

Employers: what functional skills can do for you

*“Functional skills are the fundamental, applied skills in **English, mathematics, and information and communication technology (ICT)** which help people to gain the most from life, learning and work.” (Ofqual, 2012)*

The *Skills for Life Survey* by the Department for Business, Innovation & Skills (2011)¹ found that a significant number of adults in England still do not have the English and maths skills needed for work and life. Around 15 per cent struggle with English, and almost a quarter have difficulty with everyday maths.

These statistics are borne out by employers who frequently report the need for better skills in the workplace. Depending on your type of organisation, this can impact on your:

- production levels
- service delivery
- ability to meet targets
- reputation
- growth
- profit
- competitive edge.

Employers were involved in designing functional skills in order to address the problems caused by under-developed workforce skills.

The benefits of a functional workforce

“Since our Service Technicians have been doing functional skills they have become more effective at communicating with our customers when working out in the field with new technologies. They seem more confident, willing to contribute to discussions with colleagues, work as part of a team to solve customers’ problems and challenge the normal ways of working to remain at the top of their game. As a result, our customers are more satisfied with the service they receive from us, and happy customers are what every business wants!”

Chris Starling, Head of Apprenticeship - Virgin Media

By ensuring that you have a functional workforce, **all** your employees will be able to apply skills to different contexts, take on challenges, use their initiative, work independently, and realise that tasks often need persistence, thought and reflection. The ‘business’ benefits include:

- **improved efficiency** - employees will work more quickly, accurately and flexibly, thereby reducing costs and increasing productivity

¹ <http://www.bis.gov.uk/assets/biscore/further-education-skills/docs/0-9/11-1367-2011-skills-for-life-survey-findings.pdf>

- **higher quality** products and services
- **better communications** - employees will perform well in teams, participate in discussions, and listen and react appropriately
- **customer satisfaction** - by providing friendly customer service, accurate order processing and the speedy resolution of complaints, custom will be retained and gained
- **confident, motivated employees** - employees will adapt well to change and have the underpinning skills to develop other job skills
- **better recruitment and staff retention** - if you invest in learning, you will attract a high calibre of job applicants, staff turnover will reduce, experienced staff will be retained and recruitment costs saved.

“The hospitality sector is all about keeping customers happy, so we need to have a well-trained workforce who can work quickly and efficiently, dealing with guests in a friendly manner, ensuring their needs are met. Spirit Pub Company is committed to raising the English and maths skills of our workforce and see functional skills as being the tool to help us do that. As well as developing the underpinning skills in English and maths, functional skills focus on developing someone’s ability to solve problems and apply skills, which, we believe, will in turn help our teams to become more effective in the way they deal with guests.”

Mark Peters, Head of Training Programmes and Qualifications - Spirit Pub Company

There are also benefits to employees including:

- **greater job satisfaction** - due to more autonomy, variety and work pride
- the ability to take advantage of **promotion** and **training opportunities**, possibly leading to **increased earnings of up to 10%²**
- **reduced stress** and more **confidence**
- in their **personal lives** - ability to manage finances, exploit new technologies, help with children’s homework...

Not everyone will immediately understand the benefits of functional skills. To help you convince staff at different levels, here are some facts and tips.

Senior management

Although there will be some costs associated with introducing functional skills, because of the benefits described above, senior management should view them as an investment. Change is gathering pace and, especially during this period of economic downturn, all types of organisations will benefit from investing in the skills of their workforce.

“As a Virgin Company we believe that by putting the employee first and investing in our people, success will follow.”

Chris Starling, Head of Apprenticeship - Virgin Media

Getting everyone on board

² <http://www.bis.gov.uk/assets/biscore/further-education-skills/docs/r/11-1418-review-research-on-improving-adult-skills>

Tips

- Emphasise the business case for improving the English, maths and ICT skills of their employees.
- Ask an employer already committed to functional skills to explain how this development has helped their organisation.
- Adopt a whole-organisation approach so functional skills become part of the culture; include them in job descriptions, induction programmes, appraisals etc.

Managers, supervisors, and training and HR staff

These are the people most likely to be involved in developing employees' functional skills.

Tips

- Ensure that key staff understand the benefits so that they can promote functional skills.
- Stress that their main role will be to provide support and opportunities for skill development.

Individual employees

Functional skills are relevant to **everyone**, including experienced employees and graduates. Many employees have high skill levels in some areas, but not in others - difficulties can hold them back or hinder their performance. Also, employees' skills often need updating because working methods and technology change over time.

Tips

- Emphasise the benefits to employees of improving their English, maths and ICT skills.
- Promote functional skills via newsletters, emails, the intranet and 'functional skills champions'.
- Work with employee reps, particularly union learning reps (ULRs).
- Be aware that some employees may find it embarrassing to admit to difficulties. To encourage participation and preserve dignity, avoid talking about 'weaknesses'. Focus on the opportunities to be gained and the fact that they will achieve nationally-recognised qualifications.
- In terms of practicalities, ensure that training is as flexible as possible.

Support available

There's a wealth of resources and support to help your organisation start to introduce a programme of functional skills development.

Functional Skills Starter Kit (LSIS) - provides links to useful resources and guidance to help those new to functional skills:

<http://www.excellencegateway.org.uk/node/20280>

LSIS has also produced a suite of **CPD modules**, including

1a: Employers: Introducing functional skills. There are other modules with an employer focus - 2: Identifying skills gaps in the

workplace; 3: Blended learning approaches in the workplace;
4: Maths engagement in the workplace. For links to each of these,
see:

<http://www.excellencegateway.org.uk/node/21207>

Trade unions - can support learning in your workplace, e.g. through
ULRs.

<http://www.unionlearn.org.uk/>

**Colleges, independent training providers and distance learning
providers**, such as **learndirect** ([http://www.learndirect.co.uk/
businessinfo/](http://www.learndirect.co.uk/businessinfo/)) - apart from offering a range of courses, they can work
with you to develop bespoke programmes.

Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) - these are employer-led organisations
that aim to develop skills.

<http://www.sscalliance.org/SectorSkillsCouncils/SectorSkillsCouncils.aspx>



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