

Learning Through Work:

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

Literature Review
June 2006

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. These 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 public 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 first stage of this project: a data analysis of low pay and low skills in the south east; and a literature review which seeks to characterise low pay, low-skilled work and workplaces; and identify current practices and opportunities to develop LLNIT skills.

Low pay and low skill in the South East

- The south east population is more qualified than that of the UK as a whole, with fewer people reporting low levels of educational attainment. However, there remains a sizeable group in the south east with low levels of educational attainment, who are very likely to have literacy or numeracy development needs (we estimate just over ten per cent of the south east population would fail level 1 literacy, and 40 per cent would fail level 1 numeracy).
- People with these low qualification levels are disproportionately more likely to be older (aged between 46 and state pension age) or belong to minority ethnic groups. Variation by gender with regards to qualification is marginal, and lower rates of

educational attainment among women represent historic differences rather than current achievement rates.

- Those with low or no qualifications have much lower than average rates of participation in, and are more likely to withdraw from, the labour market.
- Low qualified people who remain in the labour market are disproportionately represented in declining industries (eg agriculture and manufacturing) or service sector industries (eg hotel and restaurant sector). This group is disproportionately represented among process plant and machinery operative and elementary occupations.

There are similarities between the sectors and occupations that employ a large percentage of people with low educational attainment and sectors that have a high proportion of employees who are on low pay. Using the OECD definition of low pay ie based on hourly earnings that are less than two-thirds of the national median, we find that:

- around 18 per cent of those employed in the south east are low-paid, compared with an average of 20 per cent in the UK as a whole
- women are twice as likely as men to be working in low-paid jobs (percentage women cf percentage men), and nearly one-half of all younger people (16 to 25 year olds) in the region also work in low-paid jobs.

Comparisons of pay across occupations and industries in the south east with qualifications and demographic factors yield some interesting observations. In broad terms:

- those occupations and sectors which offer low pay are, in general, also those that employ people with low or no qualifications
- sectors and/or occupations offering entry-level employment to young people (eg the hotel and restaurant sector, and sales and customer service occupations) are also more likely to offer low pay
- sectors and/or occupations that disproportionately employ women (eg customer service occupations and personal service occupations) are among those most likely to offer low pay.

Finally, on the subject of gender differences, it would appear that low-qualified women are more likely than low-qualified men to enter occupations or industries that offer low pay. Male dominated jobs, such as those in the construction sector and process plant and machinery occupations, employ very high proportions of people who have low attainment as demonstrated by qualifications, but have a below-average proportion of people on low pay.

Characterising the low-paid, low-skilled workplace

- The incidence of low-paid work in the UK has been rising and this has not happened solely by chance. Global economic trends and competition, pursuit of flexible labour market policies and technological change have all served to alter the environment in which low-skilled individuals in the labour market operate.
- Organisations, such as those in the retail sector, smaller organisations, and those competing on the basis of cost, are more likely than other organisations to have low-paid employees.
- Low-paid, low-skilled workplaces in the main are characterised by low quality competitive strategy, few development and progression opportunities, poor human resource management practices, high staff turnover, and a lack of a union presence (although there are exceptions to this pattern).
- There are patterns to the types of individuals likely to be doing low-paid work, with women (and often women returners) and younger people (often students supporting full-time study) being over-represented. It is, therefore, not the case that everyone in low-paid, low-skilled work has LLNIT development needs. However, amongst those whose labour market position is more entrenched, higher numbers are likely to have such needs. This group of workers have few employment options because of skill deficits.
- Some low-skill jobs in the UK have what is described as 'neo-Taylorist' forms of work organisation which are designed to leave employees with little autonomy or room for discretion. This can create a vicious cycle in which low-skilled workers are offered few on-the-job development opportunities and little hope in the way of progression.
- The low-skilled workplace tends to be low involvement, low trust, and offering little opportunity for progression, learning, development or promotion. Human resource management policies can reflect these characteristics and are aimed at controlling lower-skilled workers who are left with little autonomy.

