education's National Workplace Literacy Program provided nearly \$133 million to over 300 two- to three-year demonstration projects in which employers; education, workforce, and other agencies; and (in some cases) labor unions designed and piloted workplace basic skills programs focusing on organizational and employee needs (Imel, 2003; Moore, Myers, & Silva, 1997). Results were disseminated through meetings, conferences, and publications, with emphasis on sharing and learning from experience and continuous improvement and expanding of efforts (Evaluation Research, 1992; Jurmo et al, 1994; U.S. Department of Education, 1992). The U.S. Department of Labor operated a similar though more modest program. (U.S. Secretary of Labor William Brock warned about a "bifurcated society" divided by basic skill levels.) The Small Business Administration encouraged small businesses (which employ the majority of U.S. workers) to respond to the growing educational needs of their employees, who tend to be less experienced and skilled than workers in larger companies (BCEL, 1992).

State Initiatives

Many states created special workplace literacy initiatives with funding, public awareness,

training and technical assistance for stakeholders, resource centers, and research and evaluation (BCEL, April 1988; Jurmo, 1996).

Trade Associations

Trade associations including banking, printing, and home-building industry groups developed curricula, trained members, and otherwise supported basic education services to help workers respond to new technologies and procedures.

Organized Labor

The American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) advocated for “worker-centered” employee basic education that emphasized worker empowerment for both their personal well-being and efficient job performance. AFL-CIO staff issued a guidebook (Sarmiento & Kay, 1990), wrote articles, and were active participants in conferences and other forums. State and local labor organizations (e.g., Massachusetts Worker Education Roundtable, Civil Service Employees Association of New York State, Consortium for Worker Education in New York City) supported basic education for unionized and other workers through research, advocacy, resource generation, and professional development for program staff. The U.S. Department of Labor advocated for a national system of such efforts (BCEL, October 1987).

Individual Employers

Large (e.g., Polaroid, Motorola, Aetna, Rockwell, New York Telephone) and smaller companies funded their own workplace basic skills programs. Some companies offered programs through agreements with labor unions (e.g., United Auto Workers programs with Ford, General Motors, and Chrysler).

International Collaborations

The U.S. became recognized as the leader in workplace basic skills worldwide. U.S. practitioners developed formal and informal collaborations with colleagues in other countries (especially Canada), exchanging strategies (Taylor, Lewe, & Draper, 1991), attending international conferences, developing resources (Folinsbee & Jurmo, 1994), and otherwise learning from and supporting each other.

Informing a Shift to Basic Skills for Job Seekers

By the mid-1990s, federal support for work-related basic skills programs was shifting from worksite programs for incumbent workers to basic skills services for unemployed job seekers integrated with other employment services (Parker, 2007). This change was reflected in new federal adult basic education legislation that emphasized employment-related outcomes for learners, collaboration of adult basic education programs with workforce agencies, and helping unemployed basic skills learners move into postsecondary education and career pathways in locally relevant industries.

Federal investment in workplace literacy programs largely disappeared, as did the former leadership for workplace basic skills initiatives by business, organized labor, and universities (Imel, 2003). (Exceptions included the above-described NIFL development of basic skills curricula for the healthcare and retail industries [the latter done with the National Retail

Federation Foundation] and ongoing union-based member education programs.) The reasons for the decline in investment were not entirely clear, but it could have been that federal funders were simply looking for ways to cut budgets and/or decision makers felt that public funds were better used to help unemployed get jobs than subsidizing employers to train their own workforces. This shift coincided with nationwide closings and downsizings of manufacturing facilities, automation of jobs in many industries, exporting of jobs overseas, and a decline in labor unions.

While the decreased support for workplace basic skills education disappointed many who had invested in developing high-performance models of worker education, those individuals have some reasons to feel encouraged. Emerging career pathway efforts by states and other partners were often informed by the earlier “workplace literacy” initiatives and run by individuals who had worked in them. These included Washington State’s highly regarded and frequently replicated Integrated Basic Education Skills and Training (I-BEST) model. I-BEST uses employer-education partnerships and team teaching by basic skills teachers and technical trainers, features developed in earlier workplace basic skills programs (Wachen, Jenkins, & Van Noy, 2010).

IMPLICATIONS FOR CURRENT AND FUTURE WORKFORCE EDUCATION EFFORTS

This article aims to inform future efforts to create a strengthened and expanded national system of work-related basic education for both unemployed and employed workers. This system would draw on recent career pathway and college transition initiatives that began in the early 2000s and on the above-described earlier workplace basic skills efforts. This more comprehensive system would:

- provide learning opportunities and other supports to help both unemployed and employed individuals prepare for, attain, retain, succeed in, and advance in family-sustaining jobs; and
- help transition our economy to one that is more equitable, efficient, and environmentally sustainable.

