

Learning Through Work:

Literacy, language, numeracy
and IT skills development in
low paid, low skilled
workplaces

Audit of Learning
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Executive Summary

The SEEDA-funded Basic Skills programme has created learning partnerships centred on the low-paid workplace in NHS Trusts across the south east region. These learning partnerships deliver literacy, English language, numeracy and IT (LLNIT) skills in NHS workplaces. They have offered a valuable opportunity to investigate, across a number of sites, how on-the-job LLNIT learning might widen participation in learning, to support both organisational performance and the skills development of low-paid workers in the south east.

In summer 2005, SEEDA commissioned a project to further explore these issues and, on the basis of this work, to consider how its funding might most cost-effectively be used to promote on-the-job LLNIT learning opportunities for people in low-paid and low-skilled occupations. The work focuses on the low-paid workforce, as it is among this group that the greatest unmet need for LLNIT skills is likely to exist.

This summary (and the accompanying report) presents findings from the second stage of this project: an analysis of an audit of learning conducted in organisations where low-skilled and low-paid jobs exist.

Project methodology

In commissioning the project, SEEDA collaborated with Alexander Braddell (its Project Consultant and an author of this report) to design a staged process for collecting information about low-paid, low-skilled work and workplaces and the opportunities for LLNIT learning therein. The first stage was a literature review to establish what was already known (and not known) in this field, the methodology for which is published in the first of these reports. The second stage involved Practice Evidence Gathering (PEG) teams gaining agreement to audit learning and development practices in relevant workplaces, and undertaking that audit. It is this aspect we discuss here.

The PEG teams are for the most part made up of qualified LLNIT trainers with extensive and current experience of delivering LLNIT in south east workplaces. The

PEG teams were recruited from south east workplace LLNIT providers already working in partnership with employers. In many cases, these partnerships centred on the low-paid workplace in NHS trusts and were funded by SEEDA as part of the agency's NHS Basic Skills programme. The PEG teams were contracted by SEEDA to recruit organisations to participate in the audit; as well as to undertake the gathering of evidence required by the audit.

The methodology, which guaranteed the involvement of organisations and also offered the benefit of working with experienced practitioners, has implications for the generalisability of the findings. The organisations may be judged to have some predisposition to see the benefits of LLNIT learning; the PEG teams cannot be considered objective evidence gatherers given their involvement in the subject area. While the findings may be, in some aspects, indicative of what is happening in other low-paid, low-skilled workplaces, the large number of health (and related) organisations indicates that this data is most likely to reflect patterns in this sector.

Presentation of findings

A total of 21 organisations (and 27 organisational units) were audited. The units had 53 occupational groups working in them. PEG teams reported on 43 learning events, held for the occupational groups encompassed by the units. In addition, they gathered information from 52 line managers and 69 low-paid, low-skilled employees. The PEG teams also provided their expert analysis of 165 tasks involving the application of LLNIT skills. Below we present the key findings from each strand of the audit, followed by a discussion of their implications and we conclude with our recommendations for future stages of this project.

Learning and development policy

- LLNIT skills development receives little explicit priority within training policy documents, although the existence of a training policy is close to universal. Where there is reference to any of the LLNIT skill sets, IT is the most likely to be identified in training policy in these organisations.
- Performance review systems such as appraisal are common but as these are mostly large, public-service organisations this perhaps is not surprising¹.
- The performance review systems were the most frequently identified mechanism for the negotiation of training, however informal discussions with supervisors and

¹ It should be noted that the NHS is currently introducing its first, mandatory, standardised appraisal and performance development system: the Knowledge and Skills Framework and Personal Development Review process. Organisations are currently training managers and staff to implement this system. At the time of the audit this had not yet been fully implemented.

line managers or direct application to HR or training departments were almost as common.

Learning events audited by PEG teams

- Most of the learning events audited were led by external trainers. There was some limited evidence of collaboration between external trainers and employer staff that could offer a useful transitional model to enable changes in delivery to be achieved.
- Non-qualification training formed the majority of learning events and fairly large numbers of these explicitly contained LLNIT skills development in some form.
- Largely, the learning events were configured for groups and delivered off-the-job, but on the employer's site. In one-fifth of events, this mode was combined with on-job learning application support using demonstration and assessment techniques. On-the-job learning was delivered in much the same way, indicating there may be scope for the greater integration and use of on-the-job learning.
- Colleagues, but more frequently, managers and supervisors were seen by PEG teams as key to the development of LLNIT skills at work, as well as to their application. Their needs, in the view of the PEG teams, included greater awareness raising training about these skill sets, and practical communication skills such as those necessary for coaching or managing performance.

