

# Better basic skills: better business

A guide for employers





**L&W** LEARNING AND  
WORK INSTITUTE

**L&W** SEFYDLIAD DYSGU A GWAITH  
LEARNING AND WORK INSTITUTE

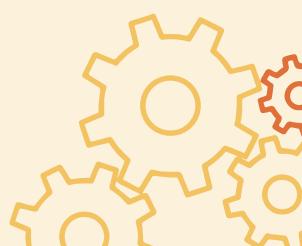


**Forum for Adult Learning NI**

This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

# Contents

<b>1. About this guide</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>2. What are basic skills?</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>3. The basic skills challenge</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>4. The benefits of good basic skills for business</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>5. Funding to support basic skills</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>6. Getting started</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>7. Tips for success</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>8. Employer examples</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>9. Further sources of help</b>	<b>18</b>





# About this guide

There is a growing need for people to upskill and retrain throughout their working lives in response to technological and economic changes. Employees need to adapt and take on board new information and ways of working, but may lack confidence in their skills to be able to keep pace with their employer's business. Addressing literacy, numeracy and digital skills gaps in the workplace can help, benefitting both business and workers.

## Who is this guide for?

This guide aims to help employers work effectively with learning providers, and access sources of funding such as the Adult Education Budget to help address basic skills needs in the workplace. It highlights the benefits of supporting employees to gain good basic literacy, numeracy and digital skills, and provides further information on how to offer training effectively.

## How was the guide developed?

This guide has been developed by Learning and Work Institute following extensive research and sector engagement. These activities included a review of research evidence on workplace basic skills provision, interviews with a range of providers and employers, and workshops with providers and experts to develop and test the content.

## How should this guide be used?

The information in the guide could be used in a number of ways, for example if the organisation is:

- ✓ reviewing the operation and efficiency of the business
- ✓ reviewing the learning and development needs of the business
- ✓ considering approaching a training provider for support





# What are basic skills?

Basic skills are the ability to read, write and speak in English and use maths in everyday life. Skills needed to use basic technology such as phones, laptops, tablets and computers to carry out a range of everyday activities are increasingly considered to be basic skills.

## Example skills for functional literacy (reading, writing, speaking and listening)

- Follow and understand discussions in meetings and make contributions relevant to the situation and the subject
- Identify and understand the main points, ideas and details in workplace texts
- Write simple emails and fill in forms accurately

## Example skills for functional numeracy

- Count quantities for a customer
- Use percentages and subtraction when giving a discount
- Extract data from tables, diagrams, simple line graphs and bar charts

## Example digital skills

- use a workplace email address book to send emails to colleagues and use the 'cc' option when requested
- search for information using browsers such as Chrome, Internet Explorer or Safari
- complete digital records for absence, holidays or expenses online

- follow organisational guidelines and policies for choosing login information including choosing secure passwords and changing them when prompted

For full details on basic skills go to:

[www.gov.uk/government/publications/functional-skills-subject-content-english](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/functional-skills-subject-content-english)

[www.gov.uk/government/publications/functional-skills-subject-content-mathematics](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/functional-skills-subject-content-mathematics)

[www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-digital-strategy](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-digital-strategy)



Most employers use English and maths qualifications – such as GCSEs – as a proxy for basic skills when recruiting new applicants. Few address the literacy, numeracy and digital skills gaps of their workforce although, when

consulted, they reveal concerns about basic skills. For instance, National Numeracy estimates that 68% of employers are concerned about their employees' ability to sense-check numbers.<sup>1</sup>

### Qualifications explained

- Functional Skills qualifications in English, maths and ICT are designed for life and work. They are available at Entry 1, Entry 2, Entry 3, Level 1 and Level 2.
- Each level takes around 55 hours of learning to complete.
- Level 2 (the highest level) in English and maths is comparable to GCSE grade 4 and is the required standard for many jobs and for access to further study.
- Functional Skills are a compulsory requirement for all apprentices who do not hold a level 2 qualification in GCSE English language and maths.

