

Literacy problem could slow national change

by **CLIFF MCINTOSH**
Does level of schooling of the workforce make any difference? Yes it does, particularly if an organization or nation is planning for, or in midst of any changes. The word "schooling" is used deliberately

ly here to avoid a problem in assessing education levels. Often "education" is used as a synonym for "schooling." As a result, a person who went to grade 8 in school may be classified as uneducated even though the person

may be a self-directed learner who is broadly and specifically educated as a result of life experience.

Despite the foregoing, generally the level of schooling is an important indicator of reading, writing and computational skills. Unless a person's day-to-day work requires him/her to read, write and do computations regularly, s/he functions at 1/2 his/her grade achievement level.

Today, functional literacy is the ability to read at a grade 10 level. For example, reading levels of sports pages are written at grade 9, editorial pages at university, instructional manuals at grade 12 and 13 levels.

We've been working recently with a company that is planning to improve its effectiveness and viability through learning and chance on the part of many employees.

Overall, about one third of the workforce have completed elementary school, one third have completed high school, 18 per cent have trade qualification and 11 per cent have attended university with 3 per cent holding a degree. But on further

analysis of the major departments, schooling levels may be a barrier to organization success *if print is the means of communication and training.*

If one assumes that most jobs at this company require very little reading as part of their daily routine, two out of three employees will be functioning at or below the functional literacy level. This will limit severely the usefulness of print materials for providing information, training or instruction.

The problem at this organization is not an isolated incident. There, 36 per cent of the workforce have less than a grade 9 education. In Canada as a whole, 28.4 per cent have less than grade 9 education. That's one in four Canadians!

As Canada switches from an industrial to a post-industrial society, a substantial amount of

retraining and new learning is needed. Training for basic literacy is a pressing need.

Are Canadians and our education-providing organizations equal to the challenge?

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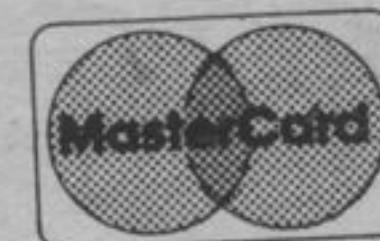
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