

## Issues in Workplace Skills Upgrading – an Educator’s Perspective

What are the real issues in work-related skill upgrading? What can people expect to find when they start training for the future? As an educator who has worked for more than 15 years in workplace learning, communication and basic (now often called ‘essential’) skills up-grading, I have found that the issues are fairly constant across different industries. People are threatened by change. They are concerned about the power dynamic of training, about having a say in determining what happens. Nobody wants to waste time or money. Nobody can afford to fail. Usually I have been asked to work on an up-grading solution at a time of a paradigm shift to a new way of working, or a time technology or even procedural change. Usually in-house training programs by supervisors, engineers and managers have been tried and have failed. What follows are some questions, grouped under headings of major issues. The questions are universal; the answers will be unique to your situations.

### Change

- Who needs and wants change? Who is willing and able to risk changes?
- Who will benefit or lose by changing? Who really cares if communication is good, if the job is done well?

The need for retraining and a new “cultural climate” –the *why* – is apparent to some, but not to all. “*Why change?*” is likely least accepted by those who have the most changing to do. Making them aware, bringing people to a realization of need and a buy-in to learning, winning them over to be a part of the solution without causing a backlash, will be the first challenge. Keeping everyone on side will be an on-going issue. Everyone has to trust each other before they will risk change.

### Goals and Evaluation

- What are the overall goals?
- What are the goals of upgrading and retraining?
- How will these goals be set?

- Whose standards will be accepted? Is grade equivalent or certification an issue?

Curriculum means goals and objectives. In traditional education and training, the experts who develop the course set the curriculum. You pass the course when you can demonstrate that you have completed the curriculum. That is, when you can show you have met the goals. This approach makes most sense when accreditation or outside standards are an issue.

Agreement about goals is one key to consensus. In workplace-based training, goals often evolve through the organizational needs assessment that lays out company and individual needs and sets a course to meet them all. Everyone has a say in setting goals. As the training process evolves, participants may fine-tune their goals, or even re-evaluate and change them.

- How will we decide if goals have been reached?
- Evaluations by whom, against what criteria, and to what end?

Training goals should make assumptions explicit. There should be general goals and tasks or even learner specific goals. Evaluation by whom, against what criteria, and to what end must be decided ahead of time. There must also be provision for evaluating the curriculum, the program, and the process. Ask, “Is this taking us where we want to go?” and make changes.

## Who

- Who makes decisions?
- Can we empower people through learning and up-grading?
- Is everyone to take part? If not, is seniority the criteria for starting?

For real change, everyone will need to rethink and relearn their job and their roles. Literacies and essential skills, like job skills, should be part of the big picture. Everyone should refresh and up-grade. Learning should be normal.

- Who are the champions? The change agents? The believers?

Every project will need committed people who can take risks, make a leap of faith, the ones who will make it work, but who can set up and get out of the way – Leaders who can let the project outgrow them.

## Where and When

- Is there going to be a right place at the right time?

It is better to start before a crisis, but people might not commit if there is no sense of urgency. Most people will put a lot of effort into maintaining the status quo. On the other hand, there is no perfect time to start. If enough people are ready and willing, and the time and means are available, that's good enough. It is not worth starting if the cooperation is not there, at all levels.

- Where and when should learning and up-grading take place?
- On site? On shift? On the shop floor? At a learning centre or school?

The answers will vary. There are reasons behind choices – space, resources, and feelings figure in decisions. On site, if practical, may be best. Integrating learning into work life can be very powerful. The new ways of doing things have to happen at work, with the people there – that's where to start changes.

## Time

- How much time is enough for planning, for literacy, for “empowerment”?

Set a generous time line. Getting things going can take 6 months to a year. Allow for setbacks and learn from them. Planning and goal setting are necessary, but **implementation** is the real name of the game. Innovation fails because not enough time, money and energy is spent on change. For real long lasting improvement, make a three and five year plan. Finding time for training, time for planning and meetings is always an issue. For learning, frequent short sessions are best.

