

# What Forward-Thinking Employers Can Do

## to Strengthen the Basic Skills of Our Workforce

A “Can-Do Guide” of  
The Open Door Collective  
[www.opendoorcollective.org](http://www.opendoorcollective.org)

December 4, 2018  
Edition

## Why employee basic skills are important

To participate effectively in U.S. workplaces, workers need to be equipped with a range of basic skills, technical knowledge and skills, positive attitudes, credentials, and a system of social and practical supports.

Twenty-first century “basic skills” are much more than the ability to read and write simple texts and understand and use numbers. Increasingly, attaining, performing, and advancing in jobs now require the ability to find and interpret complicated written information; to listen to, interpret, and convey oral information accurately; to communicate written information digitally and in hard copy; and to think critically, solve problems, and work in teams (often with co-workers from diverse backgrounds). Many jobs also require particular math skills, to manage quantitative information and use it to make decisions.<sup>1</sup>

It is clear that employers rely heavily on having a well-equipped workforce. In addition, the well-being of workers, their families, their communities, and the economy as a whole is also intertwined with workers’ abilities to apply basic skills to the many tasks required to attain, retain, succeed in, and advance in employment. Worker basic skills is thus a vital issue for employers, workers, and their communities.<sup>2</sup>



*This guide describes why and how employers (both individual employers and multi-employer organizations) might partner with adult basic skills efforts for the benefit of companies, employees, and their communities.*

*ODC welcomes feedback at [www.opendoorcollective.org](http://www.opendoorcollective.org).*

# Gaps in worker basic skills and in basic skills development opportunities

*Levi-Strauss worked with local education providers and the U.S. Department of Education to offer English classes at its plants in Texas and New Mexico, to help workers perform current jobs and transition into new ones.*

As the demands of U.S. jobs have changed, too often the U.S. workforce has not kept up with those demands.<sup>3</sup> Employers often say they can't find workers with the basic written and oral language skills and/or math skills, basic technical skills (e.g., understanding of how to use tools), background knowledge about the technical and social requirements of jobs, and positive attitudes (e.g., persistence, motivation) that jobs require. "Give us job candidates with those basic skills and positive attitudes and we'll train and support them to be able to do the job" is what employers are asking for.

The good news is that many potential and currently-employed workers have recognized that they need to upgrade their job-related skills. They take advantage of relevant education provided in their communities, at their workplaces, or through their labor unions. However, many other potential and current workers do not do so, due to a number of factors, including: a lack of adult basic education programs in their communities and/or workplaces, learners' prior negative experience trying to upgrade their skills, a lack of transportation or childcare that would allow potential students to participate and persist, scheduling conflicts with family or work responsibilities, a lack of self-confidence that "I can do it!" or a simple lack of awareness about the potential benefits of participation and how to go about enrolling.

While significant models of well-designed and -supported work-related basic skills programs have been created, there are many factors that can make or break adult learners' ability to enroll and persist in basic skills programs that meet their particular needs.

## What employers can do

Employers might understandably feel it's not their job to upgrade the basic skills of their local workforce or to strengthen the adult education programs that serve workers who lack adequate basic skills.

But many employers are interested in contributing to the solution of this major economic and social problem. They do so out of both self-interest (i.e., a need for well-equipped employees and a desire to do business in a community that is healthy economically and socially) and a sense of social responsibility and pride in their communities.

There *are* things that employers can do - individually and collectively - to help upgrade the quality, quantity, and accessibility of basic skills development opportunities for adults and out-of-school youth who will compose the local workforce for the coming decades.<sup>4</sup> As an employer, you can:

Do some initial planning.

- ***Develop your background knowledge about why and how employers have involved themselves in efforts to strengthen workforce basic skills in their company, their community, their city, or their state.***
- ***Consider why you might get involved.***
  - Do you want to strengthen the skills of your current workforce? Or are you concerned about the skills of potential workers you might hire in the future? Or both?
  - Are you more generally concerned about the employability, stability, efficiency, and well-being of the workforce in your community?
  - Do you want to get involved because you want your company to be seen as a positive, responsible leader in and contributor to community improvement?