Line managers' perspective

- Managers reported that some skills or combination thereof were important in recruitment for the occupational groups for which they were responsible. Over one-half of the line managers reported that a combination of skills was required, and four in ten of these combinations included LLNIT skills. Where a single skill was specified, close to one-half of these skills were from the LLNIT grouping.
- Of all the skills specified during the recruitment processes cited by managers (whether these were single or in combination) the ones receiving greatest priority were literacy and skills related to specific trades and crafts. Communication skills were specified in just over ten per cent of cases; however, if customer service skills are combined with this, their specification close to doubles.
- For one-half of the groups reported on by line managers, a mix of experienced and inexperienced recruits was typical. Generally, line managers believed that most recruits required training. This suggests that, even where recruits have skills, the organisations require these to be tailored in some way to meet the needs of work. Unsurprisingly, this is particularly the case for functional and safe practice skills.
- Further analysis of the line manager information demonstrated that much of the training required by experienced recruits was in the area of LLNIT skills. This finding was statistically significant. We believe this is indicative of the importance

of the LLNIT skills in terms of the total skill-set required by these workers; also since a significant amount of the training needed, even by experienced staff, is in the LLNIT skill areas, the extent to which they require a identification in employee development strategies.

- Two-thirds of the line managers in these organisations reported that they monitored the skills in which employees had been trained. However the PEG team data also suggested that one in ten did not undertake any follow-up activities to further embed skills. Monitoring tended to combine formal and informal procedures, although of these two options, informal monitoring was mentioned slightly more often when a single method was used.
- Overall, eight in ten of these line managers felt that skills requirements had increased, while just four in total thought they had decreased. Low-paid, low-skilled workers' participation in decision-making (an information processing skill) was also felt, overall, to have increased in most of these organisations.
- The line managers participating in the audit more readily identified the role of LLNIT skills to the development of better team working than task duties. Unsurprisingly, communication was a common factor here although customer service also gained recognition (a skill that might be considered to combine communication and problem solving, ie some degree of information processing).

Employees' views

- Employees gave information about the skills that had been required at recruitment and most of these identified relevant previous work experience. Task-related and LLNIT skills were required in a broadly similar number of cases. If information processing skills and communication were considered in combination with the skills of the LLNIT acronym, then these skills were the most commonly demanded (in the view of employees).
- Although employees were drawn from a large number of occupations (with varying skills requirements), there was an indication that, in their view, few of these jobs require no skills development following recruitment. More than one-half of these employees reported that a training period of between two weeks and one month would be necessary. However, this contrasted with their own experience of training at the outset of work, where large numbers reported 'only a little' training had been required.
- Employees believed that, of the tasks involving LLNIT skills required by their work, just over one-quarter required the ability to read and comprehend written information. Just over one in ten tasks involved the use of IT. In the case of IT, over eight in ten of the employees reporting its use had also received development. Just two-thirds of the employees who reported that they need to produce written information had received development to support them to do this. Only a small

numbers reported receiving development if their work involved reading in some form.

- Just over one-half of these employees reported that their skills were monitored following development; this suggests that close to one-half did not believe this to be the case. Where monitoring was taking place, largely this included the discussion of their development needs. Almost universally, managers were reported by employees to be responsible for the monitoring taking place and mostly monitoring combined both formal and informal mechanisms.
- Where monitoring was taking place and feedback was part of this, the majority of these employees agreed that they and their manager discussed any further development requirements. However, when asked whether LLNIT development needs were included in these discussions only two-thirds of this group agreed.
- Largely, these employees felt that skills requirements for their work had increased. They also felt that they played a greater role in decision-making now. Employee responses indicated that in around two-thirds of instances, training had been delivered to support the changes, suggesting there had been some recognition at organisational level of these new demands on employees.
- Employees were asked about any LLNIT/IPC skills development they would like to receive and the majority related directly to communication skills.
- When asked whether any skills development would help them and their colleagues work better as a team, just under one-half responded positively. Of these, the majority felt that communications development was required.