- There are also unit-based awards to support English, maths and digital skills that can accredit smaller units of skills.

Functional skills qualifications and unit-based awards are more flexible than GCSEs. Their content can be contextualised for your workplace and exams can be taken at various points in the year to fit in with your business needs.

**The British Army** delivers English and maths to all soldiers who join the Army without qualifications through the Service's 10 Army Education Centres. Recruits to the Army must have a minimum of Functional Skills Entry Level 2 in English and maths.





# The basic skills challenge

The problem of low basic skills is widespread in England with an estimated 9 million adults of working age having low literacy or numeracy skills or both (more than a quarter of adults aged 16-65). These 9 million people may struggle with day to day tasks at home and at work. They might, for example, find it challenging to estimate how much petrol is left in the petrol tank from a sight of the gauge, or not be able to fully understand instructions on a bottle of aspirin.<sup>2</sup>

11.7 million people in the UK are estimated to be without the digital skills needed for everyday life.<sup>3</sup> That includes being unable to undertake basic activities such as turning on a device, connecting to Wi-Fi and opening an app, or lacking the ability to use the Internet to its full advantage.

Adults are often reluctant to admit difficulties and ask for help. Many people, from store managers to delivery drivers, do not see a need to learn new skills, despite the opportunities they provide. According to OECD analysis, this lack of awareness about the need for training is particularly acute amongst workers in occupations that are very likely to experience large changes due to digitalisation. You may find staff have a range of barriers that prevent engagement with learning, including a lack of awareness, not knowing where to go or who to talk to. In the workplace, people may also worry about admitting to poor basic skills and

adopt coping strategies rather than asking for help because of the fear of losing their job, not being promoted, or being seen as ineffective by colleagues and managers.<sup>4</sup> The problem can be overlooked as workers adopt coping strategies such as relying on colleagues, avoiding tasks or taking longer than necessary to check and re-check emails, reports or data.

*"In the modern workplace limitations to employees' numeracy and literacy are masked by the use of ICT interventions, such as software packages that help with account management, and templates for written correspondence."*

Impact of Poor Basic Literacy and Numeracy on Employers.  
BIS 2016

<sup>2</sup> Kuczera, M, Field, S. and Windisch, H.C. (2016), Building Skills for All: A Review of England. Policy Insights From the Survey Of Adult Skills. Paris: OECD

<sup>3</sup> The Lloyds Banking Group Digital Skills and Inclusion Team (2020) Lloyds Bank UK Consumer Digital Index

<sup>4</sup> OECD (2019) Building Skills for All in England: Enhancing the Basic Skills of People in Work

Without confidence in basic English, maths and digital skills, individuals in your business may struggle with day to day tasks. Employees may also be reluctant to adapt to new ways of working, especially if this involves training courses that assume confidence in basic skills. They may not apply for promotional opportunities and end up 'stuck' in the same role for many years. Providing support with basic skills can utilise their skills and knowledge to progress in your company and take on new responsibilities.

People with low basic skills are a diverse group and it is important not to stereotype. More than 5 million adults with low levels of English and maths are in work, which may create challenges in the workplace. The issues are not always obvious as many employees with basic skills gaps have other qualifications, for example, around one in ten of all university students in England have numeracy or literacy levels below level 2.<sup>5</sup> In addition, an estimated 5.4 million of working adults are currently without basic digital skills yet the government estimates that 90% of all jobs will require some element of digital skills within 20 years.<sup>6</sup>

### Under-utilisation of skills

The European Commission states that under-utilisation of skills is widespread in British industry and has a negative impact on individuals' health and well-being, damaging their longer-term employment prospects. Improving basic skills in the workplace can address this issue, leading to higher levels of employee satisfaction and a more productive workplace.

European Commission, May 2016



5 Kuczera, M, Field, S. and Windisch, H.C. (2016), Building Skills for All: A Review of England. Policy Insights from the Survey of Adult Skills. Paris: OECD  
6 [www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-digital-strategy](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-digital-strategy)



# The benefits of good basic skills for business

There is a growing need for people to upskill and retrain throughout their working lives in response to technological and economic changes driven by Brexit, technological developments and automation. This means that employees increasingly need to adapt to take on board new information and ways of working, but many may lack the basic skills to keep pace with their employer's business.

