

Report for the BCITO

Interviews on literacy in the building and construction industry

**Prepared by Workbase for the
ITO Workplace Literacy Project**

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Purpose of Report

The purpose of this report is to provide the Building and Construction Industry Training Organisation (BCITO) with industry specific feedback from the ITO Workplace Literacy Project.

Background

In 2004, the BCITO and Workbase worked together to investigate literacy issues within the industry with a view to developing a Literacy Strategy for the BCITO. This was part of a wider project undertaken with three ITOs and funded by the Tertiary Education Commission.

Each ITO in the project agreed to develop their own Literacy Strategy aimed at raising the literacy levels/foundation skills of their workforce to better meet the current and future needs of the industry.

Recent industry problems with weathertightness and subsequent political intervention has lead to a change in legislation requiring builders to become licensed.

This raises issues for the industry concerning the literacy levels of the existing workforce as well as that of current industry trainees.

Method

Initially, international literacy training and research material was identified and shared with the BCITO. In particular, the results of the 1996 International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) were discussed. This survey indicated that 49% of the workforce in the construction industry had literacy skills at levels 1 and 2 on the IALS framework. Little in-depth investigation of what impact this was having on the industry has been undertaken.

A general review of the literacy requirements of the written material provided to BCITO trainees (the box of books) was also undertaken and comments provided separately to the BCITO.

In the second half of 2004 BCITO staff facilitated, and in some instances participated in, meetings between an independent consultant employed by Workbase and BCITO stakeholders to identify and discuss literacy within the building and construction industry. Focus in the meetings was on literacy needs, issues, and possible solutions to assist BCITO to develop a literacy strategy and a training plan.

The emphasis in the consultation exercise was on how the stakeholders saw literacy needs and issues currently, and possible future ways literacy needs could be raised within the industry.

In consultation with the BCITO a list of key stakeholders to be interviewed was identified. They came from a range of localities: Auckland; Wellington; Tauranga; and Otago.

The stakeholders identified were:

- Internal : Regional Managers, Senior Managers within the team at Head Office, Training Advisors
- External: Trainees, Employers, including carpentry and specialist trades Training Providers, a Union representative, and Specialist Trade and Carpentry Assessors

Each interview began with a statement covering the purpose of the project, outlining the two parties' intentions and stressing the confidential nature of the discussion. The participants were assured that their comments would be treated as confidential, and that only generalised statements reflecting views of a number of similar participants would be reported.

In each case, an open ended collaborative discussion took place which, while focussed on literacy, because of the open nature of the discussion, often widened to include a discussion of more general training issues.

Initially with most of the participants it was necessary to take time to explore what literacy meant, and to contextualise it within the training framework. Only then were they in a position to consider what literacy issues there might be within the industry, what ways they as stakeholders might deal with these issues, what others in the industry could be doing, and how the suggested solutions might impact on trainees with literacy needs.

Apart from the polytechnic tutors, and two members of the National Advisory Groups, the other participants had not discussed literacy issues before, and consequently had not considered solutions or implications. As the sessions progressed, however, they often drew on their experience, and provided relevant anecdotal stories. Interest in literacy was high, and it was encouraging to observe that there was a genuine desire to see learning opportunities provided for those needing literacy.

The sessions took place in a range of situations including Workbase's office, BCITO's head office, work sites, cafes and for the ones from the South Island, over the phone.

While the mix of participants included a fair representation from Auckland, especially North Shore and South Auckland, Wellington and Tauranga, it lacked an adequate sampling of Maori and rural views.

Findings

The participants in the interviews were committed to the process and were determined to relate the issues raised to their experience and to express their views strongly. Many expressed interest in receiving more information and more details of contact for remedial help or tutoring for trainees with literacy issues.

While initially within the discussion, using the word “literacy” did not generate much of a response, once the interviewer described what literacy might look like in the workplace, many anecdotes and examples relevant to literacy were provided by participants. All participants had knowledge and experience of literacy issues within the industry.

The findings from the interviews are presented in stakeholder groupings. A list of the interviews for this report is attached as an Appendix.

Trainees

Almost without exception trainees had a positive view of the BCITO and stated that they knew they could seek help from their training advisor, yet the majority do not do this, even when there are real and serious learning difficulties. Several trainees interviewed had not seen their advisor in the last four months or more since signing on, and were definitely having major difficulties with the training, but not with the practical work on site.