Stakeholders are invited to consider the following lessons from the workplace basic skills efforts described above. (These guidelines draw especially from Auerbach & Wallerstein, 1987; Evaluation Research, 1992; Folinsbee & Jurmo, 1994; Imel, 2003; Jurmo, 1994; Jurmo, 1998; Sarmiento & Kay, 1990; Soifer et al, 1990; and Stein, 2000.)

Lesson 1: Multiple Stakeholders Can Benefit From Well-Designed and Well-Supported Workplace Basic Education.

Potential Stakeholders

Potential stakeholders include incumbent workers from diverse demographic and occupational backgrounds; employers and trade associations from multiple industries; labor unions representing many types of workers and industries; workers’ families and communities; and local, state, and federal agencies.

Potential Benefits

Workplace basic education can improve the social and technical efficiency, competitiveness, and safety of workplaces while strengthening employer abilities to understand and respond to worker development needs. It can also help individual workers attain, retain, perform, and advance in rewarding employment, ensure their safety and health, protect their rights as workers, manage wages and benefits, participate in further education and training, and transition to new careers or retirement. Worker basic education can help labor unions ensure the well-being of current and potential members and improve the financial well-being and general stability of workers' families and communities. And it can strengthen local, state, and federal tax bases.

Lesson 2: “Work-Related Basic Skills” Need to Be Comprehensively and Flexibly Defined.

Basic skills are much more than “reading.” Workers need broader communication and problem-solving abilities, including reading, writing, speaking, listening, numeracy (applied math), digital, teamwork, problem-solving, and research skills (Stein, 2000; U.S. Department of Labor, 1991). Effective programs invest in identifying the particular basic skills employees need and the current and emerging workers' gaps in those skills as a starting point for developing learning activities that are meaningful for both employers and workers. The above-described workplace basic skills programs covered a broad range of topics, including applied math needed for statistical process control, decision-making and math skills for using company-provided benefits, language skills for communicating with eldercare patients and hotel customers, reading and test-taking skills to succeed on civil service tests, technical math and English required for electronics training, clear writing for incident reports, and basic computer skills needed to read and respond to work orders.

Lesson 3: Effective Programs Have Multiple Components Requiring Careful Planning, Coordination, and Support.

Partnerships and Leadership

Employers, workers, labor unions, education providers, funders, and other stakeholders need to use collaborative strategies to build communication, understanding, and trust; produce solid plans clarifying stakeholder roles; and invest in continuous improvement of the effort. These collaborations need effective leaders with the right mix of technical expertise, vision, and team-building skills.

Appropriate Goals Based on Systematic Planning

Program planners need to clarify:

- desired outcomes of the program (See “Potential Benefits” above);
- factors (e.g., workplace policies, practices, incentives; worker strengths and limitations; and other contextual variables [market conditions, regulatory requirements, social climate]) that support or block achievement of those outcomes;
- how a worker education program covering basic skills and other topics might support achievement of the desired outcomes; and
- other organizational initiatives (e.g., improving communication or supervision procedures, appropriate incentives for workers, changing workplace equipment or procedures,

eliminating discriminatory practices) that might be instituted in addition to, instead of, or prior to an education initiative.

Instructional Content and Methodology

While this new and evolving field generally agreed that an integrated approach to instruction was most effective, multiple interpretations of this approach emerged, varying by:

- the goals and focus of the instruction (See “Potential Benefits” above);
- how those goals and foci were determined (e.g., options ranged from quick-fix/grab-a-curriculum-off-the-shelf to more-in-depth and comprehensive needs assessments of both workers and the organization);
- who made key decisions (e.g., a small number of decision-makers or a more comprehensive mix of stakeholders);
- teaching materials (e.g., prepackaged curricula or authentic workplace documents and realia taken from the workplace) and methods (e.g., presentations of information using print, face-to-face, or video formats; individual tutorials; team-based project-based learning and workplace problem-solving) used;
- instructors’ backgrounds (e.g., basic skills instructors from local educational institutions may come with various types of training and experience in basic education; technical subject-matter-experts from the company or union might likewise have various perspectives on how to conduct training); and
- the time available for lesson preparation and instruction.

Professional Development

It is vital to carefully recruit, select, prepare, and support instructional and other staff for their respective roles. Instructors can come from both basic education and other backgrounds (e.g., technical training, human resources, safety and health, social services, intercultural relations) and from within or outside the company or union.

Noninstructional staff should be shown how they might support the program and participating workers through syncing of work and instructional schedules, encouraging words, helping workers transfer their skills back to the job, financial or other rewards, confidential and respectful handling of learner information, providing input to curriculum developers, and participating with basic skills instructors in activities as guest speakers.

