



▶ ADULT LITERACY RESEARCH

Two-dimensional work: Adult literacy in call centre and aged care industries

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▶ THIS REPORT INVESTIGATES literacy within organisations from two industries — aged care and call centres. The study was prompted by the sense that workers with limited literacies would struggle in the new world of work, which requires flexible employment, self-managed careers and individually negotiated contracts. Casual employment is now estimated to account for 20% of the workforce.

Research revealed two key findings — that most casual workers were not transient or working in a number of jobs as was expected, and that the number of people identified with literacy needs was smaller than anticipated. In fact, people with generic skills, such as those required for employability, social abilities and the capacity to read workplace cultures, could sustain employment even with limited English language literacy.

Qualitative research was conducted among employment agencies, training providers and employers in the chosen industries. Communication standards and workplace literacies were discussed with supervisors, managers and trainers. Nineteen workers, mostly contingent (contract, casual or itinerant) or with perceived low literacy, were interviewed in depth.

The research was framed around questions of employers' literacy demands, workers' literacy transfer strategies, and organisational management of skill transferability.

In aged care, standards now required by accreditation and funding authorities strongly influence personal care attendants' relationships with old people. Their language, operational literacies and reports have become more impersonal.

Literacies of call centre operators are subject to intense analysis, regulated by requirements for consistent, fast and amicable service. Call centre recruiters value oral communication and positive attitudes above ordinary reading and writing skills.

Facilities are highly proceduralised — aged care along industry lines, and call centres along the enterprise lines of key performance indicators.

In aged care, successful personal care attendants 'read the culture' and adapt organisational norms to particular situations. To be able to transfer their skills across workplaces, the contingent workers must use informal learning and develop the ability to understand and interpret the workplace context. Call centre operators, however, appear to have limited opportunities to transfer skills.

Aged care is a 'best practice' model of training, meaning there are common reference points for employers, trainers and trainees, and consistency and transferability across the industry. Call centres have a 'competitive excellence' model, with competence defined by workplace standards, trainers seeking learning opportunities within company key performance indicators, and lower transferability.

In both industries, active trainer interpretation or adaptation of training packages is seen to take second place to industry or enterprise imperatives.

▶ Messages for policy and practice

The VET system is challenged to serve the broad needs of individuals, the community and the economy, and to resist the narrowing of literacy and generic skills for company requirements.



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To avoid an undue focus on company learning agendas, off-site training can provide an opportunity to address broader educational issues, beyond the immediate employer interests.

It is important to moderate the influence of external auditors on the idea of what competence actually is. In order to ensure that this occurs trainers should re-focus their critical attention on the regulatory frameworks and training packages, by assessing practices that are in keeping with training principles.

'Transferability' involves generic literacy and communication skills that workers can then translate to other workplaces. This should be regarded as a significant generic skill requirement, and one which trainers should give more prominence.

Both industries are highly 'proceduralised', which means that workplace practice is standardised. This does not encourage workers to question or show initiative. To counter this, policy-makers, employers and on-site trainers should promote local discussion and communities of practice.

► Messages for trainers

To deliver holistic training using training packages, trainers appear to need a higher level of basic education than the Certificate IV in Assessment and Workplace Training. In addition, they require continuing development in their role.

Workshops could be used to encourage trainers to adapt training and assessment flexibly to various work environments, using 'range statements' and 'evidence guides' from training packages.

Trainers and teachers need assistance to be able to identify generic skills for 'transferability', and to draw these to learners' attention for further development.

► Messages for employers

Employers need to develop workplace learning cultures which help staff adapt to the constant changes of today's workforce. In particular, employers could seek a better balance between industry procedure and the changing needs of the workplace.

In aged care, employers are urged to adopt worker-friendly documentation, alternative appraisal processes, local communities of practice, more appropriate forms of information technology implementation, and more inclusive feedback and training for their workers.

Call centres are encouraged to recognise the generic skill and employment benefits of accredited training and recognition of prior learning.

Two-dimensional work: Adult literacy in call centre and aged care industries, by Peter Waterhouse and Crina Virgona, can be downloaded from the NCVET website at www.ncver.edu.au/publications/1497.html