Evaluation of the Skills for Life at Work Project

Final Report

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April 2011
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Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank:

• all of the employers, learners and training providers who took part in this evaluation
• staff at CfBT Education Trust for providing relevant background documentation and employer database contacts
• staff at CfBT Education Trust for the opportunity to participate in the *Skill for Life at Work Success Factors* seminar
• Professor Judy Sebba and Dr Yugin Teo, both of the University of Sussex, for their respective contributions during the course of the project.
Executive Summary

This document reports on an independent evaluation of the Skills for Life at Work project in the south east of England. It focused particularly on impacts on employers and learners, and is based on interviews with 30 employers, 5 groups of learners and 3 training providers.

Main Findings

• The bulk of the feedback from employers, learners and training providers during this evaluation was overwhelmingly positive.

• Employers cited benefits in three main areas: productivity (both for specific tasks and generally); motivation and teamwork; and confidence and communication. In a small number of cases, such positive impacts were less clear.

• For learners, it was clear in many cases that Skills for Life at Work had: opened up new possibilities; increased confidence and self-belief; and enabled the development of knowledge and skills.

• Strengths of the project as a whole included its potential for beneficial impacts, the nature and quality of the training, and its focus on certain target groups. Areas of weaknesses, though, included set up issues for employers, training issues for learners, and administration issues for training providers.

Main Recommendations

• The overall recommendation of this evaluation is that Skills for Life at Work-type basic skills training in the workplace should continue as part of wider efforts to improve skills attainment levels.

• To this end, there should be continued support for certain current practices such as: the provision of ESOL courses; the involvement of small and large training providers; the tailoring of courses to workplaces; the provision of accredited and non-accredited courses; the highlighting of progression pathways between and beyond courses; and the involvement of Trade Union Learning representatives.

• There should also be support for the development of certain improved practices: more systematic recruitment of employers across all sectors; encouragement for previous employee participants to act as recruiters for future courses; communication of learner feedback and impact examples to senior staff within workplaces; simplification of funders’ paperwork demands on training providers; and streamlining of initial assessment processes.
1. Introduction

1.1 Background

The Skills for Life at Work initiative developed from the Government’s Skills for Life Strategy Unit to take learning into the workplace in order to improve accessibility to learning for employed adults, many of whom may have had earlier negative experiences of education. In 2008, the Learning and Skills Council directed some of its share of European Social Funds into Skills for Life and in many regions of the country launched programmes to teach literacy and numeracy to low-skilled employees.

In the South East, a consortium of Professional Development Centres, known as the New Futures Professional Development Network, submitted a successful bid, led by the CfBT Education Trust, for the Skills for Life at Work project. Several partners consisting of a wide range of training providers across the region supported the proposal. The bid was ultimately successful and this project became live across Kent, Sussex, Surrey, Hampshire/Isle of Wight and the Thames Valley in January 2009. The project finished in December 2010, by which time it had supported around 5,500 Skills for Life learners and a further 1,200 teaching support staff across the South East.

Recent research has highlighted a number of issues relevant to the Skills for Life at Work programme. First, although employer-led training and level 2 vocational provision have become the main drivers to achieve the government’s World Class Skills targets set for 2020, Howard and Kings (2010) argue for the need to continue with Lifelong Learning Networks (LLN) provision, to ensure that adults have the opportunity to use their proficiency in literacy and numeracy, a view shared by Payne (2010) in his evaluation of skill utilisation at work.

Second, the Skills for Life strategy continues to be critical as many young people continue to leave school without English and Maths qualifications (Rashid and Brooks 2010). Reflecting on the Skills for Life survey on literacy levels, by age group, Williams et al (2003 p.10) commented that

There were large differences in educational achievement between the various age-groups. Younger respondents were much more likely to hold qualifications than older respondents. Around 10 per cent of respondents under the age of 35 held no qualifications at all but this proportion climbs steadily with each subsequent age group: 16 per cent of 35-44 year olds, 27 per cent of 45-54 year-olds and 41 per cent of 55-to 65-year-olds held no qualifications. However, the relatively flat age data for literacy test performance suggests that the difference between age groups in underlying ability was minimal. The sharp increase in qualification acquisition since the war- particularly in the 1960s and 1970s – has not led to a sharp increase in literacy skills.
Third, several reports point to the positive links between the achievement of basic skills and the impact on health-related outcomes (NRDC 2010a) and on young people in custody (Hurry et al. 2010). The Offenders’ Learning and Skills Service (OLASS 2010) argue that ensuring offenders have the underpinning skills for life to enable them to meet the real needs of employers, can reduce re-offending rates which benefits both the communities in which they live, and wider society.

Against this backdrop, and recognising the ‘rich research potential’ of the Skills for Life at Work project across the South East (Goss 2010, p. 3), CfBT Education Trust commissioned the University of Sussex to undertake an external evaluation of the programme. The aims and methods of this evaluation are detailed below after a brief consideration of the policy context.

1.2 Context

Skills for Life was established in 2001 in the wake of the disturbing results from the International Adult Literacy Survey of 1996, and the Moser Report of 1999. Unprecedented sums of money were made available for the adult basic skills sector in England via the Learning and Skills Council, and for research on it, mainly via the National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy (NRDC). Ambitious targets were set for numbers of adults to achieve basic skills qualifications by 2004, 2007 and 2010, and (if the results of audits are to be believed) achieved and exceeded, earlier than envisaged.

Even more ambitious targets for 2020 were set by the Leitch Report in 2006 – monitoring of progress towards these will apparently rely on results from the repeat Skills for Life survey of 2010 in England, and the participation of the whole of the UK in the PIAAC (Programme for International Assessment of Adult Competencies) survey of 2011.

Meanwhile, several studies of adult learners attending literacy and numeracy provision show at best modest progress (Brooks et al. 2007; Coben et al. 2007; Grief et al. 2007; Warner et al. 2008; Vorhaus et al. 2009; Wolf and Evans, 2011; Brooks and Pilling, 2011, in press). Two factors in this seem to be insufficient direct teaching of the requisite skills (see previous references plus Besser et al. 2004), and insufficient contact hours to make a real difference, especially in work-based provision.

Making eligibility for unemployment benefit contingent for some adults on attending classes has been tried, and apparently abandoned. Offering adult learners a financial incentive to attend is not part of the solution either: a randomised controlled trial of this with adult literacy learners (Brooks et al., 2008) found no impact on progress, but the perverse effect of lower attendance. And the hope that ICT will boost progress also seems forlorn (Torgerson et al. 2004).

For literacy at least there is now evidence on possibly more effective pedagogies such as phonics, oral reading fluency, and sentence combining (Burton et al., 2010), but it is small-scale and has yet to have much influence. And the current context is of less funding for the sector as
a whole and for research related to it in particular, and above all for the teaching of English to speakers of other languages.

1.3 Aims

The overall aim of this evaluation is to provide a rigorous independent analysis of employers’ and learners’ perspectives on the activities and impact of the current Skills for Life at Work Project and to make recommendations for future work-based basic skills training initiatives.

The evaluation addresses the following five questions:

1. How has the ESF Skills for Life at Work Project impacted on employers?
2. How has the ESF Skills for Life at Work Project impacted on learners?
3. What are the characteristics of learners who participate and who make progress?
4. What are the characteristics of the organisations in which Skills for Life at Work is most effective?
5. What is the role of accreditation where it is offered?

1.4 Method

The evaluation questions were explored through collating data from four different sources.

Documentary and website analysis – This included policy papers relating to the national policy on basic skills, English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) and Skills for Life at Work, relevant research and evaluation studies on workplace basic skills programmes, as well as annual reports from employers and relevant project documentation.

Individual interviews with 30 employers – These employers were a purposive sample drawn from a CfBT database of 150 Skills for Life at Work employers across the South East. They were selected to represent a cross-section in terms of employment sector, size of organisation, type of training offered and geographical location. The sample included private, public and voluntary organisations with an emphasis on small and medium enterprises (SMEs). (Full details of the employer sample are provided in Appendix 1).

Focus group interviews with five groups of learners – These were undertaken in the learners’ workplaces, and the sample included learners from all three types of training i.e. literacy, numeracy and ESOL. The groups were identified following initial interviews with the employers, and included basic skills learners from a large public organisation, an FE college, a private care home, a voluntary sector care provider, and a city council.

Face-to-face interviews with three training providers – These were held on the premises of the training providers’ organisations, and the sample included a private training organisation and two further education colleges.
All interviews used semi-structured schedules which enabled some common questions to be addressed by all respondents but comments to be invited pertinent to each individual and their experience. The interviews were either audio recorded and transcribed (or careful notes taken and subsequently typed up for analysis).

The interview transcripts and notes were then analysed in two stages. Using an evaluation framework structured around the main questions/foci of the evaluation, members of the project team analysed and coded their respective interview data in order to identify key messages emerging from the employers, learners and training providers they had interviewed. Following this, the themes, examples, and emerging messages for each of the completed analysis frameworks were then compared and contrasted within the team. Following drafting of the report, an additional stage of verification of findings was carried out through circulating the emerging findings to the thirty employers for feedback and comment.

**Amendments to the original research design:** It was originally proposed to hold group interviews with employers who were to be identified through meetings such as the University’s graduate recruitment fair. On further examination it was found that there was not the expected overlap in employers’ involvement in both graduate recruitment and the Skills for Life at Work. As a result, this aspect of the design was not activated. In consultation with CfBT, two additional learner focus groups were substituted for the Verification Workshops as no employer expressed an interest in attending such an event when this was raised during the employer interviews.

### 1.5 Structure of the Report

The rest of the report is in five sections. Section 2 provides an overview of the training with an analysis of the types of employers, learners and training providers within the data collection sample. Section 3 considers the impacts on employers and the factors that enabled and constrained employer benefits. Section 4 then examines the impacts on learners and the factors that seem to have been influential upon learner benefits. The report concludes with an overview of the key findings and a number of recommendations arising from this evaluation (Section 6).
2. Overview of Training

This section presents an overview of the Skills for Life at Work training that had taken place in the workplaces that featured within this evaluation. It seeks to provide an insight into the characteristics of the main players (who), the main content (what), the main approaches (how) and the main motivations (why) reported by the employers, learners and training providers in our sample.

2.1 Who?

A wide range of employers was included, most of which were small or medium sized enterprises although three large national organisations were included. The care sector was well represented and included private BUPA care homes as well as NHS and voluntary organisations. There were some employers with very specific areas of work, such as volunteer frame-makers with mental health difficulties. Also included as an employer was a large FE College whose employees included caretakers and cleaners as well as trainee lecturers.

The five focus groups included learners from: a large public service organisation; two private care providers; a Local Authority division and a general Further Education (FE) College. The varied nature of the learners was highlighted from the interviews with the employers and included both employees who had been in position a long time as well as recent starters. Typical comments included: ‘staff from all areas – logistics (porters, distribution, linen room) and housekeeping’ and all ‘staff, senior carers, nurses, kitchen, all departments’.

The multi-cultural nature of the workforce was emphasised, with several employers pointing out the educational differences amongst the staff, with overseas workers often holding high qualifications gained in their own countries:

All [16] shop floor, production line operatives, cleaning staff, some manufacturers, Poles, Filipinos, English native speakers, real mix of ages. Educationally, many of the Filipinos had MAs etc. but no UK qualifications. (healthcare product manufacturer)

Learners are Filipino/Nepalese and East European – there is a huge age range throughout. They are doing a fantastic job and need to improve their English. A lot have phenomenal qualifications but not in our language. (large FE college)

Two employers noted that originally the courses had been identified for the overseas workers but this had been widened to all staff. A manager from a support services organisation commented that ‘[originally it was] overseas staff who had language difficulties but then also new staff from this country who did not have a good education years ago’.

