

Workplace training schemes in language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) will succeed only if managers are fully involved and they support the concept of adult learning. Robert Nurden of The Network calls for greater employer engagement.

**The interweaving relationships and cultural implications in adult learning are so complex that all staff, from the boardroom to the broom cupboard, must play a full part.**

It is something that The Network, a membership organisation based at Lancaster University which promotes best practice in workplace language, literacy and numeracy, has always known. Indeed, it forms a central plank in The Network's approach to its skills for life programmes.

The message is now getting through, and over the past few years there have been many successful programmes across the country where the importance of partnership has been fully understood. If not, one can imagine the true scenario of a group of Manchester construction workers, at the termination of their literacy course, throwing their work folders into a skip with glee.

One can appreciate management's reluctance. Training usually has to take place in company time, and bosses are loath to give staff time off because this could damage productivity and profits. Besides, many consider poor skills as the individual worker's problem.

But when a provider, broker or practitioner has convinced employers that direct benefits accrue from such training, and they then support the scheme, the results can be spectacular. The number of mistakes — for example, through wrong orders and incorrect calculations — is reduced, employees gain in confidence, better teamwork ensues and morale improves. Indeed, this kind of holistic learning produces better results than individual-based study.

#### SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

"In the UK, skills for life [training] has generally been offered as a bolt-on provision, separate from other training," said Eddie Little, operations director at The Network. "To counteract this, the provider must help companies develop whole organisational needs analysis. Focusing on workers' shortcomings can reinforce a culture of individual blame and responsibility when in reality this is a matter of shared responsibility. Avoiding the use of deficit statistics about individuals enables the provider and the employer to focus on a more holistic approach to training and development."

The Andover-based company Vitacress Salads, for example, has discovered the benefits of LLN training for its staff. Last year it produced more than 42 million bags of specialist salads. It grows, crops and packages its own product, which has to arrive at the supermarket at peak quality, in correct volumes and "just in time" to go on the shelves. It is a tightrope operation and mistakes can cost the company dear.

"Putting the wrong sell-by date on a run of 30,000 bags of salad will cost us £5,000 in keeping the shift behind to rebag the produce," said Tony Alcock, the company's human resources manager.

"It's obviously important that staff are able to read and understand words and numerals, and follow our stringent hygiene standards. Our investment in LLN skills training definitely paid off. We started with ESOL for our production staff and are happy to pay them for the hour a week they stay on to improve their English with a tutor from the local college. But the savings don't stop there. The training reduces absenteeism and improves staff retention. It is about raising self-esteem; do that and people will stay with you."

Julie, high-care supervisor (twilight shift) for the section where hygiene is at its highest levels, takes up the story. "I left school with nothing, slow at reading and atrocious at maths. I've had many jobs, worked for McDonald's, hotels and retail companies.

"So my friends ask why I do a job that starts at 2pm and goes on till 11pm, where I have to wear three layers of clothing to keep out the cold, and then have to change in and out of boots and protective clothing 20 times a day and wash my hands twice every single time I go on the floor. The answer is because Vitacress has given me the opportunity to do something with my life.

"Part of being a supervisor means having to use email and use the computer order board and write reports. But I have never written a report. So the course was really useful. It was also excellent fun. All of us enjoyed it. Learning gives you the confidence, real self-confidence."

LLN training should not exist in a vacuum: it should be relevant to the demands of the modern workplace. That

# Supporting adult learning vital for a better skills base



Vitacress Salads says it has been worth investing in LLN skills training for its staff

means meeting health and safety requirements, use of metrication and the euro, and introducing and using new technology, new international standards and working practices, new demands for quality and flatter management structures.

#### TRAINING NEEDS

There's another reason why managers should be involved — they, too, may need to upgrade their skill levels. Indeed, in the field of IT, their juniors may well be more proficient than they are. Being literate and numerate now means more than writing good English and adding up accurately; it also means being conversant with an often baffling range of electronic equipment. Invariably, there are training needs across the whole organisation.

The government has realised that employer participation is vital to the success of its Sfl programme. To this end, it has established the Employer Training Pilot (ETP) scheme, which will form the basis of its National Employer Training Programme from April 2006. Still in the experimental stage, ETPs are already successfully reaching those employers who have never previously engaged in training their workforces, in particular, small and medium-sized organisations.

In recent months, trainers from The Network have held three workshops for Lancashire LSC brokers charged with delivering ETPs to employers. The first focused on marketing, the second on organisational needs analysis, while the third looked both at the role of occupational standards and the opportunity to broker embedded basic

skills training solutions to employers, as well as the implications of national tests.

A company which already knows of the advantages of workplace learning is electrical engineering company W Lucy of Oxford, which makes lampposts, railings, street furniture, library shelving and manhole covers. Despite years of good performance, it recently became clear that its existing premises were not suitable for modern manufacturing methods. That meant it had to move to another £2 million site, which would require more staff training and a radical shake-up of procedures.

Not only that but the company had to make redundancies and, with that, suffer the loss of key skill sets, as well as tackling the problem of low staff morale. In addition, there was a need to retrain its 400 UK staff, who have widely differing ethnic backgrounds. Not surprisingly, there was also the problem of staff retention and how best

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to manage the transition from one workplace to another, and the culture change that went with that.

Carol Clark, human resources manager, said that because the task was so great it had to be tackled with extreme thoroughness. "Very soon it was clear that there was a need for skills for life training, which we treated as part of an overall programme of training and development," she said. "Literacy and numeracy provision became an essential part of our business improvement programme."

The programme proved to be highly democratic. Every staff member was involved in retraining. The human resources department detected a particular need for basic skills training in the logistics department. It was here that "underperforming employees" were having a negative effect on the performance of the department and on colleagues. "The bottom line was that two staff could not read, write or count and that was affecting stock reconciliation and business performance," added Carol.

A training needs analysis by a local provider revealed that the main priorities were for English and maths, and a pilot programme was instituted. Then, this formula — report writing, reading skills, literacy and communication, etc — was offered to other departments. Before long, individual employees were coming forward of their own volition.

"The commitment of all stakeholders is vital," said Carol. "Management support is critical and they must allow time off during work hours as well as being able to address the production issues that arise as a result. It is important to build relationships and trust with staff. Employers must not deny there is a problem; they must participate and realise that such initiatives are rewarding for all concerned, not just for the student.

#### OVERALL BENEFITS

"We are now experiencing a change in attitude to learning among employees. They are gaining in confidence, but we have also learned that it is important not to aim too high. We may lose one or two staff as a result of this training but the overall benefits far outweigh the disadvantages. There is nothing more satisfying than giving someone the opportunity to change and enrich their life."

Persuasive arguments, indeed. It is a shame, then, that there is still so much opposition from managers towards LLN learning in the workplace. But when they are shown that not only does staff morale, retention and performance improve, but that profits can show a marked rise too, then the argument goes a long way towards being proved.

Let's hope that they also take responsibility for improving individual staff members' skill levels and put such strategies at the centre of their organisation's long-term planning.

■ For further information about The Network (formerly known as the Workplace Basic Skills Network), telephone 01524 593405 or visit [www.thenetwork.co.uk](http://www.thenetwork.co.uk)