

A unique perspective

The Workplace Basic Skills Network at Lancaster University

By Robert Nurden

With its long-established links to hundreds of education organisations and providers, the Workplace Basic Skills Network (WBSN) at Lancaster University is uniquely placed to provide an overview of the Government's *Skills for Life* strategy.

As a national membership body with – among its number – basic skills providers, colleges, union learning reps, employers and policy-makers, WBSN can claim to have a very special perspective. Add to that its regionally based staff, regular conferences and seminars, and close associations with the Basic Skills Agency, the Learning and Skills Council (LSC), the Regional Development Agencies and Sector Skills Councils and you have a rich and rare mix of viewpoints.

Since its launch in 1993, the Network has been at the forefront of developments in the ever-shifting panorama of basic skills. So what, from its privileged vantage point, are the dominant issues emerging from the DfES strategy for raising the literacy and numeracy standards of 1.5 million people by 2007?

One central and overriding principle that emerges from its research and analysis of several hundred case studies is the importance of delivering basic skills workplace learning holistically. The best results are had, the Network firmly believes, when literacy and numeracy are seen as part

of an organisation's overall development initiatives, not as a kind of 'remedial' training for some poorly performing staff.

In the UK, basic skills have generally been offered as a 'bolt-on' provision, separate from other training. But focusing on workers' shortcomings can reinforce a culture of individual blame and responsibility when in reality this is a matter of shared responsibility.

"We need to get away from the remedial model," Jaine Chisholm-Caunt, Operations Director at the Network, told a recent *New Statesman* round table discussion on basic skills. "What we need to do is identify how basic skills are important for the learner and important for business. They need to be ... seen as fundamental skills that underpin all the other kinds of skills that are necessary for businesses to succeed.

"Evidence shows that if this is done, benefits accrue to both employer and employee. The organisation will exhibit better staff morale, superior team-working – but also increased productivity."



Tony Alcock – Human Resources Manager at Vitacress

Just ask Tony Alcock, human resources manager at Vitacress, a Hampshire-based upmarket provider of fresh salads to supermarkets, who organised literacy and numeracy training for staff in company time. "It's obviously important for us to get things right first time, for staff to be able to read, understand and follow our very stringent hygiene standards," he said. "Investing in [basic skills] training reduces absenteeism and improves staff retention, and that saves again. If you want to know the theory, it is about raising self-esteem – do that and people will stay with you."



Julie Pitt checks the factory machinery



Vitacress 'prepared' salad ready to hit the supermarkets

Much of the reason behind the current crying need for better basic skills, according to Ms Chisholm-Caunt, lies in the changing workplace itself. "We do not have so many low-skilled jobs any more. Take a person who has been working in manufacturing for 30-40 years. They probably left school with no qualifications. That would have been fine because they would have been trained up for the job; but over that 30 or 40 year period, the job has changed. Computers have been brought in, PAYE, payments by BACS, and new kinds of quality standards that may mean the employee has to get NVQs as a minimum qualification. There have also been changes in management practices and ways of working. That person might now have to hold team meetings and communicate with workers and clients."

But the onus is also on providers, before making approaches to businesses, to do their homework.



Julie Pitt – Trainee supervisor, with colleague

To this end, WBSN works with providers to help them understand the world of commerce and how to go into the workplace and speak the language of business. To be effective, providers need to take on board a business's priorities and ways of working; they have to understand the productivity and the culture of an organisation, and they have to sell the training in a way that meets that business's objectives.

Ultimately, the Network maintains, the only way forward to ensure that the excellent work already being done by hundreds of unsung trainers across the country, is for all parties – providers, union learning reps, employers and policy-makers – to work ever more interdependently and resolutely together. ☐✂✚

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