

Workplace Basic Skills Engagement

Case Study Report

March 2018

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In January 2016, NIACE and the Centre for Economic and Social Inclusion merged to form Learning and Work Institute

Learning and Work Institute

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Learning and Work Institute is a new independent policy and research organisation dedicated to lifelong learning, full employment and inclusion.

We research what works, develop new ways of thinking and implement new approaches. Working with partners, we transform people's experiences of learning and employment. What we do benefits individuals, families, communities and the wider economy.

We bring together over 90 years of combined history and heritage from the 'National Institute of Adult Continuing Education' and the 'Centre for Economic & Social Inclusion'.

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Introduction

Learning and Work Institute (L&W) is an independent policy and research organisation dedicated to promoting lifelong learning, full employment and inclusion. We strive for a fair society in which learning and work helps people realise their ambitions and potential throughout life. We do this by researching what works, influencing policy and implementing new ways to improve people's experiences of learning and employment. We believe a better skilled workforce, in better paid jobs, is good for business, good for the economy, and good for society.

This report presents the findings from work undertaken by the Learning and Work Institute (L&W), on behalf of the Department of Education, to gather evidence and highlight features of effective practice in the delivery of basic skills (English, maths and digital) in the workplace. The scope includes formal, accredited learning (e.g. Functional Skills or other qualifications) delivered via the AEB, non-formal learning, delivered using non-regulated provision under AEB flexibilities, to provide tailored provision in response to locally identified skills needs, and informal learning activities in the work place, such as reading groups and the use of coaching and mentoring approaches. English and maths delivered as part of an apprenticeship are not included in this report. A concurrent L&W project has produced case studies of effective practice in this context.

Background

Evidence from recent L&W project work, such as the ERASMUS+ STRAIGHTEN Basic Skills project and the ET2020 Working Group on Adult Learning's recent Peer Learning Activity on basic skills in the workplace suggests there is scope – and a need – to reinvigorate the delivery of basic skills in the workplace, to ensure that more adults can participate in opportunities to learn at and in work, and to develop more effective partnerships between providers and employers. This has the potential to make an important contribution to addressing basic literacy and numeracy needs in England, in line with national skills priorities.

National statistics have shown a decline in the number of (AEB funded) English, maths and ESOL learners in the last few years. Of those who took up learning in 2017, Learning and Work Institute's Participation in Adult Learning Survey data, which includes both AEB and non-AEB learning, shows that 60% of English learners and 71% of maths learners (across all qualification levels) took up their learning for work or career progression.

This project aims to support more innovative practice in workplace basic skills, and to draw upon the evidence gathered to make recommendations which will help Department for Education, providers and employers collaborate more effectively to address basic skills needs in the workplace.

Aims and objectives

Specifically, the project aimed to:

- identify a range of delivery models used by employers and providers in workplace basic skills, identifying features of effective practice
- identify barriers to the provision of effective workplace basic skills delivery
- produce case studies to illustrate effective practice in the delivery of basic skills learning in the workplace

Policy Context

In England, the adult literacy and numeracy national standards, and Functional Skills English and maths qualifications, are being reformed, to make them more relevant to employers' needs, and English and maths are well-established components of apprenticeships frameworks. These developments, along with the statutory basic skills entitlement to fully funded provision up to Level 2, and recently enhanced flexibilities under Adult Education Budget funding, aim to create an enabling environment in which adults are supported to participate in English and maths learning. The Adult Education Budget funding rules for 2018-19 clarify that English and maths provision can be delivered in the workplace¹. However, there has been relatively little recent development of practice with regard to basic skills learning in the workplace, particularly in courses and programmes that are delivered outside of apprenticeships, and/or which might take place as part of a progression pathway preparing employees to undertake an apprenticeship. At the same time, however, national and international research and other reviews have continued to identify features of effective practice in this context. In 2017, the Government announced a Flexible Learning Fund to test delivery methods that make learning more attractive and easier to access for adults. Pilot projects take place until March 2019 and will inform policy development in this area.

Approach

A range of research activities were undertaken to address the project objectives including:

- stakeholder interviews with key stakeholders in the area of workplace basic skills, including representatives from UnionLearn, Workers Educational Association, University College London Institute of Education, Skills for Health and independent experts in workplace basic skills
- in-depth case study interviews with employers and providers, to identify and illustrate: different delivery models, learner and employer engagement techniques, measures of effectiveness, features of effective practice, barriers to

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/adult-education-budget-funding-rules-2018-to-2019>

effective practice and how these have been overcome, and future plans to develop provision.

Six case studies were identified from the initial stakeholder interviews, including: the British Army; Essex Adult and Community Learning; Hounslow Adult and Community Learning; Hull Training & Adult Education; Jewish Care, Transport for London, Unison; and West Suffolk College. These case studies include examples of Adult Education Budget funded learning provision, as well as employer investment in English and maths training for their workforce.

