



The Impact of Workplace Literacy Programs: A New Model for Evaluating the Impact of Workplace Literacy Programs

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KEY FINDINGS:

- Workplace literacy programs improved reading practices at work only in those areas that related directly to the class attended. Reading away from work improved only for students in classes where home reading was specifically encouraged.
- Classes that utilized home materials in teaching improved the home literacy practices of learners. The benefits, however, did not appear to carry over beyond the actual materials used.
- An impact assessment model that is broad-scale and rigorous, employing learner interviews, tests, questionnaires, company records, and supervisor ratings, can be performed even with limited time and resources.

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INTRODUCTION

Even though millions of dollars have been invested in workplace literacy programs, few programs have been evaluated well. Typically, evaluations have relied on anecdotes, learner satisfaction questionnaires, and standardized basic skills tests. An effective evaluation, however, should consist of two stages: formative and summative. Formative evaluation takes place during the beginning and middle stages of program operation and involves identifying problem areas while they can still be corrected. Summative evaluation takes place at the end of the program and assesses how well the program has met its goals.

To help meet the need for comprehensive and rigorous evaluation models, NCAL funded a project that developed and applied a model that meets the above criteria and that can be applied to most workplace programs. This report describes the model

and presents the results of an assessment of two workplace programs.

METHODOLOGY

Two industrial plants were chosen as test sites. The research literature was reviewed and plant managers were consulted in order to compile evaluation instruments and techniques. The methods incorporated into the model were interviews, questionnaires, Cloze tests (custom-designed, fill-in-the-blanks exercises), class observation, plant-gathered productivity indices, and supervisor ratings.

Procedures for data gathering differed for each instrument, but in all cases data were gathered before and after each course. Data analysis included coding, scoring, and categorizing items, and applying statistical tests to detect improvements.

IMPLICATIONS

Even with limited resources, it is possible to undertake an effective evaluation of the impact of workplace programs on the literacy of workers and their families, and on workers' job productivity. This study finds that literacy instruction has produced some improvement in all areas assessed. However, gains appear to be limited to areas directly addressed in class, and there is apparently no transfer of learning into areas not covered by instruction. Hence, specific goals need to be established for workplace literacy programs that encourage motivation and independence, as these are likely to spur increased engagement by workers in literacy-related activities.

FURTHER READING

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