Job design and requirements for on-the-job LLNIT skills development

- Job design is a key determinant of the LLNIT skills required in the workplace and can be seen to impact in two different ways: the design of work can either de-skill or routinise work, or, alternatively, job design may drive the requirement for extended skills amongst low-paid, low-skilled workers.
- The design of work to limit any form of discretion has a negative impact both on employee engagement and on the culture of the workplace. The design of work can limit not just the opportunities available to employees for learning but also for applying the outcomes of that learning. A corollary of this is that factors such as a

'command and control' approach to management in the work environment can serve to promote or inhibit employee learning and development.

- There is an argument that generic skills are increasingly critical and that jobs and tasks should be designed to foster the development of skills such as problem-solving, communication and IT skills.
- However, the extent to which low-paid, low-skilled workers are offered opportunities to develop and apply their skills is limited by the culture of the organisation, ie whether organisation-wide learning is cultivated, and the local work setting, ie whether line managers encourage the development of such a culture.
- Employers find it hard to understand the concepts of deficits in literacy and numeracy amongst their workers when these skills are considered in isolation. However, when these skills are put into context, for example how they are required in task completion, or how they might enable workplace change, there is greater recognition of their value.
- The appraisal and management systems for low-paid, low-skilled workers can differ from others in the organisation hierarchy: where personal development plans exist for these workers they are likely to be task- rather than development-focused, and the organisation may have little expectation that such workers will be engaged in continuous learning activity.
- We found little information in our search of the literatures regarding precisely how LLNIT needs were identified, or about how agreement was gained from senior staff to proceed with a programme of learning in these areas.
- A few accounts were found of good practice, for example, of how, once access has been agreed, practitioners may undertake an organisation communication analysis, and in some cases, link to this individual training needs analysis. In addition to senior staff such as HR and training directorates, trade unions may be involved in negotiations.
- However, although there are some accounts of good practice of this type, it is generally the case that, within the low-pay, low-skilled workplace, supervisors and line managers are key to the implementation of training in general, and for our purposes, LLNIT skills development in particular. This gatekeeper role means they are also barriers to development where they do not see the need for LLNIT skills in their workers.
- Where LLNIT skills development programmes are taking place, there are some indications of their effectiveness, but little by way of systematic evaluation.

Defining LLNIT skills and practices

- This area of skill development is characterised by disagreement about both the naming and nature of ‘underpinning’ or ‘enabling’ skills. What is certain, however, is that these skills (literacy, language, numeracy and IT), while non-technical in nature, are widely viewed as essential to learning and performance at work.
- The concept of LLNIT skills builds out of notions of basic skills, functional skills, employability skills and generic skills. The definitions of these skillsets share common themes about the ability to communicate and process information. These concepts are at the heart of the definition of LLNIT skills, ie that workplaces require literacy, language, numeracy and IT skills to be applied and the application of these skills are central to the ability to communicate and process information.
- In undertaking this review, the assumption has been made that LLNIT skills extend beyond concepts of literacy, language, numeracy and IT and encompass ideas of workplace learning design and delivery, ie focused on job needs. A further aspect of the review was the assumption that, for many low-paid, low-skilled workers (and their managers) such skills may be better delivered on the job rather than requiring time out away from the job.
- Further to this is the consideration of how any development is delivered. Therefore, in considering the LLNIT concept, we have assumed that the development of these skills must include ideas of informal learning as well as formal delivery.

Current LLNIT skills development practice

- Despite the growing interest in improving adult basic skills in the workplace, the evidence of current practice largely emanates from practitioners who report back on their experiences of delivering programmes in organisations. Generally, there is little information about in situ, on-the-job, LLNIT skill development, little about the involvement of anyone other than the trainer (and perhaps the learners), and little by way of systematic follow-up or impact evaluation.
- Case study evidence shows there is a variety of ways in which LLNIT skills needs are identified for development, with good practice indicating the need to involve managers and advisers in the development of the curricula to ensure its work focus. Other good practice included the appointment of current employees as learning signposters (who receive development to fulfil this role) to promote the available LLNIT learning opportunities.
- Much current LLNIT learning takes place in a workplace environment, although not necessarily on the job. This helps employees to relate the skills they learn to their own work, and also helps avoid problems such as getting staff released to attend training elsewhere.

