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Illiteracy kills jobs -- and workers

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Mike was among the thousands of machinists in Alberta churning out specialized industrial equipment used in the oil sands. The pay was great, jobs were plentiful.

One day, a new piece of machinery arrived on the shop floor. His supervisor tossed him the instruction manual: "It's supposed to be a lot faster than the old machine. I don't have time to show you how it works -- read the manual and get busy. We need 10 units finished and out the door by Friday."

Mike flipped through the manual and tossed it aside. He was alone on the shop floor, but thought, "How different can this be from the old model?" Switching it on, he heard a quiet hum and started feeding in sheet metal. Suddenly, the machine jammed. Reaching inside as he had done a thousand times before on the old, familiar machine, he heard a horrible screech and then a crunch. Just before he passed out, he realized his left arm had been severed at the elbow.

Mike was lucky. According to a recent report from the Centre for the Study of Living Standards, 143 Albertans were killed on the job in 2005 -- nearly twice as many as a decade ago. Thousands more suffered serious injuries; countless accidents went unreported.

The reason Mike tossed the safety manual aside was that he couldn't read it. He represents one of the 753,000 Albertans (40 per cent) who do not have the literacy skills to function fully in today's knowledge-based economy. Sure, he could read basic words, but he didn't have the literacy skills to comprehend the instruction manual for a sophisticated machine.

Literacy Alberta (along with its provincial counterparts elsewhere) promotes the importance of literacy as a serious health, safety and economic issue. Unfortunately, literacy groups across the country have seen their funding shrivel as the federal government tries to rein in discretionary spending.

Aside from the health and safety issue at stake -- the most compelling reason to ensure our workers are functionally literate -- there are two significant reasons why inadequate levels of literacy are a growing concern in Alberta.

The first relates to labour shortages. The province is desperately short of workers, yet no one seemed to notice 143 were killed in job-related accidents, some due to illiteracy. If they had possessed the reading comprehension skills to understand safety manuals, some of those workers might be alive today. Alberta is looking to bring in thousands of overseas workers to help fill the gaps. Immigrant workers are certainly part of the solution, but shouldn't keeping existing workers alive be a solution, too?

The second reason has to do with productivity. Canadian workers have been thrashed in the media by economists who worry about our country's flagging productivity. Most of us resent being told we are unproductive -- the implication is that we are lazy. Yet, productivity doesn't mean chaining workers to their desks for longer hours and flogging them to work harder. Enhanced productivity means giving workers the most up-to-date, efficient tools with which to apply their trade, and letting each worker accomplish more in less time. Economists call it capital investment.

Workers also need to be upgrading their skills, knowledge and comprehension of how to use the new equipment. For 753,000 Albertans, that means becoming functionally literate to the point of being at least able to read and understand instruction manuals.

The problem of illiteracy in our economy goes far beyond an inability to read. In the broader sense, illiteracy is about those workers who lack the ability to comprehend complex sentences and ideas. It is the difference between learning to read, and reading to learn.

Literacy is not a special interest group -- it's a fundamental economic necessity. As we head into budget season, let's urge our governments to realize the importance of the work of literacy groups across the country and fund them accordingly. This is of particular urgency in Alberta, where labour shortages and faltering productivity threaten to put the brakes on the country's fastest growing economy.

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