Learning and skills contribute to economic growth both directly, by improving the skills base available to employers, and indirectly, by underpinning the five foundations of productivity identified by the government: ideas, people, infrastructure, business environment, and places. This is the case for all levels of learning from basic skills to degree level – research clearly shows earnings, employment and productivity gains for each level of learning.

TIME FOR ACTION: Skills for economic growth and social justice. L&W 2019.

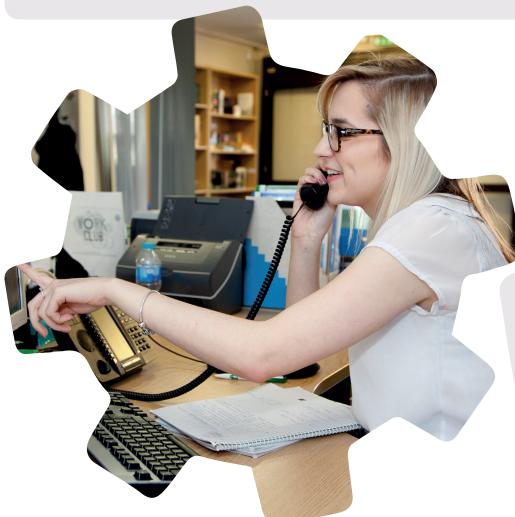
The benefits of adult learning are wide ranging and include improvements in the skills needed for current jobs; improvements in self-confidence; enjoyment from learning more; and feeling more confident at work. Learning helps people to be more productive at work and to produce work of a higher quality. Other work-related benefits include greater job security and satisfaction, securing a new job or promotion, and improving working relationships.

Increasingly, employers are realising that investing in the basic English, maths and digital skills of their staff reaps benefits for business. It helps people to do their jobs more efficiently and effectively, and provides employers with a workforce that can readily adapt to change.

## Business performance improvements

A survey of 4,239 workplaces in England (BIS, 2016) reported the most commonly cited benefits by employers that have delivered public-funded basic skills training are:

- A reduction in the number of errors made by the workforce (cited by 63%)
- An increase in the organisation's capacity to meet statutory and industry requirements (58%)
- Being able to introduce more efficient or new processes (52%)
- Being able to produce higher quality products (51%).



Improving the basic skills of your workforce can:

- ✓ improve compliance with regulations
- ✓ improve performance and productivity
- ✓ increase profits
- ✓ improve communication
- ✓ develop good customer relations
- ✓ improve recruitment
- ✓ improve staff morale
- ✓ help retain staff
- ✓ reduce wastage
- ✓ reduce errors and the risk of reputational damage
- ✓ reduce the risk of online security issues.

### Increased commitment

There is reliable evidence that training increases employee commitment for UK companies. One survey found that those employees who had had five or more days of training in the preceding twelve months were more committed to the organization than those who had received less than five days training. The effect of training held for employees in both the public and private sectors.

NDRC (2003) The benefits to employers of raising workforce basic skills levels: a review of the literature.



# Funding to support basic skills

The government recognises the UK skills deficits so there is a full funding entitlement through the Adult Education Budget (AEB) for adults to achieve their first level 2 qualification in English and maths. From 1 August 2020, the AEB is introducing an additional statutory entitlement to fully fund specified digital skills qualifications for adults, aged 19+, with no or low digital skills.

The AEB allows the delivery of more flexible courses, both formal and informal. It is possible to work in partnership with your local learning provider to develop training that specifically meets your needs and those of your workforce. AEB-funded provision can be delivered by colleges, third sector and independent providers, or Adult Community Learning (ACL) which is

often delivered by Local Authorities. Adult education providers have a remit to provide a range of learning opportunities for adults from all backgrounds and of all abilities, so are able to partner with businesses to deliver courses in the workplace that deliver the skills employers need.



