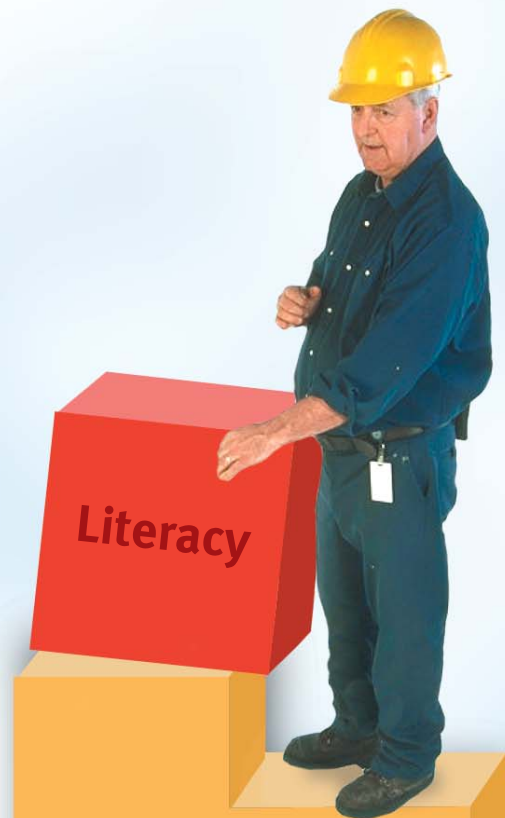


# Closing the Gap

Boosting Productivity & Competitiveness  
through Workplace Basic Education



-  Benefits
-  Cost
-  Timescale
-  In practice



[www.nala.ie](http://www.nala.ie)



The National Adult Literacy Agency  
An Áisíneacht Náisiúnta Litearachta do Aosaigh

## Benefits of Workplace Basic Education

The International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS)<sup>1</sup> found that 25% of the Irish adult population was at the lowest level of literacy. In this study close to half of Irish workers surveyed were involved in four kinds of literacy activities on a weekly basis. These included:

- letters/memos
- forms or bills/invoices
- reports or articles
- estimates or technical specifications.

In the context of recent changes in the Irish economy, there are greater demands on employees to adapt and progress. This in turn is putting the spotlight on the 440,000 Irish people now in the workforce with low levels of basic education.

Workplace Basic Education (WBE) is an innovative measure to improve people's literacy skills in their working environment.

### Benefits for employers include:

- increased quality and output
- increased profitability
- better team performance
- increased ability to handle training on the job and quicker training results
- increased retention of employees
- improved labour-management relations
- better health and safety record
- organisational flexibility.<sup>2</sup>

### Benefits for employees who participate in the WBE programme include:

- increased self-confidence;
- literacy skill development and
- a re-awakening of an interest in learning.<sup>3</sup>



## What is Workplace Basic Education?

WBE programmes focus on boosting literacy and numeracy skills of staff. These programmes can also offer practical skills such as ICT and communications skills. In addition they may also include job orientation and increasing self-esteem and improving self-confidence.

<sup>1</sup> Morgan et al (1997), International Adult Literacy Survey: Results for Ireland, Dublin: An Roinn Oideachas

<sup>2</sup> Bloom M., Burrows M., Lafleur B. and Squires R., (1997), The Economic Benefits of Improving Literacy Skills in the Workplace, The Conference Board of Canada 206-97 Report

<sup>3</sup> Conboy P. (2002), The Return to Learning Initiative Evaluation Report and Guidelines, NALA, Dublin



## Does your business need Workplace Basic Education (WBE)?

As a business you need employees who can:

- follow instructions
- understand signs and notices in particular Health and Safety information
- communicate effectively
- record faults and analyse problems
- perform calculations
- take on additional responsibility.

Workplace Basic Education programmes can increase the economic productivity of a company. Offering WBE programmes to your staff will result in enhanced reading, writing and numeracy skills which ultimately benefit the company through time savings, lower costs and improvements in the quality of work.