Process of recruitment

The learners were recruited to the courses in a number of different ways. Most commonly, this was through suggestions from senior staff on the basis of the employees lacking skills or
needing a qualification for promotion. In one local council, the Trade Union Learning Representative had suggested potential learners who may benefit and this had proved to be a powerful lever for recruitment.

Recruitment for a large public service organisation was open:

We advertise courses to all units. They look through personnel lists – Who is likely to be promoted? Who needs extra literacy for their job? And who would like to do it for general personal development?

A healthcare product manufacturer used a variety of recruitment techniques:

I spoke to all of the workforce and said ‘here’s an opportunity, who’s interested?’ Plus we had managers’ recommendations – we ended up with employees for literacy, numeracy or both. Most put themselves forward for it, but some were identified.

For other employers, it was mandatory for identified learners to undertake the courses, with this requirement being linked to a need to upskill the workforce. For example: ‘All had to do it – restructuring in our department meant that everyone had to get Level 2 so all had to up-skill’.

Recruitment to the courses was also possible on the basis of individuals requesting it for their own development. In some organisations (for example, a large hotel and a local council) all staff were offered the opportunity to do the training. Several employers pointed out that the courses were well publicised (eg in the canteen) and that employees were encouraged to put themselves forward. A manager in a private nursing home commented that he had given the staff the chance to identify themselves and ‘they all jumped at the opportunity’ whilst others said that ‘I put up a notice and they all were interested, every one of them because they could see the potential’.

The initial reluctance of some staff to engage was noted by several employers who recognised that potential learners needed encouragement to put themselves forward. A primary school Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO) commented that ‘I had to encourage some [of the learning support staff] to do the numeracy because they knew they needed it but they needed encouragement to do it.’

More positively, evidence was given of the effect of one learner successfully engaging with the training and the subsequent knock-on effect this had on other employees. An employer from a residential care home for adults described how:

initially one member of staff was interested, so the manager then asked which other members of staff wanted to undertake training. So they put themselves forward for the training.

This ‘snowball effect’ was confirmed by other organisations:
Just one member of staff was initially involved in the training as they had been approached by their line manager to do this. As a result, other members of staff also requested the training. (hotel)

It was like dominoes, one or two said they would get involved and then the other homes, they said could they do it but we wanted to do it ourselves to start with. (private children’s care home)

The learners in the interview sample from a private care provider all confirmed that they had been approached by their line manager who had identified their literacy learning needs. These had been picked up at Induction and again during the initial assessment for the NVQ in Social Care. This underlies the need for a certain level of literacy in order to access work-based learning courses, such as NVQs.

There was only one situation where the employer from a private children’s care home mentioned a degree of insistence that their staff undertook the courses:

I put it to the staff would they be interested, and if they hadn’t been, they would have been coerced into doing it.

In some cases recruitment appeared to have a link to the employer’s broader recruitment processes, linked to other government sponsored programmes such as the Future Jobs Fund. One community organisation regularly advertised volunteer jobs through the Job Centre though there were conditions i.e. volunteers needed to be aged 18-25 and unemployed for at least 6 months.

There appeared to be a perception that there were some restrictions on who was eligible to apply for the Skills for Life at Work courses. One employer noted that some staff who would have benefited from the courses were not eligible i.e. they needed to have been resident in the UK for more than 3 years and the employee had to work more than 16 hours a week.

2.2 What?

The Skills for Life at Work courses within the sample of 30 workplaces were Literacy, Numeracy and ESOL. The most frequent scenarios within the sample were either ESOL (10 workplaces) or Literacy and Numeracy (10 workplaces). Smaller numbers had received either a combination of Literacy and ESOL (3 workplaces) or Literacy, Numeracy and ESOL (3 workplaces), or just Literacy (2 workplaces) or Numeracy (2 workplaces) (see Appendix 1, Figure A2 for more details). Courses were offered at Entry level (1, 2 and 3) and at Levels 1 and 2. A variety of awarding bodies accredited the courses.

A key feature to emerge from the interviews with employers was the number and range of further training opportunities which followed the Skills for Life at Work courses. The potential
for progression was a key theme in the refreshed Skills for Life strategy as a way of ensuring the
development of employability skills (NRDC 2010b). Some employers spoke about employees
doing several Skills for Life at Work courses, either in the same subject or moving between
subjects. The manager of a primary school noted that ‘LSAs did Level 1 numeracy and then
went on to Level 2’. A private care provider stated that she had run two workshop course in
ESOL but the learners ‘have now got to a level where they can do literacy not just ESOL’.

Employers also made reference to the progression links between Skills for Life at Work courses
and GCSEs:

The Level 2 numeracy/literacy course participants can go on to do GCSE Maths/English,
for which there is ‘quite a big uptake because they know it’s more recognised beyond
the [organisation] and very often it’s needed for trades in the [organisation] (large public
service organisation)

After Level 2 courses – they could move on to GCSEs Maths and (where needed) English.
Another volunteer at the pre-school has also enrolled on the GCSE English course too so
it has filtered out to others. (pre-school nursery);

on progression to higher level work based qualifications:

Some had done NVQ in health and needed Maths and English to go on to a nursing
qualification so they were well motivated – they needed it. (NHS hospital);

and on the progression pathways between Skills for Life at Work courses and NVQs:

Also some have gone on to do NVQs which they couldn’t have done without the initial
ESOL training (private nursing home);

This was the first training course that the company had provided and now there are
many more opportunities for training e.g. NVQs, going to college (legal insurance
company);

It was noticeable how many training providers also offered NVQs. We were provided with
examples including NVQs in Customer Service, Management and Care.

2.3 How?

All of the Skills for Life at Work courses took place on the employers’ premises with a range of
locations being used – a hotel conference suite, a company boardroom, a nursing home dining
room or a room rented by the employer. Several employers mentioned that it was easier for
the learners that the course was held on the employer’s premises:
We try to make it as easy as we can, people don’t want to travel to the local college.

Providers were generally happy with the location provided, ‘learning spaces in workplaces were generally good – everybody found us a space with tables. We were offered ample evidence of flexible delivery on the part of the training providers, extending to bank holidays and evenings. Employers valued this flexibility and in one case the providers had been selected on the basis of their willingness to be flexible: ‘We have worked with all the local colleges. Basically we approach all of them and go with the ones that can be the most flexible they can be’. For some employers, the locality of the provider was important: ‘We used [this provider] because they’re local to us’.

Initial assessment was integral and was usually carried out by the training provider although in one case this was also done by the Union Learning Representative. Assessment documentation included an ESOL standard test and colleges’ own internal assessment paperwork. A personal plan was developed for each learner following the initial assessment in order to determine the appropriate level and they were then signposted to a relevant course. A common pattern was that further monthly reviews were carried out. In some cases the initial assessment was linked to the assessment criteria for accessing funding for the NVQ programmes.

The group size for the courses was variable. Some were held on a one-to-one basis whilst the larger classes consisted most commonly of 8 to 12 learners. In the larger groups there was great stress on ‘all [learners] are treated as individuals’.

The length of the courses was also variable, ranging from 8 weeks to 10 months although there were some exceptions (eg 1 week intensive). Employers stated that the length of the course was dependant on the funding available to the provider.

Where possible, courses were scheduled to reduce disruption in the workplace and ‘courses often took place outside the usual 9 – 5 pm core work time’. A manager in a private care home told us that ‘we had to organise space and rota...had sessions on a Monday so tried to schedule when they were not busy’ whilst the owner of a houseplant nursery said ‘we set it up on the quietest day of the week and in the late afternoon in order to have least impact’. In most cases staff were paid when they attended the courses and cover was arranged to make sure all staff could attend the relevant course. However, a private care provider commented that they may not be able to continue to pay staff in the future, given the financial climate.

Although most courses were held to fit in with employees’ shift patterns, with rotas being re-organised in order to accommodate learners, sometimes an employee came in on their day off or before/after their shift. A training provider said ‘most learners came to courses in their work time or if they had a day off, they would come in’.

There was a mixed picture in relation to accreditation: some courses were always accredited whilst some courses were accredited ‘if the person wanted to’. For some employers, it was
unclear if there was a formal accreditation, or not. In some cases, such as the medical products manufacturer, all learners were presented with a certificate at the end of the training. It was felt this was a good idea as it ‘gives a feeling of accomplishment’. It was also pointed out that, ‘if the member of staff moves job they can take the certificate with them’ and we were told that ‘some staff framed their certificates’. Many courses were accredited and one manager commented that she was keen for them to be accredited as she felt it ‘gives something to achieve’. Two employers spoke about having an ‘annual celebration of learning’ (local council) or a certificate prize giving ceremony to celebrate achievements (community organisation).

For another employer, the lack of accreditation pressure was a real positive:

I like learners to go for it if they want to but it’s good not to have to push them. It’s the first step for learners with no qualifications it is amazing. I always encourage my team to push qualifications as much as possible. Quite a lot have done – 70% approx– so the ones who are really nervous then they gain in terms of confidence and go on and do something else. Here’s a 10 week course, let’s try to do assessment/test at the end of it, view it as a practice, gentler approach and student benefit from this, a less prescribed/dictatorial approach. (private residential home)

We were given evidence of strong support by some employer co-ordinators who worked sensitively to build trust with the learners:

Their background is often one of humiliation, bullying, failure, taunting because of their poor skills and so when they step into the education centre they are very fearful of the same thing happening again. So we work very hard to make it clear that we appreciate that they’ve got a huge amount to contribute to the organisation, that they can do a huge amount already and that all we need to work on is the very small thing that they are not so good at. We want them to know that we understand that they’ve had a bad time in the past and we want to give them another opportunity and we want them to grab it with both hands. (large public service organisation)

The real problem is getting them there. We stress that it’s not too daunting, especially people in their late 50s. They worry that they won’t be able to perform and there’ll be others there that are much better than them. (support service organisation)

2.4 Why?

Most employers in the interview sample were unsure how long their organisation had been involved with Skills for Life at Work and most of the respondents had not been in post long enough to know the reasons why their organisation had become involved. There appeared to be confusion between Skills for Life at Work provision and other basic skills provision. Although Skills for Life at Work has only been offered for the last two years some employers stated they had been involved for five years.
There were a number of drivers for employers to become involved with the Skills for Life at Work programme. For some employers there is legislation which requires all staff to be competent at a certain level e.g., Nursery, Pre-school, FE Colleges, Health/Social Care.

Two organisations said they become involved because, as social enterprise organisations, they were looking for ways of attracting a larger diversity of employees. It was felt that involvement would add value to the organisation and could give a route into greater inclusion in the local community. A community interest company wished to include otherwise excluded groups and to ‘offer those services to socially excluded adults which in other circumstances they wouldn’t access’.

One employer explained that as most of her staff came from overseas they needed to provide evidence to the Home Office of their competence in English in order to extend their visas. They had all completed the programme and had been awarded the ESOL certificate. However, they subsequently found that the training provider is/was not recognised by the Home Office so the certificate didn’t count. A medical products manufacturer spoke of the need to have a certificate which reflected the employees’ ability to speak English. Another care home manager stressed that the training was essential for staff’s visa applications.

The manager of an NHS hospital identified the strategic importance of becoming involved with the courses, ‘it became of strategic importance to ensure that people could read and write which meant it was set up for employees in the Trust’ and this Trust had signed the Skills Pledge (HMSO 2007) which meant that Skills for Life courses could be more easily justified.

Involvement was also related to recruitment issues in care homes as there appears to be a persistent shortage of registered trained nurses in the UK. In order to get on the register, the staff have to pass their IELTS qualification at the required level so the ESOL courses in particular were seen as ‘the first step onto getting the IELTS and getting them on the register’.

