

MOVING FORWARD ON WORKPLACE LEARNING

Report from the Forum on
Employer Investment in Workplace Learning

By Ron Saunders

Prepared for the Canadian Council on Learning

Table of Contents

1. Introduction	1
2. The Key Issues.....	1
3. The Discussion Paper.....	2
4. Promising Practices	3
5. Dialogue on Promising Approaches and Action Steps	4
6. So Now What?.....	6
Appendix A. Roundtable Agenda.....	8
Appendix B. Roundtable Participants	10

Moving Forward on Workplace Learning

Introduction

The foundation of a skilled and knowledgeable society lies in early childhood development and in our formal systems of education: our primary and secondary schools, our colleges, and our universities. However, the need to invest more in our current workforce has never been greater. The demands of the knowledge economy coupled with the transformational nature of information technology mean frequent changes in skill requirements on the job. And most of the people who will be in the workforce in 2015 are in it today, so it's becoming more urgent to make the best use of the workers we have now.

Despite all the warnings, Canada's performance in workplace learning has been mediocre. Less than 30 percent of adult workers in Canada participate in job-related education and training, compared to almost 35 percent in the UK and nearly 45 percent in the US.¹ And access to learning opportunities for less-educated adults, whether by returning to the formal education system through government-funded programs in the community or through employer-sponsored training, is generally poor in Canada.² Over 40 percent of adult Canadians lack the literacy and numeracy skills they need to live and work in today's society and this figure has remained virtually constant for the last decade.

To understand better why this is the case, to document promising initiatives in Canada and elsewhere, and to explore ideas for improving workplace learning in Canada, the Canadian Council on Learning (CCL) commissioned Canadian Policy Research Networks (CPRN) to prepare the discussion paper, *Employer Investment in Workplace Learning in Canada*. CPRN and CCL then brought together leaders from the business and labour communities, from the colleges, and from federal and provincial governments to discuss the issues raised in this paper and to identify steps that should be taken to improve the quantity and quality of employer investment. The *Forum on Employer Investment in Workplace Learning* was held in Ottawa on November 9th, 2006.

This document reports on the highlights of the discussion at the Forum and the ideas for action that emerged from it.

The Key Issues

Participants in the Forum were asked to briefly outline what they saw as the key issues in employer-sponsored training. The most fundamental issue identified was that of insufficient employer investment. Many participants saw this as a longstanding problem and felt that leadership is needed at the national level in order to move forward. Other issues/thoughts mentioned included:

¹ Mark Goldenberg, *Employer Investment in Workplace Learning in Canada*, Canadian Policy Research Networks (CPRN) (2006).

² Karen Myers and Patrice de Broucker, *Too Many Left Behind: Canada's Adult Education and Training System*. Canadian Policy Research Networks (2006).

- Access to learning opportunities is seen by workers as a key aspect of job quality. With the aging labour force, employers will increasingly have to offer learning opportunities in order to attract and retain employees.
- Some expressed concern as to whether this will extend to more investment in training for less-educated/less-skilled employees, including literacy/basic skills training.
- Money for training costs is not the only issue. Workers need time off to participate in training programs; teaching approaches need to be sensitive to adult learning styles; and high quality programs are needed to generate the results that will invite employers to increase investment (and workers to want to participate).

The Discussion Paper

The Forum included a brief overview of the discussion paper by its author, CPRN Research Associate Mark Goldenberg. Mark reviewed why workplace learning is important; how Canada is currently doing; the barriers to doing more (which include time, money, lack of information, employer concerns about “poaching,” questions about return on investment, and access to training resources); the need for action by employers, workers, governments and educational institutions; the types of instruments that can support workplace learning (and current policies and programs in Canada); and some of the ideas put forward in interviews held with knowledgeable parties in the preparation of the discussion paper. Common proposals included:

- partnerships among firms, workers, unions, governments and educational institutions;
- a tool box with a wide variety of supports and initiatives and the flexibility to tailor their application to specific needs and circumstances;
- awareness campaigns and the collection of evidence to convince employers about the benefits of investing in workplace learning; and
- enhanced government financial incentives to firms (e.g., tax credits, matching training funds) and/or individuals (e.g., training leave, vouchers, use of Employment Insurance to provide benefits to workers on training leave).

Among the proposals put forward in the interviews were: greater support for sectoral initiatives such as sector councils; closer collaboration between businesses and educational institutions; stronger national recognition and qualification systems, including foreign credential recognition; and action on basic skills and literacy.