Those developing and delivering curricula need to be flexible and creative. They typically are entering into unfamiliar workplace cultures characterized by diverse internal stakeholder groups who are already busy doing their “regular” jobs and are now being asked to also get involved in a new education program. Backgrounds in anthropology, the cultures of program participants, and the work performed by participants can be very valuable assets for curriculum developers and instructors.

Workplace instructors are often asked to work on short notice, for brief periods, with

irregular schedules, with limited time to get to know the organization, and without full-time positions providing living wages and benefits. This makes recruiting and retaining workplace educators difficult and undermines program quality and sustainability. (One instructor noted the irony that, while she and her fellow workplace educators were trying to help workers secure family-sustaining jobs with benefits, they—education professionals—lacked regular jobs, wages, and benefits.)

Well-crafted staff development can help all involved to take ownership for the program and contribute to its success rather than see it as a distraction. The field developed multiple strategies for professional development, including:

- involving key stakeholders in collaborative planning and continuous improvement at the program level and in multi-program consortia;
- training noninstructional staff at companies in how they can support program participants to transfer skills covered in instructional activities back to the worksite;
- cross-program workshops, internships, and site visits;
- state, national, and international conferences in which stakeholders share strategies;
- online clearinghouses containing resources from evaluations, research, and experience; and
- online discussion groups.

Learner Recruitment and Retention

Strategies include:

- relevant instructional content delivered in engaging ways;
- paying learners fully or partially for time spent in instruction;
- peer support for participants from fellow workers;
- recognition (e.g., awards, bonuses, access to better jobs and salaries) for positive achievements; and
- respectful, confidential handling of learner data (e.g., test scores).

Scheduling and Facilities

Learning activities should be scheduled at times and locations convenient and welcoming to learners. For example, transportation might be an issue for potential learners who rely on public transportation or carpools to get to and from work if a program is not scheduled at a suitable time or location. Facilities should be appropriately equipped (e.g., with relevant reading materials; efficient learning technologies; and user-friendly furniture, lighting, ventilation, and acoustics) and convey professionalism and respect for the learners, staff, and program.

Administration of Financial and In-Kind Resources

Workplace education programs, like other operations, need well-equipped administrative staff who can efficiently procure, use, maintain, and report on necessary financial and in-kind resources. Administrators need both technical skills, such as accounting, report-writing, and facilities management skills, and an understanding of and commitment to adapting those skills to the needs of their workplace education program. (See “Professional Development” above.)

Other Noneducational Supports for Learners

Companies and unions can provide other types of supports, typically through a human resources department, to help program participants deal with other issues (e.g., health, discrimination, transportation, family needs) that might undermine their workplace success.

Lesson 4: Effective Programs Require Strong External Supports.

Public- and private-sector policy makers and funders at local, state, and national levels can help local-level programs succeed by providing:

- evidence-based guidelines that support quality programs;
- awareness-raising and coalition-building to educate the public and diverse stakeholders about the whys and hows of basic skills development for incumbent workers;
- financial and in-kind supports for demonstration projects that develop and share strategies for particular skills, worker populations, jobs, industries, and program components;
- professional development to equip stakeholders with knowledge, skills, and support networks necessary for their roles in workplace education; and
- ways to collect and share information from local programs and stakeholders (e.g., through research, evaluation, networks, and professional development) to support continuous improvement and growth of the field.

These supports should be guided by leaders who have a well-informed vision of how workplace education can support individual workers, employers, and diverse development efforts.

CONCLUSION

Our nation now faces significant social, economic, environmental, and health challenges—and opportunities. Solving the problems and taking advantage of the opportunities will require a well-prepared, well-supported, and well-organized workforce. This workforce includes the estimated 36 million or more youth and adults who have basic skills limitations (Atkins et al., February 2018).

Work-related basic education can help those millions of individuals to more effectively attain, retain, perform, and advance in family-sustaining employment. Decision-makers in the public and private sector should commit themselves to creating a strengthened and expanded

system of learning opportunities for both job seekers and employed workers (Jurmo, Fall 2020). This system should build on the work done both in more recent career pathway, college transition, and workforce education efforts for various populations of job seekers (including “disconnected youth,” immigrants and refugees, older career-changers, individuals with criminal records, people with disabilities) and in the earlier workplace basic skills efforts described here.

Those involved in system reform should objectively dig deeper to understand what was achieved, what was required for success, and why investment in basic education for the incumbent workforce largely decreased by the early 2000s. Companies, business leaders, and investors who have reaped benefits from the economy of the past two decades should now consider reinvesting in worker education in well-conceived ways.

We should not waste time or resources reinventing the wheel or using ineffective strategies. Let us use the significant expertise, institutions, partnerships, and good will we already have more wisely. ☞

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