Employers were also keen to improve specific job-related skills:

To improve the quality of report writing: the writing of care notes and reports in an acceptable manner. (private children’s care home)

Hoping for increased skills of workforce, able to write in the communication diaries without having to contact another colleague, where you had two people doing what could be done by one person. (NHS hospital)

And this was linked to a commitment to training and developing staff:

For us, anything we can get that’s funded, we’re interested in because of our commitment to training people and enhancing staff’s English language skills to communicate with guests. To give a better service really. Spoken as opposed to written English. (community interest company)
We were all doing Maths GCSE in connection with [training provider] and several of us were struggling with it and so I spoke with one of the tutors there who said why don’t you do a Level 2 numeracy course as well and she told me that there was funding available’ (pre-school nursery).

There was an awareness of the change in job roles and the consequent demands for employees to be in a position to be able to respond:

Everything is getting more technologically based e.g. if you want to go on leave you have to put your leave request via computer, so every employee needs to engage with IT and so needs to be able to read and write. Out in the field, all sorts of other demands on literacy and numeracy that weren’t there before that everyone has to be able to do. (large public service organisation)

For other employers, the development of career progression was paramount. In one privately run care home, two of the learners had applied to a university as they wanted to progress from RGN to RMN (registered mental nurse). They were interviewed by the university tutor and were told they had to pass a test in English as part of the recruitment process. Both failed the English course. As a result the nursing home manager looked for a relevant course to enable her staff to improve their skills in English. Two further employers were also keen to assist in developing longer-term prospects for their staff:

The [organisation] also has an eye on people leaving and so they need some skills so they can get jobs outside and have employment options. (A large public service organisation)

Also for people’s own personal development – language weaknesses can prevent them from moving on. I’ve seen some staff who can’t speak a word of English and with time it does develop. (manufacturer of health products)

A common driver for employers was the need to develop communication skills, a finding reinforced in recent research (Morley et al 2006). This was especially relevant in the care homes and hospitals. For example, one private care home manager (who is Sri Lankan) identified those who needed to improve in literacy and she asked them if they would be interested in doing a relevant course. As the manager talks to her staff in both English and Singhalese she was able to assess their grasp of English. The manager realised that most staff needed to improve their spoken English so that they could overcome communication barriers especially between relatives of the ‘clients’ and their families, a point reinforced by two other care homes. One care home employed a lot of foreign nationals (mainly Polish and Filipinos) who didn’t speak good English and this was affecting productivity. An immediate benefit that was identified was ‘better communication with the elderly’.
The improvement in communication skills was also important for a legal insurance company who concentrated on:

Bringing everyone in the call centre up to same standard of literacy. They have to write accident circumstance reports and can’t spell check and the reports then go to solicitors and mistakes made the company look unprofessional.

Several employers spoke about the need to develop language skills in potential new recruits:

We got to situation where we had a lot of Eastern European staff that were struggling with their English’ [..and...] ‘We are in the process of training those who start as agency staff so that the better ones can become full time staff and work up through the ranks of the company but to do that obviously communication is a key factor so to get us going we needed that first step on the ladder (houseplant nursery)

We were working with the local college seeking courses to improve literacy (13 nationalities within the staff) so wanted an ESOL course originally but very difficult to get support for those courses so for a couple of years all the college could provide us with was a ‘Customer Service’ short course which wasn’t ideal (very short) but gave them some kind of literacy help. (healthcare product manufacturer)

One manager had started as a Trade Union rep and she pushed to get a learning centre on site, having persuaded Senior Management that there was a need for basic skills training after a Skills Audit discovered that 38% of workforce couldn’t read fluently. Luckily a senior manager had ‘backed it morally and financially’ (local authority).

In one case of a big local brewery factory the courses were part of a redundancy package for employees.

For some employers, Skills for Life at Work was seen as a good one-off opportunity, often linked to the offer of free training:

We were contacted by our local Early Year’s Education Unit who suggested it to us and they organised it all really. For us, the appeal was that it was in our workplace i.e. the training happened here so it was easier for staff to get here. We weren’t aware that it was part of a bigger scheme. (children’s day nursery)

college contacted me and said funding was available. Those courses were all that was offered and were those that we needed (residential care home for adults)

[provider] got in touch with them and offered us free training courses (primary school)
The drivers for learners included the wish (or need) to gain further qualifications, particularly in ESOL. Many of the overseas learners had gained high level qualifications in their own countries before coming to work in the UK. Several learners were working towards their IELTS exam so that they could stay longer and work in the UK. Two learners (from India) told us:

back home we are nurses so we are trying to do something with that. After this course, we have got more interested in doing English more and more....We are studying English now, doing IELTS. (private nursing home)

For one learner, attending the course gave a change in routine, ‘it gets you out of work for a week, which sort of breaks up your Monday-Friday’.

Some learners spoke of the wish to gain promotion and to open future career options, ‘you have to be at a certain level to get promotion. One of the criteria is to be at Level 2’ and ‘also once you leave the [organisation] as well, to get a half decent job you’re gonna need a certain standard of grades’ (large public service organisation)

Other learners identified personal development as the main driver, ‘it’s personal gain as well, obviously. Keeps your brain ticking over.’

However, in the learner focus group interviews, there were also concerns expressed with high level of uncertainly before starting the courses. Learners talked about feeling:

nervous, wary, apprehensive, embarrassed and nervous. Shy.

One local council worker said he ‘felt embarrassed and sort of ashamed when he first started the literacy course but now, now I’m getting into it even more’. (local authority)

A care worker spoke about the ‘fear of the unknown’ as well as being ‘happy to start as it was thought to be helpful for spelling and writing’. (private care provider).

The anxiety of attending a course was captured by workers from a large public service organisation:

can I do it? But then also you’re thinking, well, hang on a minute. I haven’t done fractions now and such and such for so long, am I going to be able to pass the course?

it’s been a long time since studying . It’s coming on this has been a bit of an eye-opener having not done it for like eight years or so.

One learner expressed the view that studying was a long way from day to day reality:

You don’t do it day to day. Obviously if you were an accountant you would use numbers every single day. I mean, clerks [in the organisation] do it a lot cause it’s management
whereas people on the ground...you very rarely use all this. It is quite hard to get back into it again. (large public service organisation)
3. Impacts on Employers

This section discusses the impact of the Skills for Life at Work initiative on employers. It looks into whether there were positive and/or negative spin-offs for the organisations and companies in which the training took place. It draws most strongly on the interviews with employer representatives across 30 different workplaces, coupled with relevant feedback from the five groups of learners and three training providers.

It was clear that most of the employers who took part in this evaluation had very positive stories to tell about their Skills for Life at Work experience. The benefits that were reported covered four main areas:

- productivity (job-specific skills)
- productivity (general comments)
- motivation and teamwork
- confidence and communication.

The evidence and examples relating to each of these are now discussed, after which these is a final sub-section looking at factors that enabled and constrained employer benefits.

While the feedback from employers was overwhelmingly positive, it is worth noting that there were a small number of cases where benefits were less clear. For one employer, the issue was not so much a lack of benefits as a lack of clear evidence of benefits. For two others, there was a sense that the benefits has only gone so far: ‘probably more a confidence thing [but] not sure whether it increased their skills’ and ‘for staff it is something extra behind them [but] there is no real benefit in terms of our working practice’.

3.1 Productivity (job-specific skills)

One recurring theme in the employer interviews was the way in which Skills for Life at Work courses had contributed to increased productivity through the development of job-specific skills and tasks. While few employers were able to provide clear quantifiable evidence of productivity gains, many were able to illustrate benefits in terms of improvements in specific workplace tasks and activities. This was the case even though economic motivation had not been a key reason for undertaking the training, as was also noted by Wolf et al. (2010) i.e. ‘the motivation of employers in our sample was overwhelmingly non-economic’ (p. 391).

One example was a private care home manager who described how her international employees were much more confident after their ESOL training and able to engage in tasks and activities that they had been reluctant to do before:

Certainly they weren’t very good at taking activities so if my activities co-ordinator was off it used to only be the English nurses who took it whereas now, we’ve actually had a
mixture. Doing the crossword and everything. It gives them more confidence to speak to the relatives as well and that’s important.

In a similar way, a hotel and country club HR Manager identified specific job related tasks that his employees were now more able to do, such as, ‘more able to recommend a wine or a particular dessert or something’.

Learners themselves were able to describe how they had improved in carrying out some of their work-related tasks in this private care home:

> Sometimes our writing is very bad, the grammar classes helped us to write properly in the files, the residents’ files. She helped us to write it in a good way...and the words also. Elderly people, they use a bit of different English than which we hear now, and we can understand that.

Similarly, the manager of a community interest organisation was able to cite specific examples of job related skills which had led to improved productivity through greater accuracy of work and therefore reliability on employees. For example:

> We’ve got people who, when they first came here, they couldn’t read a clock and can’t measure and all sorts of things...if they hadn’t done the Maths, they would still be worrying about if their measurements were accurate. (community interest company)

In an NHS hospital, there were real benefits to the quality of employees’ work through much clearer communication and the ability to follow procedures which was lacking before the training:

> Improving workload logistics... people can now do their supervision in English and they weren’t able to do that before...they can now follow the Trust’s process and procedures for supervision (NHS hospital)

There were similar reports from private care homes about the improvements in daily tasks being carried out:

> Doing notes, daily life notes, an improvement in that. Improvement on the phone – they used to avoid the phone. (private care home)

And very direct impacts on business productivity from a legal insurance company where the whole case file system had been speeded up through more effective communication and fewer mistakes being made:

> There are less reports sent back to us from solicitors due to mistakes etc. now ...... Positive impact on company in terms of case files not being sent back has increased productivity and effectiveness. (legal insurance company)
The manager of a social enterprise organisation reported an improvement in attendance through staff gaining confidence in their abilities and therefore feeling better able to deal with demanding situations in the workplace:

Staff were previously sometimes absent when they could see that they had a particularly challenging day or training course, or perhaps had to attend a meeting: all activities they that they perhaps felt they couldn’t cope with due to their lack of basic skills. This has now improved. (social enterprise organisation)

The closest to a comment on specific economic benefit came from the business manager of a community interest organisation who was able to identify the provision of the Skills for Life at Work courses as a selling point:

Yes, increased motivation and productivity and because we sell our places (we used to have a block contract but now individuals choose to come to us). It’s another string to our bow, we can say that the college will be here and they can help you with your literacy, numeracy and ICT. It becomes a selling point for those who want to be placed with us. (community interest company)

3.2 Productivity (general comments)

Alongside the development of very specific job-related skills which were identified by several employers there were also, perhaps less tangible and more general, claims made about improved productivity. Interviewees from a medical products manufacturer and two community organisations all commented along similar general lines: ‘much better productivity’; ‘it has improved productivity generally’ and ‘improved their skills, freed up the manager’s time to do other things.’

While some organisations were unable to comment on immediate productivity gains, they did think that there would be long term benefits stemming from their staff having undertaken the basic skills training. A private children’s home manager was very positive about the impact of this:

I think it will [increase productivity] in the long term – the fact that all our paperwork will be more efficient and people like myself won’t have to spend so long checking everything, you’ll know that it’s more reliable and that it’ll take less time from senior members to go over things with people because they’re proactive in their learning. (private children’s’ care home)

The Annual Learning report from a Local Authority made the business case for learning claiming that ‘sickness rates have dramatically reduced for those staff taking the literacy classes’ and that more staff were ‘applying for promotion and development’.

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The Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO) in a primary school, where support staff had undertaken Skills for Life at Work courses, highlighted increased flexibility as another kind of organisational benefit. In her view:

LSAs (Learning Support Assistants) will be more confident about being in a class where they teach numeracy. And because we’re a primary school, they may get moved from a Year 2 class to a Year 6 class which is a big change but after this training I think it is less of a challenge for them. They’d feel more confident wherever they are. (primary school)

This flexibility was echoed in the experience of a general FE college where building confidence and gaining qualifications enabled the college to deploy support staff more flexibly:

Yes definitely, everybody is now working at a government Level 2. I inherited a lot of staff who’d been here forever and didn’t have any qualifications. I think the changing times mean that you need to be at a certain level and if not, you’re not able to support. It is beneficial for the students and for the staff themselves because they feel they’re more confident to support students on higher level courses e.g. even Level 3. All the staff now have skills to a level where they can be used more flexibly i.e. I can use all of them to support classes up to Level 2. (general FE college)

In a similar way, an NHS hospital manager felt that benefits of some of their employees doing the ESOL course had had an impact on their flexibility in planning shifts:

It helps with planning shifts, managers can’t put some staff on with others because their English is very poor so they have to split them so they are always put with someone whose English is a better standard. We are now improving in this area. (NHS hospital)

The manager of a private residential care home for adults with learning disabilities commented that, ‘It has increased the quality of their understanding and their work and that impacts on the company.

