

PLOUGHED INTO EDUCATION

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More than a third of employers are worried about the ability of their staff to read, write and add up correctly, according to a report.

They complain that workers cannot construct properly spelt sentences with accurate grammar or spot simple maths errors.

As a result firms are being forced to invest heavily in remedial training in basic literacy and numeracy at a cost to the economy of £10billion a year.

This is despite the Government ploughing billions into education since coming to power in 1997.

It has already been estimated that almost half of adults, around 17million, struggle with maths while five million are "functionally illiterate", which means they have the reading age of an 11-year-old or younger.

The Confederation of British Industry survey of 735 bosses of firms employing 1.7million staff showed that more than half lacked confidence in their ability to recruit enough skilled people.

More than a third were concerned about employees' basic skills in literacy and numeracy.

The report cites a food manufacturer which believed that products were being stolen each week, costing thousands of pounds a year.

"In fact, poor numeracy skills were the problem: workers on the packing lines were required to pack 25kg

boxes with smaller packs of varying weights to a five per cent tolerance level,' the report says.

"As the boxes came close to the 25 kg limit, workers had to perform rapid addition and subtraction calculations to estimate whether they needed light or heavy packets to fill the box to the correct level.

"They knew they could not fall below the five per cent level, or the box would be returned, so staff instead routinely overfilled boxes, effectively giving away free food."

A boss of a fast food retailer complained that poor basic skills led to losses.

"On the odd occasion, I have seen crew members completely thrown if a customer hands over a pound for a 99p item and the employee rings up £10 by mistake," he said.

"When the till shows that £9.01 change is due, I have seen that amount handed over, the crew member not realising that there is anything amiss."

Other employers complained that staff could not do percentages needed for adding VAT or working out day-to-day profit margins. Multiplication tables and mental arithmetic were also problematic.

Seventy-two per cent of bosses were concerned about the quality of written English and 39 per cent thought employees lacked good communication skills.

Computer skills were also seen as "weak", while many workers were not keeping up with the rapid changes in technology, said the report.

More than a quarter of firms are investing in basic literacy courses and 23 per cent in maths.

CBI deputy director general John Cridland said: "A worrying number of employers have little confidence that they will be able to plug their skills gaps.

"In our stocktake of the nation's skills, too many firms also say poor basic skills are hampering customer service and acting as a drag on their business's performance.

"Being skilled is all the more important in an increasingly global economy, and our message to students is that your hard work to attain the right skills and good qualifications is essential to securing quality, well paid jobs after school, college or university."

Tory schools spokesman Nick Gibb said: "Britain has plummeted down international league tables for maths, English and science in the past few years.

"The Government's failure on education is letting down children by not equipping them properly for the future."

A torrent of Government initiatives has damaged the education system over the last 15 years, researchers for the biggest inquiry into primary education in England for 40 years, the Cambridge-based Primary Review, warned yesterday.

They said many older teachers felt they had lost the freedom to run their own lessons in the face of Government "micromanagement".



Basic skills: Not all staff have mastered them