

Sept. 25, 2015 Is Essential Skills Day in Canada



Safety professionals understandably spend a lot of time on ensuring that workers have the job skills needed to, say, operate a forklift, work safely in a trench, handle hazardous substances, etc. But they may spend little to no time on ensuring workers have basic skills, such as reading and writing, that are essential to practically *all* jobs.

The sixth annual Essential Skills Day, which takes place on Sept. 25, 2015, is designed to raise awareness of the importance of workplace literacy and essential skills training.

Why should safety professionals be concerned about whether workers have certain essential skills? Because according to ABC Life Literacy Canada, the top five outcomes of workplace skills training are:

1. Improved health and safety (For example, in a Conference Board of Canada study, 82% of respondents associated increased health and safety with their workplace's basic skills program)
2. Greater productivity, fewer mistakes and less waste
3. Better communication and teamwork
4. The ability to retain and promote employees
5. Better customer service.

9 Essential Skills

The federal government has identified nine essential skills needed for the workplace. These skills are used in every job to varying degrees and at different levels of complexity. They provide the foundation for learning all other skills and enable people to evolve with their jobs and adapt to workplace change.

1. **Reading** – The ability to understand reading materials in the form of sentences or paragraphs. We use this skill to scan for information, skim overall meaning, evaluate what we read and integrate information from multiple sources.
2. **Document use** – The ability to perform tasks that involve a variety of information displays in which words, numbers, symbols and other visual

characteristics are given meaning by their spatial relationship. We use this skill when we read and interpret signs, labels, lists, graphs and charts.

3. **Numeracy** – The ability to use numbers and think in quantitative terms. We use this skill when doing numerical estimating, money math, scheduling or budgeting math and analyzing measurements or data.
4. **Writing** – The ability to write text and documents; it also includes non-paper-based writing such as typing on a computer. We use this skill when we organize, record, document, provide information to persuade, request information from others and justify a request.
5. **Oral communication** – The ability to use speech to give and exchange thoughts and information. We use this skill to greet people, take messages, reassure, persuade, seek information and resolve conflicts.
6. **Working with others** – The ability to work with other workers to carry out tasks. We use this skill when we work as a member of a team or jointly with a partner, and when we engage in supervisory or leadership activities.
7. **Thinking** – The ability to engage in the process of evaluating ideas or information to reach a rational decision. We use this skill when we solve problems, make decisions, think critically and plan and organize job tasks.
8. **Computer use** – The ability to use different kinds of computer applications and other related technical tools. We use this skill when we operate cash registers, use word processing software, send emails and create and modify spreadsheets.
9. **Continuous learning** – The ability to participate in an ongoing process of acquiring skills and knowledge. We use this skill when we learn as part of regular work or from co-workers and when we access training in the workplace or off-site.

The OHS Insider has additional resources on literacy in the workplace, including:

- The ties between literacy and safety
- Literacy & Safety: Understanding Is Key
- How investing in a literacy program can improve workplace health and safety
- A checklist you can use to develop a literacy plan for your workplace
- How to make sure that your safety documents aren't too complicated or written in dense, technical language, which makes it hard for workers and supervisors to understand or follow.