

A New Perspective on Canada's Literacy Deficit

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In 1994 and 2003, two large-scale international surveys of literacy skills reported that 48% of Canadian adults do not have sufficient literacy skills to meet the needs of work and life in an advanced economy. This is a staggering number – nine million people experience some difficulty in reading, writing and understanding. To a degree, Canadians, business leaders and their governments could not believe it. They denied the problem and neglected the adult literacy training system. This neglect is documented in the paper, [*Canada's Hidden Deficit: The Social Cost of Low Literacy Skills*](#), which was prepared for the Canadian Language and Literacy Research Network.

Now, a follow-up study by the Canadian Council on Learning (CCL) – [*Reading the Future: Planning to Meet Canada's Future Literacy Needs*](#) – provides some perspective on the literacy problem and opens the door to a much more proactive approach to adult literacy training.

It turns out that about three million English-speaking and one million French-speaking Canadians have the foundational skills to become fully literate. Training experts consulted by the CCL estimate that these four million people could make a leap forward with the benefit of about 40 hours of formal instruction, on average. For many, an online course could make all the difference in moving up to Level 3 literacy (the skill required to cope with the demands of everyday life and work in a complex society).

What keeps these people from making this great leap forward? There are both personal and systemic barriers to literacy training.

On the personal side, about three-quarters of the people with foundational skills believe that their reading is already adequate and most have negative attitudes toward using computers. They are not aware of the opportunities to earn better incomes and create a better life for themselves. Two-thirds of them are employed, with half earning less than \$25,000 a year.

The systemic barriers are the flaws in the adult literacy training programs available. In fact, the programs are so fragmented and poorly structured that they really cannot be termed a training system.