

Interview with Gord Lechner

Gord Lechner is the director of the BCFED Health & Safety Centre

What is workplace health and safety?

Typically, the average person spends one third of their time at work, one third sleeping, and the rest having fun (hopfully!). We spend a significant time at work, and we encounter hazards. Often what comes to mind as workplace hazards are falling, electrical hazards, broken bones—things we can see. There are also things that can take longer to develop: musculoskeletal injury, back problems and occupational diseases.

The goal of workplace health and safety is to learn from things that happen, and examine the workplace to anticipate future hazards. It is vital that workers and employers know their workplace rights and responsibilities.

Workers have four rights:

- The **right to know** about workplace hazards.
- The **right to participate** in health and safety at work, whether as a health and safety committee member, or simply by letting supervisors know about hazards.
- The **right to refuse** unsafe work, which could harm themselves or others.
- The **right to no discrimination** for exercising health and safety rights.

How does literacy affect health and safety?

Literacy can be a barrier to exercising health and safety rights. For example, literacy is important for workers to understand,

identify, interpret and participate in their health and safety rights. Take the right to know, for instance. Material Safety Data Sheets (MSDS) are written sheets that explain about potential hazards and precautions to take with workplace chemicals. Icons on these sheets are designed to account for different levels of literacy, and they should be available in other languages. However, low literacy can be a barrier, because many fine details about precautions are in text.

How many accidents are caused by workers misunderstanding safety instructions?

I've never seen accurate stats on this, for a few reasons. Many accidents are not reported. To get a good statistic, every accident would have to be thoroughly investigated, and all the factors documented. There is also no central database in Canada to compile the reports.

What can employers do to improve workplace health and safety, considering that some workers may have literacy issues?

Employers are subject to what's known as a "general duty clause". They have the general duty to provide a safe and healthy workplace under workplace safety regulations. Employers have to determine what employees know. Are procedures being followed? If not, why not? If literacy is a barrier, employers have to take steps to ensure that procedures are understood. There are a number of different ways to train

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All photos courtesy of Kayla Kinnunen.

Thank You to Magnolia Communications

Magnolia Communications recently made a generous gift to Literacy BC on behalf of their clients.

“In looking for a corporate giveaway to celebrate our 5-year anniversary, we looked at many typical gifts. At the end, we decided on a gift close to our hearts — literacy and education. Our donation to Literacy BC on behalf of our customers garnered many heartfelt thank yous. Our clients really appreciated the personal letter from Literacy BC thanking them for their donation and hopefully making a difference to improving literacy in BC. We encourage more companies to look at this alternative donation option that has a long lasting impact on a great cause.”

Phoebe Yong, President, Magnolia Communications



To investigate ways your business can support literacy, visit: www.literacybc.ca/SupportUs/supportus.php

The Nine Essential Skills of Fall

Reading Text	Inspired by Remembrance Day, start reading Catch-22. Suddenly realize where your office’s policy manuals came from.
Document Use	Check through the user manual on your leaf blower to find out whether you will electrocute yourself if you use it to unclog the flooded storm drain on your street.
Numeracy	Calculate how many minutes you have to work out to burn off the three bags of candy you picked up for half price the day after Halloween.
Writing	Write to the manufacturer of your leaf blower to complain because it won’t blow away the sodden leaves you left on your lawn through three weeks of Vancouver rain.
Oral Communication	Explain to your teenage daughter why you aren’t spending five hours in a border line up to take her shopping at a US outlet mall on Black Friday.
Working With Others	Negotiate with your partner to decide which family you’ll visit for the holidays: is two weeks with your relatives over the summer greater than or equal to five days snowed in with her relatives at Christmas?
Continuous Learning	Get so cold on the bus home that you finally give in to your crafty coworkers and take up knitting. Learn how to cast on, bind off, and read a pattern. Come home to find your Persian cat has shredded your half-knit sock and gnawed through your fancy bamboo knitting needles.
Thinking Skills	Create a plan for putting the garden to bed, raking the leaves, winterizing your house, and getting the Christmas lights up. Then, take a nap.
Computer Use	Buy all of your Christmas presents online so that you don’t have to step foot in a mall once during November and December (then have your small-town sister ask you to pick up just a couple of things on Robson St., on the Saturday before Christmas).

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workers other than handing someone a sheet of instructions and saying “read this”. You can show a video, demonstrate procedures, or have a discussion with employees.

Employers should have inclusive safety programs that anticipate various literacy levels. Employers should be able to anticipate levels through their hiring procedures and should have a sense of what they need to do to comply with the law.

In some workplaces, procedures are written in technical terms, and should be written in plain language. Sometimes, the procedure itself is out-of-date, and needs to be updated.