Case Studies

The following section presents the findings from the case study organisations.

Case Study 1: British Army

About the organisation

The British Army is the land-based military service responsible for protecting the nation and its territories. The Army delivers English and Maths to all soldiers who join the Army without qualifications to prove these skills up to Level 2. 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 soldier training before moving on to specialist trade training for their chosen job role. Almost all Army trade training has been mapped to an apprenticeship programme. The majority will gain their Functional Skills qualification, if they don't already hold an equivalent qualification, to at least Level 1 as part of a Level 2 apprenticeship programme and Level 2 English and Maths for soldiers on a Level 3 apprenticeship Programme. The Functional Skills is delivered by one of 5 contracted training providers² delivering the Apprentice Programme.

Delivery - Functional Skills outside of the apprenticeship programme

Soldiers who do not gain their Functional Skills as part of their initial and or trade training will have a further opportunity to do this through the Army Education Centres (AECs).

The Army has 10 Army Education Centre groups each of which is commanded by a Major in the Education and Training Services Branch (ETS). The groups comprise

² The Army currently works with Babcock, TQ Pearson, The Colleges Partnership, RACPD and Food Services.

two large education centres and a number of outlying small e-learning centres. Basic Skills Development Managers (BSDMs), who are fully qualified teachers and have specialist qualifications in at least two areas, for example both English and maths, or English and ESOL, provide Functional Skills and extra learning support for all soldiers who require support in their area of responsibility (AOR).

Soldiers must achieve Level 1 to be selected for promotion to Corporal and Level 2 to be selected for promotion to Sergeant. Training is geared towards supporting individuals to achieve the qualification in order to gain promotion. *'So, that provides the carrot and stick if you like...so now organisationally it's absolutely understood, absolutely accepted, and isn't really questioned as a requirement.'*

Staff Officer, Education Branch

Most soldiers in the AECs are working towards Level 2 qualifications and they are often the learners with the most challenges, for example English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) or Specific Learning Difficulty (SPLD) needs. This represents a throughput of about 2,000 soldiers a year. In an AEC every soldier undertakes a diagnostic assessment in English and maths, usually using BKSB, (an initial and diagnostic assessment tool). This is likely to change to ForSkills (an online English, maths and ICT assessment tool). Following the assessment, a learning plan is completed with the learner. This may include a combination of one-to-one teaching, classroom teaching, e-learning and group work depending on each learner's needs and can continue for as long as the learner requires. Typically though, it is an intensive short term, two to three-week, programme of learning to bring the learner up to Level 2.

In practice, many soldiers doing Functional Skills have already developed significant basic literacy and numeracy skills through work-related training, and through tasks undertaken at work, for example map reading. This means that for the majority, the focus of the learning is on test-preparedness and consolidating skills to enhance their operational effectiveness;

'...those wider skills really matter. So, things like reading and writing, understanding orders, translating orders, [the Army] absolutely value them.'

Staff Officer, Education Branch

The Armed Forces Basic Skills Longitudinal research notes that 'sound levels of literacy and numeracy [in particular, speaking and listening skills] can be regarded as enabling skills that assist staff to take full advantage of training and on-the-job experience.'

Challenges

Some soldiers who completed the basic skills programme and are now starting degree leadership apprenticeships have found that the older OCR Skills for Life

qualifications that they took earlier in their Army career are no longer recognised as equivalent to GCSEs and are having to retake basic skills tests in the form of Functional Skills. Such changes undermine the individuals trust in the original offer and lead to a lack of confidence in these qualifications as building blocks to higher level qualifications.

Outcomes

Training, and achievement of Functional Skills, of all soldiers is tracked using Maytas, a learning management system. The first-time pass rate for Level 2 delivered in the AES is approximately 89%.

The Army have found it problematic to capture meaningful feedback from soldiers on the wider impact of their learning as many view it as just another requirement to be completed as part of their training. To address this, the Army have worked with the Behavioural Insights Team to undertake research aimed at helping soldiers to think about the potential benefits of their learning before the course started and at the end of their learning. The research findings demonstrated that this exercise can help learners to understand how basic skills training helps them in their army career and in life after the Army.

The Army places a high value on education, particularly as all the skills required to operate the service effectively must come from within the organisation. All recruitment is at the 'bottom' of the organisation. There is no recruitment directly into higher ranks, providing a strong incentive for the employer to invest in skills development and to support employees to progress at work. Similarly, all staff understand that they must develop their skills in order to achieve promotion.

Success factors

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

See the [Armed Forces Basic Skills Longitudinal Study](#) for more information about the approach of the Armed Forces to basic skills

Case study 2: Essex Adult and Community Learning

About the organisation

Essex County Council Adult and Community Learning (ACL) offers a wide range of day time and evening educational provision for adults to help them improve their career prospects and develop new skills including apprenticeships, Functional Skills and GCSE English and maths, professional qualifications and family learning programmes.