Alongside increased staffing flexibility, another example of more general benefit came from a houseplant nursery where ESOL courses for international staff had enabled improved communication with staff about how the business works and its overall strategic direction. As the operations manager explained:

It’s given us the foundation for our workforce to grow and progress upwards. We are able to communicate with them better and then they can really start to understand where we’re trying to go as a company. […] If we’re able to communicate with staff better then that helps us to be able to push forward with the other improvements that we’re making. In the past we’ve struggled with getting staff to understand and buy into where we’re looking to move the company. By setting up that communication link it really helped us to push things forward. For us it is not so much about, for example,
understanding Health and Safety signs etc. ‘cos we put those in various languages, but more about staff understanding the way we want to run the business and the finer detail. For example, working towards ‘lean methodology’ within processing (removing waste) which involves a lot of tasks that it may not be obvious why we’re asking staff to do that so if we can get staff buy in to the process and understanding of why we’re doing it and what’s in it for the company then that’s really important.

While many employers were able to identify very specific or general improvements in productivity, it is important to note that a small number of others found it difficult to report or measure any changes. Some organisations thought that it had made a difference but this was based more on ‘gut feel’ rather than actual evidence. An individual overseeing training in a large public national organisation felt sure that it must have reaped benefits even if they could not be quantified: ‘Personally I am quite sure that we’ve made a big difference but it is difficult to measure’.

Other employers thought that Skills for Life at Work at Work programme reaped more benefits for individuals than for organisations. A representative of a healthcare product manufacturer could see that levels of staff confidence had improved but was unsure about other wider impacts:

Staff are more motivated. All of those who were involved took something away from. But in terms of impact on the business, I am not entirely sure as perhaps it is too short in duration and do we understand their needs enough to be able to tailor their development? It’s probably more a confidence thing, I’m not sure on whether it increased their skills. Nothing was given to us as to what impact it had had. I could see it has motivated them but there was nothing in terms of tangible feedback/evidence – I was none the wiser as to the impacts on them. There were no negative perspectives but from a business perspective it has not changed anything.

And the training manager at a children’s day nursery could see how the learners had benefited and perhaps made themselves more employable through gaining another qualification but could not pinpoint benefits to the nursery itself. As she explained:

EYFS requires all practitioners to have Level C GCSE before 2015 so it will benefit those staff, because they’ve achieved that but I don’t think there are benefits for the nursery. Our children just need to count up to 10, they don’t need to know their times tables and everything else. For the practitioners, yes it is something extra behind them e.g. for me it keeps my qualification as a nursery nurse and it just backs that up and it will be better if I go for another job. But there is no real benefit in our job in terms of our working practice as GCSE Maths is more about a qualification i.e. no direct links to nursery work.

It is worth noting that, in this small scale evaluation, none of the employers raised the fear that better-skilled employees may be tempted to leave their employment. This concurs with
previous work that has shown how employees who receive training are more likely to stay with their employer than those who do not (Ananiadou et al. 2003).

3.3 Motivation and teamwork

Many employers commented on the improvements in staff morale, motivation and teamwork, all of which concur with the findings of the Adult Learning Inspectorate (2005). As the courses were run on-site, there was a definite by-product of improving teamwork as employees had a chance to work together and talk together more. At a pre-school nursery, this was evident in the support they all felt for each other:

Staff morale yes definitely and motivation too because they have gone on and done the extra bit. Morale – because we all ended up passing one or both of them we were all just happy with each other, everyone’s just happy together, everyone feels valued and part of a team. And me and one other colleague are lead practitioners so we’re above other people but we were all doing it together and you either pass or fail so we all achieved together and that does build morale.

In a private care home, it helped to cement a team, with different nationalities, who might not otherwise meet because of the physical layout of the building or the shift patterns that they work:

They are more motivated, being together – mixed nationalities. As a team they worked better – we are a building with a top floor and basement – if you did not meet in the training or induction, they might not meet each other, also some working night shifts.

This group formation across different nationalities was echoed by the interviewee at a medical products manufacturer who could also identify changes in relation to productivity:

Good to get the different nationalities together in the classroom – helped them to bond and communicate with each other. Following the training, the co-ordinator organised a survey with Line Managers and all felt that they’d noticed improvements in communication and productivity since…Where previously the same nationalities tended to stick together, there was now a more open feeling to the workplace.

Another example of improvements in teamwork was within a social enterprise organisation, where the HR manager was able to identify development in staff self-esteem and morale:

It motivated staff to look at their own basic skills and then inspires them to ask for training also. They can then see a massive transformation in themselves once they’ve exposed and addressed their inadequacies. The training levels out the playing field. Previously staff may have not thrown themselves into team work or perhaps didn’t feel important enough to attend meetings as they felt they didn’t have the necessary basic skills.
Further relevant examples included a lampshade manufacturer who summed up what the impact of a confidence boost could be in a small business: ‘Just having one employee more happy in their work helps to boost the morale of the team as a whole’. And for the manager of a private children’s care home, there was a very positive motivating effect coming out of the learning which, in turn, affected the employees’ commitment at work:

It has this spin-off of everybody wants to be the best. If one person is doing well, the others strive to get there as well.

This peer group support was also evident at a general FE college where learners on the courses were able to help each other: ‘For those who were struggling, the peer support during the training within the group was important in the breaks and spare time’. Such networks of support have been identified as crucial in supporting adult learners to achieve basic skills (NRDC 2010b).

3.4 Confidence and communication

Developing staff confidence and communication, especially through ESOL courses, was another way in which organisations had reportedly benefited from Skills for Life at Work. Such impacts connect with the findings of previous studies. For example, in workplaces where basic skills courses were judged by employers to have been very successful, similar reports of ‘improvements in communication skills’ and ‘confidence’ were noted by Wolf et al.’s (2010, p. 394).

Examples within this evaluation included the manager of a private care home who referred to the impact that improved confidence can have on the everyday communication among staff and with residents. For example:

It gives them more confidence in dealing with the relatives – they’re very shy and I think it’s brought them out with the residents and with other staff as well.

The same connection between confidence and language was observed by this hotel and country club HR manager:

Increased their language, they’re more confident in dealing with people, talking to their colleagues.

An interviewee from a private provider of health service support staff described how improved communication had led to improved teamwork and ultimately to better service from their organisation:

Yes, better communication within staff, better communication in our language, and better understanding of their job. It has enabled people to do their job better. If they
are working as part of team and they can understand English better, then they'll be more effective in that team. If they can understand instructions better, then they can do their job better. All those thing have improved the service.

The potentially far-reaching impact across the organisation of better communication among staff and with clients was identified by several employers. This private care home found that all manner of activities had improved from social conversations to understanding instructions more easily:

It has improved communication throughout the care home. The mainly white UK residents now get a better experience in the home as they can communicate their needs better to carers and also have social conversations with them. Much more effective due to increased understanding and ability to communicate, improved ability to understand instructions, to work within a team and to communicate with residents. Team work is better now as we are speaking a common language.

Elsewhere, increased understanding by employees facilitated communication between the manager and staff which meant that fewer mistakes were made:

It has meant there are far fewer problems due to miscommunication. This was previously an issue. The manager found it very difficult to discuss anything with this employee due to the language barrier and so mistakes were sometimes made due to lack of understanding. (lampshade manufacturer)

And this confidence in communication between managers and employees was also identified by interviewees from a houseplant nursery where senior staff were beginning to see that they were saving time because the employees’ comprehension skills had improved:

It helps us to be able to communicate the skills to them better, in that we don’t have to explain things so many times. When we first started you’d explain things and get lots of nods but know that they hadn’t taken it in. Whereas now, we can be more confident that they have understood and they can talk it back through with us, so there is less training for us in the day to day.

3.5 Influencing Factors

Many employers shared their ideas on factors which had enabled or constrained them in terms of deriving benefit from the delivery of Skills for Life at Work courses. The relationship between the employer and the training provider was key to successful provision in many ways, not least in relation to the flexibility of the training provider or trainer to run the courses at times suitable for the employer. That it took place at work was advantageous for both learners and employers. Time was an issue for all concerned, some trainers had to be prepared to spend time travelling without being paid for that time, employers had to plan shifts to accommodate
the course timetable and learners sometimes found it difficult to find time to do the work associated with their study.

**Facilitating factors**

The relationship between the training provider and employer was important as identified by a houseplant nursery:

> Relevance to business is key, which needs really good communication between the provider and the business before the course as to what they want to get out of it and how it’s going to be put across.

The role of the training provider was very significant in relation to the employers having to do very little in relation to setting up the courses. A training provider said: ‘I’m the cold caller, the form filler, the sorter outer, the finance person, the certificate organiser’

There was evidence of some strong links which had been forged between employers and the training providers as in ‘they have been very helpful and we have been working with them for three years now’. Several employers spoke positively about the level of communication with the providers:

> We’ve enjoyed relationship with College and it worked well. They did communicate with us when there were issues and if we’d had any issues we’d have raised them with them then. Not sure we’d do anything differently.

So too was the relationship between the trainer and the learners, a private care home commented on this:

> They really like [the trainer], it’s a really good relationship, she really did her best. The good thing is she doesn’t want people to stop so she continues. She gave them the vouchers and did two extra sessions.

These examples support the claim that ‘putting literacy and numeracy at the centre of adult learning…involves culture change’ (Howard and Kings 2010).

The courses were set up and delivered by the training provider with little or no demand on the employer apart from finding a suitable training room/space. Several employers expressed similar sentiments to these:

> The [training provider] just gets on with it, we provide room and learners. (community interest company)

> We arranged it and then [the training provider] came in each week and told us who had or had not attended and that’s probably the extent of our involvement really. We had
the people here – the staff and we just scheduled them to attend the course. (hotel and country pub)

A private children’s care home felt that the size of their organisation made the delivery of the courses viable at their workplace:

The reason it worked here I think is because it’s quite a big home and they [training provider] were able to come here and have enough people here to do it.

And that it took place on site was clearly important to most employers such as this hotel and country club:

It went very well here – definitely helpful that it took place within the workplace.

All of the employers were keen to stress that the choice of subject(s) was closely related to the needs of the learners, at times justifying the need for all three subjects:

We are in an area of social deprivation, huge numbers of people with very low literacy and numeracy and a real need for ESOL. (community development group)

All are relevant for the needs of our people as it fits in with daily living. We all need a bit of Maths, English and ICT. (private children’s care home)

Most employers were extremely pleased with the ‘tailored’ nature of the courses in that they were made relevant to learners’ workplace demands:

Some of these people had never done a survey so we gave them guidance to help them through a questionnaire as they had literally never filled one in before. At other times, it’s using their communication notes or their handover documentation or incident for—that kind of thing. (NHS hospital)

If they’re a cleaner, they might have covered correct spelling related to cleaning. If they’re a foreign worker, they might have focused on giving instructions for getting from A to B using literacy skills, or writing a simple letter. Also they went through tenses and prepositions and expressions like ‘bank holiday’. (support service organisation)

Several employers spoke about how in general the Skills for Life at Work courses had raised employees’ awareness and made them more eager to go on to further learning:

I think they are more likely to undertake further training (medical products manufacturer)

The ESOL course was starting point for doing other job-specific training with the company (a houseplant nursery).
For other employers, there was a policy requirement for all staff to be competent in certain areas. For example, a large public service organisation required all personnel to have gained literacy and numeracy at levels 1 and 2. A general FE college and a pre-school nursery both required all staff to be trained up to literacy and numeracy at level 2.

