

Operating a Workplace English Language Program

FAQs for Employers

by Robert Vitello

Good communication skills are essential for any competitive company in today's economy. Investing in the English skills of your workers will result in enhanced team effectiveness and will cut down on errors due to miscommunication. Your workers will be able to better interact with customers, thus enriching customer service and creating a more positive image of your company. Employees will also have a deeper commitment to the workplace, and have greater opportunities to advance within the company. In addition, as technology becomes increasingly advanced, workers need to be able to adapt to changing requirements. A solid command of the English language allows for effective and efficient trainings on equipment and programs, thus enabling your workforce to be adequately prepared to meet the evolving demands of the industry.

In business terms, improving employees' language skills is an excellent return on investment for both large and small businesses. It's also an investment in your employees that will have a long-lasting impact

on their children, families and communities as well as the Commonwealth as a whole.

Launching a workplace English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) program for your immigrant workers will be a challenging and rewarding initiative. As you consider initiating an in-house English program, it will be helpful to understand of the amount of company time and resources required to plan, implement, monitor and sustain a strong workplace ESOL program. Workplace ESOL is a long-term commitment and company officials sometimes mistakenly underestimate the time and in-kind costs that operating a quality on-site basic skill training program requires.

This pamphlet offers several key suggestions for a company planning to set up a program to invest in the English skills of its workforce. There are numerous resources available to help you get started, as well as potential grant funding to support planning and implementation of ESOL classes at your worksite.

English Works Campaign

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The **English Works** Campaign calls upon business, labor, community and government leaders to dedicate the needed public and private resources to create a sustainable, high-quality ESOL system that addresses the needs and interests of immigrant workers and their employers.

English Works is led by the Massachusetts Immigrant and Refugee Advocacy Coalition and English for New Bostonians.



The recommendations are divided into four different phases of developing and operating a workplace ESOL program:

1. **Initial Planning**
2. **Building Commitment and Creating Buy-in**
3. **Designing and Implementing Workplace ESOL Classes**
4. **Continuously Improving your Program and Supporting your Workers/Learners**

As you consider implementing an ESOL program at your workplace, you may find it helpful to talk with other company executives and managers who have experience with ESOL programs. This will enhance your practical understanding of the process and familiarize you with the factors involved in building a successful program. See a list of available company contacts at www.english-works.org/forbusinesses.

Phase 1: Initial Planning

What are our goals?

It is important to clarify how this learning investment will impact your operations and employees. Improving the English communication skills of your workforce can mitigate current challenges, including high turn-over, inability to promote good workers to key positions, or difficulties with customer service or production. If you are seeking public funding, you will likely need to link the project to concrete company goals in order to successfully secure a grant.

What is a realistic time frame to accomplish our business goals through a workplace ESOL program?

Acquiring new language skills is a complex process that will not happen overnight. A typical workplace class cycle is 13 weeks of two hour class meetings twice a week, with a total of 52 contact

hours. Each worker should have a minimum of two cycles of classes (104 hours) to begin to make discernable proficiency gains. Adult education guidelines suggest at least 120 hours of practice to truly make strides and advance a level.

A comprehensive planning phase is important to set goals and timelines, and to determine funding and logistics. A publicly funded grant may cover this planning phase. The company may, however, decide to cover these costs on its own, in order to demonstrate its commitment to the project.

How will conducting workplace ESOL training affect my daily business operations?

Workplace ESOL, like all training, is an investment, and will take time away from normal production or service. Most public training grants require that classes are held at least partially on work-time and that workers are released from their normal duties. You need to factor this into your staffing requirements. For example, when a teacher has prepared lessons and resources have been allocated, a manager should not decide to tell workers that they cannot attend class that day because of production needs.

Where should we hold the classes?

The company needs to provide appropriate, dedicated space for the classes on-site that is well-lit, at a reasonable temperature, clean, quiet and uninterrupted. Employees need a non-threatening learning environment where they feel comfortable. The teachers also need a secure place to store teaching materials and records. Some companies have created a dedicated education and training space (the company conference room or cafeteria are often suggested but usually they are not good options).

Phase 2: Building Commitment and Creating Buy-in

How does a company make a commitment to workplace ESOL and training?

Companies that have been successful in supporting workplace ESOL have demonstrated

a strong commitment to life-long learning by 1) forming a standing “Education & Training Committee” with representatives from management and supervisors, key departments such as quality and customer service, workers and union representatives (if organized), and training providers (when appropriate). The committee should serve as the planning and coordinating team to design and oversee the ESOL program; 2) having the explicit and visible support of the company CEO; 3) having the CEO designate a key person as the “champion” of all employee training.

Who else should be involved?

