BC STATS

Ministry of Management Services

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Earnings and Employment Trends ◆ June 2001

Computer Training in the Workplace

Statistics Canada launched the "Workplace and Employee Survey (WES)" a few years ago and the results are now slowly being released. The survey is designed to answer a broad range of issues related to the dynamics of the workplace from both the employer's and the employee's perspective. One of the topics explored is the firm's formal on-the-job/in-the-classroom training. Below we look at what employers are doing to keep their employees up-to-date on computer technology.

The study confirms that computer technology plays a immense role in the Canadian workplace. In 1999, 6 out of 10 Canadian workers used computers in their job and 7 out of 10 companies had at least one worker in the workplace using a computer.

Employers verify there is a continuous necessity to update their computer technology. This entails investment, not only in the upgrading of hardware and software products, but also in the training of staff. In those years that employers undergo major upgrading, their investment in human skills can be costly, not only from the standpoint of providing formal training, but also from the temporary loss of staff productivity.
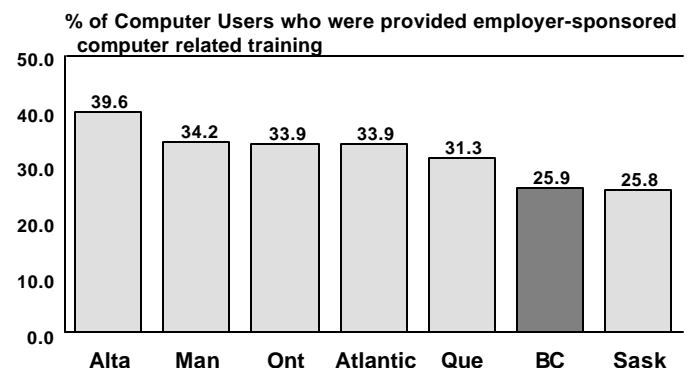
Computer training is also necessary in those years when existing systems are just being maintained. Employee turnover and mobility means new staff have to be trained and the usual refresher courses or general upgrading of generic computer skills must be ongoing.

There is a large divergence in the incidence of computer training depending on whether or not there has been an introduction of new technology. For this reason, it is necessary to separate out those firms that undergo a shift in technology vs. those that maintained the status quo when doing any analysis on the topic.

In fiscal 1999/2000, one quarter of all businesses introduced a major new software application or hardware installation. Among those firms that did, the chart below shows that the extent of employer computer-related training was fairly low right across the country, but particularly in BC and Saskatchewan.
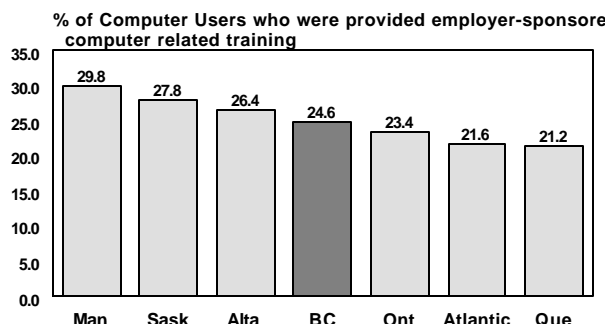
Employers* in BC have one of the poorest records in providing their staff with formal computer training - 1999

% of Computer Users who were provided employer-sponsored computer related training

Alta	Man	Ont	Atlantic	Que	BC	Sask
39.6	34.2	33.9	33.9	31.3	25.9	25.8

Employers that Implemented System Updates in 1999

The second chart shows how much formal computer training is carried out just to ensure employees keep up their skills. The Prairie Provinces appear to do the most of this type of ongoing training. Although BC employers do not appear to be as far behind in this regard, the bottom line is that in 1999, BC employers provided formal computer training to only one in four of their computer users, which is one of the lowest rates in the country.

Prairie employers* come out on top in providing ongoing employee training to maintain a computer literate workforce

% of Computer Users who were provided employer-sponsored computer related training

Man	Sask	Alta	BC	Ont	Atlantic	Que
29.8	27.8	26.4	24.6	23.4	21.6	21.2

*Employers that Did Not Implement System Updates in 1999

Interestingly, formal employer training courses comprise a small percentage of total training. Only 23 per cent of those employees learned their main workplace computer application through formal training. Instead, by far the most common method of learning was self-learning (45%) and/or being taught by a co-worker (44%).

Employers response to one of the survey's questions was that an adequately skilled workforce impeded their ability to implement major upgrades to their computer technology, yet they did not seem to be very inclined to invest in those skills themselves. Perhaps investing in highly transferable computer skills is too high risk

for employers, particularly in times of skill shortages and rising wages – there is too great a threat they will lose their trained staff to other employers. If this is the case, it may be of value to introduce incentive programs that will encourage employers to keep their computer staff up to date in this fast-moving, competitive sector.

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