

1: Summary

This report explores the ways in which literacy and maths skills are used in the workplace and the shortfalls in these skills that employers experience. It presents the results of a survey among private sector employers and a series of case studies covering a cross section of employers. On the basis of this research, it aims to identify the key functional skills needed by people at work. The report also gives an overview of previous research on basic skills among adults in Britain.

For the purposes of this report, 'literacy' has been broadly defined. Its use includes oral communication and use of English as a whole. Similarly, 'numeracy' or 'mathematical literacy' goes beyond manipulation of numbers to cover all aspects of mathematical awareness, including measuring, weighing, estimating and applying formulae.

Key conclusions

1 The ability to read and understand basic information texts is an obvious and fundamental component of functional literacy. In functional terms, what matters is for people to be able to identify a relevant item of text, to read it reasonably rapidly and easily, to take in the essential information and, if appropriate, to act on it. The ability to cope with more complex text is important if individuals are to be able to progress to higher level jobs.

2 Reading and writing must be considered separately. They tend to be rolled up together and treated as one, but writing tends to pose much more of a problem. The ability to put together a piece of writing that conveys meaning clearly and accurately is an essential functional skill. The inability to put together a short coherent piece of writing has serious implications for those seeking work or thinking of changing jobs.

3 Spelling and grammar are important and are widely seen as weak. Correct spelling of everyday words and proper use of basic grammar are important for clarity of expression and fostering a reader's confidence. There is particular dislike of 'text speak'. A functionally literate employee should be expected to be able to observe the basic rules of grammar, be able to spell everyday words correctly, use capital letters and basic punctuation properly, and use a writing style appropriate to the situation.

4 Legibility of handwriting matters. The case studies repeatedly threw up the importance of legible handwriting. There is a wide range of forms to be completed by hand in most organisations. In certain circumstances, some of these are documents that may potentially be called in evidence in legal proceedings. A functionally literate

employee should have handwriting that is sufficiently well formed that others will be able to read the text with confidence.

5 Because reading and writing are different skills, both need to be tested. A multiple-choice, online comprehension exercise is not an adequate means of assessment of writing as well as reading.

6 Understanding and responding appropriately to oral communications are essential skills. Employees also need to be sufficiently articulate to be able to raise queries if the instructions are not clear to them, or to raise practical matters of concern that flow from the instruction.

7 Multiplication tables and mental arithmetic without using a calculator constitute an essential aid in all sorts of work activities.

8 The ability to interpret and respond to quantitative data is a key part of modern working life. Data of this type is presented not only to keep employees in the picture, but employees are also expected to interpret it sufficiently to contribute to problem solving and quality improvement.

9 Calculating and understanding percentages is a functional maths skill. Percentages are widely used in internal communications and in many jobs it is essential to be able to calculate them readily. A functionally numerate person should therefore both be able to calculate a percentage and interpret the significance of percentages communicated to them.

10 As well as percentages, a mathematically literate person will be able to work comfortably with fractions, decimals and ratios. For many organisations, the ability to use a formula is also highly desirable.

11 It is important for employees to have awareness of different measures and the ability to convert between them. Despite all the moves towards metrication, imperial and metric measures both remain in daily use. Employees need to be able to cope with that reality.

12 Spotting errors and rogue figures is an important element of functional maths. A functionally numerate employee will almost instinctively carry out a reality check and pause to check what may potentially be a rogue result.

13 Some basic understanding of odds and probabilities to enable people to make a more realistic assessment, rather than treating every risk as equally likely to happen, could form a useful element of functional mathematics.

14 Functional skills are skills that have a practical purpose. It is important to boost awareness of their potential application, particularly key elements of mathematical literacy, in real and different contexts.

15 Employers need to know not only whether young people have passed or failed their functional skills modules but also the margin by which they have done so. The right approach is that the simple pass or fail should be accompanied by release of the percentage marks for each element of the modules.

16 To ensure employer buy-in, it is essential that the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority standards are clear to employers both in terms of the skills they will deliver and the level of mastery they reflect, using 'can do' illustrations of skills.

17 IT skills are of growing importance in most jobs, but the ability to acquire those depends on a solid foundation of literacy and maths skills.

18 During the course of the research, employers voiced concerns about a number of other aspects of what they viewed as basic skills. These included the decline in practical or 'hand' skills of young people, the increasing need for social skills and some concerns about general attitude.