The most commonly expressed view was that they preferred to deal with reading and maths problems at home, with their wife’s or girl friend’s assistance rather than face their employer or contact their training advisor. The key element here was their need to go over material several times to be able to relate it to their practical learning on the job. An initial discussion with the training advisor made sense of the training material at the time, but later they couldn’t understand it in written form in their book.

Trainees reported finding difficulty linking the off-job learning to the on-job tasks. Trainees generally seemed unaware of training support options available to them (other than the training advisors).

Another issue, more generally about training but also relevant to language and literacy needs, related to immigrant trainees. Participants reported that there are problems obtaining permits from the NZ Immigration Service so they can study legitimately. These trainees found working through Immigration can be time-consuming, frustrating and fruitless – some mentioned they rely on their training advisor to systematically tackle the issues for them. It was reported that the standard BCITO letter stating that the trainee is working towards a qualification, did not specify the level of that qualification and did not satisfy Immigration’s requirements to issue a permit for study.

The trainees talked to did not suggest many specific solutions to learning difficulties that they had as most had not really considered how they could be better helped. But those who needed assistance and were able to obtain it were keen that more information about pathways and options be given to trainees at sign on.

Training Advisors

The range of opinions sampled included opinions from advisors with an educational background, with carpentry and specialist trades links, and some with a career interest in training.

A major focus of the discussion was on the changes taking place at present to monitor time spent with the trainee. This together with the sudden growth in trainee numbers over the past two years has meant that there hasn't been sufficient time to deliver the support that many trainees, including those with literacy needs, require.

A chicken and egg situation exists where a training advisor doesn't want to create the circumstances where he is suggesting that trainees may have learning problems, when they may cope better than at first glance. So the issue is when to assess training needs and how to encourage trainees to reveal difficulties that are holding them back.

The background knowledge and experience of the training advisor has a major impact on what problems they attend to and how successful they are in coaching and supporting the trainee through difficulties. Those who understand learning styles and learning difficulties are empowered to make a significant difference. Many, however, do not have specific training in learning and development and lack appropriate understanding and skills to be able to help trainees in difficulty.

They considered that there was value in dealing with literacy issues, as "learning difficulties" and helping people to own their issues and deal more effectively with them on an up-front basis.

One training advisor was aware of literacy tutors being available one to one in a person's home or place of business, but did not know how to make contact with them to help a trainee.

Several training advisors were concerned that employers need to be more aware of trainees' needs and issues and to be able to encourage trainees to seek help. They were unsure of how to engage employers in getting behind the trainee and being realistic about the amount of time that trainee might need to spend in training sessions and off-site learning support.

Some said they had difficulty assisting trainees with learning needs because there was no money available from within the BCITO to pay for what they needed. They commented on differences in budgets between those trainees taken on under the modern apprenticeship scheme and those who weren't.

There was general agreement among the Training Advisors that clear communication from the BCITO regarding the three pathways at the point a trainee signed on would be useful, and a starting point for a discussion between the employer and trainee about the trainees training needs.

There was some awareness that literacy issues were a problem for some trainees, and that many had got through the system with considerable extra help and assistance, often from wives or girlfriends, or from dedicated training advisors and assessors working unpaid overtime. Without such assistance they would have failed completely.

Many were concerned that modifying the curriculum or lowering the reading age of the "box of books" would be dumbing down the qualification and if anything,

because there is an increasing need to be able to read legal material, prospective trainees need higher standards of literacy on entry. Some wanted the Elementary Certificate of Carpentry to be a compulsory prerequisite for entry to the Certificate training. (Note: no other groups wanted to introduce pre-requisites)

Those with an education training background were more interested in providing support to trainees and in sourcing ways to deal with literacy need but were generally not aware of what resources were available (either tutors or training materials). Or if they were aware, they were sure they weren't supposed to access them because there wasn't any budget for such expenditure.

Maori training advisors mostly contributed informally after the group session ended and it appears they have more to contribute that would assist Maori trainees, if given the opportunity.

Assessors

The majority of assessors spoken with were manufacturer's representatives in Specialist Trades and their backgrounds varied widely.

Many were concerned about quality issues and ensuring that no matter where they trained and were assessed, all trainees obtaining certification could be relied upon to produce the same quality standard. They considered the overall lack of systematic training of assessors led to real weaknesses.