Delivery - Functional Skills

Alongside apprenticeship provision, Essex ACL delivers Functional Skills (FS) English, maths and ICT in public-sector organisations (mainly local authorities and schools) as well as private companies. Given the broader curriculum offer, apprentices and non-apprentices will often learn alongside each other in workplace settings.

The service's workplace provision in schools has grown in recent years. Since skills requirements for teaching assistants (TAs) in schools have changed, ensuring that staff have sufficient skills in English and maths has become paramount for their employers. In particular, employers are keen that all their TAs have access to Level 2 English and maths.

The provider delivers sessions at the schools as they have found that delivering skills provision in the employees' workplace is more effective in engaging learners than asking staff to travel to a college. Provision tends to take place after working hours (between 3 and 5pm) to align with learner availability. The provider also finds that optimal course length is 12-14 weeks which aligns with one terms worth of learning at school. This is preferable to a 30-week course for both the employer and the employee.

Sessions normally take place once a week, but frequency can vary depending on need. Contact sessions with a tutor, either as a group or one to one tutorials are offered in addition to e-learning or blended provision.

The provider's delivery methods have altered over recent years to respond to employer and learner needs. For example, blended learning has been introduced to meet the needs of learners requiring more flexible provision, such as those who have childcare responsibilities. This includes face to face tutoring and e-learning both independently or with support from a tutor. At the beginning of the course, the tutor will discuss each learner's wider circumstances and suggest an arrangement that is convenient. This flexible approach, tailored to individual needs, supports learner progression.

'We appreciate now I think, more so, that if we want to help these people to achieve, we have to bend with them, as well.'

Curriculum Co-ordinator

Engaging employers

The business development team, who are responsible for employer engagement, and the Functional Skills Co-ordinator work together to engage new employers in a range of ways:

The Council's Skills Unit maps skills and engages with employers to identify need across the county. This information is shared with Essex ACL's business development team. If new businesses are set up in areas where a need has been identified, or in areas where a need is anticipated, the provider will approach them. This is working particularly well in disadvantaged areas such as Harlow, Clacton and Jaywick.

Additionally, the provider uses a 'snowball' approach whereby employers who have already engaged with provision for their apprentices are encouraged to deliver sessions more widely for non-apprentice staff. The provider finds that once an apprenticeship is being delivered, employers will often approach them for support for other staff that they have identified have specific learning needs around basic skills.

'Our business development team go out there, you know, trying to sell what we offer, the whole package, apprenticeships, our community learning classes, everything that we offer, really, as soon as we're approached by a local business.'

Curriculum Co-ordinator

Apprenticeships and Functional Skills provision is also advertised online. Essex ACL works hard during engagement to ensure that employers and employees understand the relevance and benefits of delivering English and maths in the workplace.

When an employer approaches the provider, having identified a need among their staff, they will often request that the provider focus the course on this skills gap to enable employees to better perform their role. Essex ACL is then able to tailor the course to the needs of that group and to the specific workplace. This is a key element of the provider offer:

'I think what they [the employers] really like is the fact that we're willing to discuss the different approaches with them.'

Curriculum Co-ordinator

Engaging learners

Essex ACL finds that framing provision in terms of how it will enable employees to build on their Continuing Professional Development (CPD), and better perform their role, is an effective approach to employee engagement.

'it's about identifying the job role of the person and seeing where their needs are'
Curriculum Co-ordinator

For example, when working with TAs, the provider emphasises how it will better enable them to support the children they work with, on a daily basis. They also make sure that potential learners are aware that they will gain a qualification at the end of the course.

Prior to enrolment, all learners complete an initial online assessment (BKSB) to help to understand their start level and learning needs. All learners undertaking qualification courses are required to do an English and maths assessment, even if they already have qualifications above Level 2. This helps to identify the needs of everyone coming through their doors.

Where English and maths needs are identified, learners are encouraged to do English and maths courses (advertised as 'free English and maths', rather than Functional skills). In addition, tutors are encouraged to embed English and maths skills into all courses they are delivering;

"it's just a matter of the tutor embedding it along the way on whatever course they are doing so that [the learners English and maths skills] are being improved at the same time as they are learning... So, the photography tutor... if there's been an identified need for the initial assessment, somebody's math's skills aren't that good, and that could be something they actually need for photography, so they have to understand all the apertures or other things...he should be teaching the maths required and anything else that's identified as well."

Curriculum Co-ordinator

As yet, there is no official assessment that captures digital capabilities for non-apprentices, however, the provider's digital specialist is currently developing a more robust assessment tool.

At this stage, if the learner is identified as needing extra support, they have a diagnostic - a one to one discussion with a tutor about their learning needs.

Based on this assessment, the provider will then recommend the route that will best address each potential learner's needs. For example, for learners working at the lower levels, the provider may signpost them to evening classes; an individual who may need to spend more than 12 weeks on a course would be referred to a 'Commit to Learning' class.

