

Not-so-soft skills

In times of economic recession and increased pressure on public expenditure, the adult and community learning sector needs to produce evidence of the contribution it makes to the economy as well as to the personal development of its learners, writes **MARY CURRAN**



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Much recent discussion about the skills needed to secure Britain's economic recovery has focused on skills for employability. However, too often, these fundamental skills are understood in narrow functional or vocational terms. So-called 'soft skills', what Penelope Tobin, in her 2008 paper *Soft Skills: the hard facts*, terms 'traits and abilities of attitude and behaviour, rather than of knowledge or technical aptitude', are too often neglected. Yet, time and again, employers identify 'soft' skills such as

communication and team-working as attributes vital to the success of their businesses. When I conducted a survey of Learning at Work – the long-standing part-time personal development and study skills programme run jointly by UNISON, the public services union, and the Workers' Educational Association – I found that while soft skills such as confidence were among the main motivations and outcomes for learners, they also stressed the value of these softer skills in improving work performance and stimulating work and community activism.

Many learners identified significant work performance benefits from taking part.

The main aims of the survey, which was commissioned by UNISON, were to understand the motivations of learners in taking the programme, and the impacts that resulted. The Learning at Work programme comprises two courses, Return to Learn and Women's Lives, designed by the WEA in consultation with UNISON to meet the needs of the union's members, many of whom work in low-paid jobs in the public sector. No qualifications are needed to start the courses

and learners can gain Open College credits at Level 1, 2 or 3. The courses develop skills in reflection, written and spoken communications, critical thinking, investigation and analysis, through project and group work. Return to Learn also includes numeracy and ICT. The programme's approach to learning, rooted in the personal experience and interests of the learners and in developing soft skills, is familiar to community-based adult learning but less so in workplace vocational training.

Respondents identified a range of motivations for starting their course, the most important being 'to prove to myself I could do it' (70 per cent), 'to gain confidence' (66 per cent), and 'to get back into education' (44 per cent). After completing the course, respondents identified positive changes for personal development, further learning and work. Sixty-three per cent fully (and 25 per cent partially) agreed they had more confidence. Respondents demonstrated a strong interest in further learning, with 74 per cent of respondents fully (15 per cent partially) agreeing they were more willing to do further training or learning. Survey responses on the impact of the course on work indicated positive benefits to employers, with 42 per cent of respondents fully (30 per cent partially) agreeing that they are now willing to take extra responsibility at work, and 36 per cent of respondents fully (34 per cent partially) agreeing they are now better at their job after completing their course.

Increased community and trade union participation was also reported. 30 per cent of respondents became more involved in their communities. Examples of voluntary work undertaken by learners after taking the course included mentoring for a youth offending team, acting as treasurer for a PTA and as a school governor, organising fundraising events for local women's refuges and homeless shelters, joining the residents association group, taking part in local politics, and helping in the local Asian community. Fourteen per cent of respondents reported becoming more active in UNISON, for example, as a branch secretary, equalities officer, women's officer or workplace nominee. Sixteen per cent expressed a wish to become a union learning representative.

The value of increased confidence and motivation in further learning suggested in the quantitative data was confirmed in the comments made by learners. More than 100 said that taking the course had made a positive difference to their lives, with many comments on confidence, enjoyment in learning and making changes. The following comment was typical of many: 'Improved confidence, self belief, self worth. [It] gave me skills which I can apply in all areas'. Learners reported gaining the confidence to do different jobs and take higher-level courses. One, who took the Women's Lives course in 2007 when working as a ward clerk, had gone

on to take a short Open University course and to begin a degree in occupational therapy. Another, who had left school at 16 and held no qualifications at the start of the course, commented:

The course gave me much more confidence and made me realise I can do it! I surprised myself as to how well I did. Because of Return to Learn I went on to complete an Open University course and an accredited teaching assistant course. Return to Learn made me become a learner for life. I now have a thirst for learning and love it.

There has been much discussion in post-16 education and training of what is meant by soft skills, their value, and how we measure them. Depending on the context – from management training to employability – different sets of soft skills are identified. They range from emotional intelligence and problem-solving, to readiness to work, motivation and behaviour, with communication skills mentioned at all levels. Key to soft skills is confidence in oneself and in learning, enabling people to become motivated and effective learners who will continue to learn in different areas of their lives. There is substantial evidence that employers value soft skills, not least in the Leitch report. Soft skills can be developed in any learning context, including non-vocational and accredited learning. However, a narrow focus on vocational and functional skills risks reducing the range of opportunities within which to develop soft skills, and undervalues the contribution which non-vocational learning can make to employability and work performance. At a time of economic recession and pressure on public expenditure, the adult and community learning sector needs to enhance evidence of the contribution it makes to the economy, an area under-researched compared with its contribution to wellbeing and civic participation. The development and impact of soft skills is a fruitful area for such research.

Mary Curran is Special Projects and Research Manager for the Workers' Educational Association

The survey – a postal questionnaire supplemented by comments from learners – was sent to the 605 learners who enrolled on the programme between 2005 and 2008. 161 completed questionnaires were returned. Learner journey case studies for 15 individuals were also analysed.

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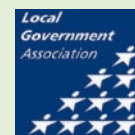
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