- A conclusion from the evidence is that those who facilitate learning require some understanding of theories of situated learning in order to adapt work activities for this purpose, and to help staff to use whichever learning methods may be most appropriate for a specific context. That is not to say that individuals involved in delivering LLNIT skills development in the workplace (or other types of learning, such as vocational training, that may require LLNIT skills support for the learner) do not have these skills, but rather that there is a need to recognise the need for this skillset.
- Learners who have been identified as needing to improve their LLNIT skills can sometimes feel stigmatised. The way in which these skills are 'marketed', and the naming of the programmes used to teach LLNIT skills, is therefore important. Employees may find it easier to say that they are attending a 'computing course' rather than a 'basic skills' or literacy or numeracy course.
- Evidence from case studies reveals a variety of approaches to the acknowledgement, recognition or accreditation of LLNIT learning. However these case studies also demonstrate that it is not always considered appropriate to seek a qualification for learning and some learners do not wish to work towards accreditation.
- What is largely missing from the literature at present is any account of which types of performance deficit arise from individuals' lack of LLNIT skills, or the way in which such skills are used by employees and managers, or how, and at what level they are required by organisations.
- In tandem with, and perhaps because of, this lack of a linkage between LLNIT skills and performance, there is little evidence (from the reports in the literature) of job re-design where LLNIT skill development has taken place, although there are some anecdotal reports of changes to jobs leading to increased skill requirements. Given this lack of linkage, there is little hard evidence to date of the value of LLNIT learning to the organisation.
- However, what evidence there is suggests that learners gain confidence as a result of LLNIT development, and the applied nature of work-based programmes enables them to quickly see the outcomes and utility of development.

The future of learning for the low-paid, low-skilled workforce

- Workplaces can become effective sites for the development of knowledge and employees can be helped to learn in informal ways, such as learning from colleagues, and through observation and listening. These methods are consistently reported as effective means for employee learning.
- Workplace learning can be improved in various ways; for example the development (and implementation) of a work environment which invites

individuals to learn, the tailoring of a workplace learning curriculum to particular tasks, and the encouragement of participation by both those learning and those guiding the learning.

- Developing a culture of learning where participation in some form of learning is expected is a facilitative measure. Where a range of curricula is available, a range of staff may become involved and LLNIT skills development can become de-stigmatised.
- Practitioners using Organisational Communications Analysis report that this is effective, as the approach examines individual learning needs as well as structural, emotional and socio-cultural issues in (and barriers to) learning.

Conclusions and recommendations

- There is much to indicate that more research is required to illuminate the extent of learning in low-skilled, low-paid workplaces and also the extent to which on-the-job and informal methodologies can be used to facilitate LLNIT skills development.
- There is evidence to suggest the linkage between LLNIT skills and performance although this exists at the macro, national level. There is a dearth of evidence about how these skills (or lack of them) affect the ability of the individual to perform within the organisation or affect organisational performance as a whole.
- This lack of specific evidence makes it difficult in some cases to persuade employers of the value of developing LLNIT skills in their low-paid, low-skilled workers. This is doubly problematic given that employers have difficulties in recognising and identifying LLNIT skill needs within their workforces.
- Were employers to be persuaded of the value of these skills to their organisation, the release of individuals from their work to engage in learning can prove a further barrier to development particularly for those in low-paid, low-skilled work.
- Given employers' reluctance to release individuals for training, on-the-job training has obvious advantages. However, there is little information regarding the design, impact, outcomes or utility of approaches to on-the-job skill development, although it should be noted that this is in common with a lack of specific information about design and impact within this area of activity in general.
- Also, there have been few studies of the skills needed by those involved in developing LNIT skills to workers on the job, although a substantial skillset is likely to be needed.
- Further research will be needed to identify specific sub-sets of LLNIT skills needed in specific jobs and the consequences of lack of appropriate skills, both for individuals and for organisations.

- As a first stage in gaining further information about the way in which LLNIT skills are used and developed in work, an audit tool was designed using the findings of this literature review as a basis. This work is reported in a subsequent volume.