

Firms forced to teach teenage workers the 3Rs

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Companies are being forced to give teenagers remedial lessons in literacy and numeracy because they leave school with such a poor grasp of the three Rs.

- **Your view: How can we better prepare young people for the workplace?**

Half of employers said some teenagers were "unable to function in the workplace" claiming they cannot make simple calculations in their heads, speak in an articulate manner or understand written instructions.

In a critical report published today, the Confederation of British Industry says that an obsession with iPods, mobile phones and the internet has boosted the computing skills of the "Generation Text".

But the improvements have come at the expense of the three Rs as many struggle to read and write properly, it claims.

The conclusions come as 600,000 16-year-olds prepare to receive GCSE results on Thursday.

advertisement Last year more than half of pupils failed to gain at least five good grades including English and maths. Employers fear that weaknesses in the three Rs may leave the UK open to "grave" economic problems.

Richard Lambert, the CBI's director general, said: "Young people are clearly doing some things very well.

These technology-smart whizz kids are making a great impression at businesses with their expertise in IT and computing.

"Their fluency with iPods, mobiles and MySpace has translated well into the workplace, and often gives them an edge over their bosses.

The challenge ahead is for schools to channel that same enthusiasm into numeracy and literacy skills, where far too many young people are struggling.

"Maths and English skills are a vital bedrock for further learning, and are essential both in the workplace and in life.

We have to sharpen the skills of more of our young people, so that they are starting from the strongest possible position."

The CBI surveyed more than 500 companies with 1.1 million employees.



The CBI survey found many business are having to retrain teenagers on basic numeracy and literacy skills

It found that nine out of 10 firms were satisfied with school-leavers' IT skills. Information and communication technology (ICT) is now compulsory for five- to 16-year-olds and there has been a 50 per cent increase in the number of pupils sitting a GCSE in the subject over the past decade.

However, more than half of those questioned said the shift in emphasis had triggered a decline in fundamental literacy and numeracy, with many having to retrain teenagers on basics that should have been covered in the classroom.

According to the report, 15 per cent of businesses stage remedial maths lessons and 13 per cent retrain staff in literacy.

The findings come just days after it emerged that many universities are forced to offer classes in essay writing because too many students start degree courses unable to write properly.

Ministers have put literacy and numeracy at the forefront of school reforms.

Under Labour, the literacy and numeracy hour was introduced in every primary school, giving young children newly-focused tuition in the basics.

From 2009, so-called functional skills modules, focusing on the practical uses of maths and English, will be introduced in all schools. Boys are being targeted with extra resources amid fears that many cannot read properly.

But critics say reforms under Labour have failed to improve standards fast enough.

Exam results published this month showed four in 10 schoolchildren had a poor grasp of the three Rs at the age of 11 and 14.

According to the CBI, 86 per cent of employers believe the Government should do more to improve maths and English skills among pupils.

Mr Lambert said: "The implications of not doing so are grave.

We simply cannot match the labour costs of India, China, and other emerging economies, and only a higher-skilled workforce will keep the UK competitive.

The under-qualified will be left to choose from an ever dwindling pool of unskilled jobs.

"Basic literacy and numeracy problems are a nightmare for business and for individuals, so we have to get these essentials right.

Progress has been made but it is nowhere near enough, especially considering the massive investment made in education."

According to the CBI, three quarters of employers said the lack of language skills among school-leavers was also a concern.

As The Daily Telegraph revealed GCSE results are expected to expose a further crisis in foreign language tuition as thousands more teenagers drop the subject at the age of 14.

It follows the Government's decision to make GCSEs in French, German and Spanish optional for the first time in 2004.

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