

PREPARING SBI TEAMS TO DEAL WITH FUNCTIONAL WORKPLACE ILLITERACY

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the seriousness of illiteracy problems in small businesses as reported by 134 owners and/or managers of small businesses. The focus is on the reading, writing, and computational abilities and skills of employees, customers, and suppliers. Suggestions are offered to help SBI directors and student teams when they encounter illiteracy problems in a client's business.

INTRODUCTION

SBI Directors and students on consulting teams may encounter a problem that plagues many businesses-functional workplace illiteracy (FWI). Within or associated with the client's business there may be people who have reading, writing, or computational skills that are deficient and inadequate for the demands of the job and the business.

ILLITERACY IN AMERICA

Illiteracy is a national problem that adversely affects business organizations and operations. Businesses need people who can read, write, and compute, yet according to the Coalition For Literacy, 27-million Americans can't read. (#1) Secretary of Labor Elizabeth Dole described this growing problem when she said,

"At the same time that skills levels are, increasing, you have about 500,000 young people dropping out of school each year and another 500,000 who complete high school but are functionally illiterate. About 20% of workers are functionally illiterate, and many have skills that are obsolete or soon will be obsolete because of the increased technology." (#2)

The problem is even more critical as evidenced by the declining scores on the college entrance tests that gauge advanced reading skills of students hoping to enter colleges and universities. (#3) Verbal scores on the Scholastic Aptitude Test taken by students entering college in 1990, are down and tied for the worst performance ever. (#4)

ILLITERACY PROBLEMS IN BUSINESS

Illiteracy is a major problem for many businesses. The Bottom Line: Basic Skills in the Workplace, a joint publication of the U.S. Department of Labor and the U.S. Department of Education,

describes a major concern of business as the need for workers with stronger basic skills to accomplish tasks in the workplace of today and to adapt to the workplace of tomorrow. (#5) The Wall Street Journal describes American schools as " ... producing students who lack the skills that business so desperately needs to compete in today's global economy." (#6)

The illiteracy problem is described in greater detail in many business oriented publications. FORTUNE, in a special issue, discussed the problem and what businesses are doing. (#7) Supervisory Management offered suggestions for supervisors. (#8) Articles on the problem of illiteracy in business have appeared in recent issues of Association Management and IABC COMMUNICATION WORLD. (#9 and #10)

ISSUES FOR SMALL BUSINESS

While the problem and the responses by businesses are well publicized, Anderson describes two items that are of special interest to those involved with small businesses. First, the issue of work force illiteracy is elusive in that the most of the published literature is anecdotal relating to a few dramatic instances rather than solid data. Second, most of the data does not include small businesses. (#11)

ILLITERACY PROBLEMS IN SMALL BUSINESSES

The Survey

Information about illiteracy problems in small business was obtained from questionnaires completed by the managers and/or owners of 134 small businesses in Texas. Participants in the study were asked to mark the blocks that best describe the seriousness of nine problem areas for their businesses. The problem areas, presented in figure 1, involve the reading, writing, and computational skills/abilities of employees, customers, and suppliers.

FIGURE 1

SERIOUSNESS OF LANGUAGE AND MATH PROBLEMS

AS REPORTED BY SMALL BUSINESS OWNERS AND/OR MANAGERS

VERY SERIOUS SERIOUS SLIGHT NO DESCRIPTION PROBLEM PROBLEM PROBLEM PROBLEM

Reading abilities/skills 1 5 28 100 of employees 0.7% 3.7% 20.9% 74.6%

Writing abilities/skills 1 8 38 87 of employees 0.7% 6.0% 28.4% 64.9%

Mathematical or computational abilities/ 2 6 36 90 skills of employees 1.5% 4.5% 26.9% 67.2%

Reading abilities/skills 1 5 43 85 of customers 0.7% 3.7% 32.1% 63.4%

Writing abilities/skills 1 3 37 93 of customers 0.7% 2.2% 27.6% 69.4%

Mathematical or computational abilities/skills 1 4 41 88 of customers 0.7% 3.0% 30.6% 65.7%

Reading abilities/skills 2 2 13 117 of suppliers 1.5% 1.5% 9.7% 87.3%

Writing abilities/skills 2 1 15 116 of suppliers 1.5% 0.7% 11.2% 86.6%

Mathematical or computational abilities/skills 2 1 16 115 of suppliers 1.5% 0.7% 11.9% 85.8%

Totals may not equal 100% due to rounding.

