

Barriers to employment

Margie Comrie
Elspeth Tilley
Franco Vaccarino

Niki Culligan
Frank Sligo
John Franklin

Illustrated by Kerry Ann Lee,
Art-Design-Illustration,
Phone 021 0333 166, hmsb@bigfoot.com
Wellington

Department of Communication & Journalism Wellington and Palmerston North

What are the major barriers to employment for people with low functional literacy in English? In one-to-one interviews we asked 90 people undertaking literacy training courses to tell us what they perceived as their most significant barriers to employment.

This research programme was initiated by the Wanganui District Library in collaboration with the Department of Communication and Journalism, later joined by the Whanganui Community Foundation, Literacy Aotearoa (Wanganui), and Te Puna Mātauranga O Whanganui.

This poster displays actual quotations from interviews with people of low functional literacy in English. All were taking part in adult literacy training courses and were volunteer participants in this research into adult literacy and employment. Each quotation occurs within an illustration showing people featured against photographic backgrounds of Wanganui. The illustrator, Kerry Ann Lee, developed these depicted persons following the demographics of our interviewees: ages, gender, ethnicity, etc., though, for reasons of privacy, without knowing the specifics of the individuals originally making the comments.

Objectives

1. to document interviewees' experiences in a vivid manner
2. to seek ways to keep interviewees' words in a prominent place in the forefront of the research
3. to find ways in which interviewees' own words might have an appropriate influence in debate about national literacy and employment policy
4. later to provide feedback to interviewees on what they and others had said in a supportive and accessible manner.



1. Need for Formal Qualifications

The provision of adult literacy training is fragile and much in need of development. Obtaining sustainable long-term funding is a major issue. Clear, accessible information is lacking about the range of available funding or applicable criteria. Funding regimes should take into account all the associated costs, especially of working one-to-one with students when needed.



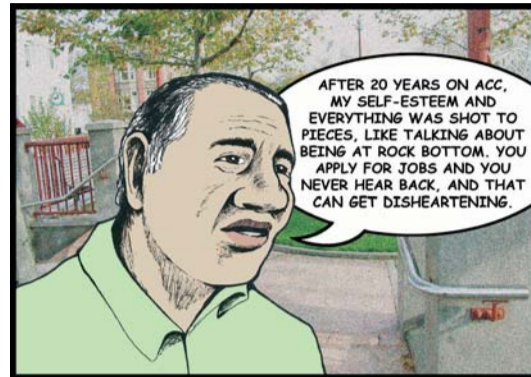
2. Need for Technological Skills

The Workplace Productivity Working Group report (2004) notes that in NZ, labour utilisation (LU) is high by OECD standards, but labour productivity (LP) is relatively low. Our relatively unsuccessful LP rate indicates a capability deficit, including people who lack competencies or opportunities in the workplace to create innovative change. Technological progress requires capacity building right across workplaces, not just hardware and software solutions.



3. Health or Physical Barrier

Health and physical problems are a major barrier to employment and literacy learning. Better identification and support systems are needed for people with problems of poor eyesight, hearing loss, ADHD, dyslexia, and related conditions which have undermined their ability to participate in classroom activities. Specific support to catch up on literacy attainment is the next required step.



4. Lack of Confidence

Especially in a context of low unemployment, often a business has to do what it can for staff with low self-esteem and lack of self-confidence. However, managers may have little training to equip them to assist such individuals. Of concern is the absence of support systems for people in literacy learning once they enter employment.



5. Jobseekers' Attitudes

In a fraught and contested site such as adult literacy and employment, feelings tend to run high. Undoubtedly there is a frustration in the community with people who are perceived as not pulling their weight. It is also true that a minority of individuals decide not to fully enter or re-enter the workforce. Yet this country's high labour utilisation rate illustrates that this group is relatively small.



6. Need for "3 Rs" Literacy

While employers will generally provide job-specific training, they do not believe they should teach functional literacy. Yet businesses need staff to have a high level of competency in communication and other life skills – which are developed in literacy learning. Quality evidence that employers find credible is needed about ways in which literacy learning translates into advances in competencies and other beneficial outcomes for the firm.



7. Lack of Work Experience

Government innovations such as transition from school to work schemes and work experience schemes are all steps in the right direction. The Adult Literacy Strategy has been useful in getting stakeholders to address issues of adult literacy. However, we believe that its relatively narrow alignment to problems of low literacy is now outmoded, and it should be replaced with a Lifelong Learning Strategy.



8. Family Commitments

Family commitments that impede an individual's ability to undertake personal or professional opportunities constitute barriers to both literacy and the workplace, and were identified by many respondents. Interviewees pointed to the need for better childcare support and a more flexible working environment, which come together to create family-friendly workplaces. A family-friendly workplace may be more important to a job-seeker than a high rate of pay.

Reference

Workplace Productivity Working Group (2004). *Workplace productivity challenge. Report of the Workplace Productivity Working Group.* Wellington: Department of Labour (August).

<http://literacy.massey.ac.nz/>
0800 MASSEY (627 739)



Massey University