Employers can also encourage workers to improve literacy. Some employers offer tuition reimbursement for improving language skills. In some larger workplaces, employers have coordinated internal programs that fit work schedules of employees.

According to a recent Conference Board of Canada study, 64% of employers felt that workers fully or largely understood health and safety practices. Only 40 per cent of workers agreed. How can employers make sure safety messages are understood?

That’s less than half of workers saying they understand, and over half of employers thinking they do. That’s a big gap. That should be an alarm bell.

Employers need to ensure that employees both understand procedures and follow them. Employers have to observe and consult workers and the health and safety committee to ensure compliance with regulations.

The BCFED Health & Safety Centre runs four different programs to address this. Our mandate is health and safety education. We try to get to areas of the population that have barriers, whether they are geographic, financial, age-related or

literary barriers. Two of our programs teach people what their rights are and how to report accidents. One program is taught as an ESL class. For migrant workers, we deliver the same critical information, but in their own native language, because they are not in Canada for long.

Worksafe BC (BC’s Worker’s Compensation Board) is another good resource. They have information in many languages and they can provide speakers on specific workplace hazards.

Workplaces can also work with literacy organizations to improve the literacy levels of their employees. If they want a long-standing relationship with their employees, this is a good investment. It will help not just health and safety but productivity and employee retention.

The Conference Board of Canada says that almost 60% of adults at the lowest literacy level rate their own reading skills as good or excellent. How can workplaces ensure that workers understand health and safety instructions, when workers may not be aware of (or will not admit) what they don’t understand?

I would suggest two components. Observation and consultation. It’s what is required by law.

Employers and supervisors need to observe workers to ensure procedures are being followed. If there are any problems, they need to be investigated, and corrected.

Employers should be consulting with the workplace health and safety committee. At least half of the committee must be worker representatives. A health and safety committee is required for any workplace with 20 regular employees (full or part time). For anything under 20 employees, there needs to be a designated worker representative selected by the workers. These representatives can assist and work with employers to

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recommend and find solutions to challenges like workplace literacy.

Workplace accidents must be reported and investigated. This is how workplaces learn about, and fix, safety issues. Workers with low literacy may be reluctant to bring forward a safety problem because of fears of filling out forms. What can workplaces do to encourage reporting?

Workers can report accidents verbally, there is nothing that says workers need to make a written report. What the law says is that all workplace accidents or incidents need to be reported, and the employer needs to initiate an investigation. The investigation is where the documentation happens.

There are a lot of barriers to workers reporting accidents: fear of being disciplined, fear of damaging the company's safety record, fear of being made fun of by coworkers, fear of making supervisor upset, or fear of red tape.

Workers need to understand the reason for reporting, which is to prevent reoccurrence. Not to lay blame, or punish anyone, but to make sure that the incident doesn't happen again.

Workers need to know that they don't need to fill out a form, that it's OK to come forward, that the workplace just wants to understand the situation in order to improve it.

Workers also need to know that they should report accidents because the extent of injuries isn't always clear right away. For example, a back problem might get worse. You need to report the problem because if a serious injury develops and you haven't reported it, it's very difficult to prove that it was caused by work.

Workers can call Worksafe BC's phone number to report an injury. They do not have to fill out a single form.

Workers with low literacy, or whose first language is not English, may not be comfortable speaking out about unsafe work practices. What are some ways to encourage workers to stand up for their own safety?

This comes back to the initial point. All workers need to know about their health and safety rights, and how to exercise them correctly and effectively. We need to communicate these rights clearly to people at all literacy levels.

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The BC Literacy Directory invites YOU...

WHERE ARE YOU?
Click on a region



- > USEFUL WEBSITES
- > Advanced search
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- > Edit program data
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...or click on a city

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Have you updated your program listings lately?
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Workplace Literacy Resources

Literacy BC has a library filled with thousands of literacy resources. Contact our library at any time at library@literacy.bc.ca for help, check out our list of workplace literacy resources at www.literacybc.ca/PLRC/workplace_resources.pdf, or visit these links:

How Essential Skills training benefits business. Victoria Read Society, 2009. www.nald.ca/library/research/read/skillsplus/skillsplus.pdf

Fact sheets about workplace literacy and Essential Skills. Canadian Association of Municipal Administrators, 2009. www.camacam.ca/en/literacylearning/literacyfactsheets.asp

Literacy in the workplace CUPE fact sheets, 2008. www.nald.ca/library/research/cupe/factsheets/factsheets.pdf

Addressing Canada's literacy challenge: a cost/benefit analysis. T. Scott Murray et al. Ottawa: Data Angel, 2009. www.nald.ca/library/research/cost_benefit/cost_benefit.pdf

Literacy scores, human capital and growth across fourteen OECD countries. www.statcan.ca/english/research/89-552-MIE/89-552-MIE2004011.pdf This study showed a positive association between investments in literacy and growth and labour productivity. For example, every 1% increase in literacy scores is linked to an eventual 2.5% relative rise in labour productivity and a 1.5% rise in GDP per capita.