Challenges

Engaging longer-term employees can be challenging. The provider finds that they can be reluctant to retrain in a position in which they have years of experience. As discussed above, to overcome this, the provider frames the skills offer in terms of the benefits to their role and to their own professional development.

Outcomes

Outcomes of Functional Skills learning are measured through achievement of qualifications and feedback forms to capture learner and employer perspectives on the effectiveness of the course.

RARPA is used to record learning objectives and outcomes of learning for non-qualification courses.

Success factors

- Flexible approach to delivery, including blended learning, to meet individuals' learning needs supports learner progression
- Framing provision in terms of how it will help the learner to progress in their specific job role is key to effective engagement of staff.
- Proactive approaches to employers and tailored provision to address identified skills gaps/specific learning needs promotes employer engagement with basic skills

Case Study 3: Jewish Care

About the organisation

Jewish Care is the largest health and social care charity for the UK's Jewish community, touching the lives of 10,000 people every week. The organisation provides a wide range of services for older people, people with disabilities, mental health needs and sensory impairments, as well as Holocaust survivors and refugees. Jewish Care also offers support and guidance to families, carers and the bereaved, as well as programmes for children and young people.

Delivery - Literacy team

The charity's literacy team is led by an English Language Development Facilitator (ELDF), a two year post funded by a charitable trust. The post holder has a background in teaching and learning and is a specialist in ESOL. The team comprises a pool of around 15 volunteers, 7 of which are currently active.

All new care staff who, on appointment, do not have a Level 1 or above literacy qualification, are required to undertake a full skills online assessment. Staff assessed at Level 1 have the option to access literacy and numeracy Level 1 and 2 qualifications provided by the London Learning Consortium if they do not already hold a qualification.

Staff who test below Level 1 are offered support by the literacy team. Although there is no requirement to take up the offer, the Facilitator finds that once people understand the role of the team, the majority of staff approached are happy to receive help. The team also respond to self-referrals - individual requests for literacy-related support, for example report-writing.

The Facilitator and volunteers go into the homes and centres to work with staff on a one-to-one basis, usually for an hour a week. The team try to be as flexible as possible including some teaching in the evenings and early mornings.

Learning objectives are identified using a short, individualised learning plan (ILP) completed with the learner. 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. Sometimes learners want learning to be focused on language they need for work, sometimes it's more about day to day literacy needs outside of the workplace, for example, helping children with homework.

All learning is learner-led, 'because people are working in different situations with different clients, it kind of has to be.... As all of my volunteers are ex-teachers, or

current teachers with availability, then I trust that they know what's best for their learners.'

English Language Development Facilitator

Learners are advised to work towards no more than three objectives to begin with, over a six-month period, with scope to extend for another couple of months if necessary.

Learners are expected to continue their learning outside of the sessions. This might typically be a reflective learning task such as looking back at the daily reports they have written and identifying how their language has improved. In general, learning is reviewed every six weeks to check on progress and make sure that things are moving in the right direction.

Learners based in the same location are also encouraged to share and discuss their learning. A group of kitchen staff for example, each of whom spoke different languages, practised their language speaking skills by talking to each other in English, about the different stories they were reading, as part of their learning.

In the charity's hotel services roles, i.e. catering and housekeeping, there are a significant proportion of staff for whom English is not a first language. The literacy team does not run ESOL courses, but homework for all learners each week includes speaking with others, for at least half an hour, in English.

The popularity of the project with staff means more volunteers are needed. To meet the demand the facilitator plans to trial the recruitment of non-qualified 'learning mentors' who can support learners with wider literacy skills for example, communication or conversation skills.

'A lot of the things that we're asked about are things like having conversations with residents. People don't always feel confident to converse. Just have someone brought in to chat with the learner for even half an hour, just to get their confidence up on their conversational skills.'

English Language Development Facilitator

The charity is about to launch an online learning management system which will include an area for literacy and potentially, numeracy. This will include resources for volunteers and e-learning for staff. Volunteers currently have access to a range of resources to support their teaching, including materials developed by the facilitator, links to suggested websites, course books and a library of easy reader books.

Jewish Care has a strong ethos of supporting staff to develop both professionally and personally. Improving care is the ultimate aim. Clearer communication with clients and their families makes for better person-centred care. This ethos includes person-centred support given to staff through this project. Many staff have been with

the organisation long term and worked their way up. Providing opportunities for staff to improve their skills supports the charity's preference to promote from within;

'It's a win/win from their point of view. You get more highly skilled staff, great. The staff see that you're investing in them, they're happy, great, and happy staff work harder.'

English Language Development Facilitator

Challenges

One-to-one delivery means that the main challenge is getting around to everyone. The nature of the work means it is not possible to simultaneously release several caring staff from one home and as the homes are in different locations, the added travel time for staff makes group sessions unworkable.

Managing expectations, from both the learner and employers' perspective, about the length of time it takes for literacy skills to improve can also be a challenge. This has required education for managers about realistic timescales and for the learners, breaking learning down into manageable milestones.