*Albany International has offered classes to help employees develop basic skills needed to manage benefits and write work reports in its plants in upstate New York.*

Get involved in one or more ways.

You can:

1. **Support basic skills services in your community<sup>5</sup> by . . .**

- Providing in-kind assistance (e.g., help with fund-raising, volunteers, meeting space, equipment and supplies, publicity . . .)
- Providing financial assistance targeted to particular projects or general operations;
- Referring employees and employee family members to the programs.

2. **Support basic skills development within your own company.**

If you believe that some of your current employees might benefit from the upgrading of one or more of their basic skills, consider working with an education service provider to set up a basic skills support system for those workers.

Form an education planning team (typically with the help of an outside education provider experienced in workplace education) to clarify the basic skills needs of your company and individual workers, decide strategies for responding to those needs, recruit participants, and evaluate and support the program.



### 3. Plan and advocate for educational opportunities for out-of-school youth and adults.

Employers are looked to as a source of jobs, tax revenue, and stability for communities. They can thus play very important roles as advocates for worker basic skills development. As an employer, you can do so by:

- Participating in local- and state-level workforce development boards and helping to strengthen educational opportunities for current and potential workers.
- Advocating for this issue when communicating with other stakeholders, including other employers, public policy makers, and/or union representatives.
- Supporting adult education advocacy efforts through in-kind assistance and company donations or corporate foundation grants.
- Supporting the development of the leadership skills of adult educators and adult learners by providing scholarships and fellowships to allow them to attend conferences, conduct research, or otherwise develop leadership expertise.
- Participating in the planning and piloting of new community, city, or state basic skills systems for various worker sub-populations, jobs, and/or industries.

## In conclusion . . .

*You, as a forward-thinking employer, have multiple opportunities to make a significant difference on this issue of employee basic skills.*

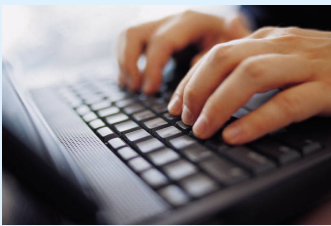
*In so doing, you can contribute to workforce productivity, safety, health, and promotability and to the development of your community.*

*You can also enhance trust and cooperation among stakeholders who have common interests but too often don't communicate and collaborate.*

*Such thoughtful, informed, patient leadership can have multiple benefits for many stakeholders at this time of challenge and opportunity.*

*The National Retail Federation Foundation has provided customer service and related training (e.g., oral and written English, career awareness, use of retail technologies) to retail workers and job-seekers nationwide. Partners included community colleges, shopping malls, and a national drug store chain.*

## Endnotes



1. A February 2017 report by the National Skills Coalition (“Foundational Skills in the Service Sector”) describes the basic skills (i.e., math, reading, and technological proficiency) gaps of workers in the U.S. service jobs. Available at <https://www.nationalskillscoalition.org/resources/publications/file/NSC-foundational-skills-FINAL.pdf> .)
2. Visit [www.opendoorcollective.org/workforce-development-resources.html](http://www.opendoorcollective.org/workforce-development-resources.html) for resources from multiple sources that describe the basic skills needs of workers in many industries and models of basic education for various jobs and worker populations.
3. A February 2018 paper by the Open Door Collective (“Basic Skills, a Key to Advancing the Workforce”) highlights data about the numbers of U.S. adults with basic skills challenges. Available at [www.opendoorcollective.org](http://www.opendoorcollective.org).)
4. The Business Council for Effective Literacy was founded by McGraw-Hill President, Harold W. McGraw, Jr. BCEL worked in the later 1980s and early 1990s with public and private sector leaders and institutions in a nationwide effort to raise awareness and support for adult basic skills services. Such services were designed to help adults and out-of-school youth to participate more fully in work, family, and civic roles. Read BCEL’s publications at <https://eric.ed.gov/?q=BCEL>.
5. To find adult education programs in your area, visit [www.nationalliteracydirectory.org](http://www.nationalliteracydirectory.org).