



LITERACY IN THE WORKPLACE

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Introduction

As we get closer to the end of the century, it becomes increasingly clear that one of the most potent forces to have impacted on the economic and social environment of the countries across the globe, especially since the last decade, is the force of globalization. This is reflected in increased pace of economic liberalization, freer flow of technology, integrated financial markets and corporate strategies of multinational companies that operate on a premise of homogenous market (ILO/ROAP, 1996). This has far reaching implications not only for the way the enterprises are reorganizing themselves to meet the changing market demands but also for the way the work is done keeping in view the aspects of cost, quality and flexibility, and hence substantially, on the workers performance. One of the critical elements in the context of globalization is international competitiveness; and for achieving and maintaining international competitiveness what is required is high productivity, of both men and machine. The importance of workplace literacy in this context, therefore, becomes self-evident.

Functional Literacy

To provide a clear-cut definition of functional literacy may not be an easy task. This is in spite of the fact that the problem of literacy, or rather illiteracy, is not confined to developing countries alone; it afflicts developing and developed countries alike although the magnitude may differ (Tanguiane, 1990). As reported by Tanguiane (1990), in 1981 the American newspaper, The Christian Science Monitor, estimated the number of functionally illiterate adults in the United States at 23 million, commenting that the figure was not diminishing.

A general distinction between the traditional type of adult illiteracy, defined by the World Bank (1996) as the proportion of fifteen years and older who cannot, with understanding, read and write a short, simple statement on their everyday life³ and the functional illiteracy, may however be established by following the UNESCO Recommendation: "A person is functionally illiterate who cannot engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning of his group and

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³The Bank has clarified that this is only one of three widely accepted definitions, and its application is subject to qualifiers in a number of countries.

community and also for enabling him to continue to use reading, writing and calculation for his own and community's development" (Tanguiane, 1990). This rather broad definition however makes it clear that functional literacy is a relative concept; a person who is considered to be a functionally literate in one country may be functionally illiterate in another and vice versa. Hence in terms of above recommendation, a multiplicity of factors, including the level of development, may have to be considered before classifying some one as functionally literate or otherwise.

The Changing World of Work

For better appreciation of the requirements of workplace literacy, it may be useful to delineate the changing trends in the workplace.

Globalization is giving rise to new workplace technologies. At the core of globalization is the strategy adopted by multinational companies of increasing decentralization and dispersion of production processes. This is best illustrated in Hong Kong's relationship with Southern China cited in the ILO study (1996), where 30,000 plants carry out processing for Hong Kong companies; yet in 1991, more than half of Hong Kong's trade depended in the end on demand in the United States because most of its China trade involved processing for re-exports to the United States.

To cater for the rapidly changing demands, the production systems are undergoing significant changes. The Tayloristic model of production systems are being replaced by decentralized, flexible automation systems. The hall mark of such arrangements is fewer job classifications with workers expected to assume greater responsibilities. Multi-skilling and job-rotation are becoming the key words. In some cases there are no first-line supervisors; instead that role is expected to be performed by the workers. The attributes that are being looked for in workers more than their job-specific skills are trainability, positive motivation and a capacity to perform as a team-player. More importantly, personnel policies are undergoing significant change. The emphasis is on having a small core-group of employees with other outputs being provided by temporary or contract workers. While, for the managements, this is one of the key elements towards greater flexibility, reduced costs, and greater efficiency, it is this element which for the workers, could imply change of workplace literacy into what is called by Cassidy and Shanahan (1979) as "survival literacy" (cited in Roberts, 1995).⁴

⁴Roberts (1995) in his analytical review of the definitions of literacy includes functional literacy as one of the modes of literacy in what he calls as the "pluralist approach". Survival literacy is another such mode.

Workplace-Literate Workers

In order to perform satisfactorily an individual worker must possess appropriate competencies relating to a particular occupation. The absence of these in a worker would mean financial loss and perhaps even lost opportunities for an enterprise which it can ill afford. And here lies the convergence of interest. Workers with an adequate level of workplace literacy are an asset to an enterprise embarking on reorganization, new production schedules or launching new units. In the normal circumstances the managements, therefore, like to explore ways of upgrading skills of workers subject, of course, to cost-effectiveness of such programmes. One of the most common programmes in this category would be when a new process is to be established or an additional activity is being added to the enterprise profile. Yet there are not sufficient instances where an enterprise has methodically carried out training need analysis of its employees and then arranged for a programme to meet the identified needs. Moreover, the qualities which would be helpful to a worker in coping with the rapidly changing technologies and the attendant organizational changes, e.g. team-work, interpersonal relations, communication skills, and which are generally not adequately imparted during formal schooling are also the attributes for which little attention is paid even by the employers except with some notable exceptions.

