# Need Help With Upskilling? Here’s Where to Start.

Support workforce development through workplace literacy

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# Welcome!

Do you have a sense that basic education gaps are the source of your workforce development challenges? If so, we have a solution you!

* Got staffing challenges?
* Do applicants lack the basic skills needed to meet your demands?
* Got trusted workers you can’t promote due to foundational skills?
* Is weak digital literacy hampering automation advancements?

If you are finding business challenges related to basic foundational skills, you’re not alone. The trend toward increasing skills and responsibilities to frontline workers, as well as increased automation, is placing skills pressures on employers. Job seekers often lack necessary skills and trusted incumbent workers often lack key basic skills to adjust to innovations.

More stringent hiring criteria is not always the answer, and does not solve the advancement options among the longer-standing current employees.

# **A Local Solution Outside Your Doo**r!

This short guide will help you build a solution through a workplace literacy program.

As you proceed, please keep in mind that Behind Every Employer is a resource team of employers like yourself who have pursued the path you are on, found solutions, are still working on them, and are ready to help.

# Getting Started

## Why a Workplace Literacy Program?

The American workforce has become increasingly diverse over the last half century. This diversity has fueled the US economy well during that time, but has also brought skill gaps depending on where in the country you do business.

You are probably familiar with the skills gap. Business challenges related to foundational skills are not unique to your workplace. Nationally, the most recent comprehensive [snapshot](https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/piaac/current_results.asp) of key workforce skills in every state and county in America showed the country is not making progress in improving the skills gap that in 2017 (most recent data) showed that almost 20% of adults in the U.S. were at the lowest levels on basic education, almost 30% lacked basic math skills, and almost a quarter are at the lowest level of digital problem solving.

You can see how your community stacks up [here](https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/piaac/skillsmap/).

## What is a Workplace Literacy Program?

Workplace literacy programs are employee training programs that focus on developing essential literacy and other foundational skills needed for the work. These are defined as essential reading, writing, math, English language, and digital fluency. Included are essential employability skills or soft skills such as interpersonal and resource management, and personal qualities that contribute to effective work relationships such as responsibility, self-discipline, flexibility, integrity, and initiative (more on [employability skills](https://cte.ed.gov/initiatives/employability-skills-framework)).

You might assume that employees either have these skills or not. In actuality, these skills can be enhanced and there is a national system funded to support employers in those efforts.

The good news is you have a resource in your community! Each community in the U.S. has a federal/state funded program to provide workplace literacy services.

## Tell Me About These Resources

Adult education programs are an integral part of our nation’s economic and workforce development strategy. These federally funded programs serve over 1.5 million adults with low basic skills each year providing workplace literacy, English, high school equivalency, employability skills, and digital literacy.

A powerful local asset on their own, adult education programs are just one part of a broader array of workforce development services in your community. American Job Centers provide employment services, access to tax credits, labor market information, services for workers with disabilities, and other services.

The good news is that working with one partner nets you access to the rest!

## What Can I Expect?

Adult education services are customized to the needs voiced by local community partners, including businesses.

In some communities, issues related to limited English proficiency and high school completion are a top priority. In other areas, workforce development training programs and services to employers are a priority to support local economic conditions. While the mix of these services is unique to each local community, every adult education program is able to support the broad portfolio each of these services priorities.

## Where Do I Start?

These following five steps provide an easy guide to getting off to a productive relationship. Once you have considered each area, you are ready to start.

#### What are your pressure points?

First take a close look at your workforce needs.

Do you have a cohort of tenured incumbent workers hired before you carefully screened recruits for foundational skills? Has there been a marked deterioration in the quality of job applicants? Is turnover a problem? Have you recently upgraded or introduced new equipment/computers, or are considering automation enhancements but are worried about adoption?

You may have a mix of some or all of these challenges.

Before you engage with a local provider, it’s best to have a good idea about what you believe your major challenges are. Once you’ve given that a considered analysis, you’ve taken the first step toward being ready to reach out to connect to a local program.

#### Consider what you can bring to the table

Like any productive partnership, workplace literacy programs take commitment and resources from both parties.

Employers with successful workplace literacy programs have a lot of skin in the game. While the actual classes and other services are funded by federal or state funds, employers play an important role in successful programs.

Roles and resources employers should consider include the following:

* Identifying and recruiting workers
* Scheduling classes and identifying a conducive place for classes
* Defining the focus of the curriculum
* Committing time to offer a responsive point of contact in the business
* Providing incentives to workers for program participation
* Working with providers to develop promotional pathways for workers

Another important step may be to talk with others within your business to learn what other divisions are facing similar challenges.

Skill challenges impact business units in different ways. HR managers are looking at metrics related to retention and succession planning; the production team is looking at cycle time, safety, and waste; and purchasing may be struggling with challenges related to the skills of contract workers.

Having a deeper understanding of how foundational skills are impacting the different parts of the business not only provides you with a deep understanding of business pressures, but also helps you build more allies within your business to support your effort.

Once you have a good understanding of your company’s ability to commit to some of these critical elements, it’s time to connect to a local program.

#### Be ready to share the performance that makes your business tick, and listen to what performance drives the adult education provider

We all treasure what we measure. So do adult education providers. Most likely though, the provider understands your business performance pressures about as much as you understand theirs!

Chances are, you are seeking adult education services because of lagging business metrics. Be ready to share those with the provider. Similarly, the adult education provider has performance measures that drive their success and often their funding. It is best to understand those as you begin.

Fortunately, their adult education measures complement yours.

In addition to learning and credential gains, adult education providers have federal measures related to participant employment and earnings. There is even a measure related to effectiveness in serving employers.

That being said, it’s no surprise that educational gains will drive much of a provider’s behaviors. After all, they are an educational organization. But that is why you are here. You need educational services.

Be prepared to find ways that you can work with the provider to find ways to ensure workers can attend class and get the sufficient time needed in class to benefit from services. Skill gaps are causing you challenges. Rectifying what might be years of missed education or time to learn English can be surprisingly quick, but it does take a consistent and supported effort from you.

Finding common ground on performance should be one of your first priorities in your relationship with the adult education program. Once you commit to that, you are ready to reach out.

#### Reaching out

Once you have developed a better sense of what you believe will benefit your business, have talked to others to determine other diving factors within the business, have considered what you can bring to the table, and are ready to have a shared productive discussion about performance, it is time to reach out!

Now you need to find an adult education provider in your area. There are several ways to do this. One is to search the [national list here](http://nasdae.org/state-ae-directory/) for a provider near you.

If cold calling providers does not seem like the best option, or if you have tried that with limited success, consider contacting the American Job Center in your area. Remember, these entities are part of the local workforce development system that includes adult education.

Businesses are the core customer of the American Job Center, and they may have great insight into effective workplace literacy providers in your area.

If you are a business with multiple locations in a state or the country, the best first step may be to contact the state adult education office. These staff have jurisdiction of all federally funded services in a state and have staff skilled at workforce development and career pathways. Find your [state office here](http://nasdae.org/state-ae-directory/).