

# Workplace Skills for Life and the challenges it faces in the future

*Robert Nurden of The Network, a Skills for Life organisation based at Lancaster University, writes about the current state of play for Sfl in the workplace and the challenges and opportunities it faces in the future.*

**B**ack in 1999, the *Moser Report* stated that up to seven million adults in England had difficulties with literacy and numeracy, and one in five were functionally illiterate. In industry, poor skills cost an estimated £4.8 billion a year.

These were figures that shocked the adult education community, but employers were slow to react. They often failed to appreciate the link between poor company performance and low skill levels.

But the workplace has changed hugely in recent years. Forecasts suggest that, by 2009, 40% of jobs will fall into the managerial and professional categories, with only 21% working in operative jobs.

Virtually every worker now needs a portfolio of skills to function effectively. The growth in the number of health and safety regulations, greater emphasis on more accurate paperwork, invoices and orders, currency conversions and universal use of computers are all making greater demands on employees.

These changes have been the key to organisations finally responding to government initiatives such as Skills for Life (Sfl), which was established in the wake of the *Moser Report*. At the same time, the *Train to Gain* scheme, more closely defined LSC priorities, and bodies such as the Sector Skills Councils have, by focusing on employers, brought the issue into the workplace. There are now encouraging signs that real progress is being made. Since 2001, the number of adults in the workforce without a Level 2 qualification has dropped from 7.1 million to 6.8 million and things are broadly in line to meet the government target of a 40 per cent reduction in adults in the workforce without a Level 2 qualification by 2010.

A key idea that is pushing more managers to engage with Sfl is that of the whole organisational approach. Rather than seeing low levels of literacy and

numeracy as a problem that individuals must solve, a forward-looking company will treat the issue as an organisational one. This means that management will put time and resources behind a language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) training programme in which all members of staff take part.

There is now overwhelming evidence that you get better results, both for individuals and for the whole organisation, by taking this comprehensive approach," said Sue Batt, Network Regional Director. "Staff morale invariably improves, as does performance, and individuals see an improvement in their lives."

In this scenario, learning embraces the whole workplace and context is everything

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Progress is measured not by qualifications or individual gains in skill, but by changes in collective practice and ultimately by organisational performance.

But the advances are only being achieved in this highly complex field because stakeholders – providers, tutors, employers, brokers, staff, and union learning reps – are forging good relationships. For example, a broker, provider or tutor must learn about a company's unique style and discrete culture before launching in with a needs analysis.

Schemes such as the *National Pathfinder on Developing a Whole Organisation Approach*, joint work between Business in the Community and KPMG in supporting large companies in developing Sfl

strategies, and The Network's own pilot projects with local councils and health authorities, as well as its *Breaking Down Barriers* courses, have all contributed to the overall improvement.

The concept of embedded learning is also a vital ingredient in the greater professionalism now evident in workplace Sfl. This approach combines the development of LLN with vocational and other skills. A survey conducted by the National Research and Development Centre found that 93% of literacy learners gained key skills qualifications on fully embedded courses, compared with only 50% where literacy was taught separately.

The Network is engaged in conducting vital research for the DfES on embedded learning in the workplace. It is gathering core data about the way embedded learning is delivered, while compiling case studies that demonstrate good practice.

Workplace Sfl faces many challenges. More trained and qualified tutors are needed to deliver government targets. And, despite the successes outlined above, there still needs to be better dissemination of good practice, case studies and an improved sharing of materials.

There are also some caveats that need spelling out. "Workplace Sfl must not allow itself to be squeezed, following the recommendations of the *Foster Review of Further Education* and the *Leitch Report*," according to Eddie Little, Operations Director of The Network. "If the future landscape is employer-led and demand-driven, then we must be careful that we don't end up with a series of fragmented and regional initiatives with no coherent national strategy. I hope, too, that the skills and vocational elements of skills do not take precedence - at employer insistence - over Sfl. Above all we must avoid a cut-and-run to NVQs and similar qualifications."