

The *impact* of poor skills in retail and construction

Robert Nurden, of Lancaster University-based The Network, reveals some uncomfortable statistics about the lack of basic skills qualifications among workers in the retail trade and construction industries.

In today's increasingly competitive world, it is important for staff in both the retail trade and the construction industry to possess good literacy skills. The impact of poor skills in these areas of work can be devastating, with a drop in both production and profits.

Retail

The study of the retail industry throws up some uncomfortable statistics. The Network found that some 20 per cent of retail employees have no qualifications, lack literacy skills, and have widespread needs in ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages). The main skills gap appears to be in communication.

And with the number of people employed in retail rising all the time – 5.4 million are expected to be working in the sector in 2006 – it is doubly important that shops and stores are doing all they can to ensure that their staff measure up. In retail, good communication skills are essential, along with a good standard of literacy and numeracy. A high proportion of staff, whether it be at the checkout, through customer services or simply over the counter, have frequent and prolonged contact with customers.

"There is much to be done in the field," said Bronwyn Leonard, who led the research, while liaising closely with Skillsmart - the Sector Skills Council for the retail trade - and human resources managers. "But 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 language literacy, numeracy [LLN] and ITC skills among their workforce.

"Independent concerns, however, tend not to engage in literacy skills training

because they don't have the funds, are too busy and understandably are unwilling to release staff in company time."

The sector is also hampered by 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.

But it is far from being all gloom and doom. There are shining examples of good practice in literacy training, which have succeeded in transforming the performance of both individuals and their company. The

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Asda branch at Lower Earley, near Reading, decided to give staff training over and above that ordinarily 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, staff would have the knowledge, skills and confidence to push themselves further.

Sarah Cass, a clerk who opted for training, takes up the story. "Training during work time was vital. 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 work. I had already been asked to do tasks and I was spending a lot of time trying not to do them." Now she feels more confident with doing these kinds of tasks.

"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 employer takes the 'whole organisational' approach and training initiatives must have the backing of line managers."

Construction

Defects cost the construction industry a staggering £1bn a year in repair bills, and many of these errors are caused by poor reading and writing on the building site. It has long been known that there is a need in the building trade for better skills in language, literacy and numeracy (LLN), but the extent of that need has remained unclear - until now.

The Network study shows that up to 90 per cent of learners in the building trade need better LLN skills to be effective on-site. Yet only a handful of 20 employers in a survey conducted in the West Midlands admit there is a need. The "macho" culture of the industry means that most workers are reluctant to admit deficiencies. Workers use ploys like saying they have "forgotten their spectacles" to avoid reading a health and safety document.

The "phone a friend" phenomenon operates on site so that any worker with a construction problem to solve goes away and gets in touch with a mate. One of the largest areas of lost revenue occurs before workers even arrive on site. Map-reading skills are so poor, they frequently have difficulty finding the site.

"One of the most worrying things to come to light," said Joy Evans, the research leader for The Network, "is that there is deep resistance among many employers and employees to admit there is a problem. There is little openness about the need for better LLN skills."

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