**Constraining factors**

In contrast to the positive relationship between training providers and employers, there was also experience of what happens when that relationship does not work so effectively. In this instance the College (training provider) needed a specific number of learners to make a course viable but the employer, an NHS hospital, needed a greater degree of flexibility:

College would have to realise that we can’t necessarily come up with 8 people for each session because of the pressures of the workplace and last minute changes in shifts.

For the learners there were competing demands for their time and, while in the workplace, it was not always easy to switch off and concentrate completely on the course. This large public, national organisation experienced frustrations when learners were called away to attend to job specific matters which were always likely to take precedence;

I have worked with people who can barely read or write and I just begin to make progress with them and then they are whisked off for something much more important and they come back 2 years later and are back to where they started. So that can be frustrating for us and for them [...] So we give them a taste of it and then can’t get as much of it as they’d like.

The learners at a private care home also found it hard to find the time they needed to really focus on the course:

Yeah…it needs lots of time. We have to spend some time for our own, to sit and study…Yeah. We get three off days. In that, we are finding time to sit and study. That’s the hard part...Because we’ve got other things also like friends.

A private children’s care home felt that the time they had was good but they would have benefited even more from a longer course:

It would just be nice to have more of it because it was a 10 week course, would be nice to have it for longer – for the same learners, to carry on the subject further, to make it for a year would have been fine. We’d go for that.

There were difficulties when the Skills for Life at Work courses were not fully understood or supported by learners’ line managers and this caused difficulties for an NHS hospital:
there are some learners in certain areas in the Trust whose managers have not been as supportive as they could be – made it difficult for the learners, they haven’t realised how much work is needed, very unfortunate.

One employer did report that the varied ability levels within the group militated against the learning meeting the demands of all the learners, as the health care product manufacturer illustrated:

One difficulty was that on the pre-course assessment there was a lot of variation in the levels of staff (entry level up to some at level 1 and 2 and some in middle) but the 2 ladies that came in had all of them together. As they got to know them they separated them out a bit. However, I did get some comments that ‘I stopped going to part of it cos it was hard to sit through the basic stuff.

However, the ways in which employers were identified by the training providers seemed to have been fairly arbitrary and this has inevitably constrained the range and breadth of employers involved in Skills for Life at Work and this means that some employers will still be unaware of the project (ALI, 2005). This large FE college approached the recruitment of employers on past experience and what would work best for them as the training provider:

I did find that the ESOL was the most responsive so I’d get on to the internet and look at local care homes. BUPA came through when I was in Train to Gain office and we did 3 care homes and because it was quite successful with biggish groups – 16 in a group – then I went for other ones. People targeted employers that worked for them – care homes work for us around here as there are a lot of them. Care homes we could fit in any time. A case of ringing and offering, some people would be a little bit wary and wouldn’t phone back and others did and once we were in....

3.6 Summary

The reported benefits for employers can be summarised in terms of three separate but overlapping strands:

- productivity – from job-specific tasks such as report writing to generalised improvements in communication and morale
- motivation and teamwork – in terms of staff commitment to their work, and in building more positive staff relationships within the workforce
- confidence and communication – through learners feeling more able to do their jobs effectively and to communicate better both within the workplace and to external clients.

There were few negative comments from employers although it was clear that line managers and senior staff had to be committed to the training. What became clear was that the
relationship between all parties (employers, learners and training providers) was pivotal to the success of the courses.
4. Impacts on Learners

This section shifts the focus from employers to employees. It considers whether and how Skills for Life at Work courses impacted on the learners who took part in the training. It is based on both the first-hand accounts of learners in five different workplaces, as well as the views of employer representatives (who almost always had been responsible for coordinating the training courses and in some cases had taken part themselves) from all of the workplaces in the study.

Overall, the learner and employer feedback received in this evaluation provides a considerable number of examples of positive impacts for learners. These can be presented in terms of three main areas of benefits:

- opening up new possibilities
- increasing individuals’ confidence
- enabling skill development.

Each of these is now considered, followed by a discussion of the factors that seem to have been influential upon the variability of benefits across different kinds of learners.

It is worth pointing out that the findings in this chapter connect with those of certain previous studies. The interim evaluation of this initiative noted that, for the vast majority of learners in their sample, the training was reported to have ‘improved their skills and helped them to do their job better’ (Pageplace and Tallon, 2010, p. 13). Similarly, Wolf et al.’s (2010, p. 393) larger-scale study of workplace basic skills programmes found that ‘learners had been highly positive in their overall evaluations on the courses’. This study also point out, however, that ‘the measurable impacts on [learners] had been very modest’ (p. 393). This is an important qualifier to bear in mind throughout this chapter as there were very few cases in this evaluation where reported benefits for learners were backed up with monitoring data or evaluation evidence.

4.1 New possibilities

A strong theme in the interviews with employers was the way in which Skills for Life at Work training courses brought about an opening up of new possibilities for many learners. There was talk of how these courses had ‘started some people on the road to doing all sorts of things that they never dared to do’. In talking about their training, learners used phrases such as ‘a crucial first step’ and ‘a start that I can develop from’. Across the different workplaces, courses and learners, there seemed to be four main ways in which taking part in basic skills training had opened up new opportunities for learners.

First, Skills for Life at Work courses had enabled staff to gain qualifications that were needed for subsequent promotion. Within a military context, for example, staff participating in a numeracy Level 2 course saw clear benefits for career progression:
because without it we wouldn’t get promoted, so if I get promoted in two or three years’ time, then this course has helped it, no matter how long it takes me to get promoted.

There were similar reports from employers and learners in other public sector organisations such as health care (‘most were doing it to get onto a nursing course’) and education (‘if you want to move on here, you know that you can, because you have that Level 2’).

Secondly, learners benefited through gaining qualifications that would be useful in the future beyond their current workplace. Relevant examples here came from nursery nurses who felt that having their numeracy Level 2 was ‘something extra behind me that backs up my qualification as a nursery nurse and will be better if I go for another job’, and soldiers who knew that ‘once you leave the Army, to get a half decent job you’re gonna need a certain standard of grades’.

A third connection between Skills for Life at Work courses and new opportunities was the way in which taking part in the training increased learners’ belief and desire to pursue opportunities. This was strongly articulated by a number of employers:

I have offered training to our support staff for many years but they have always said ‘No, no, no’. But once they signed up for this and did Level 1, I was surprised that they then wanted to go on and do the Level 2. (Primary school)

Because their skills have improved, then they are more willing to take other opportunities because they know they’ll be able to manage. (large public service organisation)

Some have grown quite a lot over the year and are asking me if they can go to other courses e.g. nearby literacy workshops. In the past, it would have been more team leaders that would go, not learning assistants. (FE college)

It’s given them the motivation to go on further to other study – maybe they were disaffected by their schooling and not really had that learning and while they’ve been on the course they’ve been much better motivated and they want to go on to other courses outside work. (NHS hospital)

These changes are particularly significant given the uncertainty and apprehensions reported by learners prior to commencing their courses (see section 2.4).

Finally, new possibilities opened up for Skills for Life at Work learners not just because they believed in themselves more but also because others began to believe in them. The following quote from an Army basic skills training coordinator illustrates this point well:
For the average guy who comes on a course it will move them on a rung – help them to cope just that little bit better e.g. once they can begin to read, learn how to skim and scan, how to confidently write notes/emails etc. then they get noticed by their Chain of Command and are put on other courses and so they can begin to have a proper career. Whereas before they were the ones who couldn’t be put on courses because they didn’t have basic writing skills.

4.2 Increased confidence

Another important area of impacts on learners concerned Skills for Life at Work courses contributing to levels of confidence and self-belief. While there were some cases where ‘increased confidence’ was mentioned by employers as a fairly vague catch all-type category, there were many others where employers and learners gave specific examples of what this meant and what had helped to bring it about. Analysis of these more detailed accounts suggests that taking part in basic skills training courses helped to bolster learners’: confidence in their skills and abilities; confidence in themselves and confidence through a supportive learning environment.

Confidence in their skills and abilities

One way in which Skills for Life at Work courses contributed to confidence was by helping learners to improve specific aspects of their skills and abilities. As discussed below (section 4.3), the workplaces in this evaluation provided examples of developments in learners’ communication skills, writing skills, numeracy skills and teaching skills. What’s important here is the way in which these developments in individuals’ skills were associated with greater belief in themselves within the workplace.

So participants of an ESOL course in a care home not only ‘greatly improved their English skills’ but also showed ‘a massive increase in confidence and self-esteem [in terms of being] more willing to get involved in things and much more confident to communicate with other workers/managers and care home residents’. Another example came from support staff in an FE college who, after completing Level 2 literacy and numeracy courses, attached great significance to the fact that:

Now when we are supporting literacy and numeracy, you know you are 100 percent sure what the reason was for something and you could help the student just – 100 percent. You just knew it. You were confident, you know you did the exam and you passed and so you were like, ‘I’ve got this.’ ‘I can help a student.’

Confidence in themselves

There were various ways in which undertaking a Skills for Life at Work course provided learners with an opportunity to realise that they were able to do much more than they had previously thought. As this support staff learner in an FE college explained:
Just to be able to achieve and have that course, I felt really good about myself because I’d achieved and I’d worked hard to get it and it made me feel really good. Because you know, ‘I’ve passed my Level 2 in Maths and English’ and I haven’t done that since I was at school.

Similarly, the Training Manager in a private day nursery, where several staff had undertaken literacy and numeracy courses, talked about how:

a lot of the girls were very nervous beforehand and once they got into it and were being taught in the environment that we were being taught in, it did boost their confidence that they could learn again.

As well as giving participants confidence in themselves as learners, the training courses also made it possible for staff to do things that ‘they never would have dared do’. In a primary school context, for example, a Level 1 Numeracy course required support staff ‘to form a numeracy club for children, which for LSAs who before would never have gone near maths, was a huge change ... but they realised that they can do it and so have become more confident’. Along similar lines, Literacy courses within the Army meant that ‘two very dyslexic lads I worked with said that only captains and majors can do sudoku but I showed them how to do it and one of them was very skilled in seeing patterns and they were doing really hard ones really quickly and I can’t tell you the confidence that it gave them.’.

**Confidence through a supportive learning environment**

The chance to undertake training in a supportive small group environment within the workplace was another way in which Skills for Life courses contributed to building participants’ confidence. For care home ESOL learners, for example, the course was an important opportunity to speak without fear of making mistakes:

Normally we wouldn’t talk much because it may go wrong. But before finishing the first class and she made us so calm and she gave the freedom to talk to us if we go wrong also, she will correct it when we finish... So we got the confidence to talk. Now, as I’m talking... and I know somewhere I’m mistaking but still I have the confidence to speak.

The same point was made by a training provider, who noted how these kind of basic skills courses had ‘increased confidence because it’s given people the ability to have a go and not feel a fool e.g. using a word or saying and being able to ask ‘Have I got that right?’ rather than just being silent’. A senior member of staff in a primary school commented that ‘If you’ve got staff that feel under-confident about something then this is a very non-threatening way to gain in confidence because it was a small group and they had chance to get to know each other and they didn’t feel stupid for not knowing things as they were all at a similar level’.
Elsewhere, the HR Manager of a social enterprise organisation, talked about how Skills for Life courses had provided a significant opportunity for older staff to open up about weaknesses that they had previously kept closely guarded from colleagues:

It’s greatly increased staff confidence and self-esteem - especially so with the older learners who were previously very resistant to training and also to letting others know about their lack of numeracy and literacy skills. The training has taken down these barriers which, previously, they were very protective over.

