

EDUCATION

Workforce literacy investment hard to take

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Literacy Works Executive Director Helene Waranch doesn't understand why companies won't spend the money to teach their workers about the basic economics of workforce literacy.

At \$150 a student, she figures the on-line distance learning course costs less than \$1 an hour during the course of a month. And the investment translates into workplace loyalty, decreased errors and injury prevention.

Instead, Literacy Works' corporate clients are paying to lose the liability that already injured workers represent. **Kemper Insurance** and the **Injured Workers Insurance Fund**, for instance, have enrolled students who lost jobs in manual labor to workplace injuries but who do not have the necessary skills to hold a sedentary job.

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RICH RIGGINS

Literacy Works Executive Director Helene Waranch doesn't understand why companies won't invest in the basic economics of workforce literacy to retain skilled workers.

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"If they don't get them another job they are going to have to pay unemployment forever," Waranch said.

The distance learning program was adapted for students with childcare issues or students whose employers would support — but not develop — in-house learning.

Distance Learning Coordinator Milton Dave said distance learning students tend to reach their goals faster than those who attend a learning center in person. He speculates that the online forum is a less threatening environment for students.

That factor is critical for the students who are sent to Essex-based Literacy Works from the insurance companies. They are not making their career changes out of choice.

There are, of course, reasons why some employers would rather defer the cost of career enhancement courses until they are under duress.

While investing in career enhancement courses is seen as a way to increase employee loyalty, some employers may fear losing workers to better opportunities.

"The thing about employee training is that companies need to give their employees opportunities to use their new skills, but in some industries you have to change jobs to move up," Waranch said.

Waranch has been on the other side of the issue.

When she owned a printing press she was concerned that low level workers would not be able to read the products they were producing. She led a trade association effort to test workers and provide anyone with a seventh grade or below reading level an hour a week of training in company space. Forty-five out of 200 workers required some level of training.

Waranch said most illiterate workers still make their way through manual labor without drawing attention to their deficit.

According to Waranch some entry-level jobs are structured to accommodate, rather than address, literacy issues. For example, cashier positions in fast food restaurants often rely on visual keyboards.

In a state with an impressive ratio of residents holding advanced degrees, Waranch said there is a reluctance to address those who lack the most basic skills.

According to the Maryland Association for Adult Community and Continuing Education the state ranks 46th of 50 in funds appropriated for adult students.

"How many people does it take in manufacturing to support the ideas of every Ph.D.?" Waranch said.