In specialist trades, assessors were aware of the employment dynamics for workers with low literacy skills where their low level of skills put them at a disadvantage in the employment relationship.

Assessors wanted to see some sharing of information along case study lines that would enable a number of assessors to be exposed to worked examples, and to show them how to manage similar situations in a workplace environment. This would lead to examples of alternative assessment methods and strategies being presented for those with literacy issues and would open the issue for discussion.

Having a region-wide forum where all assessors could discuss assessment examples and develop more uniformity of assessment standards, and which members of the quality team could also join, was identified as a possible way forward.

Employers

Due to time and accessibility difficulties only nine employers were able to participate. Four were in carpentry and five were in specialist trades. They were located in Rodney, the North Shore and Tauranga. In addition there was at least one very large employer, who operates recruitment labour hire programmes that include training and modern apprenticeships.

In dealing with trainees most were unaware of the reasons for their trainees' difficulties in completing the record of work and generally thought it was laziness or lack of time after working long hours. They did not recognise literacy issues as possibly being behind the reasons for non-completion of the record of work.

They were unsure how to support and mentor trainees. Employers reflected that the relationship between employer and employee has changed and is in many cases more formal and distant. The immediate supervisor has more knowledge of their problems in training, but no leverage over time or money to remedy the situation.

It seems too difficult for either party to raise training or literacy issues without it appearing an employment issue. Employers don't want to put pressure on employees in case they leave, and employees are unaware of how the employer could help and the reasons they should raise training issues with them.

Most were working flat out and had taken little time to consider the issues.

Over the licensing process, many had strong views, and considered it necessary to have a grandfather clause for builders who had solid reputations so they would not have to sit a written exam.

Some were concerned that the BCITO might take up literacy issues and begin pre-requisite testing shutting out people who were practical and capable on site, and who needed extra support to move through to obtain the qualification.

Immigrant employers were identified as facing additional problems and wanting more assistance and formal communications from BCITO to meet their needs in communicating with government departments, so they can receive help already targeted for them.

Providers

There was an appreciation of the work the BCITO has done and is putting into the training curriculum.

There was a general awareness of literacy issues amongst this group and of possible ways of working with trainees to support their learning difficulties. It was reported that it was certainly common to find trainees struggling with literacy training.

The major concern here was that dealing with literacy successfully is never a remedial tack on solution. Yet that is the major option available at present given the literacy requirements of the "box of books" which is above the literacy level of many trainees on their courses.

The majority of the providers are attempting to deliver a more holistic programme catering for the different learning styles (auditory, visual and kinesthetic). Some are more comprehensive in their delivery and choice of options and back-up learning support than others.

Those that were aware of the Elementary Certificate in Carpentry considered it was a well constructed curriculum able to be adapted by tutors.

Block courses and evening courses were provided to allow for flexibility, but often trainees may attend only for certain topics and not others making it difficult to cater specifically for those with learning difficulties. As one tutor put it, it can be like a railway station and you have fleeting contact with a student who comes for a session and then you don't see him again for weeks. So even if a tutor was aware of a student's literacy needs, he/she would find it difficult to assist in a consistent way when they are only attending one or two sessions of either a night class or day release.

Many trainees were described as reluctant to seek help at all, and only if they can talk after class when everyone has gone. Students were also hard to get to learning support sessions, sometimes for cultural reasons, and did not want to admit that they needed help.

Some providers are gearing up to support builders working towards the new registration requirements. They are tackling literacy issues within a holistic framework and recognise there are many educational approaches that can be tapped to demonstrate knowledge in practical situations.

Schools that have developed courses covering the Elementary Certificate in Carpentry are experiencing a growing demand for places at year 10, 11 and 12. The curriculum resource provided by BCITO has been welcomed as practical and clearly structured to allow them to adapt it to their training situation.

Providers were more experienced at identifying wider learning issues. They saw the provision of more learning pathways and options, allowing people to self select with guidance and determine meaningful goals as an important way BCITO could assist trainees entering the industry.

Providers considered that closer co-operation between employers and industry representatives and the BCITO will be needed to make progress on literacy issues.

Providers reported it was vital that the Training Advisors are able to get "buy in" from employers to obtain the release time for those trainees who need the learning support of a provider block course, and especially to obtain work release for the duration of the course.