One of the training provider interviewees explained how this opening up about weaknesses was typically much more challenging for literacy as opposed to numeracy: ‘People will admit to maths much more easily than the English and say, “My maths is dreadful” whereas with the English it will tend to be ‘Oh I haven’t got my glasses’. It’s okay to say that you’re not good at maths but not to say that I can’t write a sentence.’

There was also the fact that small group training courses created a setting where staff of different nationalities, shift patterns, job roles and/or parts of an organisation became part of a shared experience. This sense of Skills for Life at Work enabling new connections between employees was touched on in several workplaces:

It improved their feeling of inclusion in the company greatly ... a definite increase in confidence and staff morale, staff are more willing to get involved. They are more motivated and having all the nationalities together in the classroom helped them to bond and meant improved team work. (manufacturing company)

On the course we can talk between ourselves and try and help each other out and stuff. ...We have discussion with each other. Sometimes you cannot learn from one teacher, but you can learn from the other guys on the course. (Army)

We were all working on exactly the same level... And I found that we all helped each other. One of our colleagues she was fantastic and she sort of like helped me work out things and showed me ways to do it and I just found it really good. (FE college)

I mean for me especially ‘cos I didn’t really know anyone, because we had staff from three different sites on the course ... and we were all just talking and helping each other out, it meant that everyone got to know everyone properly. (FE college)

4.3 Skill development

Benefits in terms of developments in learners’ skills, knowledge and understanding were noted in many workplaces. During interviews with employers, for example, there were frequent references to improvements in the following skill areas:
• **spoken communication**

It greatly improved their English skills. A couple of staff in particular had hardly any English before the training, but afterwards were able to have stilted conversations and also able to communicate with the care home residents. (care home)

Employees’ English skills and understanding were much improved. One member of staff was much more proficient with interpreting and processing orders. Her vocabulary was greatly improved and she was able to discuss her work or any problems/queries she had in more detail with the manager. (manufacturing)

• **writing and reading skills**

It certainly improved the confidence of the staff, especially when it came to anything written e.g. reading and writing emails, [which has meant that] our email correspondence is now much more effective. (private care home)

Staff were much more willing and able to carry out the writing tasks in their job e.g. much more proud of their written logs, which previously they may have been embarrassed about (social enterprise organisation)

The course was really useful for one dyslexic learner. The tutor organised for her to get some special reading glasses through a government scheme. And she still uses some of the tips she learnt. (legal company)

• **numeracy skills**

There was a lot of knowledge that they were confused about before and so it’s been good to go through that e.g. units of measurement - they were confused about whether to multiply or divide to get the answer so it was being able to go through it practically in terms of what you need to do. So it was about ironing out misconceptions and being able to really understand what a question/maths problem is asking about. (primary school)

I’ve learned three different ways of multiplying and there is one that I prefer to do. And it’s not the one that I used to do so that’s really beneficial. (large public service organisation)

We learnt about the triangle which helps you do percentages, fractions, and decimals. And that was...well I found that fantastic. I’d never done it before. (FE college)
• teaching skills

They learnt about different ways of teaching now e.g. for division and multiplication, when they were taught on Skills for Life it was in a completely different way to how they learnt at school 20 years ago and some of them found it easier and some found it harder. But getting their head round the fact that they need to be able to show students in more than one way was actually quite a learning curve for them. (FE college)

Also doing the course gave them a bit more of a realisation of what students are expected to do i.e. a lot said that they weren’t fully aware what students have to do particularly in terms of the exams etc.. So there was a combination of up-skilling and an eye opener in terms of what is expected of students. (FE college)

These various examples of skill development often had knock-on effects for undertaking specific tasks in the workplace. The earlier discussion of impacts on employers cited several cases of improvements in job-specific skills and productivity – care workers being more willing to run activities with residents and speak with relatives, waiting staff in a hotel and country club being more able to recommend menu choices to guests, and call centre staff in a legal insurance firm making fewer mistakes in their case reports. As shown in Table 4.1, further examples of job-specific skill development came from the group interviews with learners in military, educational and social care workplaces (Table 4.1).

As well as benefits for performing tasks at work, there were also reports of how basic skills courses yielded benefits for life beyond work. To quote two employers:

It’s affected their lives generally as they are often below entry level, can’t read electricity or gas meter, can’t read a letter which says that the doctor has moved. It has a wider impact on the community.

It has enabled them to help their children with homework i.e. they can take things home too – this is so important.
Table 4.1: Learners’ reports of job-specific skill development

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Calculating percentages</th>
<th>Helping teach grammar</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It’s helped me with maths in my job because my maths was really poor at school. Simple things like day to day, I’m trying to work out shooting scores for the recruits, and they want to know ‘what’s the pass percentage?’. Before I’d be trying to like work it out and even on a calculator I couldn’t do it. But now even though I haven’t got that I can turn around and do it on paper probably quite easily now I know the method, so it’s definitely going to help me. (Army)</td>
<td>For us we got taught how to use apostrophes, you know, for the exam and everything, but we also got helped on how to help students, how to use an apostrophe. So - kind of going from ‘Ok if I know it in my head I know that this is the rule but I really don’t know how to explain it to people’, to …. here’s the different ways of being able to explain it to a student so that they don’t get it wrong. (FE college)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Writing notes</th>
<th>Talking in English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It helped us with writing. From the beginning we are writing notes what we are doing with the residents etc. We just have to record it – everything – so... sometimes we make it confused. Should I write this? Shall I make it? How will I write? How will I express? What is the correct tense to use there? How can we write these sorts of things? (care home)</td>
<td>We already would talk with each other in English in that class. Otherwise, outside the class we have a tendency to talk in our own language and it wouldn’t improve us, we know and - After the class we always made the decision ‘We’ll talk in English only.’ Yeah’ (care home)</td>
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4.4 Influencing factors

As well as investigating how Skills for Life at Work had impacted on learners, this evaluation also sought to explore whether the training had been noticeably more or less effective with particular kinds of learners. Employers, learners and training providers were therefore asked whether they felt that the courses (i) had been more effective with certain types of learners; and (ii) had had any negative impacts on learners.

While there were no interviewees in any category who felt that Skills for Life at Work had been detrimental for staff who took part, there was a definite feeling that the degree of benefits did vary between different learners. This was certainly not a case of interviewees reporting clear-cut evidence of differences in outcomes for different types of learners. Rather it was some interviewees making references to a number of often inter-connected factors that seemed to have been influential on the extent to which different individuals had benefited from the training.
Firstly, and not surprisingly, the influence of learners themselves was noted by several employers and training providers. There were examples of the powerful effect of learners’ different motivation levels:

For the ones who engage and are motivated there is no doubt that they benefit a huge amount ... It will always more effective with more receptive ones. We had a group that were just back for 4 weeks wind down from 6 months in Afghanistan and a one week Literacy course was not what they were interested in, they did not want to do it, they had just survived 6 months of enemy fire and they probably learnt nothing. But I have a group in now who can’t get enough of it, work through lunch, do homework. Why? Most want to be promoted, never get chance to sit in a classroom and practise spelling etc. etc. and most army courses are 8am-6pm with more in the evening so 9am-4pm is a bit of doddle really. (Army)

There are always some people who don’t want to be there and do the least they can, but the majority do not have that attitude. (Health service contractor)

The only one that sticks in my mind was a Nigerian lady who was more or less told that she had to do the course. She was fine with me but there was a brick wall from the first minute I met her. (Training provider)

The influence of learners’ age and career stage was also noted with older learners facing more difficulties in some settings but faring better in others:

It’s harder for older people (50+) to access these courses – their motivation is not so great. The biggest negative impact is on those below entry level – avoidance. They sometimes won’t admit their difficulties or it suits them not to make progress, it can be quite handy to say they don’t read or write. (community organisation)

On the confidence side, there were definitely some that gained more in terms of confidence and self belief i.e. older staff members who were at school a long time ago and were ‘I’m not sure if I can do this’ and those who were really unsure about their Maths skills and didn’t get their GCSE Maths at school. (private day nursery)

Also significant were cases where learners’ engagement was limited by competing priorities:

The only problem to the learners is finding time for training/learning. Many have additional needs and outside pressures on their lives e.g. family. (social enterprise)

Also significant was the nature of the training courses, with references being made to the benefits of factors such as:

- small group teaching – ‘Small group meant that it could be more individual so with the numeracy it started out that everyone was being taught the same thing which was a bit
frustrating but then after finding out what everybody’s specific weaknesses were the tutor could make it much more individualised. In a large group you wouldn’t get that.’ (primary school)

- sensitive tutors – ‘The trainers here made it not like going back to school, which is a fear of people here. Instead they made it enjoyable and relevant to their day to day work and life.’ (health service contractor)

Two issues about courses that proved limiting for learners in certain contexts were:

- Timing - ‘Yes, because we are sitting down just after our lunch we have a full stomach. But some people are doing short days, so they’ll be hungry. Like a few of them started half seven until two o’clock and in between twenty minutes’. (care home)

- Accreditation – ‘Some people have found it too challenging – the assessment- and chose not to do it because of the pressure of assessment and that’s no slight on the College. It’s just the individuals we deal with but they are still benefiting from the course. (social enterprise)

Finally, the **nature of the workplace** was another influence that affected how learners benefited from Skills for Life at Work courses. One issue here was the question of whether learners enjoyed the support of senior staff after completing their training:

Learners are more motivated and they will be more effective provided they get the support and recognition once they go back to their jobs. Sometimes there are some ignorant middle managers who just assume that people will never be able to do things and so continue treating them as they did before. (large public organisation)

Another issue was whether there was a close connection or not between the content of the course and the current job responsibilities of the learner. There were two examples of learners reporting greater benefits from their literacy, as opposed to numeracy, training due to the nature of their job tasks:

We have to write a lot here but the maths we don’t use things as high up as percentages with the children because we’re teaching 3 year olds not 13 year olds but hey in the sales we can now say I know how much is off that! (pre-school practitioner)

With the English and things like when I have to write letters. It’s just basic things like that I didn’t really know I needed extra help with but once I did the learning it did help me – yeah. Probably more the English than the maths, but I probably found the maths harder to do because I’m not using it that much probably. (college administrator)
4.5 Summary

The picture emerging from the workplaces that took part in this evaluation is that Skills for Life at Work courses had a range of benefits for learners. In particular, there were reports of learners gaining in three main ways:

- **new possibilities** – through gaining qualifications needed for promotion/progression and belief/support to pursue opportunities;
- **increased confidence** – in their skills and abilities, in themselves as people and through a supportive learning environment;
- **skill development** – in various areas (speaking, writing, numeracy, teaching) related to both tasks at work and life beyond work.

While there were no clear reports of negative impacts on learners, there was a feeling that the degree of positive impact varied between learners depending upon a mix of factors. This included the influence of: learners themselves (motivation levels, age, career stage, competing priorities), the training courses (group size, tutor sensitivity, timing, accreditation), and the workplace (senior staff support, and connection between course content and job role).
5. **Project Strengths and Weaknesses**

Having discussed impacts on employers and learners in the preceding two sections, this section considers the strengths and weaknesses of Skills for Life at Work as a project. It looks at the aspects of the project that were seen by interviewees as areas of strength/success and points of weakness/difficulty. The aim is to explore in a little more detail the project characteristics that were seen by interviewees as enabling (strengths) or constraining (weaknesses) the kinds of beneficial impacts outlined previously. The discussion draws together the views of employers, learners and training providers, and points out where there is strong agreement or important differences between these three groups.