In the care sector, shift-work and short-staffing can create problems in maintaining contact with learners. The team are as flexible as possible to work round this, for example meeting with learners for a ten minute catch up if the full hour session is not possible.

Outcomes

Learners' literacy levels are re-assessed at the end of their learning using the same online assessment they completed before the learning began. This measure shows that virtually all learners make progress.

The facilitator stresses however, that softer targets, for example improving communication skills, are equally if not more important as these make a more tangible difference to people using Jewish Care's services.

Managers have reported that the language skills of learners have improved, that staff are more confident to communicate in English and are happier in their roles.

Tutor notes and feedback from the learner are recorded for the ILP. The facilitator feels strongly that the positive feedback they have received from learners is because the work that the team deliver is tailored to them:

'It's something that they want to do. Otherwise, with adult learning, if you force people to do things they get bored and they don't want to do it anymore.'

English Language Development Facilitator

The facilitator emphasised how rewarding the project has been for those involved,

'People feel really good about being able to learn at work because it makes them feel super valued.'

English Language Development Facilitator

Success factors

- The learner-led approach and context specific content of the learning is key to engaging staff with low levels of skills in learning opportunities at work
- The non-formal approach allows greater flexibility to design learning content and delivery methods to suit the needs of individual learners.

Case Study 4: Unison

About the organisation

Unison is one of the largest trade unions in the UK with more than a million members. The union represents staff delivering public services from within both the public and private sector, including the NHS, local government, police and justice services, transport, the energy sector, and schools.

Unison's Learning & Organising services staff support Union Learning Representatives (ULRs) to promote, deliver, and negotiate for learning opportunities within their workplace. ULRs also encourage and support other colleagues with workplace learning. Learning & Organising services develop their own workshops for union members and potential members, and work with ULRs to support better training opportunities in the workplace, to raise awareness and also engage with employers around basic skills provision.

A network of active and trained ULRs is key to employer and learner engagement. ULRs promote learning in the workplace by offering support and encouragement to staff to get back into or maintain learning, by celebrating learning achievements and by running non-formal literacy and numeracy schemes.

Delivery - non-formal learning schemes

ULRs run a range of informal sessions in workplaces which are often aimed at encouraging employees with low levels of basic skills into learning. These include:

- The Reading Agency's [Reading Ahead](#) scheme which aims to encourage people to read, to share their reading experiences, and to review things that they've read in a learner diary. Some ULRs run this scheme through reading groups who meet, typically, once a month.

When groups are run with employer involvement, employees may be given time out of their working day to attend. In many cases, employers are also actively involved in the promotion of reading groups within their organisations by sharing it within internal communication networks to raise awareness. Otherwise, they are run during the lunch hour or outside of working hours.

- The '**Making Every Penny Count**' toolkit; a set of resources which enable ULRs to talk to people about financial literacy and numeracy to do with their own finances. Typically, short informal sessions are delivered at lunchtime on topics such as understanding payslips, payday loans, credit unions, money management and budgeting.

Unison also deliver work-specific support around literacy, numeracy and digital skills. Examples include numeracy workshops for teaching assistants and health workers

and literacy workshops (around formal letter-writing techniques) for employees in the energy sector.

Unison also worked with School Improvement Liverpool to run a numeracy workshop for teaching assistants which had a two-fold purpose:

'It's both to support the numeracy skills of the teaching assistants but also around the methods and the ways that numeracy is taught in schools so teaching assistants feel more confident in supporting children'

Unison Learning and Organising Services

Employers who have specific concerns about a skills gap within their workforce can approach Unison ULRs who will then work with the employer and local providers to deliver courses tailored to address this need. Developing links and collaborating with both employers and local providers is therefore a key element of ULR's role.

In other cases, bespoke support has been developed in response to learning needs identified by employees themselves. For example, in response to requests to their line managers from cleaners at Unison HQ for support with IT and English, a staff member from Learning and Organising Services delivered a twice weekly, one-hour session to five cleaners around word processing, accessing and responding to emails as well as basic use of computers and the internet. These were one-to-one sessions, over a nine-month period, which enabled the tutor to tailor content to individual learning needs, ability and wider aspirations. The cleaners felt that they had progressed significantly and were inspired to continue self-directed learning:

'They felt that they had an opportunity to access what other members of staff tend to access as a right, but for a lot of them, they had an e-mail address and an e-mail account but hadn't accessed it. All of the people who participated felt that they had improved, and they had gained from it, and that they wanted to continue accessing the computers and using the skills that they'd developed.'

Unison Learning and Organising Services

Learner engagement

Informal provision such as the Reading Ahead scheme is designed to inspire and encourage employees to start thinking about their literacy and numeracy skills in a low-pressure/light touch environment, *'to talk about and engage with aspects of [literacy and] numeracy without really focusing on that as the main outcome...'*

Literacy and numeracy lead, Unison Learning and Organising Services

New learners are often attracted through word of mouth, as existing learners advertise the relaxed approach and social aspect of the sessions. If held at lunchtime, refreshments for learners are often provided which encourages new learners to attend.