The Respondents

More than half (54.6%) of the businesses were described as retail operations. The others included 2.2% wholesalers, 5.2% repair and service operations, 7.5% manufacturers, 16.4% professional services, and 14.2% with combined operations. The businesses ranged in size from no full-time employees to 250 full-time employees. Sixty per cent of the businesses reported having part-time employees.

The participants included 79 males and 55 females. They ranged in age from 20 years to 60 years.

Survey Results

The summary of responses, presented in figure 1, reveal that illiteracy and innumeracy are problems for small businesses. Figure 1 presents the number and percent of respondents marking each block.

Reading, writing, and computational skills and abilities of employees are problems for small businesses. While nearly 75% of the respondents indicated "no problem" with the reading ability/skills of employees, one in four respondents did find this to be a problem area. More than one-third (35.1%) of the managers and/or owners of small businesses indicated problems with the writing ability/skills of employees. Nearly one-third (32.9%) described the mathematical or computational abilities/skills of employees as a problem. Considering the importance of reading, writing, and

computational abilities/skills of employees, it is discouraging that so many managers and/or owners of small businesses describe these deficiencies as problems for their businesses.

The literacy and numeracy abilities/skills of customers are problems for a large percentage of the small business owners/managers. Only 63.4% stated that the reading ability/skills of customers were not problems for the business. A large percentage (30.5%) reported problems with the writing ability/skills of customers. One-third (34.3%) reported that the mathematical or computational skills of customers were problems for the business.

Although the literacy and numeracy problems with suppliers are not as great as those with employees and customers, problems do exist. Problems with the reading ability/skills of suppliers were reported by 12.7% of the respondents. A slightly higher percent (13.4%) reported problems with writing ability/skills of suppliers with the highest percent (14.1%) indicating problems with the mathematical or computational ability/skills of suppliers.

Reading, writing, and computational deficiencies of employees, customers, and suppliers are problems for many small businesses. SBI directors and students on the consulting teams must be prepared for FWI problems in small businesses.

PREPARING STUDENT TEAMS FOR FWI PROBLEMS

The program director must be alert for reading, writing, and computational deficiencies of student team members. Declining SAT scores, criticisms of public education, and performance on proficiency exams point to the possibility of language and computational deficiencies of college students who may be on the consulting team. Students with deficiencies will need special attention.

Team members should be alerted to the problem of FWI in small businesses. The information presented in this paper, supported with local area studies, can be useful in emphasizing the reality of such problems for small businesses.

Many articles describe the signs of reading, writing, and computational deficiencies. Student consultants should read industry related materials for specific examples of deficiencies, efforts to hide the deficiencies, and the resulting problems for the business.

While the student consultants should be alert for language and computational deficiencies, they should NOT react immediately to their observations. The observations should be professionally noted and discussed in privacy with the director and other team members.

Student teams should be alert for language and computational deficiencies of customers and suppliers. Customers who are unable to read directions may need graphic aids. Suppliers who deliver the wrong materials may be causing costly problems for the business. The client may need to find new methods for working with customers or suppliers who are illiterate.

Local area programs for combatting illiteracy and innumeracy should be contacted for information and assistance. Community education programs are being alerted to the problems within small businesses. (#12)

The section "Opportunities for Improvement" in the final report can address the problem of illiteracy. Local area remediation programs can be identified and described as well as the possible benefits from such programs.

CONCLUSION

Functional workplace illiteracy is a problem for small businesses. It is a problem that will not go away. SBI directors need to recognize the magnitude of the problem and be prepared to assist the student teams when they encounter illiteracy.

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