5.1 **Strengths**

All 30 employer interviewees were asked whether, based on their experiences of Skills for Life at Work, they would recommend this kind of training to other similar organisations/companies. Their responses indicated a near universal enthusiasm for recommending the initiative to others:

- Most definitely, especially to other [voluntary sector] organisations like ours. (social enterprise)
- It was really successful. If they offered it again, I’d say yes straightaway. (care home)
- I am positive that we will do things in the future as well. (hotel)

In expressing their willingness to recommend the programme, several employers also stressed how this would depend on there being certain similarities to their own situation. For example: similar senior support (‘I would recommend it but they would have to have support from the top’); similar training needs (‘Yes, if you’ve got staff who feel under-confident about something I’d definitely recommend it’); and similar motivated staff (‘If they are qualified nurses then their aim is to get as far as they can’).

That there was strong support for the project across the employers that took part in this evaluation is a definite endorsement of the Skills for Life at Work initiative. But what was it about the project that these employers, and along with them the learners and training providers, saw as its main strengths? Three main points emerge from this evaluation: the potential for beneficial impacts; the nature and quality of the training; and the targeting of certain groups of learners.

**Potential for beneficial impacts**

One main strength referred to by all three groups of interviewees was the fact that the project had brought benefits for individual learners and their organisations. The preceding two sections have outlined various examples of learners and workplaces deriving positive gains from these
training courses. There were echoes of many of these in employers’, learners’ and training providers’ reflections on the initiative as a whole. For example:

Yes I would recommend it because I think it works, from an organisational perspective it made the staff more flexible, watching the peer support within group was good and that is an advantage to any company. (employer)

After this course we’ve got more interest in doing English more and more. (learner)

Judging by the attendance, the feedback, and the people wanting to do the exam – I can’t think of any negatives. (training provider)

**Quality of the Training**

Underlying and enabling these impacts, though, the other really significant strength of the project was the nature and quality of the training. References to a whole range of characteristics of the training cropped up throughout the employer and learner interviews. Table 5.1 presents an overview of the most important positive features with illustrative quotes.

### Table 5.1: Positive features of the training

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tailored</th>
<th>Flexible</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘It wasn’t a set standard course – she found out what we wanted and did that. She tailored it to our need – descriptive writing and that sort of thing and use of descriptive words and grammar.’ (care home employer)</td>
<td>‘We had a very flexible trainer - running courses on Saturday afternoon so that people can get to them. They have been very helpful and working with us for three years now.’ (social enterprise employer)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free</td>
<td>Work-based</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Yes, for many companies it’s down to budget and where it’s funded it’s a great advantage. There were benefits there for us. And ESOL course are so expensive now and because it’s not part of our mandatory training we can’t afford to pay for it. It’s not an area we can cover – more for employees to have it already or to sort it themselves.’ (care home employer)</td>
<td>‘Having the training on site was most successful as it guaranteed that people were going to be there so we could maximise what we got out of it. A more recent off-site ESOL course has been less successful as it was in their own time not work time and so attendance was more variable and it had less impact.’ (horticultural nursery employer)</td>
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</table>
Accreditation optional

‘The nice thing about it is that you can offer it unaccredited, you suit the course to meet the learners’ needs. They did receive a certificate of attendance but if they take the test they will receive an Edexcel certificate. The literacy and numeracy learners usually that was their aim - the qualification - because either they had a low grade at school or they’d left school and suddenly realised that they were more than capable… with the ESOL students, the non-accredited was fantastic for the lower levels.’

(training provider)

Small group

‘They were good because they set us all tasks and gave us all the relevant paper work and although we worked through them you could go into small groups so that if someone didn’t understand you could help and also the teacher would help too. We all did it ourselves but we had the back up of the teacher.’

(pre-school employer/learner)

Face to face

‘For the majority of the team I have here, what worked well was being in a classroom. They are more your chalk and talk type learners i.e. they’re not very motivated in terms of e-learning/self-study, you tell them it’s on the system but most wouldn’t bother, they need to be brought in. Skills for Life still delivers that type of face to face learning, which is good as a lot of my team need that type of learning.’

(FE college employer)

Supportive

‘A couple of them didn’t pass Level 2 straight away but they were offered extra help, slots to re-sit so they went all out to help us. The girls were not made to feel stupid about it. So they went over and above in trying to get us to pass, lots of support. I mean some of us hadn’t sat exams for like 30 years so definitely went out on a limb to support and encourage us.’

(pre-school employer/learner)

Appropriate learner target groups

Finally, one further area of strength that was mentioned by training providers and some employers was the way in which the project was targeted at appropriate groups of learners. One training provider felt that:

The principle of the project was good. Capturing people who we could genuinely help and who genuinely needed help i.e. the project did what it was supposed to do. This scheme was the first one that allowed us to go for that group.

Other employer interviewees were particularly supportive of the opportunity that this training gave them to develop and employ qualified staff from overseas:

The ESOL courses are the first step along the way to being able to retain these qualified staff – often trained nurses in their own countries (private care home)
We are in the process of training those who start as agency staff so that the better ones can become full-time staff and work up through the ranks of the company. But to do that obviously communication is a key factor so to get us going we needed that first step on the ladder. (horticultural nursery)

5.2 Weaknesses

Turning to weaknesses in the project, there were three main sets of difficulties reported by interviewees during the evaluation. These tended to align fairly closely with the three interviewee groups and their roles/experiences of the project. That is, employers tended to raise issues to do with project set up, learners (and some employers) mentioned training issues, and training providers were concerned about administration issues.

Set up issues

Employer representatives highlighted a number of challenges associated with setting up the training within their workplaces. These included:

- **Organising/funding staff release** – The need to re-organise staff rotas in care homes, shift patterns in factories, staff cover in schools and so on was a definite challenge for those staff who were organising this training in their workplaces. As the head of operations in a horticultural nursery explained, ‘the hardest thing was the impact on the business in terms of freeing up people, which was work for my managers in terms of coordinating cover by other staff’. Similarly, in a legal claims processing company, it was ‘difficult in terms of taking staff out of the call centre, we had to split in to 2 teams to maintain cover’. In one private care home, the manager made clear that, although funded, the training had involved certain hidden costs due to the training happening during work hours. As she explained, ‘I was practically on the floor. I would have four staff instead of six – if there were any issues then myself or others would help out. I decided to put them down for training and they got paid for it. I didn’t tell anyone, I just did it.’

- **Learner resistance** – Overcoming initial negativity by staff selected for Skills for Life at Work courses proved an area of difficulty in some workplaces. The following account from the training coordinator in a company providing housekeeping/cleaning staff within a large NHS hospital is a good example:

  Getting people to admit that they’ve got a problem is the main difficulty that we have. Everybody thinks they’ve got enough skills already. The younger generation think they know everything e.g. if they’re going to university and doing some cleaning at the weekend they say ‘Why am I doing a literacy and numeracy test?’. And older people (i.e. in their late 50s) say ‘I’ve never had any problems so why do I need this now?’.
• **Manager support** – There were a few reports of difficulties in gaining and maintaining support from managers. One issue here was insufficient evidence showing the worth of Skills for Life at Work. One coordinator in an NHS hospital commented that that ‘Data in relation to the evidence base, proving its value and worth, that would have helped to convince the management quicker’. The experience of a co-ordinator in a city council, however, was similar initially but then improved: ‘When I started, middle managers were not interested, but as it grew they could see the benefits’. Another challenge in two NHS hospitals, though, was poor communication between learners and managers – ‘learners not always going to their line manager and drawing attention to their difficulties with maths or literacy’ or ‘learners saying that their manager wouldn’t release them, but then the line manager saying that they hadn’t been told about it’.

• **Travel to/from assessments** – Where training course ended with a formal assessment that was off-site, there were understandable logistical difficulties for employers. The one difficulty reported by the Training Manager at a private day nursery, for example, was ‘getting to the exams (4 in total) which was a fair way away and was during the day so meant arranging for 12 staff (out of 14 in total) to be off site in one day’.

• **Minimum number requirements** – For one employer (an NHS hospital), requirements by the training provider for a minimum number of course participants proved problematic. As the co-ordinator explained: ‘The college emailed us to re-start courses but then in the third week they just stopped it because they said the numbers weren’t high enough – this was just when numbers were beginning to pick up and the learners were left without a course so very disappointed’.

**Training issues**

The group interviews with learners highlighted certain aspects of the training courses that had presented difficulties of some kind. Some of the same aspects were also raised by employers. Taking learners and employers together, the main concerns were:

• **Short duration of courses** – In several workplaces, there were calls for courses to be longer: ‘some of them would have liked to have spent more time on their weak areas because there was quite a lot to fit in to the 10 weeks (primary school), ‘You’re trying to refresh or go over a lot of different things; fractions, percentages, subtraction, division...it’s just a lot to take in such a compact time’ (large public organisation), ‘We needed more time in each session a week because where we were a big group’ (FE college).

• **Complex pre-assessments** – Until later simplification, one employer had difficulties with the complexity of the pre-assessment process: ‘When it first started, we had big assessments which took most people 1.5-2hrs but then the training provider simplified it and it has been just as useful’. Along similar lines, one of the training providers questions
why ‘learners were required to do both literacy and numeracy initial assessments even if they were just doing literacy’.

- **Lack of pre-course materials** – In one workplace (large public organisation), basic skills learners would have liked more in the way of preparatory materials before their course. Their view was: ‘They should send out preparation packs with some basic adding, subtracting forms ... to go through before you start’.

- **Course content too generic** – While the tailored nature of the training was cited as a strength in many cases, there were some interviewees who felt that the content could have been more specific. One employer (in a family-run manufacturing business) felt the literacy training could have been ‘more focused on the actual job of the employee and the business she worked in’. One learner (in a large public organisation) wanted to be able to focus more on specific areas of numeracy that he was weak on ‘rather than covering every part of it’. These findings concur with previous research which found that the US Army’s FLIT programs, which focused on training job-related reading quickly, produced not only greater gains for job-related reading than general literacy programs, but also gains in general reading that were on average better than those delivered by general literacy programs (Sticht *et al.*, 1987). Similarly, research in England on embedding basic skills instruction in vocational training found that attainment tended to increase in line with higher degrees of embeddedness (Casey *et al.*, 2006).

- **Lack of follow-up provision** – A number of employers were disappointed not to have been able to access follow-up courses for their learners:

  We tried to get further training set up but nothing was available. It would have been good to have had the opportunity for further /continued training. (care home)

  We haven’t heard from you at all to know what else is on offer in terms of Skills for Life. There has been no contact or follow-up. (legal claims company)

  Some staff asked me what else we could do but I was informed that there was no further funding. A problem was that staff got motivated but then it’s over. (manufacturing company)

**Administration issues**

The other main category of project weaknesses concerned administration and was principally an issue for the training providers. Not surprisingly, the kinds of difficulties reported by training providers were similar to ones flagged up in the earlier interim evaluation (Page, Place and Tallon 2010).
• **Paper work** – All three of the training providers that took part in this evaluation spoke at length about the paper work associated with the project. Difficulties included ‘changing requirements’, ‘lack of templates’, ‘duplication’ and sheer volume. To quote one training provider: ‘What has driven me absolutely round the bend has been the paperwork, I think I’ve spent more hours doing the paperwork than I have teaching and it has been horrendous. I understand the need for paperwork, I do, but the amount of paperwork is completely ludicrous and a lot of it, I think, is repetitive. Things coming back because something has been worded slightly differently’.

• **Receiving funding** – Two of the training providers reported severe delays with receiving payments for courses. One talked about it being a ‘nightmare getting the money – due to paper work issues and red tape’ between the various organisations involved in the project. The other had to take the step of suspending their Skills for Life at Work training ‘for five months until we got paid - we could have increased our volume of learners if we hadn’t lost this time’.

• **Hidden costs** – An issue raised by one training provider was the hidden costs stemming from travelling time for staff to visit employers and the amount of photocopying and postage that was required. Her view was that these costs were not adequately taken in account in the funding and this had an impact on recruiting employers (‘I don’t want to travel too far as I don’t get paid for sitting in the car’).