Activities for which LLNIT skills are required

- PEG teams were asked to report on workplace activities undertaken by the occupational groups they visited. This revealed that most of these groups are required to regularly process information and communicate with colleagues, external companies and/or members of the public. Many of the activities were covered by regulatory frameworks.
- PEG teams reported that almost 90 per cent of activities involved face-to-face communication, some 80 per cent involved paper-based communication, and 35 per cent involved ICT-mediated communication.
- For 84 per cent of the activities the PEG teams believed that the requirement to apply one or more LLNIT skill was specified, or else clearly implied by documentation such as job descriptions, health and safety documentation or competency frameworks associated with the activity. In the majority of cases, PEG teams believed that these requirements were communicated to the workers, mostly by the line manager or at induction. However, in one-quarter of cases, there appeared to be no evidence that the requirement had been communicated.

- For just over one-half of the activities audited (55 per cent) PEG teams reported some form of organisational accommodation was made for limited LLNIT skills. Sometimes this took the form of restricting participation in the activity to those employees judged to have a sufficient skill level for the task. However, PEG teams also reported that there was no evidence of formal assessment of LLNIT skills associated with these activities, nor of managers or supervisors being qualified to assess LLNIT skills.
- The activities in which LLNIT skill needs had been identified were frequently those that contributed to safe working practice, team working and quality assurance. The PEG teams believed that poor levels of LLNIT skills were liable to compromise most of the activities. Poor LLNIT application was judged to pose a risk to safe working in 142 of the 165 activities, a risk to quality assurance in 154, to resource management in 156 and to work management in 155.
- Conversely, strengthened LLNIT skills were believed to help safeguard activities or, in some cases, enhance performance of the activity. Customer service was believed to be the work area that could most benefit from enhanced LLNIT skills.
- Support for the application of LLNIT skills was reported in a majority of the organisations. This was broadly categorised as formal training, coaching, resources, systematic feedback and work organisation. Of these, ad hoc, informal coaching was the most widely available.
- PEG teams believed that these types of support could be applied generally across activities. Furthermore, they believed that this type of support could be adopted to support LLNIT skills development and use (and the attendant performance management systems to encourage these) and thereby respond to perceived organisational shortcomings.
- At the conclusion of the audit, the PEG teams were asked to offer suggestions for how best to make LLNIT skills more visible to organisation and employees. They recommended that organisations should specify both the LLNIT skills required by work activities, and the standard of the application required; and systematically communicate the requirement for LLNIT skills, along with the risk to activities of poor application of these skills, and the value added to activities through effective application of these skills.
- PEG teams believed that a coherent support system would be required in order to bring to staff's attention the need for LLNIT skills in work activities; encourage them to use and develop these skills; help work teams, managers and supervisors to attend to the development and use of these skills; help employees in all roles to develop and implement strategies to apply LLNIT skills.
- Furthermore, LLNIT skill application would need to be reinforced through both coherent development of individuals' abilities in conjunction with 'just-in-time' on-the-job support for the application of LLNIT skills.

Implications of audit findings

It is fair to judge that these organisations have some support for learning and that this is largely task related, and frequently aims to ensure safe workplaces and practices. However, despite the involvement of a large majority of these organisations in the SEEDA NHS Basic Skills programme, LLNIT/IPC skills development receives little explicit priority (as far as PEG teams could ascertain) within the training policies. Where a LLNIT skill area was identified, this largely was IT. This appears to indicate that the need for LLNIT skills is generally not recognised at organisational level and further to this, we would suggest that the role of these skills in underpinning work practice is similarly unrecognised.

At the local level, evidence from the line managers suggests a greater (but by no means universal) recognition of a need for LLNIT skills, although systems for measurement (noted by line managers) could be considered rather ad hoc. PEG teams reported that the need for LLNIT skills was either specified or implied in much organisational documentation, including job descriptions. However, in one-quarter of the activities recorded, this appeared not to have been communicated to the employee and where it was, the specification itself appears to have been related to task performance rather than skills.