# 6

# Getting started

**Talk to your local adult education or training provider –** this may be an organisation you already work with for other training needs. Local business support services, networks and Chambers of Commerce can also help to identify suitable and reputable training providers.

The local authority's adult education service, local Further Education college or an independent providers, or local authority adult education services. They may have an outreach or business development team who specialise in working with employers and may be able to use Adult Education Budget funding to run basic skills courses for employees. You can work with them to work out the best place to start and a delivery model that suits your business in terms of:

- delivery times and days
- length of courses
- engagement and participation
- accredited or non-accredited training
- in employees own time/company time or shared
- contextualised course content.

"We'll meet an employer, who will run a series of care homes, or childcare places, or they'll be part of a multi-academy trust, and therefore we will work within that group of organisations to deliver a range of things, including basic skills. So, we'll put together a package of things that they want."

(Provider)

**Essex Adult and Community Learning** has a flexible approach to working with employers. Delivery includes blended learning and aims to meet individuals' needs, helping them to progress in their specific job roles. They help employers tailor provision to address identified skills gaps when addressing basic skills.



You may want to run a small pilot with one group of employees or you may want to carry out a training needs analysis to inform you of current skill levels and areas for development in one department or throughout the organisation. A learning provider can help with this.

It is important that everyone, at every level of your organisation, understands the issues and is committed to supporting staff. Establish an appropriate structure for advice and guidance including initial skills checks, assessment, support and progression to higher level learning. Government funding covers course delivery, but you can invest in developing course content that is tailored to your workplace and develops

specific skills such as writing better emails and reports or using authentic, work-related numeracy examples. Basic skills courses can also include building soft skills such as teamwork, problem-solving, resilience and the ability to work under pressure.

You can set up a steering group to monitor the training and ensure its effectiveness for your business. A learning provider can help you evaluate learning activities, gather feedback to inform the programme and ensure there is fair and equal access to learning.



"The haulage company, at the beginning when we first started, a lot of their non-English speaking drivers were getting lost. So, we needed to work with them to improve their basic English skills, but also, we ended up working with those who are staffing the radio, to improve their language skills and communicating with the drivers as well."

(Provider)



"Sometimes employers want to make sure that all their people can do things, such as have digital skills at a certain level. It could be that they are concerned about their health and safety documentation which is too difficult for those whose first language is not English and they want to support them to upskill their English as well as deliver the statutory requirements. So, we tend to go in to listen. We found that listening is the best thing."

(Provider)



# 7 Tips for success



## Promote basic skills positively –

with an emphasis on the benefits it can bring to individuals. Recognise and celebrate success through certificates, award ceremonies, 'learner of the month' and articles in company newsletters. Recognise and record changes such as increased confidence to contribute to meetings or readiness to take on new tasks.



## Embed provision into your existing workplace systems and processes.

Integrating basic skills means that it's more likely it is to be accepted and avoids it being side-lined or stigmatised. This can help to raise the profile of basic skills training as part and parcel of wider staff development.



## Manage expectations.

Work out learning agreements with your staff. Ensure operational managers and supervisors are engaged in the process so they positively support engagement. Include signposting to higher level learning to encourage lifelong learning. Agree whether time to learn will be fully or partly during paid work time.



## Work in partnership.

Get to know the learning provider and what opportunities are available. Work with them to ensure courses fit your business needs and make sure that opportunities are clearly communicated to staff in ways that promote uptake. This can help to work out a learning agreement that includes details of the partnership in terms of venue, resources, staffing, how employees will be recruited, what records will be kept and who has access to these



## Work with unions and union learning representatives.

If your organisation is unionised, union learning reps can help encourage individuals to participate and develop resilience if they find learning tough. Many unions provide online learning and access to union learning centres to support basic skills development.

Union Learning Reps run a range of informal sessions in workplaces which are often aimed at encouraging employees with low levels of basic skills into learning. They also deliver work-specific support around literacy, numeracy and digital skills.

Examples from Unison include numeracy workshops for teaching assistants and health workers and literacy workshops (around formal letter-writing techniques) for employees in the energy sector.