## Can you afford not to invest in Workplace Basic Education?

In a rapidly changing economy and with the advances in technology in western industrialised countries, employees require ever higher levels of literacy if they are to adapt and participate fully in the workplace. Problems of staff recruitment and retention, lowered output, higher rates of absenteeism, higher accident rates and poor quality control are linked to basic skills difficulties among staff. Workplace Basic Education has a role to play in combating these problems.

Studies show that poor literacy skills in the workforce are directly associated with higher operating costs and a lower profit. In Britain, a survey undertaken by Gallup<sup>4</sup>, estimated that low literacy skills cost the British economy over **€9.5 billion** (at 2002 euro costs). The survey suggested that on average employees with poor literacy skills cost a company employing over 50 employees approximately **€330,000** per year. An average company employing 1,000 people or more could save **€996** per employee if the basic skills of the workforce were improved.

Lack of basic skills poses a threat to business competitiveness and productivity. It is clear that the benefits of Workplace Basic Education training far outweigh the investment costs. The question remains can you afford not to invest in WBE?

**Improve job performance – improve basic skills.**



**Workplace Basic Education programmes are underpinned by the National Adult Literacy Agency's definition of adult literacy:**

"Literacy involves the integration of listening, speaking, reading, writing and numeracy. It also encompasses aspects of personal development – social, economic, emotional - and is concerned with improving self-esteem and building confidence. It goes far beyond mere technical skills for communication. The underlying aim of good practice is to enable people to understand and reflect critically on their life circumstances with a view to exploring new possibilities and initiating constructive change."

<sup>4</sup> The Basic Skills Unit (1993), The Cost to Industry: Basic Skills and the UK Workforce

## How do I develop a Workplace Basic Education programme?

There are four basic steps for companies to follow to successfully implement a WBE programme. They are:

- Work with a trained professional service e.g. Vocational Education Committee to develop a programme
- Involve all the key stakeholders in planning and setting goals for the programme
- Develop and implement programmes to meet the needs identified in the initial assessment
- Evaluate the programme.

## Elements of best practice in Workplace Basic Education development

The following elements have been identified from Irish and international best practice of workplace basic education programmes.

### Development and delivery of programmes

- Use a partnership approach involving key stakeholders such as employers, employees, trade union and practitioners
- Appoint an existing staff member as a liaison person in the workplace
- Appoint a VEC co-ordinator to promote and recruit participants
- Be aware of the sensitivities that employees can feel
- Agree objectives agreed at the outset
- Support voluntary participation
- Adapt and be flexible to suit the particular needs of participants.

### Development and delivery of courses

- Deliver minimum of 120 hour course (over 30-40 weeks)
- Recommend no more than 7 - 8 learners in a group
- Initial assessment should be flexible, informal and appreciative of achievements
- Class sizes should be determined on the learners' abilities and needs
- If mixed level groups, then supports may be needed for very basic learners
- Held on the company's premises if suitable and where possible.

### Curriculum development

- Negotiate with relevant stakeholders
- Take into account the participants needs, interests and goals
- Cover areas including communications, maths, computers, personal development.

### Access to Accreditation

- Offer as an option
- Depending on level and time, participants may complete some FETAC foundation modules.

### Support structures

- Attend course on work time or part work time
- Allow for payment for travel where necessary
- Allow for additional one-to-one tuition where necessary
- Suggest Supervisor interest and encouragement
- Use the Adult Guidance Service.

### Evaluation

- Set up monitoring group with key stakeholders to oversee developments
- Provide on-going feedback.

### Progression routes

- Inform participants of further learning opportunities available both within the workplace and in their local Adult Learning Centre.



## Costs involved

Workplace Basic Education programmes cost approximately €12,000 (at 2002 cost) for a 30 week (120 hours) programme for 1 group (7 - 8 participants).

These costs include the following:

- Preparation/planning time (prior to programme commencement) including:  
initial meetings with management, union, employers; initial meetings with workers; initial steering group meetings; promotional work; direct recruitment; selection and assessment of group; curriculum development 10 hours x 8 weeks (80 hours)
- Course Co-ordinator hours over the 30 week programme - 2 hours per week (60 hours)
- Tutoring hours over the 30 week programme - 4 hours per week (120 hours)
- Travel time and expenses for Co-ordinator/tutors as appropriate
- Materials such as books etc.
- Evaluation of programme
- Other costs (e.g. room hire, administration etc.)