The PEG team activity audit noted that for more than one-half of the audited activities, organisations sought to accommodate limited LLNIT skills (rather than address the development need). Therefore, while the line managers and employees reported opportunities for development in general, opportunities focused on developing the types of LLNIT skills needed in the activities audited appeared to be lacking. It was practice in some organisations to restrict involvement in some activities only to those with requisite levels of LLNIT skills; often, the PEG teams reported, these activities were those that contributed to safe working practice, team work and quality assurance. Low levels of LLNIT skills were judged to compromise many of these activities and functions.

Despite these gaps in LLNIT provision, around two-thirds of the line managers, and a similar ratio of employees, reported that opportunities for career progression existed, and that development and training was available to support this. These organisations therefore appear more willing than most low-paid, low-skilled workplaces to offer opportunities to progress and access to training to support this¹. However, the audit also indicated that, while support (in the form of training or development) for progression exists, there may nonetheless be some failure to capitalise on the increased skill levels attained as a result of this development. For example, while the line managers noted that there were no barriers to the application of newly developed

¹ This willingness may reflect healthcare initiatives such as the Department of Health's lifelong learning framework and action plan, *Working Together – Learning Together*, issued in 2001.

skills at work, their descriptions of how workers would gain this opportunity indicated in many cases that formal or informal progression was required (either to act up or actually gain promotion). The employee data supports this view, and we would note that only in two cases were there indications that they had been given some project that did utilise newly gained skills (rather than the opportunity, for instance, to 'act up'). Therefore, even where skill development is facilitated, organisations may fail to capitalise on their investment.

The audit suggests a lack of linkage between policy and the requirements for LLNIT skills development to perform work. Line managers' perceptions indicate that there is a gap between what is known at local level about the LLNIT skill demands of jobs and central parts of the organisation that facilitate development activities. Employees themselves make the link between development and performance, in many cases identifying that they would like further development to help them perform their jobs better.

Facilitators of on-the-job LLNIT learning

The increasing demand for skills amongst these workers and the increasing demand for them to participate in decision-making are factors likely to facilitate greater embedding of on-the-job LLNIT learning. Training has been offered (in most cases) to support the introduction of such changes, however, the extent to which communication and problem-solving development has been considered within this is unexplored. There would be benefits to further work to explore this issue.

Release from work for low-paid, low-skilled staff is likely to remain problematic. While there were indications from some of the PEG teams that organisational change was required to enable greater release of staff time, it is more likely that organisations will be persuaded to embed LLNIT development where there are not requirements for staff release. Providers should consider whether on-the-job delivery strategies can be used for some of the LLNIT development that is required. While there was support from PEG teams for this approach (on-the-job development) in some cases, where a significant skills gap existed then they believed that some off-the-job training would probably still be required.

Monitoring systems existed in most organisations and comprised informal and formal strategies. Their existence suggests that, with organisational support, these could be used to leverage LLNIT skills development needs identification as well as development delivery. However, we found a lack of any development programmes for managers to develop the skills required to be able to engage with these concepts. The PEG teams reported that managers require awareness-raising training for LLNIT skills as well as development support monitoring and coaching (ie, the basics of performance management) if these aspects were to be effectively embedded in provision.

In view of this, we suggest that some form of transitional model is likely to be required to support these types of changes (if indeed these ideas are taken on board by organisations employing low-paid, low-skilled workers). We suggest here a key role for current LLNIT learning providers to work in partnership with organisations that goes beyond the delivery of traditional learning events for employees, to help support the development of skills in management, supervisory and indeed internal training staff, to be able to deliver LLNIT on-the-job themselves.

However, the key change that must be achieved for any of this to be embedded is that organisations must recognise that there is a real need for LLNIT skills. There has been sustained attention on LLNIT skills in recent years: successive skills white papers have reiterated the government's commitment to Skills for Life. The DfES has invested significant funding in Skills for Life. In the health service, the Department of Health has invested in basic skills development through individual learning accounts, and SEEDA too has invested in development of these skills. Despite this, while organisations have undoubtedly become more aware of basic skill issues, there still remains a failure in most cases to *embed* basic skill development in organisational policy and strategy.

