

Basic skills improvement should be seen as part of a wider development strategy for both the company and the individuals within it. **Robert Nurden**, of the Workplace Basic Skills Network, reports.

Getting employers on BOARD

"For too long we have ignored the voice of business and failed to look at the skills problem through their eyes. So we have been listening to employers ... to find out their needs and how we can bridge the skills gap together."

Charles Clarke, Secretary of State for Education and Skills, at a CBI conference in Manchester

The Government has pledged £1.6bn over the next three years to tackle the problem of poor basic skills, and has also acknowledged the vital role played by employers in improving the overall literacy levels of the UK workforce. Four out of five newly created jobs require skills levels above that of A-level, but only 33 per cent of Britons have these, compared to 75 per cent of Germans, according to Charles Clarke.

So why has it been so difficult to get employers on board? There are a number of reasons. Bosses are often wary of releasing staff for what they may see as unnecessary training. They may also fear that as a result of staff taking time off, production will drop. It is quite likely, too, that they mistakenly believe they will have to pay for training. The culture of short-termism within companies only exacerbates the problem: the boss will quite justifiably ask what benefits will accrue from releasing employees for basic skills instruction.

Instead of seeing basic skills as a 'bolt-on' provision, a more holistic approach towards getting employers involved can achieve more successful results, according to the Workplace Basic Skills Network at Lancaster University. The approach that education providers take is

to try to get bosses to see basic skills as part of a general development strategy for both the company and the individuals within it.

Linda Marklew, head housekeeper of Mercure London City Bankside Hotel, said the whole working atmosphere had changed as a result of staff undergoing basic skills training. "My employees are more motivated and are happy to go that extra step to provide a top service," she said. "Basic skills input can have a double effect, benefiting both the company and individuals personally."

She also pointed to another important aspect of modern skills training, which is often overlooked. Along with the rest of her staff she herself took part in IT training. Because of today's rapidly changing workplace, most bosses will need basic skills training too, particularly in IT. Indeed, younger junior staff may well be more proficient in new technology than their superiors. Perhaps this is another reason why employers can be so reluctant to fling open the door to basic skills.

"To be literate today means more than writing good English and adding up accurately; it also means being conversant with an often baffling range of electronic equipment," says Fiona Frank, executive director of the Network.

In practice, this means making literacy relevant to the demands of the modern workplace. That could involve meeting health and safety requirements; use of metrication and the Euro; introducing and using new technology; new international standards and working practices; new demands for quality and flatter management structures.

"To be really effective, we must get away from 'the deficit model' or 'remedial action'

associated with literacy," says Frank. "The key is partnership at all levels. There is strong evidence that organisations learn best when workers from all levels of the company are involved. This also has the effect of producing a better-run and more effective organisation."

To this end, the Workplace Basic Skills Network is signed up to a process of three-way participation between providers, brokers – for example, small business advisers, Investors in People assessors and local chambers of commerce – and union learning representatives.

The Network trains adult literacy, numeracy and language teachers to be consultants and collaborators, possessing analytical and negotiation skills, knowledge of business and industry, and an awareness of other stakeholders such as government bodies and unions. In this way, they can support organisations to make the best use of all their staff. ■

The Workplace Basic Skills Network is based in the Department of Educational Research at Lancaster University. It is a membership organisation designed to support the workplace basic skills elements of the Skills for Life national strategy by building professional capacity in workplace basic skills, through dissemination and sharing of good practice and the provision of continuing professional development. The Network is currently funded by the DfES. Contact Workplace Basic Skills Network, CSET, Lancaster University, Lancaster LA1 4YL. Tel: 01524 593405. Email: wbs.net@lancaster.ac.uk. Website: www.lancaster.ac.uk/wbsnet