

It is particularly important for staff employed in the retail trade to have good communication skills and to be literate and numerate. A high proportion of employees, have frequent and prolonged contact with customers whether it

be at the checkout, through customer services or simply over the counter. Whereas in other circumstances – say in a warehouse – it might be possible to ‘conceal’ poor basic skills, out on the shop-floor it’s clearly more difficult.

## Basic skills in the retail trade

By Robert Nurden, Workplace Basic Skills Network



With the number of people employed in retail rising all the time (5.4 million are expected to be working in the sector in 2005) it is doubly important that shops and stores are doing all they can to ensure their staff measure up.

Recent research for the Workplace Basic Skills Network (WBSN) at Lancaster University and the South East England Development Agency does, however, throw up some uncomfortable statistics. After polling further education providers in the south east, it found that some 20% of retail employees have no qualifications, lack basic skills, and have widespread needs in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). The main skills gap appears to be in communication – at 43% – and then customer handling at 40%.

“There is much to be done in the field”, said Bronwyn Leonard, who is leading the research for WBSN, while liaising closely with Skillsmart – the Sector Skills Council for the retail trade and human resources managers. “It is important to distinguish between large retailers and small and medium-sized businesses. The chain stores have the resources to train their staff in their own procedures, and there is evidence that these large organisations are now trying to develop literacy, numeracy and ICT skills among their workforce.

“Independent concerns, however, tend not to engage in basic skills training because they don’t have the funds, are too busy and understandably are unwilling to release staff in company time. They are under continual commercial pressure from, say, the sales season, Christmas, Mother’s Day or whatever. It is very hard for them.”

The sector is also hampered by traditionally high turnover rates. The fact that most people do not see the retail trade as a conventional career path can dissuade management from providing training programmes. The study shows that oral communication needs special attention. But there is also a lack of good form-filling, report writing and general numeracy skills. Top-of-the-range IT skills have also become a must-have in many organisations.

But it is far from being all doom and gloom. There are shining examples of good practice in literacy and numeracy training, which have succeeded in transforming the performance of both individuals within a company and the company itself. These showcases, Ms Leonard believes, can act as a beacon. Some programmes will involve the take-up of National Tests, others will not.



Take the Asda branch at Lower Earley, near Reading. The supermarket decided to give staff training over and above the standard workplace training already offered. These courses targeted employees who did not normally receive staff development, for example, nightshift workers and checkout operators. The idea was that through the programme, which was brokered through a local Lifelong Learning Partnership, staff would have the knowledge, skills and confidence to push themselves further or to think about promotion.

Posters were put up inviting people to come to road shows in the canteen, which were timetabled to take into account those on shift work. Those interested were able to talk to tutors and find out more about what kind of courses were on offer.

Sarah Cass, a personal clerk who opted for numeracy training, takes up the story. "Training during work time was vital. Outside of work you are plunged back into your own family commitments. I could learn without worrying about the time and where else I needed to be.

"Before going on the course I was frightened to be given any work that was statistical. I had already been asked to do these type of tasks and I was spending a lot of time trying not to do them." Now she feels much more confident with doing these kinds of tasks, and has been able to help her children with their homework.

Getting a Level 1 qualification was a confidence booster for Sarah, and she is planning to go on and do a Level 2 certificate. Now Asda is hoping to continue its training programme, offering more staff the chance to improve their numeracy and literacy skills.

"In a way, the positive Asda experience is an answer to the questions posed by the research," said Ms Leonard. "There were added bonuses, too, such as improved teamwork and morale. But it is vital that any training initiative has the backing of line managers. We are now ready to think of the implications the research has for future training initiatives in the retail sector."



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