Other engagement strategies include posters around the workplace and advertising through workplace intranets or internal communication mechanisms. ULRs also run surgeries to promote learning whereby potential learners can talk to them about learning and how to make that happen.

Building on these informal sessions, Unison have developed short taster workshops around reading, writing and numeracy for ULRs to run at strategic points throughout the year such as during Learning at Work Week.

Learning at Work Week is a particularly opportune moment for ULRs to work with employers as they are often more willing to allow employees time during their working day to engage in learning. This works most effectively if the learning is relevant to the workplace and aligns with the business strategy.

Unison engagement with healthcare assistants has found that numeracy skills is a big barrier for their progression into nursing roles. Therefore, they are piloting a drug calculation workshop (or short course) to develop capability and confidence around numeracy needed for healthcare specifically targeting healthcare assistants who want to progress from lower-band roles. This work is supported by the WEA and complements projects UNISON run in partnership with National Numeracy.

Challenges

Communicating to employers the value of supporting workers to develop basic skills, and the importance of flexible provision to enable learners to access learning in the best way for them, can be challenging. Unison find an effective approach to overcome this is presenting learner engagement as a business case. In other words, framing the provision in a way that has relevance to the employer.

Employees are often reluctant to disclose learning needs both because they are concerned they will be penalised by the employer, and because they have developed sophisticated coping mechanisms to hide their needs. The ULR is ideally placed, as workers can disclose information to them without fear of judgement or discrimination and the ULR can offer support, motivation and encouragement

Success factors

- The ULR holds a unique and valuable position within workplace environments. The ULR is ideally placed to encourage a joined-up approach to workplace learning as they can work closely with employers, providers and employees/potential learners. This enables every stakeholder to feel that they are being listened to, valued and given opportunities.
- Informal group sessions which promote social learning using a light touch approach are very effective for learner engagement. These sessions give potential learners the opportunity to reflect on their own position and think

about the steps they would like to take to develop their skills in a relaxed, low-pressure environment.

Case Study 5: Hounslow Adult and Community Learning

About the organisation

Hounslow Adult and Community Learning (ACL) is a local authority adult and community learning provider, delivering a wide range of community learning and qualification courses. The biggest single subject provided is ESOL. Unemployment in the area is relatively low. Hounslow borders Heathrow airport so there are employment opportunities in logistics, hotels and public transport and there are several large high-profile employers in the borough e.g. Sky and GlaxoSmithKline. However, a lot of Hounslow ACL's learners are in low skilled, low paid work.

Hounslow has worked with a variety of employers in the borough to deliver Functional Skills in English and maths, primarily in response to individual employer requests from employers or employer partners. Two examples are provided below.

Delivery of Functional Skills

Union Learning Representatives – Bus Drivers

Hounslow worked with the Union Learning Representatives from a bus company in the area to deliver Functional Skills English and maths.

The courses were delivered using a blended approach of distance learning and face to face tutorials. In response to the request from the reps, Hounslow commissioned an external training company to develop online learning content for Functional skills at Entry Level 3 and Level 1 for both English and maths. Learners logged on to a portal to complete the online content at a time that suited them. In addition, the course tutor met with the ULRs at the union regional office for monthly small group tutorials over a period of about six months. The ULRs worked in different garages across the borough but were released one day a month for union activities. Some of the group, of six or seven ULRs, did Entry Level 3 and some, Level 1.

The intention was that having done the course, the ULRs would support other drivers to complete the training. The course was again delivered using a blended approach. The course tutor maintained regular contact by phone and email and went to the garage one morning a week, so learners could drop in and get support. The ULR also provided additional on-site support. Despite these efforts, roll out to other drivers was less successful due to problems keeping learners engaged. In total, only about four of the seventeen drivers enrolled completed the qualification.

Special School – Learning Support Staff

A school approached Hounslow ACL for support to improve the personal maths skills of their learning support assistants.

Prior to the course, Hounslow completed initial assessments in English and maths on site with all the learning support assistants. This was done over several mornings with staff covering each other's work while they did the assessment.

The school was unable to release staff from their working day to do the course, so Hounslow adopted a blended delivery model, using the online content developed for the Unison project alongside face to face tutorials delivered at the school. In addition to contact hours (time in class supporting students) staff were paid for one extra hour a week for non-teaching activities such as meetings. The employer agreed to make this hour available for tutorials.

