

# New education program proves Literacy Works

According to the Education Department, more than 40 million Americans age 16 and older have only the most basic reading and writing skills. They can sign their names, but have difficulty with other simple tasks, such as filling out a job application, reading a map or understanding their

benefits coverage.

For many corporations, the effects of this problem are revealed in the bottom line. The National Institute for Literacy estimates that about 20 percent of

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America's workers have low basic skills, which is estimated to cost businesses more than \$60 billion in productivity a year. Specifically, a low level of literacy can lead to increased employee turnover, poor product quality, accident or safety violations, high rates of absenteeism and costly errors.

In a survey of more than 300 executives, the institute found that, while 71 percent reported that basic written communication training was critical to meet their workplaces' changing skill demands, only 26 percent of companies offered this training. While 47 percent of the executives reported the need for workers to improve basic math skills, only five percent of companies offered basic math skills training.

Who can fill this gap? In Baltimore County, it's the adult education professionals at Literacy Works to the rescue. In addition to its classroom-style training programs, the organization recently introduced Literacy Connects, an Internet-based, individualized, distance-learning program. Students can take courses in reading, writing and math at basic, intermediate and advanced levels. They also can take Microsoft Office tutorials.

"This program enables adult literacy anytime, anywhere because it eliminates barriers to learning, such as day care, transportation, employment, health and mobility issues," says Literacy Works executive director Helene Waranch. "It also provides a cost-effective way for businesses to help their employees improve skills—resulting in a stronger, more qualified workforce."

Verizon Communications was so impressed with the program they contributed a \$20,000 grant to develop, expand, equip and promote it.

"We've been associated with Literacy

Works in the past and have found them to be a very professionally run organization with a strong story to tell," explains Joe Droney, Verizon's director of construction in Maryland and Washington. "When you think of illiteracy, you typically think of children, but Literacy Works demonstrates the impact of illiteracy among adults and, subsequently, their children. It addresses the root of the problem."

Literacy Connects is unique because its curriculum is tailored to meet the needs of each student. Once individuals register and are tested, they are assigned instructors. Using the password provided with registration, students can gain access to a Literacy Connects Web site. They can log on anywhere there is a computer—at home, in the office or at Literacy Works community technology centers in Lansdowne and Randallstown.

Students have set times for individualized course work, as well as live chats with other participants. In addition, they regularly communicate with a trained instructor who facilitates learning, answers questions and reviews all completed assignments. After a minimum of 60 hours of instruction, students are tested again, advancing only when they demonstrate proficiency.

Each course costs \$75 and includes 60 hours of computer time. For all four courses, employers pay \$150 per student per month. Already several companies have signed on, including the state's Injured Workers Insurance Fund, the Baltimore County Office of Employment and Training, Kemper Insurance and Oak Crest Village.

Preliminary results are compelling. Waranch says, "Statistically, the academic results for distance learning students in the program are similar to those who go through the classroom version. But students in the classroom took 88 hours of class time on average to complete the course work, while distance learning students took only 52 hours on the computer."

Waranch reports that students who have completed the program have received their GEDs, found better job opportunities and have greater interaction with their children in educational activities at home. On the job, students who improve their skills are more productive, make fewer mistakes and have a higher level of self-confidence.

**Coming July 1: Silence in the Workplace Can Sabotage Success**

*Kim Goad is president of Ovarions Inc., a performance-improvement consulting firm. E-mail her at [kim@preparedtoperform.com](mailto:kim@preparedtoperform.com)*

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