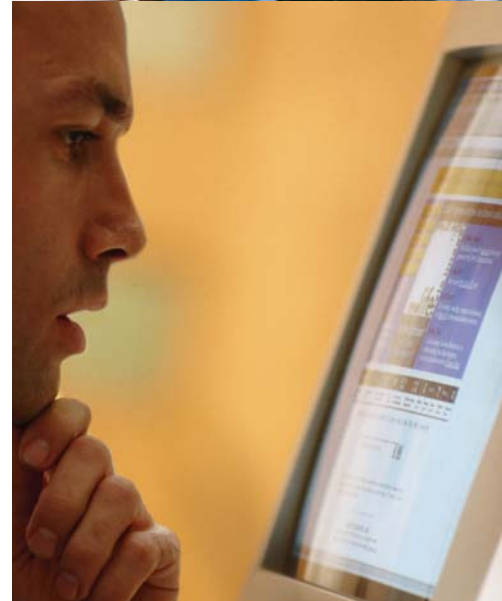
These costs only include the external costs of the course and do not include extra costs such as time off for attendance, replacement personnel or cost of bonus incentives.

## Who can deliver Workplace Basic Education programmes?

The 33 VECs provide local adult literacy services throughout Ireland. The service consists of trained and experienced group literacy tutors, many of whom have worked on the Return to Learning initiative. NALA in conjunction with Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT) provides professional qualifications for literacy practitioners. These tutors can thus co-ordinate Workplace Basic Education programmes by:

- conducting or supporting a training needs analysis
- designing the basic education programme
- publicising and recruiting participants
- delivering and evaluating the programme.

Contact the Adult Literacy Organiser in your local VEC area for more information on developing a WBE programme. Check your local telephone directory for contact numbers for your VEC or ring NALA.



## Models of best practice

A highly successful workplace basic education initiative is in operation in all the 34 Local Authorities. The Return to Learning project is a partnership initiative between the Local Authority National Partnership Advisory Group (LANPAG) and the Department of Education and Science (DES), supported by the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA). The project aims to give Local Authority employees an opportunity to attend a workplace basic skills course.

This initiative was piloted in 2000/01 in five locations, Mayo, Meath, Offaly, South Dublin and Tipperary South Riding, with 120 employees participating. The local VEC adult literacy service were the providers of the programme. In 2002 the initiative was expanded to the remaining sites. There are currently 46 programmes in operation with over 350 adults participating.

The Return to Learning model was developed in practice, based on previous intensive basic education models. The elements of best practice that occurred in this initiative include:

### Development and delivery of programmes

- Partnership approach: employers, employees, trade union and practitioners
- Key workplace person: Partnership Facilitator
- VEC co-ordinator appointed to promote and recruit participants
- Objectives agreed at outset
- Voluntary participation
- Adaptable and flexible.

### Development and delivery of courses

- 80-hour course (usually 4 hours per week over 20 weeks)
- 7-8 learners in a group
- Mixed level groups: supports needed for basic learners
- Held on work premises in most cases.

### Curriculum development

- Learner-led
- Areas covered included communications, maths, computers, personal development.

### Access to Accreditation

- Optional
- Some learners completed FETAC foundation modules.

### Support structures

- Course on work time
- Payment for travel where necessary
- Additional one-to-one tuition where necessary
- Supervisor interest and encouragement
- Used Adult Guidance Service.

### Evaluation

- Monitoring group oversaw developments
- On-going feedback given
- End of course report written.

### Progression routes

- 90% of learners continuing on to further learning.

## Benefits of the Return to Learning initiative

From the evaluation of the pilot series a number of benefits were identified as follows:

- An increase in self-confidence, with spin-offs in terms of communication and interaction with others;
- Literacy skill development reported in relation to handling of specific literacy tasks, such as form-filling, letter-writing and newspaper reading;
- Greater familiarity with computers and some development in computer skills;
- The positive influence of participation in Return to Learning on home and family lives;
- A re-awakening of an interest in learning and a desire to continue to learn now that this interest had been triggered.

For further information on the Return to Learning initiative contact NALA at 01 8554332.

