

Literacy and the Workforce

Demand for higher skills in the workplace

Today literacy is more important than ever. Low skilled jobs are disappearing, as the workplace demands higher and higher levels of skills.

The International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (IALSS) measures skills in four areas¹.

IALSS Skill Domains

Prose	Information from continuous texts like newspapers, brochures
Document	Information from texts like charts, forms, maps
Numeracy	Everyday math skills
Problem solving	The ability to think broadly to solve problems

It also measures on five levels how well people understand and use printed information in their daily lives. Level 3 is the minimum level people need to get a job in today's knowledge-based world¹.

IALSS Skill Levels

Level 1	People have difficulty dealing with any written material
Level 2	People can deal only with written material that is clear and well laid out.
Level 3	People can understand and use the information they need for daily life
Levels 4/5	People can understand and use complex written material

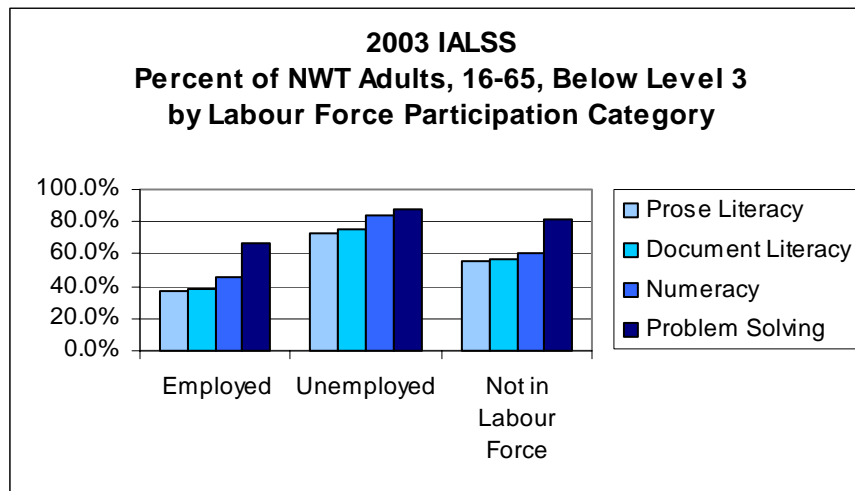
Literacy and earnings

Whether people have a job or not, and what kind of job they have, often depends on their literacy and numeracy skills. In Canada, literacy has a large effect on earnings, more so than in most other countries that took part in IALSS. In Canada there is a clear relationship between high prose literacy scores and high earnings, particularly for women. Approximately 50% of women earning \$60,000 or more are at Literacy Levels 4/5, while approximately 45% of women earning \$20,000 or less are at Levels 1 and 2¹.

Literacy and unemployment

Employment rates for people with literacy skills below Level 3 are significantly lower than for those with higher literacy scores. However, as we can see in Figure 1, although many people with low literacy are unemployed, there are also many people with low literacy skills in workplaces. This has serious implications for issues like work safety.

Figure 1: Per cent of NWT adults, 16-65, below Level 3 in each labour force participation category

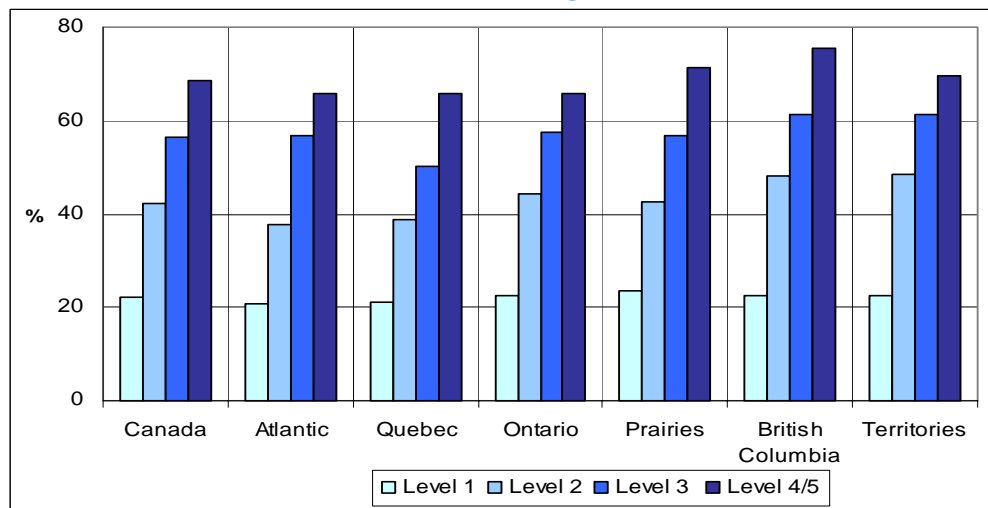


Source: *Building on our competencies: The Northwest Territories Results*³

Literacy and training

Lack of basic literacy skills is a barrier not only to employment but also to job training. In all provinces and territories, those with the highest literacy levels receive the most training, much more than people with the lowest literacy levels. About 70% of those at Levels 4/5 take part in training, compared to about 20% of those at Level 1. This means that, in Canada, people who need training the most are the least likely to take part in training (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Per cent of population receiving adult education and training during the year preceding the interview, by document literacy levels, 16-65, Canada and regions, 2003



Source: *Literacy in English in the Northwest Territories*³

What can we do?

We need to begin at the beginning.

- We need to make sure young people understand the importance of staying in school, and what happens to them and their families if they don't.
- We need to improve training for those with the lowest literacy levels.
- We need to recognize we have many workers with low literacy, and encourage more workplaces to offer workplace literacy programs.

¹ Human Resources and Skills Development Canada & Statistics Canada. (2005). *Building on our competencies: Canadian results of the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey 2003*. Catalogue no. 89-617-X1E. Ottawa.

² Murray, T.S. (2008). *Measuring and monitoring literacy in the NWT: A profile*. Presentation at Territorial Adult Educators Conference, Yellowknife, NT, March 3, 2008.

Murray, T.S. (2008). *Measuring and monitoring literacy in the NWT: Sharing the investment, sharing the rewards*. Presentation at Literacy Matters Workshop, Yellowknife, NT, January 29, 2008.

Murray, T.S. (2008). *Measuring and monitoring literacy in the NWT: The cost of complacency*. Presentation at Literacy Matters Workshop, Yellowknife, NT, January 29, 2008.

³ Human Resources and Skills Development Canada & Statistics Canada. (2005). *Building on our competencies: The Northwest Territories results of the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey 2003*. Ottawa.

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