Promising Practices

The Forum included presentations regarding two examples of innovative workplace learning initiatives.

Staples Business Depot

Joanne Taylor, Director, Corporate Human Resources and Organizational Development, for Staples Business Depot spoke about Staples' commitment to provide learning and development opportunities to a diverse workforce of 13,500 employees at 300 work locations. It is an ambitious program, especially considering the fairly high staff turnover that is inevitable in the retail sector. Key features of Staples' approach include:

- a blend of e-learning and classroom training (with increasing emphasis on the former), coupled with active coaching on a daily basis;
- information that is easy to find on an internal portal;
- a resource library designed to meet varying learning styles;
- co-financing of training regarding product knowledge by the vendors of those products;
- a program of tuition reimbursement for college and university courses;
- a learning and development plan for every position; and
- measuring results.

Staples has found that this approach has strengthened employee commitment while enhancing customer service. Nevertheless, Ms. Taylor noted that it is much easier to garner support for training driven by short-term needs (such as the launch of new products) than it is for long-term skills development. This applies not only to investment by the employer, but also to participation by employees, as illustrated by the low uptake of the tuition reimbursement program.

Nova Scotia Community College and Dexter Construction Company

Ken Jones, Dean, Customized Training and Part-Time Studies, for the Nova Scotia Community College (NSCC) spoke to Forum participants about the NSCC's learning partnership with Dexter Construction Company.

Dexter had been having difficulty attracting enough skilled workers to meet its needs. The solution was the establishment of the Dexter Institute, a two-year program involving a mix of classroom time at NSCC (funded through tuition fees) and practical training on-site at Dexter in all aspects of Civil Construction (involving paid time for the "interns"), a job guarantee upon graduation, and a retention bonus for those graduates who stay with Dexter for at least two years. The opportunity to earn while learning has proven attractive, with many more applicants than places. Over 200 students have enrolled in the program over six years.

Ken noted that among the keys to success for the program were: support from the company's top management; relevant, up-to-date training material; and the attractive package for participants – a college diploma, a good career, the opportunity to “earn as you learn,” and the retention bonus.

Canadian Autoworkers Union

The forum also heard from David Robertson, Director, Work Organization and Training, Canadian Autoworkers Union (CAW), about the organization's efforts to promote and deliver workplace learning programs. The CAW has given priority to training issues in collective bargaining (bargaining with the companies for funding as well as time off for the participants). The training activity focuses on both basic and technical skills as well as the development of a respectful workplace culture. In order to achieve adequate investment in training, the CAW's view is that governments need to establish obligations for companies and provide supports to the workplace parties to facilitate training programs.

It is worth noting that the issue of “obligation” is clearly a contentious one, with representatives from employer associations expressing the view that legislated requirements are not effective.

Dialogue on Promising Approaches and Action Steps

In small, multi-stakeholder discussion groups, forum participants were asked to identify the most promising approaches to improve the quantity and quality of employer investment in workplace learning, taking into account the examples in the discussion paper and the presentations at the Forum. They were then asked to put their ideas in the form of recommended actions.

The ideas that emerged fell into the following categories, with proposed action steps highlighted in bold.

Financial Incentives

- There was a general view that additional financial incentives are needed from governments to foster more investment/participation in structured learning activities.
- One specific suggestion was for a training leave program with EI-funded benefits for the participants. This would implicitly involve contributions from employers, workers, training participants (who would receive benefits at the EI support rate – well below their full salaries) and governments.
- However, while many (though not all) participants favoured the use of EI to provide training incentives, there was no consensus at the Forum on how best to use the EI fund in this regard. Accordingly, one possible action step would be to **bring the key stakeholders together for further dialogue towards developing a strategy for the use of EI funds to support training.**

- The possibility of a tax credit for training was also discussed, but there were concerns about how to design this so that it fosters incremental training and does not just end up providing public funds to employers who would train anyway.
- There was little or no support among participants for the establishment of individual learning accounts.

