

## Essential Skills 101: Things you need to know

### What do we mean by literacy and Essential Skills?

#### Literacy

Today, the definition of literacy refers to the ability to understand and use written information, such as reading, writing, numeracy, critical thinking and problem solving.

Literacy also encompasses a more complex set of skills that people need at work. These are called Essential Skills.

#### Essential Skills

Essential Skills are the underlying skills used to perform everyday tasks. Most of these skills are required to some degree in all jobs and some of them are absolutely essential in many jobs. Although there are nine such skills needed for success in the workplace, the most important skills for professional drivers are: reading, writing and math.

### Essential skills definitions

#### Reading Text

- Reading materials in the form of sentences or paragraphs

#### Document Use

- Tasks that involve a variety of information displays in which words, numbers, symbols and other visual characteristics (e.g., lines, colours or shapes) are given meaning by their spatial arrangement

#### Numeracy

- Using numbers and thinking in quantitative terms to complete tasks

#### Writing

- Writing text and writing in documents, such as filling in forms, and nonpaper-based writing such as typing on a computer

#### Oral Communication

- Using speech to give and exchange thoughts and information

#### Working with Others

- Employees working with others to carry out their tasks

#### Thinking Skills

- The process of evaluating ideas or information to reach a rational decision

#### Computer Use

- Using different kinds of computer applications and other related technical tools

#### Continuous Learning

- Workers participating in an ongoing process of acquiring skills and knowledge

## Why Should Businesses consider Essential Skills?

Both businesses and employees in the trucking industry have had to adapt to changing demographics and increases in skill requirements. Higher requirements are likely to demand a higher level of ability in the underlying Essential Skills needed to perform them. Without accurate diagnosis of the causes of performance problems, you run the risk of investing in solutions that will not address underlying issues.

In addition to the fact that skill levels sometimes fall behind those needed on the job, it is also true that people have different levels of ability. Essential Skill levels vary over time. People gain and lose ability depending on how skills are used and how often. Infrequently used skills and weaker skills may be problematic for professional drivers unless provided with an opportunity to refresh and build upon their skill level. Building Essential Skills into your workplace can support this.

## Building Essential Skills is more than training

Considering Essential Skills (ES) is more about workplace learning as a whole, not just training. It is about creating an environment within your business to facilitate this.

There are a number of ways to improve business performance through Essential Skills. Some you can do on your own but others require the guidance of someone with Essential Skills expertise.

Although it takes thought and practice to build ES into ongoing work routines, improvement can be achieved through small incremental changes. Many employers have found starting small and building on successes works well.

## Success Factors for building Essential Skills into your business

### 1. Essential Skills expert

Connect with someone who knows - an Essential Skills advisor (see the resources section). They provide guidance, help you determine your ES training needs, develop and deliver training and help you access financial supports. Learn what they can do for you.

Training is only one of the many ways to build ES into your workplace. Ask the Essential Skills advisor about strategies to include and consider ES within your business. This ensures ES become part of your workplace performance strategies. If they can only speak about training, make sure to speak to others familiar with embedding or integrating ES into a business.

### 2. Learn from others

Whenever possible speak to others who are familiar with ES. For example, network with other employers, your local Chamber or board of trade and education providers who have developed ES initiatives. These can be great resources to learn more about ES and how to build them into a business.

### 3. Workplace Champion

Essential Skills initiatives need a champion. Clear support from a workplace leader is critical. Your champion needs to be able to explain and promote workplace learning and its benefits to others at the workplace - both managers and employees. Building ES into a business can be difficult for people to

understand. Your champion needs to be able to link ES to the business's common issues and challenges. They rally resources and support, and remove roadblocks for the project team.

#### **4. Planning Process**

The planning process for building ES into your workplace is critical for success. Thorough planning includes putting together a small group of workers and management to guide activities and the workplace needs analysis to determine the learning needs and interests. It also includes setting priorities, determining activities and evaluating outcomes.

#### **5. Working group or team**

If possible, create an ES or learning team. Depending on the size of your organization, the working group can range from a few employees providing ideas on how to build ES into the workplace to a more formal project team. The working group must represent a cross-section of employees.

The group's goal is to identify areas for improvement and strategies to achieve them. Just as a safety committee is devoted to finding ways to improve safety, the ES team looks for ways to build workplace learning and ES into the workplace.

Seek advice from an ES advisor on developing an Essential Skills working group.

#### **6. Inclusive**

Building ES into your workplace is successful when it is a team effort – engage employees from the beginning. Start with conversations about learning and development with professional drivers and dispatchers during staff meetings, training and other existing events. Seek input on areas for improvements such as documents, training and workplace communications.

If you think of your employees as 'customers' for your training and communications, the voice of that customer might help you discover where plain language, clear formatting, consistent terms, visuals and time to interact might pay off. Start small, focusing on a particular issue. Build experience and success. When people see positive, they see other opportunities for improvements.

#### **7. Integrating Essential Skills**

How can we further leverage ES and learning at work? Start a learning program. There are several models that could fit. Peer training, learning centres, individualized support, group learning with differentiated instruction, or co-training where an adult learning specialist works with your trainers.

How can we support each other to grow essential skills through work? Focus on meanings. Take the time to talk about why. People who don't know the reasons for what they do can't appreciate the relationship between their work and business performance.

#### **8. Learning Environment**

Creating an environment where employees are motivated to learn and attend a workplace learning programs is critical. Many people will want to improve their work performance. They will also want to know what is in it for them. Motivation to get involved in any workplace learning or training activities depends on how well employees feel valued and respected by their employer. Employees will want to

know that their workplace is a safe environment for learning where they will feel empowered, not ridiculed.

## 9. Confidentiality

In order to create a safe environment for learning, keep all responses from the Workplace Needs analysis. These same principles apply for any programming offered in terms of individual assessments and progress during learning.