More varied courses, more links, and more co-operative initiatives like the Housing NZ Corporation partnership with BCITO are likely to appear and will be favourably viewed by polytechnics who may contribute either pre- or post-course elements.

Unions

The general direction of revamping the curriculum and increasing the time Training Advisors are spending with trainees is supported and in line with what the union believes will increase skill levels.

In seeking additional literacy support, Polytechnic day release day course were the preferred option because this means the trainees would be fresh and able to absorb what they were learning.

National Advisory Groups and Regional Advisory Groups

Within the members of these groups, there is a wealth of experience and knowledge and they offered full and frank comments on the industry wide issues. Many of the issues raised by employers and trainees were similar to those raised by these groups.

They saw value in strengthening the role of the training advisors and in up-skilling them to better identify learning needs and difficulties. They also saw value in speaking in those terms rather than using "literacy" needs.

BCITO Managers

The managers considered that most staff have been caught up in the workload created by the huge increase numbers of trainees coming through the training system. There has also been a high turnover of training advisors resulting in many working very long hours. Consequently there has been a focus on purely trying to maintain the business of the BCITO.

They thought that the majority of staff were convinced that there were few literacy problems and most trainees didn't complete their record of work because of laziness and lack of commitment rather than literacy needs.

All expressed some interest in strengthening the skill base of the training advisors so they could be more appropriately able to identify trainee learning difficulties.

In general, they saw the value of improving the tracking and monitoring of trainees' progress through the newly set up computerised records system that training advisors are required to keep. This was viewed as a major tool for monitoring progress and raising issues for further investigation.

There was a sense of pride expressed in the new re-write of the training curriculum.

There was little awareness of the overall literacy needs of those currently in the building and construction industry – either as trainees or employers.

Additional findings across all stakeholder groups

A key concern mentioned by a wide range of participants was the poor levels of literacy in school leavers, coupled with the widespread use of "texting" and it's reinforcement of bad spelling.

Concerns were also expressed by participants from all groups that literacy needs were hidden, and there was the suggestion that men preferred to deal with them in their own way with wives' or girlfriends' assistance.

Anecdotes of how people are assisted to complete training suggest that many trainees were lucky in having the help and assistance provided by concerned employers (going 'above and beyond') and competent, dedicated training advisors.

A consistent message gained through the interviews was the low level of understanding of literacy issues throughout the industry. This often manifested itself in negative attitudes to trainees who were regarded as dumb or lazy (not necessarily the personal view of participants but a reflection of what they see in the industry).

There was a strongly held view expressed by people across all stakeholder groups except training advisors, that BCITO should resist introducing compulsory pre-requisite requirements (like NZCEA level 2 Maths and English), and maintain an open entry option to the Certificate of Carpentry.

Many employers, training advisors, assessors, polytechnic staff and NAG representatives expressed serious concern at the current BCITO exam format for

assessing RCC, as it posed literacy issues for many in the industry who are highly skilled and capable but who may not be able to pass the written exam because their literacy skills are low.

Comment

The findings in this report are a positive step towards the on-going development of a literacy strategy for the BCITO as it suggests:

- that the literacy of new entrants is often not sufficient to meet the literacy required by training and sometimes the job;
- a mismatch between the literacy requirements of the job and the literacy requirements of the training material provided. While this is inevitable consideration should be given to attempting to narrow this gap as much as possible;
- that there are literacy needs among trainees, and some employers, that are not adequately catered for within the current training and re-training system for carpentry and specialist trades; and
- there is low understanding of literacy – how to recognise it and how to raise it - amongst key stakeholder groups and this is resulting in some negative attitudes towards trainees, and trainee reluctance to self-identify as needing help.

The extent of the gap between the literacy skills of trainees and the literacy requirements of training and the industry is yet to be determined – both in terms of the numbers of trainees and employers affected and the type of skill gap that currently exists.

The BCITO has the potential for strong leverage through training advisors and its employer/assessor networks. As trainees and employers often lack information about options and learning supports available, training advisors are in a uniquely powerful role as influencer and facilitator, to enable appropriate information and options to be accessed and implemented.

Currently many training advisors do not have a training or learning/education background. A future opportunity may include training in adult education principles and up-skilling in understanding literacy issues.

The current training system in offering three options, would seem to be able to cater widely for trainees needs. However, it appears that these options are not promoted or presented to most trainees on sign up – and are sometimes not available within every region.

