

Evaluation of Skills and Opportunity for the New American Workforce

Executive Summary

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Introduction

This document summarizes the results of an evaluation of the Skills and Opportunity for the New American Workforce program. The evaluation was conducted by RTI International under subcontract to the National Immigration Forum. The Skills and Opportunity for the New American Workforce program is a contextualized English language learning model designed to help employed (incumbent) retail workers improve their worksite vocabulary and communication skills. The hybrid worksite course is structured to be 40 percent in person and 60 percent online. The 12-week program consists of 30 hours of in-class instruction and 45 hours of online learning through the Blackboard Learning Management System.

The project was implemented in collaboration with three employer partners in major cities: Kroger (Houston area, TX), Whole Foods (New York City area, NY), and Publix (Miami area, FL). A total of 27 cohorts took part across the three sites. Classes were held at partner community college campuses or in classrooms at store locations. Classes were scheduled to accommodate participants' working hours and included both day and evening classes. Each class session lasted 2.5 hours. Most sites met once per week for approximately 12 sessions between March and June 2016. A total of 532 employees enrolled in the program.

The evaluation was guided by several research questions focusing on (1) English language gains for employees following the program; (2) participants' experiences with the program and benefits perceived for skill development, job performance, confidence, and motivation; and (3) benefits perceived by managers. Lessons learned will be used to inform similar efforts on a larger scale.

Data sources for the evaluation included (1) administrative and test data provided by the project managers (e.g., attendance, online module completion, 30-day and 60-day retention, promotion, employee demographics, test scores, and grades); (2) instructor survey (at the end of the program) and an instructor log (weekly) administered online by RTI; (3) employee survey administered by the instructors before and after the program; (4) two-part (workforce background and employee ratings) manager survey implemented online by RTI or on hard copy. RTI also conducted site visits to several Miami and New York City area sites, observed classrooms, and conducted interviews with instructors and instructor partner staff.

Key Findings

A majority of enrolled participants successfully completed the curriculum. Approximately 67 percent of students completed the English language course in Miami, 53 percent in Houston, and 83 percent in the New York City area.

Instructors were highly experienced at teaching English language courses. Of the 15 instructors who responded to a survey, 73 percent had more than 5 years of experience. Sixty-six percent had specific experience teaching an English language course that combines in-person instruction and online learning time.

Participants made significant improvements in English skills. Language gains on standardized tests were made by 57 percent of students in the New York City area; 50 percent in the one class tested in Houston; and 47 percent in Miami (nationally, gains were made by 46 percent of adult students enrolled in English language classes in 2011–2012¹). A majority of students in the New York City (67 percent) and Miami (83 percent) areas, and nearly all students (91 percent) in Houston, demonstrated progress in language skills by the end of the program on a custom assessment tool developed by the Forum’s partner, Miami Dade College. More than half of participants reported that they “improved a lot” in their understanding of spoken English (53 percent) and in feeling more comfortable using English (55 percent). An overwhelming majority of participants reported being somewhat or very much on track toward the goal of improving communication skills at work and outside of work (90 percent) and toward the goal of doing their job better by improving their English skills (95 percent).

Participants reported additional work-related benefits. Across all cohorts, the 30-day job retention rate was 100 percent. Job promotions were reported for 11 percent of participants in the New York City area, 19 percent in Houston, and 20 percent in Miami. Some 79 percent of employees reported being on track for a promotion, and at least 82 percent reported being somewhat or very much on track to make more money. At least 70 percent of employees reported being “very satisfied” with their job.

Managers perceived benefits for their employees and businesses. Managers saw the most improvement in their employees in the areas of morale and job satisfaction (93 percent), self-esteem (92 percent), confidence on the job (91 percent), and interactions with customers (89 percent). Progress was also noted in employees’ understanding of safety guidelines and processes (93 percent) and in store productivity (88 percent).

¹ U.S. Department of Education, Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education, *Adult Education and Family Literacy Act of 1998: Annual Report to Congress, Program Year 2011-12*, Washington, DC, 2015.

Lessons Learned and Recommendations

The findings from the pilot phase of this curriculum suggest several steps that can guide future efforts to expand and enhance the program.

- (1) It became apparent over the course of the program that the overall level of digital (computer) skills was lower than needed for this hybrid program.** The online learning component required that students have basic computer literacy skills and access to computers and be able to manage the online work independently. For many students, this was a challenge. A majority of instructors felt that not enough time had been devoted to individual or group instruction on computer and online training. They also recommended that students be screened initially for computer literacy skills. Students who need to learn basic skills should be supported, and all students should be provided with access to computers. Also, instructors believe that time should be allocated during class for students to complete some of their online work. Finally, instructors asked that other platforms that are more user friendly be investigated, including those that may be accessed on mobile devices. Responses to the employee survey indicated that a majority already use mobile devices daily to send texts or engage in social media. In sum, instructors recommend improving the online learning component by adding more computer instruction, providing better support for students, screening for computer literacy, and making changes to the online curriculum presentation and platform.
- (2) Responses to the employee survey suggest that participants would welcome the additional computer skills instruction.** More than half of participants (59 percent) reported that they “improved a lot” in feeling more comfortable using the store technology and equipment, including computers, cash registers, and electronic tools. Still, among participants using store technology as part of their job, about one-third (36 percent) reported feeling somewhat comfortable or not very comfortable using the store technology. In addition, about 10 percent of employees reported that they do not use a computer at home, at their job, or anywhere else.
- (3) The contextualized English language course, which used vocabulary and scenarios relevant to employees in their jobs, allowed participants to take what they learned in class and apply it to their jobs on a daily basis.** According to instructors interviewed, the opportunity to practice English relevant to their jobs helps students gain self-confidence, which motivates them to use English with customers and managers. Students were observed to engage and contribute during class when it was most relevant to their own jobs. This suggests that class activities could be further customized to specific job functions for the benefit of students.