At this point, it may be useful to describe the workplace literacy requirements identified by the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) (1989):

Values and integrity - to strive for quality not only in one's dealings with others but also when undertaking tasks, whether individually or as part of a team; recognition of the importance of care and treatment of others.

Effective communication - to use effectively a broad range of forms of communication (oral/written/technical/visual etc.) depending upon different purposes and intended recipients.

Application of numeracy - understand, interpret and use effectively numerical information whether in written or printed form; identify which form of numerical communication is most effective (maps, flowcharts, models) for a given situation depending upon the intended recipients; use numerical based approaches to solve problems.

Applications of technology - to understand the role and potential of information technology in both learning and work situations; have a working knowledge of computers and other electronic equipment as appropriate to one's needs; appreciate the range of information technology products and packages currently available and being developed; appreciate the manner in which technological developments in the wider sense are

affecting society (different types of materials and products and their applications).

Understanding of work and the world - economic awareness signifying the understanding of basic economic ideas (wealth creation, supply and demand, the character of enterprise society, growth, competition, etc.); the competence to apply knowledge, concepts and skills of review and analysis to economic issues and problems and the capability to identify, criticise, and evaluate economic aspects of decision making as they affect individuals, organizations, industry and society at large.

Personal and interpersonal skills - to identify responsibilities; undertake a variety of roles (supportive, authoritative, etc.) in dealings with others especially when this involves the completion of tasks with and through others; review one's own strengths and weaknesses and set targets for personal self-development; aim to be self-reliant and self-confident; respect oneself.

Problem solving - to identify and define the nature of a problem both individually and as part of a team; formulate solutions and devise strategies dependent upon available resources; organize an approach to solve the problem; implement and review problem solving activities.

Positive attributes to change - to be critically aware of the positive and negative effects of change, whether with regard to oneself, the individual organization, or throughout particular industry, as determined by a variety of change agents.

It may be noted that the requirements identified by the CBI are broad in nature but there is little doubt that these are important attributes which a worker has to possess in varying degrees depending upon the nature of the task assigned to him/her for successfully completing that task.

Learning Organizations

For the workplace literacy programmes to be part of in-built management process in an enterprise, the enterprise has to be a learning organization which recognizes that learning is the key to growth and development and plans for its (organization's) future accordingly. In the learning organizations, the empowering of workers is through learning. It would mean creating a system in which everybody learns. It is this kind of environment that will provide necessary support to the workplace literacy programmes as well as to the participants of the programme.

Role of employers and workers organization in promoting workplace literacy

As indicated earlier, workplace literacy programmes are usually delivered in conjunction with job-specific training since more often than not, it

facilitates assimilation of the training being imparted. However, while on-the-job training as a mode of training has a long past, the workplace literacy programmes are somewhat of a new phenomenon. And therefore its coverage is not very high. One of the important findings in this regard, as reported by Hollenbeck (1993) is that firms with literacy programmes report a higher incidence of basic skills deficiencies and a higher level of need improvement in skills than firms without such a programme. Another finding of Hollenbeck was that the larger firms (among the small and medium-sized category) were more likely to have workplace literacy programmes. The median employment size for the firms with such programmes was 210 employees.

These findings are important pointers for employers and workers to place workplace literacy programmes. A collaborative effort therefore has to be mounted in planning and implementation of the workplace literacy programmes not only in bigger firms but also for smaller firms. Since the capacity of the smaller firms to make investments in terms of time and money is likely to be limited, feasible cost-effective methods (e.g. a cooperative venture) may have to be worked out. Special attention has to be paid to the requirements of older workers as well as female workers. It has also to be recognized that in some cases the attitude of the employers could be a serious impediment in planning and implementation of workplace literacy programmes for these and other disadvantaged sections.

Conclusion

The quality of the workforce is a key determinant for the development and growth of any enterprise. Increased productivity which enables high quality goods at lower prices can only be achieved by a trained and well motivated workforce. And for ensuring this, the enterprises have to make conscious efforts to ensure that workplace literacy of the workers is maintained. Among the most important broad elements of workplace literacy identified as requirements in the future manufacturing industry are a basic knowledge of science and scientific methods, problem solving, self-learning, and teamwork. An introduction to information technology is another competency which occurs frequently in this list.

While some degree of responsibility for imparting workplace literacy lies with the public authorities responsible for planning and implementation of education and training activities, in view of rapid changes in technologies and the attendant changes in the workplace organization, a major role has to be played by employers and workers. A well structured and efficiently implemented workplace literacy programme will benefit all concerned - the employers, workers and the society.

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