

## **A New Economic Engine: Workplace ESOL**

### **Our future workforce depends on it**

A well trained and productive workforce is an essential component of a successful economy. In today's competitive economy, retaining and developing good employees is critical. The Baby Boom generation is turning 63 and is filing for Social Security benefits. More than 10 million skilled workers will be leaving the workforce by 2010. With the only workforce growth in the state and region coming from immigration, keeping the status quo is not sustainable.

Immigrants will be expected to fill much of this growing gap in the labor market yet 93% of new jobs created in the region over the next 10 years will require at least modest English language skills. Unless more workers gain access to ESOL classes, the Commonwealth will inevitably face a gap in workers with the language skills needed to fill skilled positions and drive continued economic growth. There is a growing *economic* incentive to invest in ESOL classes for immigrant workers; additional investment in ESOL would raise productivity; boost GRP; raise household incomes, and increase government revenues.

According to the Boston Redevelopment Authority, there are over 88,000 Limited English Proficient (LEP) residents in Metro Boston, an increase of 37% since 2000. If these 88,000 residents raised their English skills just one level from Low to Medium, their average earnings would increase from \$25,000/year to \$33,000/year and the region would see increases in: direct and indirect income by \$732 million, new spending and job creation, \$108 million in Gross Regional Product, and over \$9 million in new federal, state and local tax revenue.

Savvy employers are increasingly turning to work-based English as a Second Language (ESOL) programs as an effective way to maintain a skilled workforce and to stem high turnover costs. With work-based programs, many low wage workers, who are holding down 2 jobs or raising children, are better able to participate. Their earnings increase as a result of their increased abilities and their success is good for business.

An added benefit to employers is that service delivery to customers and clients improves: staff with improved language abilities are better able to provide quality products and services, thus generating more business.

In selected industry sectors such as healthcare, investing in workplace ESOL programs is a necessity. The single largest employment sector in the Commonwealth and Boston, healthcare offers a large number of entry-level healthcare jobs that provide good starting pay and benefits, relative job security, and opportunities for advancement: features that also attract low-income, low-skill applicants and recent immigrants. At Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, 37% of BIDMC's 8,500+ employees are ethnic minorities and most of them are non-native English speakers. With higher skilled positions at the hospital requiring education and credentials, the only way to help limited English speaking employees keep up with changing job demands and advance from their current positions is to help them acquire higher order English language skills.

BIDMC offers in house English language classes to improve their job performance and to enable employees to enter in-house workforce training pipelines in nursing, surgical technician, medical lab technician, research administrator and patient care technician. It's a win-win that helps BIDMC retain good employees and fill skilled openings, and employees get onto an "escalator" to higher paying jobs. To help develop these workforce programs, BIDMC obtained state (Workforce Training Fund) and private (Boston Foundation) grants as seed funding and contracted with JVS for its workplace ESOL classes.

**Issues to keep in mind when establishing an effective workplace English program include:**

1. *Employer/manager commitment:* If top management isn't clear about why it is doing the program and what it expects from its investment in terms of improving employee performance and advancement, momentum will eventually dissipate and employees will get mixed signals about the value of their participation in classes in the eyes of their employers.

2. *Learning gains take time:* At least 143 classroom hours are needed on average to advance one level of proficiency, and 3-4 hours per week is minimum instructional time. Location matters as well: worksite instruction leverages employer investment and gets past the obstacle of publicly-funded waitlists.

3. *New models are necessary:* Learning must be contextualized to what students need to know to do their jobs, and instructors must use "functional" language rather than the "formal" academic language taught in typical ESOL programs. For example, kitchen terms and language in a hospitality workplace, and pre-college content for employees who are entering healthcare occupations where college will be needed to advance.

4. *Support, track and share success:* Use standardized pre- and post-testing to assess student progress and feed results back to both student and employer; place student at right skill level and in right career track to increase the likelihood they will advance to the next level; provide classes at convenient times and places; provide release time (paid if possible); provide coaching to address classroom issues (e.g., study skills, time management), academic issues, and career advancement; and build in reinforcement through public recognition (graduation ceremony, newsletter) and financial rewards (e.g., pay raise, bonus, tuition reimbursement).

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