Conclusions

The evidence suggests that, despite a positive disposition towards (and in some cases funding for) LLNIT skill development, there has been little action taken to embed LLNIT skill development within these workplaces. Therefore there remain skill deficits that impact on safety, quality and flexibility. Taken together, we may conclude that a benign attitude and the provision of funding, in and of themselves, are insufficient to initiate organisational change and embed a strategic recognition of the importance of LLNIT skill development.

The work set out to answer some fundamental questions impacting on LLNIT skills at work, and it is with these that we use to conclude our analysis.

How are LLNIT skills and practices best defined and why?

Given that employers generally struggle with the vocabulary of skills, and in the audit managers and supervisors had difficulty in labelling the types of skills they required in various jobs, we suggest that introduction of another acronym into this area is not helpful. However, it is also acknowledged that employers' use of terms such as 'communication skills' are not helpful in attempting to identify the skill development required. Therefore we make recommendations for the later stage of the work to address this.

What LLNIT skills and practices does the workplace require?

PEG teams identified a range of LLNIT skills and practices required in these workplaces. In brief, these were oral, ICT-mediated, paper-based and either formal or informal communication or information-processing skills. We recommend that in the second phase of the work this exploration of skill needs is extended.

How are current demands for LLNIT skills and practices currently negotiated?

The audit indicted that development requirements were mainly negotiated via managers or supervisors and in many cases some training was available. Nonetheless it was evident that, in a majority of organisations, skills deficits remained, and it might, therefore, be more appropriate to ask how LLNIT skill deficits are accommodated, since many organisations had devised ways to circumvent these skill deficits.

What perceptions exist in the workplace towards LLNIT skills and practices?

All individuals interviewed were broadly supportive of the need for LLNIT skills, and this is perhaps not surprising since in many cases they were organisations that had been in receipt of training funded by SEEDA for the development of such skills. However, the absence of LLNIT skills from training and HR policy in many of these organisations suggests that, whatever goodwill exists, it is not leading to the sustainable embedding of LLNIT practices within the workplace. There is a limit to the extent of any direct influence that SEEDA can exert on employers, since in the majority of cases it funds the training providers, not employers.

However, we suggest that SEEDA considers whether it might be possible to make any future development funding contingent upon providers requiring formal sign-up from organisations that will potentially benefit from the training provided under the scheme, so that the organisation becomes a partner in the initiative rather than simply a beneficiary (often with no real idea of the source of the funding). Furthermore, we suggest that, as part of this sign-up process, organisations should be required to agree to revise training and HR policies to embed adult basic skill development before funding is given; in addition, SEEDA should request that the recipient organisations provide a formal evaluation to SEEDA of the impact of the funding on their organisational performance. This would do much to move practice on (in terms of embedding development opportunities) and make the benefits visible to senior management.

What are the consequences of current practices for the workplace?

The consequences of current practices are severe: many adults remain insufficiently skilled for their current positions, let alone any chance of progression; threats to

safety, quality and work flow arise from skill deficits; and organisations are rendered significantly less flexible as a result of skills deficits.

Next steps

In light of the findings from this project, it is timely to consider ways in which to help organisations embed these processes (from the identification of LLNIT skills and recognition of their impacts for practice to ensuring that skills development in these areas becomes policy). Below we suggest a staged methodology to take forward this work, in which on-the-job LLNIT skills developments will be trialled and evaluated:

- identification of LLNIT skill needs – establish working groups with line managers and employees to identify which LLNIT skills are required by their work, in what way and at what level
- development of skills of LLNIT practitioners involved in this work – to support the identification of training needs and skills gaps, and designing and delivering on-the-job learning
- designing delivery options and materials – development of a range of approaches for on-the-job delivery, and accompanying materials drawing on work-based examples
- trial the options in different organisations – a subset of options to be trialled at a number of employer sites depending on skills gaps identified
- implement the pilot – collection of baseline evidence (individual and organisational), assess individual's skills; develop line managers and deliver skills to employees
- test and evaluate the pilot – capture learner and manager evaluation of the approach and materials. Assessment of progress ie distance travelled from baseline (individual and organisational). Gather cost estimates from managers of time away from work typically needed for employees to attend training
- gauge cost-effectiveness – the value of increased performance/(the costs of training including LLNIT practitioner time & management development + cost of salary during training + loss of any business revenue that would be accrued in the employee's absence).