The benefits to employers of raising workforce basic skills levels: a review of the literature UK, 2003. www.nrdc.org.uk/publications_details.asp?ID=42

Business results through Essential Skills and literacy guidebook Canadian Manufacturers & Exporters - Ontario. www.nald.ca/library/research/cme/business/business.pdf Designed for employers

Tracy's tips: what can you do about literacy at your workplace? Tracy Defoe. The Learning Factor, 2008. www.nald.ca/library/learning/defoe/tips/tips.pdf

Workplace Literacy Central www2.conferenceboard.ca/workplaceliteracy/default.asp Information, tools and advice for Canadian organizations and employers about raising literacy at work.

What you don't know can hurt you: literacy's impact on workplace health and safety. Conference Board of Canada, July 2010. abclifeliteracy.ca/en/system/files/11-019_WhatYouDon'tKnow_WEB.pdf

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Sometimes there is a cultural barrier. For migrant and immigrant workers, work realities in Canada might be very different from their country of origin. They need to know that here it is all right to speak out or ask questions about health and safety.

Often, people with low literacy levels are working entry-level jobs, which are usually very hazardous and high turnover. They are afraid of the consequences of reporting safety issues, even though there are protections in law. For example, migrant agricultural workers can be sent back on the next plane if their employer wished to do so.

There have been some recent tragedies, for example, on the mushroom farm¹ and the farm van². Had the workers known that they had rights and felt safe reporting, they might have spoken up about workplace hazards.

Tragically, the most extreme cases that we hear about are workers that have literacy as a barrier.

Much more work needs to be done around these issues by all everyone.

Contact the BCFED Health & Safety Centre at: www.healthandsafetybc.ca.

1 In 2008, three workers died and two were severely injured in an incident involving toxic gas at a mushroom farm in BC.

2 In 2007, a van carrying farm workers crashed, killing three and injuring 14. Seventeen workers were crammed, without seat belts, into a van meant for 10.



The Need for Clear Writing

To write with clear language is to write so your reader can understand the meaning on the first reading.

A clear warning sign protects people from danger. A clear form reduces mistakes and saves administration time. More clients will read a clear website.

How much of your workday is spent reading? Would you be more productive if everything you read were easy to read, understand and remember?

Almost 40% of Canadians have difficulty with reading and writing. Maybe they are learning English as a second or third language. Their skills might be rusty. Maybe they did not finish school. Perhaps their school—or even university—did a poor job of helping them learn. If your materials are easy-to-read, you will connect with this audience. Advanced readers will absorb your message that much faster.

Tips to improve clarity at your workplace:

1. Write at a grade 6 to 9 reading level. This is the level of most newspapers. Within Word, turn on the “check readability” option, or try this website: www.online-utility.org/english/readability_test_and_improve.jsp
2. Does your workplace “utilize the synergy from our out-of-the-box thinking”? Jargon and abbreviations are difficult to read. Take them out.
3. Investigate your workplace, your materials and your signs from a literacy perspective. Literacy Alberta has a toolkit to help you conduct a literacy audit. You can borrow it from Literacy BC’s library. Contact the library at library@literacy.bc.ca.
4. If you are looking for additional help, Literacy BC offers clear language consulting services. Just let us know how we can help you. Contact us at info@literacy.bc.ca.

Everyman Bank

Savings Account Information

A savings account is the perfect capitulus to your chequing account. Whether you're saving for a special purchase, creating an eloquentia fund or holding the cash coadunatio of your ignotus patrocinator, our savings bank accounts offer greater feliciter than other short term savings and ignavus options.

Chequing Account Information

Choose the catervatim of services and fees that will help you pay as little as patrocinator based on your needs and the amount of banking you do. You can compare accounts on your own, or let our Chequing Account Scelero make a reprehendo for you.

Visa Card Information: Low interest Card

Our el... Classic Visa rewards you with point for e... you spend on the c... deemable for...
 fen... riter de...

This pamphlet contains banking information about the most basic banking services. How much do you understand? Any word that requires a grade 12 or higher reading level has been replaced by Latin. Forty percent of Canadians have difficulty reading at a grade 12 level.

Literacy BC Members: Come to Our AGM!

**November 26, 2010 5:30 to 7 PM,
 Executive Hotel Vintage Park,
 1379 Howe St., Vancouver BC**

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