It is a good practice to designate a “worker-employee liaison” who is able to represent learners’ interests and articulate their concerns. Often workers are not comfortable speaking in team meetings with supervisors and managers, and so having someone who is a natural leader and has the trust of the workers serving on the Education and Training team can be very useful. If your workforce is unionized, it is mandatory that your team include union representatives and stewards with whom it negotiates the terms of the program. The union has an interest in promoting education for its members, and can be helpful in promoting classes, recruiting students, customizing curriculum and program aspects.

Finally, you should hire an education and training provider who has a proven track record of operating a successful workplace ESOL program. English for New Bostonians has a ready list of area providers. You may want to interview several providers to find the one the best suits your needs. See www.english-works.org/forbusinesses for the guide “Selecting a Provider”.

While the provider should have a critical role in the program, it is important that the company itself maintains a high level of involvement. Programs tend to be more successful when they are company-driven, rather than when the company delegates all responsibility to the training provider.

What other commitments are important?

Research shows that paid release time is one of the most critical factors affecting program quality and retention of worker commitment. Classes

should be offered at times that are convenient for workers, with at least half offered during work time as paid release and/or compensated with stipends/bonuses that are tied to attendance. This is a significant commitment for employers. Grant sources that require a company match usually allow release time as an in-kind match.

The company should also conduct a thorough Workplace Needs Analysis (WNA) to ensure that the proposed workplace ESOL training is a viable solution to your business’s challenges. A WNA can often be completed by your training provider. See materials on conducting a WNA at www.english-works.org/foresolproviders.

You may find that, in addition to Basic Skills/ESOL classes, you may want to offer other educational trainings or employee advancement opportunities, such as General Education Development (GED) or computer classes. This recognizes that we all are engaged in lifelong learning and softens any resentment from co-workers who do not participate in workplace ESOL classes.

Should attendance be mandatory?

It is much better if participation is voluntary. If the program is high quality and well supported, employees will be willing to make the commitment and sacrifice to participate.

How can the privacy of workers be protected?

It is important that there is a level of confidentiality, since many employees may be reluctant to admit that they have an English skills deficiency in reading, writing or speaking. Individual assessment and learning progress should be reported to supervisors and company management in aggregate to ensure this privacy. While you must make sure that students are making progress, do be mindful of confidentiality.

How do we formalize roles?

Part of the planning process should be to work with the ESOL provider to draft and sign a detailed Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) to help keep all parties on track and to formalize the different roles and responsibilities.

Phase 3: Designing and Implementing Workplace ESOL

Who should oversee the implementation of ESOL classes?

The Education and Training Team should oversee all aspects of the program, including the recruitment of learners, especially utilizing the worker representatives. The team should meet regularly to monitor how classes are going and to resolve problems.

How do we recruit workers for the program?

Various outreach methods should be used for recruitment including notices in paychecks, letters mailed to employees' homes, sign-up tables in the cafeteria. This outreach should be conducted in an encouraging and non-threatening manner, and should include the training provider.

What should be taught in the ESOL classes?

Teaching material can be customized to your company's operations, products and services, while also helping learners to gain well-rounded oral and written English skills. Teachers will need assistance in creating customized curricula and will need to collaborate with key staff from various departments. Teachers should be encouraged to learn about your company and industry so they can be effective in helping support employees' work-specific skills.

Phase 4: Continuously Improving your Program and Supporting your Workers/Learners

What should our level of involvement be once classes have started?

The success of the ESOL program and the progress of the learners are directly related to the involvement of the company and the Education and Training Team. The provider should report back on attendance and progress during regular monthly meetings. All company officials, especially supervisors, should support the learning by engaging and encouraging workers,

and consider teaching a lesson on some aspect of the company's operation.

What can we learn from the ESOL program?

Since the classes focus on the workplace and workers' jobs, be prepared for sensitive organizational issues to come up in classes or privately in conversations between the teachers and workers. A mechanism should be set up for teachers to relay important information in a productive way that that does not compromise individual confidentiality.

Many companies realize the value of continuous improvement and employee input, and the ESOL classes can be a great source for encouraging and supporting these efforts. The committee should also establish both formal and informal evaluation methods to assess the program's impact by gaining input from all stakeholders including learners, other workers and supervisors.

Gauging Return on Investment and Celebrating Success

Supporting ESOL classes is challenging work for all involved. It is important to take time to celebrate successes, such as by holding ceremonies to mark the completion of a cycle of classes or by celebrating graduations from the program. These are great opportunities to invite local government officials and funders to your program. You can also find ways to communicate support for the program through company newsletters and reports when detailing other improvement measures and cost-saving results.

The company should work closely with providers to track meaningful return-on-investment calculations that are connected to improved communication. Areas to track include specific information available on reduced errors, fewer complaints indicating better customer service, and other communication-related data. Funders are very interested in concrete business gains. Studying these effects will allow the company to better assess the program's cost-saving benefits, and help the company to make decisions about program expansion and continuation.