The employer was proactive in working out the make-up of tutorial groups as they wanted to foster a positive attitude towards the course, rather than staff feeling that they were being told they must improve their maths. The tutor went to the school for an hour every Wednesday and the school created a rota so that each learner would receive a face to face tutorial once a month. Eventually, the rota was removed in favour of a drop-in approach, so learners could call in for support when they needed it. The active involvement of the employer also helped to maintain the engagement of learners; *'there was an awareness from staff that it had been organised by the employer, so they did feel I think a bit more obligation to stick with it.'*

Provider

Learners completed assessment tests on the provider's online portal at the end of each section of learning. If the learner failed the test, the tutor provided feedback by email before resetting the test. At face to face tutorials, learners were given an individual programme of learning, and timescales to help them to keep up. Learners were also able to do exam practice for the Functional Skills exam.

Outcomes

Of the learners who sat the exam, approximately 75% were successful. Of the learners who did not achieve the qualification, additional learning support needs may have been a factor. Blended learning does not suit everyone, and given the limited tutorial opportunities, some learning needs are difficult to meet.

In general, learners reported increased confidence in their maths skills and the employer felt more confident about the skills of their employees. The school has since invited Hounslow ACL back on an INSET day to deliver a session to learning support assistants on English skills and to raise awareness around the content of the Functional Skills English curriculum.

Challenges

The online delivery model is not effective for everybody as it relies on learners having adequate motivation and self-management skills. In the Unison ULR example, Entry Level 3 learners, in particular, struggled to manage their own

learning online and may also have found it difficult to fit in alongside competing demands for their spare time.

Hounslow found that some of the older learners at the school, who perhaps had done 'O' Levels or similar some time ago, found the content challenging but had sufficient wider skills and the 'robustness' to engage with and organise their own learning compared to others on the course. The online content used for the course requires updating to make it more accessible and to reflect changes in the way people access material, for example through phone apps.

Hounslow ACL recognises that for employers, releasing staff can be one of the most difficult aspects of engaging with workplace learning;

'...a barrier for lots of employers is if you're running shifts and you're releasing people, it's enormously complex to do that...so I think it very much depends on the particular employer and their strand of work and how they organise their shift patterns basically...I think it needs that for a successful outcome.'

Provider

At the school, for example, it was not possible to take all the learners out at the same time to sit their exams. The school had to pay for additional staff to back-fill while existing staff sat their exams over three separate days. In practice, *'everyone needs to go a bit sort of, beyond what they would normally do, in order for it to actually happen.'*

Hounslow, in partnership with six other West London local authority adult and community learning providers and at least two employers from each borough has recently been successful in their bid for the Department for Education's Flexible Learning Fund. The West London Blended Learning Project will work together to develop a platform where each provider can post and share online content and then trial different approaches to blended learning. The aim is for 700 learners to achieve qualifications using a blended approach, through some form of partnership with their employer.

'I really think that ...in a borough like Hounslow where a lot of people are doing shift work...they're in low skilled, low paid work, they're balancing caring responsibilities as well... that we will need a, sort of, more flexible approach to involve employers. I think ...it would be trying to find a blended learning approach that would have enough commitment ...enough involvement from an employer and the provider in terms of ...whatever would work best for the learner to keep them on that learning.'

Provider

Success factors

- Close working with the employer to plan the provision
- Commitment from the employer to ensure paid time off for staff to attend learning during their working day is key to maintain the engagement of learners.

Case Study 6: Transport for London

About the organisation

Transport for London (TfL) is an integrated transport authority which manages and delivers public transport throughout London, including London overground, London underground, congestion charging, street management, bikes, river services and some suburban rail services. The authority has over 27,000 employees.

Learning Zone Team

In the Learning Zone Team, within TfL's Learning and Development Service, there is one full-time maths tutor, and three part-time English tutors; one of whom solely delivers GCSE English, one who is a dyslexia specialist, and the third who delivers Functional Skill English and ESOL.

The highest qualifications delivered are GCSE maths and GCSE English language. Sessions for these take place once a week over the course of a year. The same class will be repeated at different times throughout the week to ensure employees on different shift patterns can access the course. This flexibility is key to the effectiveness of the provision as it enables learners to access the course.

The team also deliver 'Improve your English' and 'Improve your maths' courses which offer various Functional Skills English or maths qualifications, depending on the learners' level and their reason for engagement. Sessions last 2 hours and run three times weekly – again so that employees can attend at suitable times outside of work.

Digital provision includes I.T. for beginners, a digital skills award at Entry Level 3, and the European Computer Driving Licence – a Level 2 award.

Delivery includes both group sessions, in classrooms at the Learning Zone and one-to-one teaching. Learners who have one-to-one support tend to have quite low levels of literacy, or have additional needs, for example dyslexia or dyspraxia.

Most English and maths provision is generic. However, there are examples of role-specific learning for staff. For example, there is specific provision for train operators and station staff.

Support from various unions in the company helps to maintain provision. The London Underground also have union learning representatives who support individuals to engage in learning.

