



Skills transform lives, generate prosperity and promote social inclusion. Without the right skills, people are kept at the margins of society. Many working aged Nova Scotians did not graduate high school. Their skills run the gamut, as do their life goals and personal expectations. Unfortunately a variety of social, emotional and physical blockers including family responsibilities, illness and undiagnosed learning disabilities interrupted or stopped learning journeys.

Individuals without a high school diploma or GED are two times more likely to be unemployed than they were a decade ago, and the length of time between jobs has increased, the number of hours worked fewer and the demand for income assistance higher. Entry level jobs previously performed by low literate/skilled working aged adults have been changed by technology and the increase in hiring of Temporary Foreign Workers.

A recently released fact sheet from Statistics Canada, *Economic Downturn and Educational Attainment*, clearly spells out the relationship between educational attainment and employment rates.¹ In 1990, the employment rate for those without high school attainment was 56%; by 2011, however, that number dropped to 37.2%.

Today's job market has witnessed a decline in repetitive and manual labour jobs and seen an increase in jobs requiring higher-level thinking skills. The decline in employment rates for those without high school attainment virtually parallels the exponential growth in technology. This trend is described by economists as *skills-biased technological change*. Technology can do things now that only a few years ago were thought to be beyond the reach of computers.²

We don't need extensive research to prove that finding and retaining a job for those with low education attainment is difficult. Nor do we need extensive research to show the relationship between those without a high school diploma relying on income assistance for survival. Employment Insurance states that almost half of the male repeat claimants (48.5%) did not graduate from high school.³

The transition from income assistance to work is difficult. A report issued in 2008 revealed that 33% will return to income assistance within the first year, and 50% within five years.⁴

¹ Education Indicators in Canada Fact Sheet (June 2012) Catalogue no. 81-599-X — Issue no. 009, ISSN 1709-8653, ISBN 978-1-100-20665-3

² Erik Brynjolfsson, co-author of *Race Against the Machine* (Lohr 2011).

³ Schwartz and Nicholson 2001 Clearer Sightlines to Employment

⁴ Lightman, Mitchell and Herd, Dean. 2008. "One Year On: Tracking the Experiences of Current and Former Welfare Recipients in Toronto". *Journal of Poverty* 9.4.

Income assistance recipients face many toxic stressors in their life, poverty, food security, violence in the home, mental health, and low literacy to name but a few. While a “work-first” quickly move income assistant recipient into the labour market it forces them into entry level jobs with unstable hours, no benefits and little security. Community learning organizations (CLO’s) look to eliminate the supply side of the income assistance burden by helping low skilled, low literate, low employed and unemployed working aged adult gain the skills needed to work in a knowledge-based economy.

A learner enrolled in a community learning program will take two to five years to gain the skills needed for long-term sustainable employment. In Nova Scotia 11 CLO’s deliver a unique learning opportunity by blending employment readiness programming with basic adult upskilling. These blended programs have a higher program completion rate leading to successful attachment to the labour market.

The value of basic adult education is always underrated, even though its learners will directly benefit today’s workforce. Learners enrolled in community learning programs need and want to be productive.

Poor literacy skills are directly linked to higher poverty and lower health outcomes, so it would follow naturally that if we want healthier lives and meaningful employment for all Canadians, improving literacy will reap substantial benefits.

Functionally illiterate Nova Scotians can read and understand basic text with some degree of fluency. They can find a single piece of information in the written text if it relates to a question or directive they have been given, they can also understand basic vocabulary. When we look at math skills functionally illiterate Nova Scotians can perform simple mathematical processes (count/sort/basic arithmetic). They can understand simple percentages, graphs and spatial representations, but cannot handle complex problems.

UNESCO defines functional illiteracy as “measured by assessing reading, writing and mathematical skills in the various domains of social life which influence individual identity and insertion into society. From this perspective, literacy involves not only reading and writing but also the acquisition of the skills necessary for effective and productive performance within society.”⁵

Strong literacy skills benefit the individual, the workforce and the economy. Simply put, a smarter worker is a more productive one. Trapping low literate/skilled working aged Nova Scotians in jobs where their skills will continue to deteriorate places an unfair burden on the individual, their family, the government and generations to come. “Investing in their education will increase their long-employment opportunities. Good jobs now and in the future will encompass thinking, doing and continuous learning in every field regardless of discipline.

In today’s knowledge-based economy jobs are becoming more complex and illiteracy, or a lack thereof, affects virtually every aspect of society, from poverty and crime rates to health care and the economy.

Reading and math proficiency in Nova Scotia is on the decline according the United Nations Economic Culture and Scientific Organization. This could explain why workers, businesses and economies across Canada and in overseas countries are outperforming their Nova Scotian counterparts.

⁵ Brown, G (2011); Education for All: beating poverty, unlocking prosperity; UNESCO

Poor literacy can have a number of negative effects. According to the World Literacy Foundation, “businesses with poor literacy chart significant losses as a result of needing to correct orders and process refunds and customers turning away the business following poor communication -- not to mention the internal problems that can arise from miscommunication. Low literacy skills costs the global economy \$1.9 trillion annually”⁶

The Dartmouth Learning Network has been offering a successful but registration limited Employment Readiness Program for the past four years. With financial support through the Department of Community Services Work Skills Program this program will be expanded to include and increased number of learners who are low skilled, low literate, low employed or unemployed living in Dartmouth North.

Many income assistant recipients want a job and have a desire to work. Some may even have had a job in the past, and other may have not worked at all. Regardless of their background these individuals no longer have a choice; they must find and retain employment. This will not be an easy journey as many have not experienced paid work. If the individual is lucky enough to secure a job, retaining it becomes another challenge because they have poor work habits and attitudes. Their situation is further aggravated by their lack of work experience and understanding of how to present them self to a protective employer.

The Dartmouth Learning Network will work with community partners to assist 16-24 low literate, low skilled, low employed and unemployed working age adults residing in Dartmouth North to take a holistic approach to employment preparedness. We will follow four strategic pathways:

- Life Skill Development
- Employment Strategies
- Computer Training
- Industry Certifications

Program Outline

- Community Partners identify 24 participants to be screened to enter into an enhanced Employment Readiness Program to be offered by the Dartmouth Learning Network
- Learners attend orientation and screening session to determine literacy levels and career objectives

Learner Program Outcomes:

- Learners will develop a personal inventory that will help them learn about their strengths, weaknesses, and interests.
- Learners will learn to set goals and discover the important steps for searching successfully for the job best suited to them.
- Learners will learn proven ways to help them connect with the right job, company or employer.
- Learners will learn the proper way to prepare a resume that fits them to the job they are interested in.
- Learners will learn how to write a cover letter that tells a prospective employer what to look for in the resume.

⁶ Cree, A, Kay, A, Steward, J (2012) [The Economic & Social Cost of Illiteracy](#); World Literacy Foundation

- Learners will learn how to anticipate and respond to interview questions, how to dress, and the importance of body language.
- Learners will receive information on the best ways to look for a job and fill out an application.
- Learners will learn how to become a successful employee who works well with others and can look forward to advancement.

Employer Program Outcomes

- Through a Hire Local First communication strategy employers will develop and understanding of the hidden labour market in the community.
- Employers will be able to visit the www.hirelocalfirst.ca website to search the resumes of prospective employees that fit the requirements of their entry level positions.
- Employers will be able to post entry level employment opportunities that learners can be matched to.
- **Hire Local First has the potential to be expanded across the province.**