

Tracy's Tips

What can you do about literacy at your workplace?

Don't take literacy for granted. Read every day and encourage others to read too. How?

1. Make it easy for people to read on their breaks and during lunch by having the newspaper there. Recycle your magazines in the break room.
2. Find a place for a 'take a book leave a book' basket or shelf where people can share a book and find something to read.
3. Start a book club at work. Reading and discussing is a great way to motivate people to read for business or general interest. And it helps build a learning community at work.
4. Make books and reading part of what your company values. Give books as gifts and rewards, and read a story aloud at family parties.

Paying attention to literacy can increase employee engagement.

Try these literacy strategies to leverage participation and retain skills.

5. Everyone's job is moving toward more integration of different kinds of literacy and work. Checking a standard? Literacy. Recording a non-conformance? Literacy too. How can we support each other in growing literacy 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 their customers' success.
6. Teach supervisors and team leaders to be coaches and teachers. They can reinforce literacy with every opportunity. The inevitable problems in work bring learning opportunities and literacy learning is in there, too. The people who directly lead your front line workers have more chances to ask questions, teach problem-solving or demonstrate how to write something up.
7. Can you invite thinking in your work communications, even for the statistical data you want employees to notice and understand? Yes, if you treat every chart as the answer to a question. And make that question the title. It's thought-provoking and invites the reader to consider the document meaningfully. "How many of our products were delivered to customers when they wanted it?" makes your 'on-time delivery' number accessible and meaningful.
8. Don't make the mistake of taking the thinking out of the job in an effort to error-proof. You need every mind at work for safety, for observation and especially for innovation. No dumb jobs, no marginalized workers. Engagement retains employees and grows your business. It retains literacy skills, too.



What about the workplace training you do now?

Literacy is the ultimate transferable skill and the foundation of other learning. Take a literacy-and-learning focus to get more from all kinds of learning situations.

9. Training that doesn't stick can be a sign that you need to support essential foundational skills like literacy. What can you do? Improve the training. Don't assume that everyone will learn like you, at your pace. Expect that people will need different methods, more discussion, demonstrations or practice along with the content of the course. If they learn and remember and apply the training, it worked. If they don't, you just might be wasting time and money. It is worth getting it right.
10. How can you change the training and communications you are going to do anyways to retain literacy? Consider your orientation, safety and job training. Newsletters, town halls, crew meetings, teamwork, even schedules. Do you put them out without considering the reader, the participant, the worker and how they will find the meanings there? If your workforce is a 'customer' for your training and communications, the voice of that customer might help you discover where plain language, clearer formatting, consistent terms, visuals and time to interact might pay off.
11. How can we go further with leveraging literacy 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, co-training where an adult learning specialist works with your trainers. Start with conversations with front-line workers, leaders and, if you have a union, include representatives from the beginning. You will find a shared interest there. Unions have been big supporters of workplace literacy and essential skills programs in Canada.
12. Workplace literacy is about us, not them. Include everyone in the learning plans. Ask almost anyone and they might tell you that they have too much to read, too much information to keep track of, and overwhelming documentation. Just like fitness and nutrition, we all need a healthy learning and literacy lifestyle. And like wellness, keeping fit for learning will pay off at home and at work.
13. What are your goals? Your organization's goals? Are you on a path to be part of a continuously improving learning organization? People are the foundation of your plans and literacy is the velcro on the skills of those people. We all need to pay attention to that velcro. If you take it for granted it wears out, but literacy is renewable every day. And with effort we can all improve and extend our literacy, too.

These tips were published as part of Tracy Defoe's presentation "What Now?" following Craig Alexander's presentation on *Literacy and the Economy* at the Vancouver stop on the 2008 Literacy Tour of British Columbia. For tips on program models, improving communication with employees and other topics in workplace education check www.thelearningfactor.ca for our monthly tips.