Recognition/Certification of Prior Learning

- Forum participants noted that certification of individuals' prior learning will help encourage further engagement in learning activity as well as greater utilization of workers' existing skills in the workplace.
- While there are numerous prior learning recognition systems in place (e.g., at colleges and universities), it would be helpful to **establish an ongoing multipartite (business, labour, governments, educators) mechanism to develop standards for prior learning certification.**

Accreditation of Training Providers

- Forum participants noted the importance of having quality standards for training providers.
- To ensure that training programs are of high quality, we need to **identify ways of measuring the quality of training providers and develop a standard for accreditation.**

Certification of Employer Training Systems

- The idea was also put forward of **establishing an ISO-type certification system for employers' training activities.** Employers would be assessed using independent criteria and those who were deemed to systematically provide high quality learning activities could be certified, and this would become a way for employers to make themselves more attractive to potential employees.
- The UK's "Investors in People" program and the UK's Adult Learning Inspectorate were cited by some participants as possible models. A Quebec program for recognizing skills acquired in the workplace, the "Cadre général de développement et de reconnaissance des compétences," was also mentioned.

Collaboration

- The sector councils were seen by Forum participants as vehicles for useful collaboration on learning initiatives among employers, labour groups, and training providers. **Training partnerships among vertically linked companies should be encouraged.** This may be a vehicle for larger companies to help smaller suppliers develop the skills of their employees.

- Forum participants felt it would be helpful to **establish links among sector councils at the national level, sectoral organizations at the provincial level, and local/regional level bodies for coordinating labour market programs.**

Leadership

The discussion that drew the most consensus at the Forum was about the need for leadership and champions to encourage employer investment in workplace learning in Canada. The problem of underinvestment has been identified for a long time and is becoming more pressing with the aging of the workforce.

Some felt that, notwithstanding the devolution of much of the responsibility for labour market programs to the provinces, it is critical that the federal government exercise leadership regarding the importance of skills development for employed workers. The view was that the workplace learning agenda has become of increasing importance to Canada's prosperity through its effects on productivity and competitiveness, and so should be identified by the Prime Minister – and not just the Minister of Human Resources and Social Development – as a priority in the context of an overall national economic agenda. Accordingly, some forum participants suggested that **stakeholders raise the workplace learning issue with the Prime Minister, indicating also what actions the stakeholders themselves would be prepared to do.**

Others stressed the need for shared leadership, from both levels of government and from CEOs of major corporations. It was noted that **the Work and Learning Knowledge Centre of the Canadian Council on Learning could provide a forum for further dialogue among the key players,** including leaders from the business and labour communities.

“To change business, you need to use business as a model, not a politician.”

Forum participant

So Now What?

The ideas for action shared at the Forum involve multiple stakeholders. The opportunity is there for firms, unions, governments, and educational institutions all to play a role in improving the quantity and quality of employer investment in workplace learning.

- **CEOs (and heads of employer associations)** can champion investment in workplace learning within their own organizations, in vertically linked companies, among employer colleagues, and in their discussions with government officials.
- **Unions** can continue to make investment in training a priority in collective bargaining and in public policy advocacy.
- **Organizations engaged in facilitating training partnerships** at the national, provincial, and community levels could look for opportunities to collaborate and exchange information on promising initiatives. (In this regard, CCL intends to work with stakeholders, including those not at the Forum, to identify exemplary practices.)

- And **governments** clearly have a role to play, in exploring new or enhanced incentives for employers and workers to participate in learning activities, in fostering the development of standards regarding recognition of prior learning and the accreditation of training providers, and in increasing awareness among Canadians of the importance of skills and lifelong learning for our competitiveness and future economic development and success, both for individuals and nationally.

Action is needed on all these fronts. Canada's continued prosperity depends on it.

Appendix A

Roundtable Agenda

Forum on Employer Investment in Workplace Learning

9am – 4.30pm : November 9, 2006
14th Floor, 250 Albert Street Ottawa

AGENDA (rev November 8)

Objectives of the Forum

1. Explore and reach some agreement on the importance of employer investment in learning in Canada
2. Identify promising policies and practices to ensure that the quantity and quality of workplace learning in Canada match the needs of the economy and maximize the potential of our people
3. Identify practical follow-up steps that could be taken by participants to improve workplace learning in Canada

8:30 Registration

Continental Breakfast

9:00 Opening remarks

Dr. Paul Cappon, President and CEO of the Canadian Council on Learning

Objectives, expected outcomes and context for the Forum discussions

Arthur Kroeger, Chair for the Forum, former Deputy Minister of six federal departments

Introductions

Suzanne Taschereau, CPRN Senior Advisor and Facilitator for the Forum

9:30 Employer investment in learning: What the research says

Brief overview of key themes and issues from the discussion paper *Employer Investment in Workplace Learning in Canada*

Mark Goldenberg, Research consultant and former Assistant Deputy Minister – Human Resources Development Canada

9:45 Dialogue and Plenary Discussion on Key Themes and Issues

Exchange at tables followed by dialogue in plenary

10:40 Break

11:00 Examples of innovative policies and practices in workplace learning

Joanne Taylor, Director, Corporate Human Resources and Organizational Development, Staples Business Depot

Ken Jones, Dean, Customized Training & Part-time Studies
Nova Scotia Community College

11:45 Identifying most promising approaches to move forward
Exchange in mixed working groups including Business, Union, Government, and Educational institutions.

