

OXFORD  
OPEN LEARNING

*Literacy &  
Numeracy Survey  
2014*

## INTRO

*England's young adults are trailing behind the industrialised world for literacy and numeracy skills, a major study by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) revealed last year. In the first Survey of Adult Skills, which measured the performance of adults in 24 countries, the UK's 16 to 24-year-olds were ranked 22nd for literacy and 21st for numeracy.*

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Projections drawn from the results of the study indicate that there may be more than eight million adults in England and Northern Ireland who have the numeracy skills of a ten-year-old. The OECD mentioned in its report that, for all countries, boosting these essential skills must form a key part of tackling unemployment and improving well-being overall.

With these rather worrying results in mind, Oxford Open Learning set out to discover how people view their own and their colleagues' levels of literacy and numeracy - particularly as they relate to their ability to do their job effectively. The YouGov survey of 927 UK office workers also took people's opinions on whether they feel a lack of skills had held them back in their careers, as well as their employers' contributions - if any - to helping them improve.

## OFFICE WORKERS GENERALLY CONFIDENT IN LITERACY AND NUMERACY

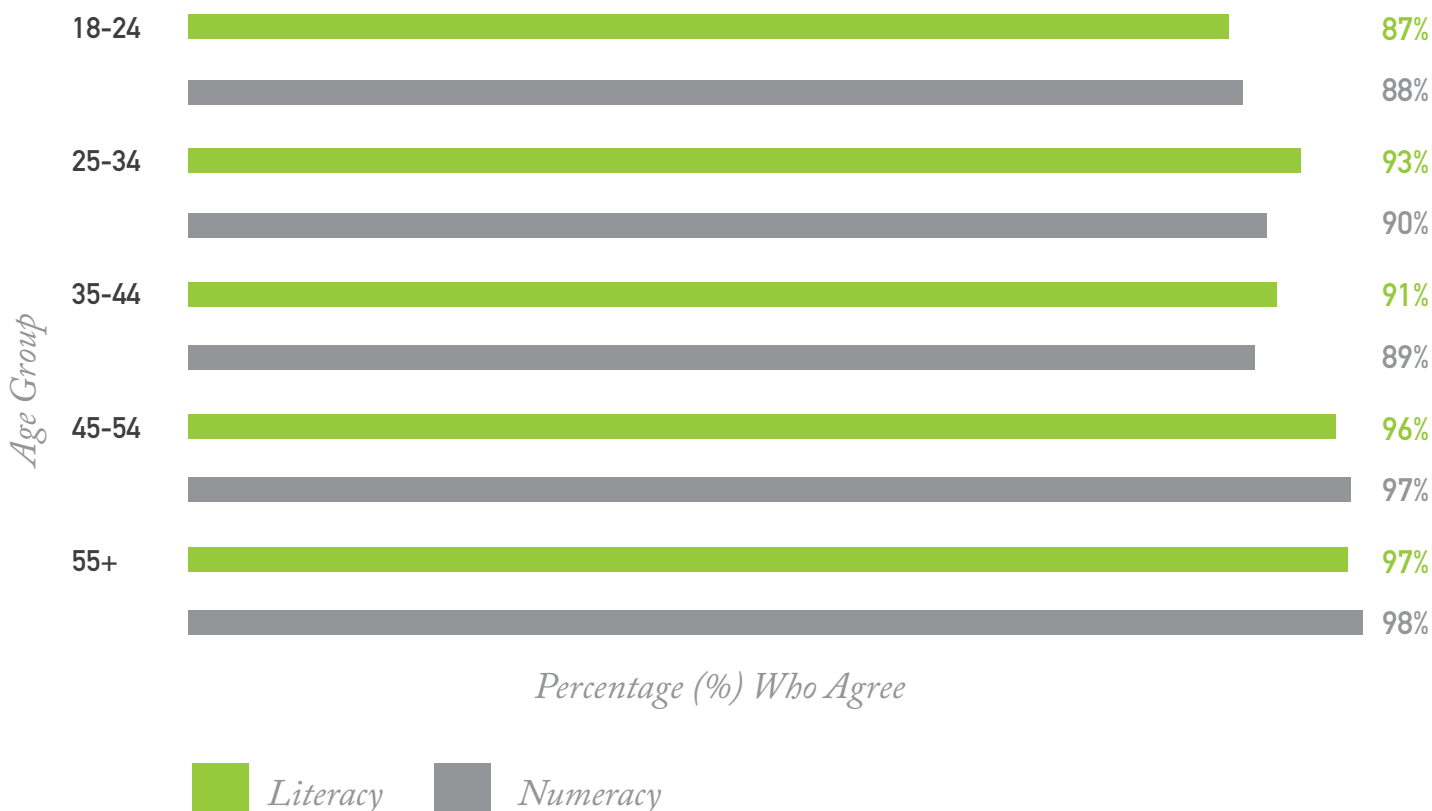
*The survey revealed that, overall, office workers in the UK are confident that they have sufficient literacy and numeracy skills for their current roles. 93% of UK office workers agreed that they have the literacy and numeracy skills necessary for their jobs, while only 4% (literacy) and 5% (numeracy) disagreed.*

Although this doesn't necessarily go against the results of the OECD study - the YouGov poll only canvassed office workers, while the majority of people with lower literacy and numeracy skills may be working in other sectors - it is nevertheless reassuring to find that more than nine in ten respondents are confident in these areas. Additionally, the poll only asked whether people felt their skills were "sufficient".

