

Numeracy @ WORK

GET THE FACTS:

Canada scored a 'C' on numeracy skills compared to other developed countries. Only about 45 out of 100 Canadian adults can do every day arithmetic and understand the numbers in printed materials. The rate of Canadians with inadequate numeracy is increasing significantly, and is taking a toll on the workplace. According to a 2005 study a lack of employee literacy and numeracy skills costs employers \$4 billion a year .

Numeracy is about more than just numbers – it requires the ability to integrate math and communication skills. It means being able to interpret data, charts and diagrams, process information, solve problems, check answers, understand and explain solutions, make decisions based on logical thinking and reasoning.

Numeracy issues are linked to personal budgeting challenges and debt, reduced employment opportunities, increased health risks, higher rates of depression, increased risk of exclusion in the school system and increased risk of involvement in the criminal justice system.

A struggle with numeracy can lead to a struggle with keeping up with automation on the job or new technology. It is also linked to increased risk of accident or injury on the job as a lot of health and safety information is communicated through charts, numbers and conditional statements.



HOW DO YOU KNOW?

Most employees with low numeracy skills have developed coping techniques and ways to disguise their challenges. And many are not even aware of the extent of their lack of skills.

So how do you know if your employee is struggling with numeracy issues?

There are some easy to spot indicators like the inability to perform basic calculations or to read a tape measure. But also watch for signs that an employee:

- Has difficulty telling time, understanding schedules or filling in a time sheet
- Makes seemingly unreasonable estimates on amount of product required, or how long something will take to do
- Struggles to count money or make change
- Loses track when counting, or seems not be able to remember numbers
- Has difficulty recognizing simple patterns and placing things in order
- Struggles to connect numerical symbols (5) with their corresponding word (five)
- Seems unable to grasp concepts or quantities like biggest vs smallest, or less than/more than
- Mismanages their personal finances and/or has significant debt
- Makes seemingly careless mistakes with measuring

MAKING IT WORK @ WORK

Would any of these strategies work to make your employees more productive and safer at work:

- Allow the use of a calculator on a phone or other technology
- Team up with co-workers who can assist with calculations
- Review safety instructions verbally and don't rely on posted charts or information
- Provide premeasured cleaning supplies as per safety/hazardous materials standards, or draw lines on measuring materials with notes such as "fill to here"
- Provide different coloured measures for different amounts and create a key to follow – use purple for this, yellow for this, etc.
- Avoid describing products by numbers, such as 1 ¾ screw – consider offering a simple sizing chart to compare items to rather than rely on employees being able to understand the numbers involved
- Allow extra time to complete task, provide support, check in and encouragement often
- Work with the YMCA Learning Services to develop individualized training and supports for employees who struggle completing certain tasks

IN REAL LIFE

B was self-employed as a general labourer and handyman. It was seasonal work, cash only deals. He had not completed high school and had no formal training. As B moved closer to retirement age with no savings and personal debt, he realized he could not always rely on cash only jobs. With low-level numeracy skills, B found it difficult to obtain and maintain steady employment, and manage his own finances. He had developed methods to "hide" his difficulty but at each job it would become evident, affecting his work performance.

B came into the YMCA to enroll in the Learning Services program. He wanted to learn how to read a tape measure to increase his chances for employment as a general labourer. The Instructor and B worked to understand some basic mathematical concepts including fractions, and then moved on to using a measuring tape. At the completion of his instruction, B had not only learned basic mathematical concepts and how to read and use a measuring tape, but also basic budgeting. Shortly after completing his upgrading in the YMCA Learning Services program, a local employer hired B to work in the lumber department— and he achieved his goal!

WE CAN HELP

The YMCA of Simcoe Muskoka is here to support both employers and employees. We can offer one on one customized support for:

Academic upgrading to pursue a high school diploma or further training

Developing worksite specific strategies to support an employee in completing tasks

Hands on practice to upgrade numeracy skills

Also these courses can be adapted to your needs:

- Become Money Smart
- Cash Handling and Customer Service
- Meals and Money