The team have recently introduced an online pre-course maths assessment, which they are currently piloting, and are planning to broaden the scope of online provision. It is felt that this will increase flexibility for learners who would prefer to access online

platforms from home. They will capture learner feedback through surveys during the pilot period which will inform decisions about roll out of the service. Regardless of the pilot's success, face to face provision will be available to ensure that there is a range of delivery methods on offer to suit different learners.

Engaging learners

Learners are most commonly identified via self-referral, or sometimes by their managers through Performance and Development discussions. Both approaches are quite informal.

Learning opportunities are promoted using a range of approaches including the staff intranet and an in-house social media site. Additionally, the Learning Zone Team promote the various courses and qualifications in different internal publications. The provider suggests that the most effective marketing strategy is word of mouth, although its reach is hard to monitor.

TfL identifies a number of different drivers for learner engagement, including:

- career development - organisational change in the last two years has prompted people to upskill in order to secure their jobs
- familial education - when children are moving up to secondary school and parents want to be able to help their children with their English and maths homework
- inspiration - older employees tend to engage to keep their mind active and learn something new; and specific learning goals
- many learners engage with a set learning goal, for example better punctuation, pronunciation, multiplication or division.

Learner outcomes

Prior to starting the course, learners and tutors have an in-depth discussion about their learning aims, what they want to get out of the course and their motivations for engagement. Based on this, they set targets with their tutor. They also develop a 'learning plan' whereby they agree on a realistic learning timeframe (both self-study and contact time). The tutors try to be as flexible as possible to suit the learners' working hours and wider responsibilities. Depending on regularity of attendance, the learning plan is reviewed at 6 months. This involves the tutor and learner having another discussion reflecting on the learning plan, assessing progress against targets set, and setting action points to reach targets.

The Learning Zone team are required to demonstrate the effectiveness of their delivery through a 'balanced score card' which captures information about customer satisfaction, attendance, and delivery, amongst others. Information is gathered from feedback forms where learners give their perspective on the course and its benefits.

Learners are able to rate their tutor, the learning space, satisfaction with the course, the feedback they received, their confidence at the end of the course compared to when they started, and suggestions for improved delivery. They are also asked to give advice to potential learners who are thinking about engaging.

A more informal but important way of measuring effectiveness is the number of word of mouth referrals that they receive:

“I think customer satisfaction is always important... The continued referral of people, the continued word of mouth, which is obviously, something which is very difficult to measure, but certainly if that suddenly stopped, I would be very worried, but the fact it continues...The fact we get managers referring people to us, I think is a very positive thing.” (Learning Zone Team Leader)

The information gathered from the feedback forms, as well as anecdotal evidence, shows that gaining a qualification is a key benefit of engagement for learners. Many learners value increased confidence as a ‘soft’ outcome of the course. Higher confidence in turn improves learners’ ability to help their children with their homework, help their colleagues at work, contribute actively to teamwork activities and meetings, and understand their role and responsibilities at work.

The provider also holds an annual award ceremony where learners who have gained qualifications receive their certificates, presented by a senior member of staff. Learners are also invited to speak about their learning experience and how they feel it has benefited them. This is another good approach to motivating learners and raising awareness.

Employer outcomes

The Learning Zone team were originally set up approximately twenty years ago when London Underground found that a significant number of station and train staff were failing their annual relicense test, which they needed to continue to perform their roles, not because they were unable to do the job, but because literacy and numeracy levels were low and they struggled to read and respond to questions in the test. Today, it is still essential for operational staff to be able to pass similar tests in order to keep the organisation running safely and effectively.

Challenges

Delivering classes via online platforms has been challenging as their technical infrastructure is not reliable. They are currently in discussions about how best to overcome this issue.

Advertising and raising awareness of the service so that more learners can access provision is a challenge for both the provider and learners. For the provider, less funding has limited the capacity of delivery and outreach. For learners, the provider

suggests that their marketing is not tangible enough for learners who are not actively considering engagement. One approach to overcome this is to continuously advertise accredited courses.

Due to organisational restructuring employees are deprioritising learning. To address this, the provider endeavours to be as supportive and flexible as possible. During this period, tutors have adopted a mentor role to give wider support to employees rather than solely focussing on basic skills provision.

Learners tend to be unwilling to disclose their learner status to their managers due to the perceived stigma associated with accessing provision. Now, the Learning Zone have a confidentiality agreement in place whereby they do not share learner status with managers unless the manager referred them initially.

Releasing staff to attend provision can be challenging for employers both in terms of logistics and timing; efficient business operation is more of a priority for employers than basic skills training.

Success factors

From the provider's perspective, the flexibility of the offer is the most essential and effective element of their offer as it enables employees to fit learning around their work on a weekly basis.

"The flexibility is the most effective thing we can offer. it's just the nature of the organisation we work for, but we can't say to people, you need to be here every Tuesday at ten o'clock to do this English training, that just doesn't work. We need to be as flexible as we can... We don't tie anybody down to a specific day of training or a specific time or anything. I think that is key basically, you can't tie people down because of work demands. (Learning Zone Team Leader)