## Research on Workplace Basic Education

The National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) commissioned research to contribute to the development of Policy Strategy and Guidelines for Irish Employers on Workplace Basic Education (WBE) provision to benefit low skilled employees who are at risk of future unemployment<sup>5</sup>. This research was conducted by external consultants, Olga McDonogh and Frank Murtagh.

This research involved consulting with a number of Irish based companies and other key stakeholders to seek their views on the need for and relevance of Workplace Basic Education in Ireland. The findings showed that many employers were unaware of adult literacy difficulties and ways of responding to this problem in the workplace.

### The key research findings were as follows:

- Employers had very little or no awareness of literacy difficulties amongst their workforce
- Where the company encountered the problem they managed the issue rather than dealt with the causes, for example, moved the employee to another job that did not require literacy skills
- All the Companies said they would welcome advice about how to best identify and handle the problem
- All said they would welcome advice on how to promote tuition/training adapted to the specific needs of staff with literacy difficulties
- All would like to be informed about what support is available from their local provider.

These findings validate the Irish anecdotal evidence NALA have been gathering over the last number of years that employers are not aware of the literacy needs of staff and methods to support this. Therefore the findings of the research support the urgent need to develop a policy strategy and guidelines to support employers to provide WBE for low skilled staff.

Based on both the research findings and the NALA WBE Strategy document, NALA have developed guidelines to support employers to provide WBE to benefit low skilled employees who are at risk of future unemployment. These **guidelines** are outlined below:

- Work with a trained professional service to develop a programme.
- When developing an effective WBE programme allow for adequate time for development and design of programmes. Effective promotion with employees also takes a significant amount of time.
- Adopt a partnership model of working that includes all relevant local stakeholders and providers.
- It is critical that a comprehensive needs analysis is conducted at the outset which fully recognises the needs of both employees and employers.
- Agreement between all partners (employers, funders, employees and providers) should be established at the outset and maintained throughout.
- Provision needs to be made for an effective promotional campaign within each company to attract appropriate employees.
- Ensure continuous monitoring and evaluation throughout the programme through the development of appropriate research and evaluation. It is essential to document each stage of the process.
- Course content should be adaptable and relevant and should reflect the real needs of employees.
- Tutors and Co-ordinators must be well trained to adapt to the workplace environment and to use relevant and up-to-date materials and methodologies appropriate to the course and students.

<sup>5</sup> This research carried out by NALA was part-funded by the Combat Poverty Agency. The views expressed by the research are not necessarily those of the Combat Poverty Agency.

## What WBE activity is NALA doing?

For the past two years NALA has initiated a range of projects related to WBE including research and awareness building. These have included pilot WBE programmes with private and public sector employers. In addition the highly successful 'Return to Learning Initiative' piloted with five local authorities was last year rolled out to the remaining 29. Other NALA WBE activity has included:

- Working with employer organisations, unions and Government to devise a national plan for WBE
- Accessing funding to conduct research and disseminate findings
- Providing Workplace Basic Education training for adult literacy practitioners

The NALA Workplace Basic Education strategy document, Workplace Basic Education programmes in Ireland: Approaches and models for implementation (available at [www.nala.ie](http://www.nala.ie) under publications), was agreed by relevant government departments, employer organisations, trade unions and practitioners. This strategy outlines the models for development and recommends a dedicated funding source for this. Government policy and documents have recognised the need for investment and NALA continue to push this issue as a key priority for further education and training.

NALA recognises the support of employer organisations, IBEC, ISME, CIF, SFA, Chambers of Commerce of Ireland; the Department of Education and Science and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment; trade unions, ICTU, ITUT, SIPTU, UNISON; adult literacy practitioners and others.

## What is the National Adult Literacy Agency?

The National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) is a non-profit membership organisation, concerned with national co-ordination, training and policy development in adult literacy work in Ireland. Our recent achievements include:

- A major basic education distance-learning project on TV and radio
- The piloting of an interactive basic education project using the Internet
- The launch of a major initiative on health and literacy.

For further reading in relation to WBE check out the NALA website at [www.nala.ie](http://www.nala.ie) and search for 'workplace literacy' or contact us at the numbers below.



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