

Literacy @ WORK

GET THE FACTS:

Officially Canada's literacy rate has remained consistent at around 99%.

But... not really.

4 out of 10 Canadians do not have the literacy skills they need to function well in everyday life, or to be fully competent in most jobs. They may not be able to do tasks such as fill out a job application or send an email – or read safety instructions or policies and procedures on the job.

Low literacy does not mean someone *can't* read. It means they do not read well enough to understand large amounts of text or to pull the important information from it.

Literacy challenges go beyond reading. People with low literacy also have difficulties understanding spoken and written information. They may also have trouble organizing information, following a line of reasoning, and keeping track of a set of instructions.

People with low literacy come from all demographics and education levels. “Use it or lose it” – even those who graduated from high school or university can lose their literacy skills over time if they are not challenged to use them in daily life.

Adults with low literacy skills become highly skilled at hiding their barrier. They are also more likely to develop anxiety, have poorer overall health and lower salaries, struggle to maintain employment, and not participate in their community.



HOW DO YOU KNOW?

Adults with low literacy skills have learned to adapt and cover their barrier so well that a full 80% would describe their literacy level as “good” or “average” and fail to recognize the extent of their skills gap.

An applicant or employee may have low literacy skills if they

- Quit school
- Have an unstable employment history, changing jobs often
- Struggle with technology

There are also some less obvious indicators:

- Makes excuses for why they can't read something or fill out paperwork – I forgot my reading glasses, I hurt my hand, I don't have time right now so I'll take it home
- Stares at the page without moving their eyes
- Fills out the wrong information in paperwork if they do not actually understand the questions



MAKING IT WORK @ WORK

Would any of these strategies work to make your employees more productive and safer at work – while not singling out employees who are struggling?

- Provide instructions verbally or through text or voice messaging instead of written documents
- Avoid giving multiple step directions but rather break up tasks into stages. Keep instructions simple and clear and check for understanding.
- Review the content of any new safety signage or procedures verbally with everyone, rather than rely on employees to check in and read the posted materials
- Create a buddy system for filling out paperwork/reports so that not everyone has to do the typing/writing
- With new hires, work with them through the onboarding paperwork rather than have them complete it independently
- Create simple checklists for common procedures in easy to understand language and have them available on the spot
- Consider rewriting documents to use the words that people already use – avoid formal or technical terms if an everyday word can be used instead. And avoid using jargon or acronyms.
- Have someone not familiar with your business and the work you do to read through your documents to check for how easy they are to understand

And also consider allowing flexibility in an employee's schedule to attend literacy upgrading programs.

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

Reading, writing, comprehension support

Filling out documents

Developing worksite specific strategies to support an employee in completing tasks

IN REAL LIFE



A client with a history of short term work assignments obtained a placement at a local business with the support of a Job Coach. The client continued to come into the office on a regular basis to talk about his frustration with the lack of support he felt at work. It turns out the client could not remember the steps for a weekly task, and it was becoming a source of frustration for both him and the employer. The Job Coach was able to work with the client and the employer to create a step by step cheat sheet that the employee carried in his wallet to help him complete the task, and the client is still a loyal employee several years later.

LEARN MORE

[About Workplace Literacy in Canada](#)

[Office of Literacy and Essential Skills Workplace Survey](#)

[How To Make Information Accessible: A guide to producing easy read documents](#)