Women office workers were slightly more confident in their literacy and numeracy skills for their current job than men (women: 95% and 96% vs men: 91% and 90%, respectively). Significantly, twice the proportion of people from the C2DE social group - usually equated as a working class background - indicated a lack of confidence with their numeracy skills compared with the ABC1 group (8% vs. 4% not confident), although there was little difference for literacy.

Additionally, and in a finding that chimes with the OECD's results, those aged 18 to 24 were least likely to agree that they felt their literacy and numeracy skills were adequate for their job, while those aged 55 and over were the most likely.

### CONFIDENCE IN OWN LITERACY & NUMERACY SKILLS BY AGE GROUP

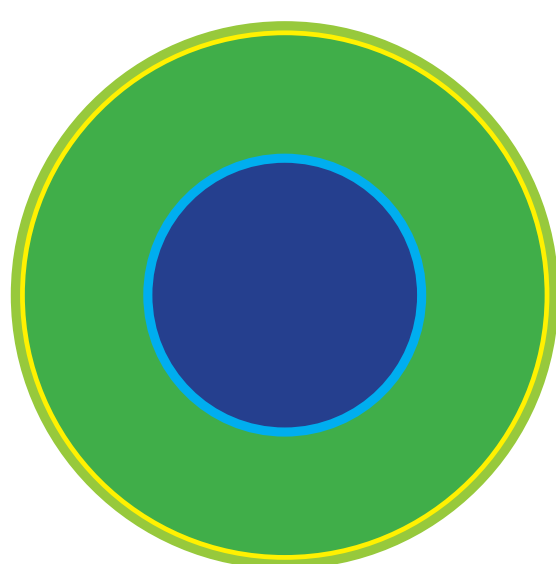


## TWO IN FIVE THINK A LACK OF SKILLS IS HOLDING THEM BACK

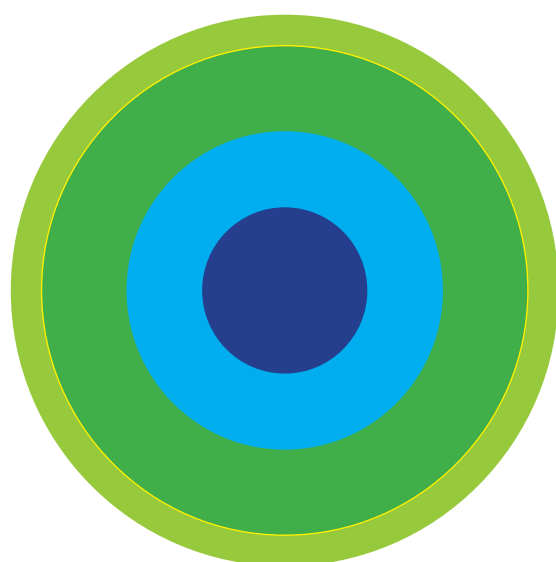
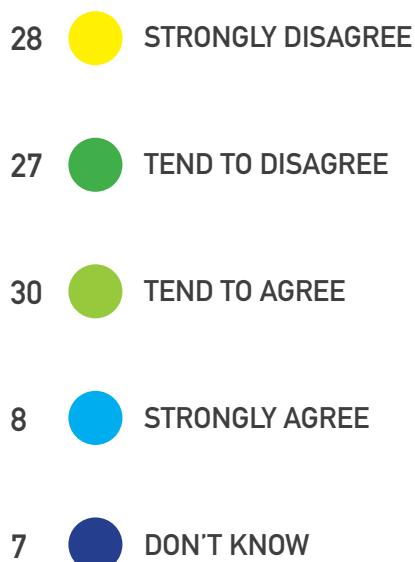
*Overall 41% of UK office workers said that a lack of confidence in their skills in general – not necessarily in literacy or numeracy – had dissuaded them from applying for a new job or promotion, compared with 54% who hadn't. Perhaps unsurprisingly, those aged 18 to 24 were more than twice as likely to say this, compared with those aged 55 or over (54% vs 26%).*

This reaction can be interpreted in two ways: either these people do lack the skills necessary for advancement, or they believe they do - to the extent that they are put off from progressing in their careers. In either case, a lack of skills or perception thereof could be preventing a significant proportion of people from fulfilling their potential.