# Employer examples

**The British Army** delivers English and maths to all soldiers who join the Army without qualifications through the Service's 10 Army Education Centres. Recruits to the Army must have a minimum of Functional Skills Entry Level 2 in English and maths. The requirement for speaking and listening skills is Level 1. About 40% of new recruits to the Army will not have gained qualifications above Entry Level 3 prior to joining the Army. All soldiers must reach Entry Level 3 English and maths prior to leaving basic training. Recruits undertake Functional Skills training in English and maths alongside their initial 14-week

Top tips include:

- Whole organisational approach to delivery of basic skills
- Mandatory learning and linking achievement in learning to promotions ensures high levels of engagement.

**Transport for London (TfL)** has its own basic skills team within its Learning and Development Service, the Learning Zone.

It offers various Functional Skills English, maths and digital qualifications, depending on the learners' level and their reason for engagement. Sessions last two hours and run three times weekly so that employees can attend at suitable times outside of work. Staff can self-refer, be signposted by a union learning rep or by their managers through Performance and Development discussions.

Top tips are:

- Flexible provision that suits varying shift patterns.
- Formal and informal opportunities for staff to improve basic skills.





**Jewish Care** is the largest health and social care charity for the UK's Jewish community and provides one to one support in literacy for care staff who do not have a Level 1 or above literacy qualification. This is usually for one hour a week (early mornings or weekends) to fit around shift patterns and the charity uses its own staff and volunteers.

Top tips are:

- The learner-led approach – employees can self-refer
- Context-specific content of lessons
- The informal approach – employees work with a volunteer to work on the skills they need at a time that suits them.



"Typically, learning is related to job roles, for example being able to correctly spell the kitchen implements a learner uses in their role or being able to write down a recipe requested by a resident in a home".

(Provider)



# 9

# Further sources of help

<p><b>Acas Model Workplace</b> helps you to check how good your organisation is at people management - from recruitment to performance management</p>	<a href="https://archive.acas.org.uk/modelworkplace">https://archive.acas.org.uk/modelworkplace</a>
<p><b>Business in the Community</b> helps to create a skilled, inclusive workforce today and for the future</p>	<a href="http://www.bitc.org.uk/who-we-are/">www.bitc.org.uk/who-we-are/</a>
<p><b>The Campaign for Learning</b> produces resources and events such 'Learning at Work Week' to promote adult learning</p>	<a href="http://www.campaign-for-learning.org.uk/">www.campaign-for-learning.org.uk/</a>
<p><b>Investors in People</b> supports continuous improvement and employee recognition</p>	<a href="http://www.investorsinpeople.com/">www.investorsinpeople.com/</a>
<p><b>Government websites:</b> Register of training organisations Functional Skills English content Functional Skills maths content Digital strategy and digital skills</p>	<a href="http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/register-of-training-organisations">www.gov.uk/government/publications/register-of-training-organisations</a> <a href="http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/functional-skills-subject-content-english">www.gov.uk/government/publications/functional-skills-subject-content-english</a> <a href="http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/functional-skills-subject-content-mathematics">www.gov.uk/government/publications/functional-skills-subject-content-mathematics</a> <a href="http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-digital-strategy">www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-digital-strategy</a>

**Learning and Work Institute** has employer case studies to support basic skills

<https://learningandwork.org.uk/resources/research-and-reports/workplace-basic-skills-case-studies/>

**Ofsted** has reports on all training providers detailing the quality of teaching and learning

<https://reports.ofsted.gov.uk/>

**Unionlearn** works with unions to support learners to improve their basic skills. It provides resources, training and case studies

[www.unionlearn.org.uk/](http://www.unionlearn.org.uk/)



# L&W LEARNING AND WORK INSTITUTE

4th floor, Arnhem House,  
31 Waterloo Way, Leicester LE1 6LP

T: +44 (0)116 204 4200

E: [enquiries@learningandwork.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@learningandwork.org.uk)

W: [www.learningandwork.org.uk](http://www.learningandwork.org.uk)

@LearnWorkUK