12:30 Buffet Lunch

PM

1:30 Report back and plenary discussion

2:15 Identifying steps that could be taken by government, business, etc.
Working groups by 'community' – one for government, one for business, one for educational institutions, etc.

3:00 Short Break

3:15 Report back and plenary discussion

4:00 Next Steps

4:15 Closing comments

Shirley Seward, Chief Executive Officer, Canadian Labour and Business Centre

Daryl Rock, Associate Director, Knowledge Exchange, Canadian Council on Learning

Arthur Kroeger and Sharon Manson Singer, President, Canadian Policy Research Networks

4:30 Adjourn

Appendix B

Roundtable Participants

CPRN/CCL Forum on Employer Investment in Workplace Learning
November 9, 2006

250 Albert Street, 14th Floor

List of Participants

The Honourable Perrin Beatty

President and CEO
Canadian Manufacturers and Exporters

Diane Bellemare

Première vice-présidente et économiste en chef
Conseil du Patronat

Barbara Bremner

Associate Vice President
Electronic Learning and Technology
Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science
and Technology

Paul Brennan

Director
Corporate and Community Relations
Association of Canadian Community
Colleges

Andrew Cardozo

Executive Director
The Alliance of Sector Councils

Tracy Defoe

Teleflex Canada

Terry Downey

Executive Vice-President
Ontario Federation of Labour

Carolynne Fletcher

Director
Corporate Education Centre
Humber Institute of Technology and
Advanced Learning

Paul Holden

Director
Industry Training Partnerships
Manitoba Competitiveness, Training and
Trade

Andrew Jackson

National Director
Social and Economic Policy
Canadian Labour Congress

Karen Jackson

Assistant Deputy Minister
Workplace Skills
Human Resources and Social Development
Canada

Ken Jones (presenter)

Dean
Customized Training and Part-time Studies
Nova Scotia Community College

William Lahey

Deputy Minister
Environment and Labour
Government of Nova Scotia

François Lamontagne

Coordinator
Work and Learning Knowledge Centre

Scott MacInnis

Director
Continuing Education and Contract Training
Camosun College

Andrée Mallette
Adjointe exécutive
Commission des partenaires du marché du travail

Philip Mondor
Vice-President
Canadian Tourism Human Resource Council

Laurette Morris
Director
Strategic Policy, Health Benefits and Child Support Services
Alberta Human Resources and Employment

Conrad Murphy
Workplace Learning Manager
Bow Valley College

Michael N. Murphy
Executive Vice-President
Policy
Canadian Chamber of Commerce

Bryan Neath
National Coordinator
Training and Education Department
United Food and Commercial Workers
Canada

David Robertson
Director
Work Organization and Training
Canadian Autoworkers' Union of Canada

Derwyn Sangster
Director
Canadian Labour and Business Centre

Shirley Seward
Chief Executive Officer
Canadian Labour and Business Centre

Joanne Taylor (presenter)
Director
Corporate Human Resources and Organizational Development
Staples Business Depot

Ron Townsend
International Representative
The United Association of Journeymen and Apprentices of the Plumbing and Pipefitting Industry of the United States and Canada

Nicholas S. Wise
Director
Program Policy
Human Resources and Social Development
Canada

Leslie Woo
Director, Labour Market Policy Branch
Ontario Ministry of Training Colleges and Universities

Donna Wood
(Researcher on Labour Market Issues)
Ph.D. Candidate, University of Edinburgh

CPRN and CCL

Richard Brisbois

Researcher
Canadian Policy Research Networks Inc.

Paul Cappon

President and CEO
Canadian Council on Learning

Jennifer Fry

Director
Public Affairs
Canadian Policy Research Networks Inc.

Mark Goldenberg

Research Associate
Work Network
Canadian Policy Research Networks Inc.

Arthur Kroeger

Chair of the Board
Canadian Policy Research Networks Inc.

Daryl Rock

Associate Director
Knowledge Exchange
Canadian Council on Learning

Ron Saunders

Director
Work Network
Canadian Policy Research Networks Inc.

Suzanne Taschereau

Facilitator