While some trainees who struggle with their training because of literacy problems are able to access personal support networks this is obviously an ad hoc solution. Greater support from employers and trainees accessing training support systems will provide more consistent results. Employers, however, may find it difficult to provide this support because of business pressures and their limited experience as trainers.

The concept of learning pathways offers trainees choice, and helps build self-esteem. It encourages training advisors to explore learning preferences with trainees, and identify early on what additional supports they are likely to need. They then would need further capability building to play this role, and access to a database of up to date information on practical training courses and literacy tutors available within their area.

On-going monitoring of the progress, problems, solutions and outcomes for small groups of selected trainees with literacy issues within specific localities, would provide valuable learning to help shape future developments.

Current revamping of the “box of books” is moving in line with the type of improvements trainees suggested. Further development work in design of training materials that better support a variety of learning styles and offer more visual supports would be beneficial to all trainees. It should be noted that rewriting training material to lower the literacy level required does not necessarily equate to dumbing down the content. Rather it involves making the same content more accessible to trainees.

Trainees have said they are finding difficulty linking the off-job learning to the on-job tasks. The research evidence in many countries is strongly supporting the long term value of investing in the development of on-job solutions.

Concerns expressed about the evenness of assessment practice can be problematic for trainees with low literacy as it means that they may not have their literacy issues identified early in the assessment process and assessors may not be picking the most appropriate ways of assessing these trainees. Alternatively assessors may recognise obvious technical skills and not identify the foundation skills which are required for competency to be achieved.

On-going concern with the difficulty many existing competent practitioners may have with the new registration requirements because of (real or perceived) low literacy levels is undoubtedly having an impact on the number of builders pursuing registration. This will become more of an issue as the final date for registration approaches. Ensuring that the literacy levels of the registration process are closely matched to the literacy required to (competently) perform the job expected of a builder may be part of the ongoing analysis carried out by the BCITO.

Next Steps

A suggested approach for 2005, which would be a first step in the BCITO literacy strategy, would be to identify the size and type of the literacy skills and requirements of the industry by:

1. profiling the literacy skills of new trainees
2. profiling the literacy requirements of the job(s) of employees while they are in training – now and in the future
3. identifying the literacy requirements of the training material
4. comparing the literacy requirements of the industry with the building practitioner licensing process.

There is also an immediate opportunity to increase trainees' awareness of the existing training support options that are available to them if they are struggling with the requirements of training. The affect this may have on demand for training support, and the availability of support would need to be reviewed.

This work would inform, and lead to solutions being found to, the other issues raised in this report. These would form the Literacy Strategy for 2006 and beyond.

Conclusion

The stakeholders involved in the interviews summarised in this report have helped confirm the issues regarding literacy which have been of concern to the BCITO. These are a complex set of issues which will continue to impact on the outcomes of training and job performance for the industry. However, given the BCITO's central role in providing training materials and training support, it is in an extremely strong position to address the literacy issues faced within the sector. It is hoped that this report generates some ideas for the future that the will assist the BCITO in this journey.

Appendix

Interviews for literacy project 2004

Building and construction industry

Stakeholder groups	Total number of people spoken to	Individual interviews	Group meetings	Locations
BCITO staff (Managers and Advisors)	17	9	1 (8 people)	Auckland, Wellington, Tauranga
Providers	27	7	1 (20 people)	South Auckland, Wellington, Otago, Porirua, Auckland Central
Trainees	9	9		Auckland, Wellington, Tauranga
Employers	9	9		Auckland, Tauranga
Assessors	9	9		Auckland, Tauranga
National advisory groups	2	2		
Regional advisory group	1	1		
Union	1	1		

BCITO staff; Management: Regional Managers (2), HR Manager, Training Manager, Business Development Manager, Qualifications Manager, Training Advisors

Providers; Unitec (group sessions), Otago, (phone session) High School (2), both day schools and evening adult community education providers, Tradestaff – apprenticeship trainees

Trainees; carpentry (4) and special trades (5), Maori (1), female (1)

Employers; carpentry (4) and special trades (5)

Assessors; not necessarily employers, maybe supervisors, manufacturer's representatives (carpentry and specialist trades)

National Advisory Groups; both were part of other stakeholder groups

Regional Advisory Group; one employer

Union; also on National Advisory Group