## Money

- Who pays for the training? Who gets paid to participate?

Cost of instruction, training aids, and the like are usually shared between the company and any other funding partners. Upgrading is usually tuition free to participants. Employers, unions government training grants and other funding partners have all paid or shared costs in my experience. There have been successful up-grading programs with paid, part-paid or unpaid training time. Fairness will be the issue — if managers or others do their training on paid time, why shouldn't everyone?

## Partnerships

Workplace programs are often multiple partnerships, as joint labour management activities but also partnered with educators, government, with neighbouring operations, or sometimes with community groups.

- Are partnerships worth the effort? Consensus and education take time
- Can you share? Information, decision-making, and credit
- Can all these people be a positive force in achieving goals?

Few operations go it alone with learning or up-grading at first. Partners bring money, expertise, and other support. Partners also have their own issues and their own needs. It is important to bring these out as much as possible. Consider that each partner may have at least two roles at the table, and may have needs and issues to protect. For example, a beginning joint committee might see issues for

### Employers and Managers

- as company representatives
- as an individual challenged to fix things, watch the balance sheet, change and learn new skills

### Union representatives and Workers

- as a group with a history
- individuals who may be asked to learn and change

### Partner funders

- as representatives of an organization with policies and rules,
- as an individual bridging public and private sectors

### Educators

- as representatives of an institution
- as an educator with a philosophy
- as an individual learning about a workplace, the people there and their issues.

Listing roles and issues would be a good exercise for members of a group getting started in workforce education.

## How

- How do we get started?
- How do we find / choose partners?
- Will there be a needs assessment for the organization? For individuals?
- What about job task analysis or a literacy audit?
- Do we have to do them all?
- Can we plan for success without all the formal preliminaries?
- Which approaches to literacy, to basic math or other skills will be used?
- Will others be available?
- How do we respect privacy and maintain confidentiality?
- How do we bridge people with low reading levels and rusty learning skills to technical skills up-grading?

## A short note on literacies, skills upgrading, and empowerment

Previous studies have laid out the background to the literacy and basic skills situation in workforce. Many of these studies make this look like a big picture problem. For solutions we need to accommodate the individual person in their real context. You can't upgrade the skills of a factory – it takes hundreds and thousands of individual changes to make a difference. Participants will be at all levels of an organization.

Everyone will have to change. The people whose skills are excellent will still need to change assumptions and generalizations about their co-workers. They will need to develop respect and trust for everyone. “Empowering” workers means sharing responsibility and power. People will not share power with anyone they feel is unworthy or incapable. Demonstrating success, and refusing to take a deficit perspective or attribute blame will be important. These things are easy to say, and difficult to do. At best, everyone needs to become supportive.

What do people mean by an essential skills or literacy skills problem? And what can be done?

People with developed academic skills have a difficult time understanding what it means to not have those skills. A person with low literacy skills today may be a high school grad, or someone with Grade 11 from 20 years ago, who hasn't been using or improving their skills. A literacy problem means, in practical terms, that you have difficulties learning new concepts, and analyzing problems. It means that you don't meaningfully understand what you read, so you can't extract information or make generalizations or follow instructions from text or charts or tables.

Writing then, is also a challenge; you don't keep at it, so clarity and precision get rusty. Taking part in meetings, speaking up and making a point are hard, too, if you never do them. It is easier to sit back, coast along, or just be negative and resistant.

If “use it or lose it” is the situation, you start by using what skills and literacy you have to learn more. Doing is the key, and you learn what you do. So if you want team work, learn in groups with shared tasks. Empowered multi-skilled workers? Approach the process of learning in ways that are most congruent with those goals. This means that the educational partners, and any trainers, will need to live this philosophy.

Finally keep in mind that blanket solutions, single methods and quick fixes are not likely to be winning strategies. No one knows why anyone else didn't pick up these skills, though how adults fall behind after leaving school is easier to understand. If we can't point to a single cause, then we need the biggest tool bag, in optimistic expert hands, to develop a solution.