

Canada's hidden skills gap

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There has been a lot of talk lately about the skilled worker shortage in Canada. What we should be talking about is the shortage in workers who have adequate essential skills.

Essential skills are the skills we all must have to thrive in our work: Oral communication, reading, document use, computer use, working with others, basic math, thinking, continuous learning and writing.

Every job demands these in varying degrees, and they are transferable from one job to the next. Canadians should all leave school with these skills and continue to develop them over time. Studies have proven that the more of these skills we have and use, the better our health, the higher our incomes and the more we engage in our communities.

Unfortunately, they are also the skills that more employers than ever are complaining they lack.

It is not a question of whether you have them or you don't; think of them as a continuum. Many of us have some of these skills, but not enough to thrive in today's knowledge-based economy. There is an oversupply of people whose skills levels fall short and a huge number of jobs that need people to be further along the continuum.

The cost of the skills gap is difficult to calculate, but Serge Coulombe and Jean-François Tremblay, economics professors at the University of Ottawa, have estimated that a one-per-cent gain in literacy skills leads to a 2.5-per-cent increase in productivity and a 1.5 per cent increase in GDP - a potential boost of \$27 billion in today's economy.

Our school systems have begun to realize they have not been keeping up. Alberta is refocusing its curriculum on literacy and numeracy, and is overhauling the education system to ensure its students have the skills required for the 21st century.

The recent Programme of International Student Assessment results showed that the math scores of Canada's 15-year-olds are 14 points lower than they were nine years ago.

In light of this, many jurisdictions across the country are taking a hard look at "Discovery Math" and other recent innovations in education to make sure children have both the basic skills they need, as well as the capacity to think critically and work creatively. Changes to our K-12 systems will need time to design, implement and take effect.

Post-secondary institutions are also experiencing increased demands for "job-ready" graduates. This includes not only job-specific skills, but also the skills of communicating, thinking and working with others that are so vital in today's workplaces. Post-secondary institutions have instituted committees to advise on program content and other initiatives to help meet these demands.

There is one sector, though, that is not pulling its weight to get the supply and demand of essential skills in equilibrium, a sector that seems to be making demands, but not doing enough about improving the supply.

Canadian employers have lagged in workplace training investment compared to their OECD competitors, dropping training budgets by more than 40 per cent over the last decade. It is hardly coincidental that they also lag in labour productivity and competitiveness.

Employers in Canada, and especially in the West where we are also experiencing a technical skills shortage, would be well advised to invest in workplace essential skills training for their employees. They cannot hire their way out of this problem - there just are not enough workers available.

They would find that the increased productivity from their existing and "up-skilled" workforce would help to offset some of the technical shortages they are experiencing. They would also find an increase in safety, employee retention and customer satisfaction. In fact, the benefits far outweigh the costs.

Workplace training is available through a variety of providers, including government agencies, colleges and non-profit organizations that specialize in programming specific to each sector and often to the employer. While the details have yet to be worked out, it appears that if criteria are met, this training would be eligible for funding under the Canada Job Grant.

The essential skills shortage is a pan-Canadian problem. It is time for all of us to recognize that these skills are aptly named and demand that employers play their part in increasing the essential skills supply.

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