• **Receiving vouchers** – Receiving vouchers for learners was a problem for one training provider and one employer. The training provider was reportedly ‘still waiting for £2,200 in vouchers. The learners finished in October and it’s now January, which makes us look inefficient’. Similarly, one of the employer interviewees described how ‘a £30 voucher was offered to learners who completed the training but this has not been received’ despite sending several reminders.

5.3 **Summary**

The employers, learners and training providers identified a number of strengths and weaknesses within the project as a whole.

Major positive features of Skills for Life at Work include:

- its potential for beneficial impacts (particularly for learners);
- the nature and quality of the training (flexible, tailored, work-based etc.);
- its focus on certain target groups (such as overseas staff).

Areas of weaknesses and challenge, meanwhile, were:
• set up issues for employers (organising staff release, manager support etc.);
• training issues for learners (short course duration, complex pre-assessments etc.);
• administration issues for training providers (paper work, funding etc.).

Taken together these various strengths and weaknesses help to provide the basis for the planning of future training initiatives of a similar kind.
6. Conclusions and Recommendations

This final section draws together the key findings of the evaluation and outlines a series of recommendations for future development.

6.1 Key Findings

The evaluation’s key findings can be presented in terms of the five overarching evaluation questions outlined at the outset. These focus on: impacts on employers; impacts on learners; differential impacts amongst learners; differential impacts amongst employers; and accreditation and project strengths and weaknesses.

**Impacts on employers (Evaluation Question 1)**

The employers who took part in this evaluation mostly had very positive stories to tell about their Skills for Life at Work experience. The benefits that were reported emerged under three main headings:

- productivity – in many different ways from job-specific skills improvement through to more generalised improvements in communication;
- motivation and teamwork – in terms of staff commitment to and understanding of their work, and in building more positive staff relationships within the workforce;
- confidence and communication – through learners feeling more able to do their jobs effectively and to communicate within the workplace and to external clients.

There were a small number of cases where such positive impacts were less clear. For one employer, the issue was not so much a lack of benefits as a lack of clear evidence of benefits. For two others, there was a sense that the benefits has only gone so far: ‘probably more a confidence thing [but] not sure whether it increased their skills’ and ‘for staff it is something extra behind them [but] there is no real benefit in terms of our working practice’.

**Impacts on learners (Evaluation Question 2)**

The picture emerging from the workplaces that took part in this evaluation is that Skills for Life at Work courses had a range of benefits for learners. During the interviews there were reports of learners gaining in three main ways:

- opening up of new possibilities – through learners gaining qualifications needed for promotion or future progression, increased belief and desire to pursue opportunities and greater recognition from senior staff;
- increased confidence and self-belief – in terms of their own skills and abilities, in terms of themselves as people and as learners and in terms of experiencing a supportive learning environment;
• development of knowledge and skills – across various areas (speaking, writing, reading, numeracy, teaching) related to both tasks at work and life beyond work.

The basis for these impacts was almost always employers’ and learners’ reports of changes they had seen in themselves or other staff. There were very few cases where reported benefits were backed up with monitoring data or evaluation evidence.

**Differential impacts amongst learners (Evaluation Question 3)**

While there were no clear reports of negative impacts on learners, there was a feeling that the degree of positive impact varied between learners depending upon a mix of factors. This included the influence of:

- learners themselves – such as motivation levels, age and career stage, and competing priorities;
- the training courses – such as group size, tutor sensitivity, timing, and accreditation;
- the workplace – such as the degree of senior staff support and the amount of connection between course content and job role.

This makes clear that progress amongst learners on Skills for Life at Work courses is not a simple question of which kinds of learners seem to do well, but rather a complex question of what kinds of combinations of learner characteristics, training course processes and workplace contexts seem to be conducive to learner benefits.

**Differential impacts amongst employers (Evaluation Question 4)**

There were very few negative reports from employers in terms of their experience of Skills for Life at Work but some employers did find it hard to quantify or evidence productivity improvements. The key to the success of these courses in the workplace seemed to rely heavily on the inter-relationships between employers, training providers and learners:

- employers and training providers – effective communication, managing time and understanding each other’s requirements;
- employers and learners – allowing time for learners to study and disclosing basic skills levels to managers;
- training providers and learners – tailoring the courses to the needs of the learners in the workplace and managing the different levels of learners.

Where the relationships between the different parties (and ideally all three parties) was strong, then the success of the courses was optimised.
Accreditation and project strengths and weaknesses (Evaluation Question 5)

Evaluation Question 5 had a specific focus on the role of accreditation, and there is no doubt that learners’ and employers’ views on accreditation were mixed. On the one hand, there were many cases where the opportunity to gain qualifications that had currency in relation to promotion and future prospects was hugely important to learners and their managers. On the other hand, there were also situations where being able to offer learning opportunities to staff without the absolute requirement of undergoing assessment for an external qualification was critical to engaging certain individuals in the project.

More importantly, though, what this evaluation has shown is that the question of accreditation is just one amongst several aspects of the project that were significant to participants. During this evaluation, employers, learners and training providers identified a number of characteristics of the project that they saw as overall strengths or underlying weaknesses.

Major positive features of Skills for Life at Work included:

- its potential for beneficial impacts – particularly for learners but also for workplaces;
- the nature and quality of the training – key attractions were that it was tailored, flexible, free, work-based, accreditation optional, small group, face to face and supportive;
- its focus on certain target groups – such as the opportunity to develop and employ qualified overseas staff.

Areas of weaknesses and challenge, meanwhile, were:

- set up issues for employers – such as organising staff release, learner resistance, manager support, travel to/from assessments and minimum number requirements;
- training issues for learners – including short duration of courses, complex pre-assessments, lack of pre-course materials, course content too generic and lack of follow-up provision;
- administration issues for training providers – such as paper work, receiving funding, hidden costs and receiving vouchers.

6.2 Recommendations

Based on positive feedback from employers, training providers and learners, the overall recommendation of this evaluation is that Skills for Life at Work-type training in the workplace should continue as part of as part of wider efforts to improve levels of skills attainment. The 2020 minimum basic skill targets set by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) are for 95% of the population to have literacy skills at Level 1 or above, and 95% of the population to have numeracy skills at Entry level 3 or above (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2009).
With this in mind, specific recommendations are that **there should be continued support for the following current practices**:

- supporting the provision of ESOL courses as well as the development of progression pathways for ESOL learners (e.g. ESOL to IELTS) in areas of skill shortages
- funding training providers to include small training providers as well as larger colleges, and to be able to offer courses on a one-to-one basis where necessary
- careful tailoring of courses to the needs of different workplaces by training providers
- allowing both accredited and non-accredited courses in view of the different benefits that both routes can provide to learners and employers
- highlighting progression pathways between and beyond Skills for Life at Work courses and marketing the continuing professional development opportunities
- involving Trade Union Learning representatives who, alongside other contributions, could help employees to overcome concerns about admitting to the lack of basic skills in the workplace.

**There should also be support for the development of the following improved practices in future provision:**

- systematic recruiting of employers by training providers so as to ensure full coverage of all employment sectors
- encouraging previous employee participants to act as recruiters for future courses
- publicising learner feedback and examples of positive impact in order to secure engagement from senior staff within workplaces
- simplifying the paperwork requirements of funders and the demands that these place on training providers and speeding up payment time-scales for training providers
- streamlining the initial assessment processes (in particular, whether there is a need to assess a potential learner for both literacy and numeracy even if they are only going to register for a literacy course).
References


Adult Learning Inspectorate (2005) Making the most of training. London: ALI.


Appendix 1: Details of the Employer Sample

Characteristics of the Skills for Life at Work Database

The evaluation team was provided with a database of Skills for Life at Work employers from which to draw a sub-sample. This database contained 150 employers, 2323 learners and 21 different training providers.

The size of employers was categorised as either under 250 employees, or over 250 employees. Of the 150 employers: 81 (54%) had under 250 employees; 49 (33%) had over 250 employees; and 20 (13%) didn’t have a size stated on the data.

Geographically the data was taken from Kent, Sussex, Surrey and Hampshire and was divided into 2 areas: Area 1, Hampshire; Area 2, Sussex, Surrey and Kent.

The employers covered a wide range of sectors, however Care was the most commonly represented with 33 % of employers being in this category. Education (to include early years) was the next most frequent with 14 % of employers, followed by Hospitality/Tourism with 11%.

Across the 150 employers, 18% had received ESOL courses, 18% had received Literacy courses and 13% had received Numeracy courses. However, there were also considerable numbers of workplaces where combinations of courses had been undertaken such as Literacy and Numeracy (23%) and Literacy, Numeracy and ESOL (7%). For some of the employers, the database did not specify what particular courses were undertaken, but just stated Skills for Life at Work (17%).

Characteristics of the Evaluation Sample of 30 Employers

The 30 employers chosen for interviews were selected to give a sample which represented the overall make up of the data. 10 employers were selected from Area 1 (Hampshire) and 20 from Area 2 (Sussex, Surrey and Kent). Characteristics considered were:

- size of employer
- type of course offered
- type of provider offering the training
- sector of employer
- number of learners.

However the initial lists selected had to be expanded when problems were encountered setting up the telephone interviews. Difficulties included situations where: contacts had left and their replacements weren’t knowledgeable about the training; contact details were incorrect; contacts were not available/too busy; contacts did not wish to take part; and/or contacts professed to know nothing about the training taking place. This necessitated additional employers being added to the initial list thus affected the balance of the employers.
Of the 30 employers finally interviewed, 21 had under 250 employees and 9 had over 250 employees. Across these 30 workplaces, 612 learners had received training from 17 providers, so most of the providers in the overall database were included (there were 21 in total).

As shown in Figure A1, 12 industry sectors were represented in the sample, whereas the overall database included 17 industry sectors. However, much of the make up of the sample, did reflect that of the original database, with 33% (10) of those interviewed being in the Care sector and 14 % (4) from Education and given that some of the industry sectors only had one or two employers in the total data, it wasn’t possible to get representation from every sector in a sample which was 20% (one fifth) of the total.

Figure A1: Representation of Industry Sectors within the Database and the Sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sector</th>
<th>Overall Database</th>
<th>Employer Sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Care</td>
<td>50 33</td>
<td>10 33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>21 14</td>
<td>4 14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hospitality/Tourism</td>
<td>16 11</td>
<td>2 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>9 6</td>
<td>3 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retail/Wholesale</td>
<td>8 5</td>
<td>0 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health/NHS</td>
<td>7 5</td>
<td>2 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other services (eg cleaning)</td>
<td>7 5</td>
<td>0 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voluntary/Charity</td>
<td>5 3</td>
<td>2 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local Government</td>
<td>4 3</td>
<td>1 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training</td>
<td>4 3</td>
<td>2 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture/Horticulture</td>
<td>3 2</td>
<td>1 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Armed Forces &amp; Public Services</td>
<td>3 2</td>
<td>1 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction</td>
<td>3 2</td>
<td>1 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research/Science/Technical</td>
<td>3 2</td>
<td>0 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transport</td>
<td>3 2</td>
<td>0 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative services</td>
<td>2 1</td>
<td>1 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communications</td>
<td>2 1</td>
<td>0 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>150 100</td>
<td>30 100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In terms of course types, there was a fairly similar pattern between the sample of 30 and the overall database with some important differences. As shown in Figure A2, one clear difference was a greater number of workplaces in the sample that had received ESOL courses (33% in the sample compared with 18% in the overall database). Within the sample, there was also a larger proportion of workplaces that had received combinations of courses as compared with the overall database (e.g. Literacy and Numeracy courses accounted for 33% of sample and 23% of overall database, and Literacy and ESOL courses accounted for 10% of sample and 4% of overall database).
Figure A2: Representation of Course Types within the Database and the Sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course Type</th>
<th>Overall Database</th>
<th></th>
<th>Employer Sample</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESOL</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Numeracy</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lit &amp; Numeracy</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lit/Num/ESOL</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lit/ESOL</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SfL at Work i.e. focus unspecified</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>150</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
<td><strong>30</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>