

LSC CALLS ON BUSINESS COMMUNITY TO BREAK SKILLS TABOO

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The Learning and Skills Council (LSC) South West is calling on businesses for their support in tackling the taboo subject of poor literacy and numeracy among the region's workforce.

Recent research from the CBI revealed that nationally 5.2 million adults lack the English skills expected of a 14-year-old and 14.9 million would be unable to match them at maths.

The impact of this on the business community is huge with literacy and numeracy issues costing companies employing 1,000 people or more as much as £500,000 a year in reduced productivity, according to the former Department for Education and Skills.

Despite boasting a relatively well-qualified workforce, with a higher than average number of adults employed within skilled trades, the South West is no exception. One in five of the working population currently does not possess sufficient 'skills for life'. This is defined as 'the ability to read, write and speak in English and to use mathematics at a level necessary to function at work and in society'. A total of 1.75 million adults in the South West still have literacy and numeracy skills below Level 2 – the equivalent level to a C grade at GCSE.

Now the LSC is calling on the business community to play their part in addressing this subject, and in particular, help to identify the training requirements of their workforce.

Explains John Tempest, Director of Skills Development (Skills for Life) at the LSC South West: "Basic literacy and numeracy skills are a real taboo. Many employers either don't recognise it or don't talk about it. However, it is clear that a lack of skills is having an impact of productivity, at a time when the economy can least afford it.

"The good news is that the LSC has a range of programmes in place that can help employers, be they in the public or private sector, to support those employees who need to improve their basic skills."

As part of the 21st Century Skills White Paper produced by Lord Leitch, the Government is committed to ensuring 95 per cent of the population has 'functional' levels of literacy and numeracy by 2020. This will help to significantly combat the current skill gaps between the UK and other G7 nations. Currently output per hour worked is around 25 per cent higher in the US and Germany and over 30 per cent higher in France.

The first step for many employers towards addressing this issue is the signing of the Skills Pledge. Created by the LSC, it is a voluntary, public commitment made by a company to support its employees to develop their basic skills, including literacy and numeracy. This is supported by the Train to Gain service which helps individuals, through their employers, work towards achieving qualifications to at least NVQ Level 2.

Adds Tempest: "While everyone recognises that the South West boasts a highly-qualified workforce, there remains a significant proportion of the region's adult population with significant basic literacy and numeracy issues.

"The Skills Pledge provides companies with the opportunity to address this very real issue head-on, while the Train to Gain service, gives companies the means to train their workforce from the bottom-up."

Examples of how low levels of communication and math skills impact on organisational performance:

Job role Example of problems

- Bakery operatives - Large groups of employees in a bakery did not understand spoken or written English. When the despatch area of the factory was reorganised and the colour coding of bays changed chaos ensued.
- Plastic injection moulding operative - Notes about process faults or handover information at the end of shift not recorded accurately and legibly on a white board, affecting quality control.

- Bus driver - Difficulties completing accident reports in clear, concise and objective language.
- Construction engineer - An engineer was not confident in getting his point across at meetings, which resulted in him agreeing to things that he knew would not work.
- Call centre workers - Call centre workers for a large gas supplier were not able to write good-quality letters responding to complaints. This made dissatisfied customers even more upset.
- Hospital supervisors - Newly promoted supervisors did not have the skills they needed to complete paperwork, carry out performance appraisals, lead their teams effectively etc. Nor did they have the skills needed to benefit from conventional supervisor training.

Ends

Note to Editors:

LSC

The LSC exists to make England better skilled and more competitive. We are responsible for planning and funding high-quality vocational education and training for everyone. We have a single goal: to improve the skills of England's young people and adults to world-class standards. Our vision is that by 2010, young people and adults in England have the knowledge and skills matching the best in the world and are part of a truly competitive workforce. Established in 2001, we work nationally, regionally and locally from a network of offices across the country. For more information visit:

<http://www.lsc.gov.uk/westofengland>

All media enquiries, please contact:

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Kelly Davis or Richard Cook at Bray Leino PR

T: 0117 973 1173

E: kdavis@brayleino.co.uk / rcook@brayleino.co.uk

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