

The Impact of Basic Skills Improvements on the Performance and Trainability of Service Personnel



The Services have a responsibility to ensure their personnel are fully prepared to meet the demands of their rank and their specific appointment, are well placed to respond to the required training and, in the longer term, to take advantage of career opportunities. Poor literacy, language and numeracy skills hamper their ability to respond effectively to these requirements and opportunities. Knowing specifically how and in what ways improvements in these Basic Skills (BS) impact on day-to-day performance and the ability of personnel to respond to training would help inform the development and targeting of BS provision as well as future investment decisions.

Multiple Dimensions of Performance

It is important to distinguish different aspects of performance, such as teamwork, coping with change, using technology, quality of work, speed, error rate and working safely, and to consider how the effects of BS improvements differ across these dimensions. Research into the impact of elective learning in the Army has identified two overarching dimensions of operational effectiveness. The first dimension concerns the ability to deal with routine unit activities, such as personal administration and managing kit and equipment. In Army research, commanding officers and subordinate managers have reported the adverse impact of poor BS on the day-to-day performance of some of their soldiers, the increased management burden



this brings and the cumulative impact this has on unit efficiency. The second dimension concerns what the soldier then does carrying out specific operational tasks, at times in hostile, combat environments – for example, the ability to calculate and relay correct grid references or to write an accurate patrol report.

Most of the available research evidence about the impact of BS on performance is drawn from the Army context. Through qualitative research, associations have been found between low BS and:

- being confined to the Military Corrective Training Centre
- being involved in accidents
- going Absent Without Leave.

Quantitative research has not yet established the extent to which these associations reflect the causal impact of poor literacy and numeracy skills.

Trainability

The enabling role that BS learning plays in preparing Service personnel to engage more effectively with military training has formed a key part of the case for investment in BS learning in the Armed Services. Firstly, much training specifically requires Service personnel to provide evidence of good literacy, language and numeracy skills. For example, most personnel undertake accredited apprenticeship schemes, with Key Skills (KS) qualifications forming part of the award. Speaking and listening skills at Level 1 have been shown to represent the minimum level required to engage effectively in Service training. Secondly, even when BS are not independently tested, they may be involved in key activities or aspects of training. For example, training in map reading requires Service personnel to use their numeracy skills. Thirdly, even when BS are not an explicit focus or obvious component of military



training, Level 1 and 2 BS may enhance the ability of personnel to assimilate training. BS are sometimes seen as 'metacognitive skills' (Hudson, 2007), which support the acquisition of further skills and the ability to 'learn how to learn'. This was a common theme in interviews with Army commanding officers about the value of elective learning (Hanlan et al, 2004).

Coping Strategies

Service personnel are often able to develop practical coping strategies, which reduce the short-term impact of poor BS levels. For example, they rely on memory, or depend on colleagues to carry out BS tasks for them. However, in the long term, this is likely to affect their ability to engage effectively with training and to cope with new challenges, thus reducing the overall flexibility of the Armed Services to respond to changing technology, roles and working practices.

Thresholds in Basic Skills Levels

There is preliminary evidence of critical thresholds in BS levels, with the relationship between BS and some aspects of performance evident only below Level 1. Mapping of the BS demands of different roles, tasks and training courses within the Army has revealed the wide range of BS demands on soldiers during different phases of training and at different stages of the career. For example, generic private soldier tasks, such as calculating ammunition requirements for range work and reading intelligence reports, were assessed at Level 1 or above. Mapping of the BS requirements of all training courses is important, in order to identify personnel who are operating below required levels and to ensure that appropriate support is provided.



Applying Basic Skills Learning at Work

There are mixed findings about the extent to which Service personnel are able to apply BS learning in their day-to-day roles. Half of Army line managers in the recent Army BS survey (2006) report that BS improving operational effectiveness and day-to-day efficiency at work. However, less than a third of BS learners in the Army reported that their training 'showed them how to use it in their job' and less than a quarter felt it made a difference to how they do their job now. This suggests that further work may be needed to tie the benefits of BS learning more closely to day-to-day job roles, for example, through an expansion of embedded or contextualised provision.

Making Training and Publications Accessible

Alongside the provision of BS training and support, the literacy and numeracy demands of training courses and key publications should be reviewed and, where appropriate, adjusted to accommodate the BS levels of trainees. This might include reducing the reliance on delivery methods that involve high BS demands, such as extended lectures that require personnel to take written notes simultaneously. The readability of important publications and training materials should also be reviewed against the literacy levels of the potential audiences.



Further Research Questions

- What are the key dimensions and measures of operational performance and operational effectiveness, and how does the impact of BS improvements differ across these dimensions? What are the cost-benefit implications for investment in improving BS?
- How can the Services ensure that BS provision prepares Service personnel for the literacy and numeracy demands of day-to-day roles and for future advancement?

Further information can be found at:

www.niace.org.uk and www.nrdc.org.uk

References

Hanlan, C., Magee, D., Peacocke, C., Peacocke, T. and Slater, J. (2004). *The Value Added from Elective Learning in the Army*.

Hudson, C. (2007). *Working Mathematics for the 21st Century?* London: National Research and Development Centre (NRDC) for adult literacy and numeracy.