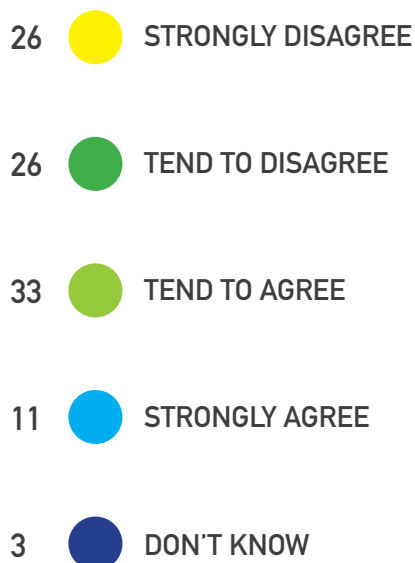
### MEN & WOMEN'S RESPONSES TO "LACK OF CONFIDENCE IN MY SKILLS HAS LED ME TO NOT APPLY FOR A JOB OR PROMOTION BEFORE"



*Percentage (%) of Men*



*Percentage (%) of Women*



## MEN HAVE LOWER OPINION OF COLLEAGUES' SKILLS THAN WOMEN

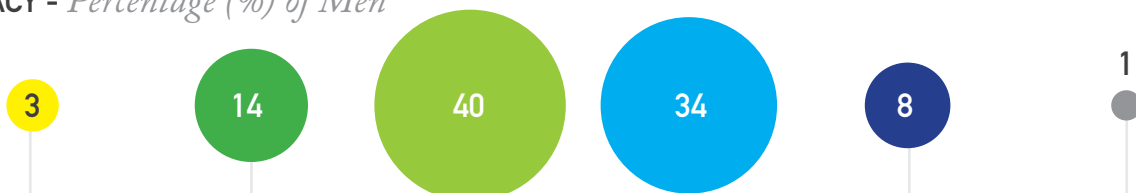
*When it comes to the perceptions of workmates, respondents were generally positive – although not quite as confident in colleagues' skills as their own. 85% said they felt their colleagues have sufficient numeracy skills for their current jobs, falling to 80% for literacy, while 10% and 13% respectively said they did not.*

While a fairly small proportion, the suggestion that around one in ten office workers feel their colleagues lack the basic skills necessary for work is significant. Men were less likely than women to have faith in their colleagues' skills: 80% of men think their colleagues have adequate numeracy skills and 75% think this for literacy, compared with 88% and 86% of women respectively.

Interestingly, although women appear to have more confidence in both their own skills and their colleagues' than men, they are more likely to be held back by the belief that they lack the confidence in their skills to advance their careers.

### MEN & WOMEN'S RESPONSES TO "I FEEL MY COLLEAGUES HAVE SUFFICIENT LITERACY & NUMERACY SKILLS FOR THEIR CURRENT JOBS"

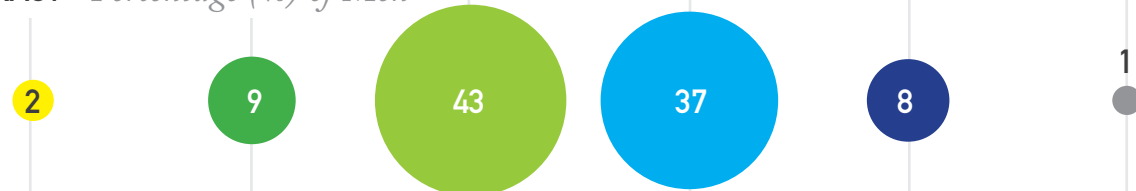
LITERACY - Percentage (%) of Men



LITERACY - Percentage (%) of Women



NUMERACY - Percentage (%) of Men



NUMERACY - Percentage (%) of Women



STRONGLY  
DISAGREE

TEND TO  
DISAGREE

TEND TO  
AGREE

STRONGLY  
AGREE

DON'T  
KNOW

NOT  
APPLICABLE

## ARE EMPLOYERS DOING ENOUGH TO HELP?

*It might justifiably be argued that it's the place of schools, and not employers, to ensure adults are equipped with the basic literacy and numeracy skills they will need for the world of work. And while not all office-based roles naturally lend themselves to these sorts of opportunities, 41% of respondents say their employers provide them with enough opportunities to improve their numeracy and literacy skills.*

However, a sizeable proportion (29%) don't, indicating that this is an area where the private sector could be doing more: particularly in conjunction with groups like the National Literacy Trust (NLT), which works with employers, community groups and schools to help raise standards among people of all ages across the UK.

The YouGov poll also asked office workers about the perceived barriers to taking further qualifications and education in their lives, with some interesting results. 31% of respondents said they don't have time to study for a qualification, while 30% said they couldn't afford it. Additionally, 31% of people felt that they were already sufficiently qualified for their jobs, while just over one in five (21%) said they felt there were no barriers to taking qualifications within their current role.

Responses were fairly consistent across all age ranges until the oldest group (55+), in which just one in six said they can't afford (16%) or don't have time for further education (17%), while 46% said they believed they were already qualified. Also worthy of note was that respondents in the C2DE social grade were considerably less likely to feel they were already sufficiently qualified for their jobs (22%).

### PERCEIVED BARRIERS TO TAKING FURTHER ACADEMIC OR PROFESSIONAL QUALIFICATIONS (%)



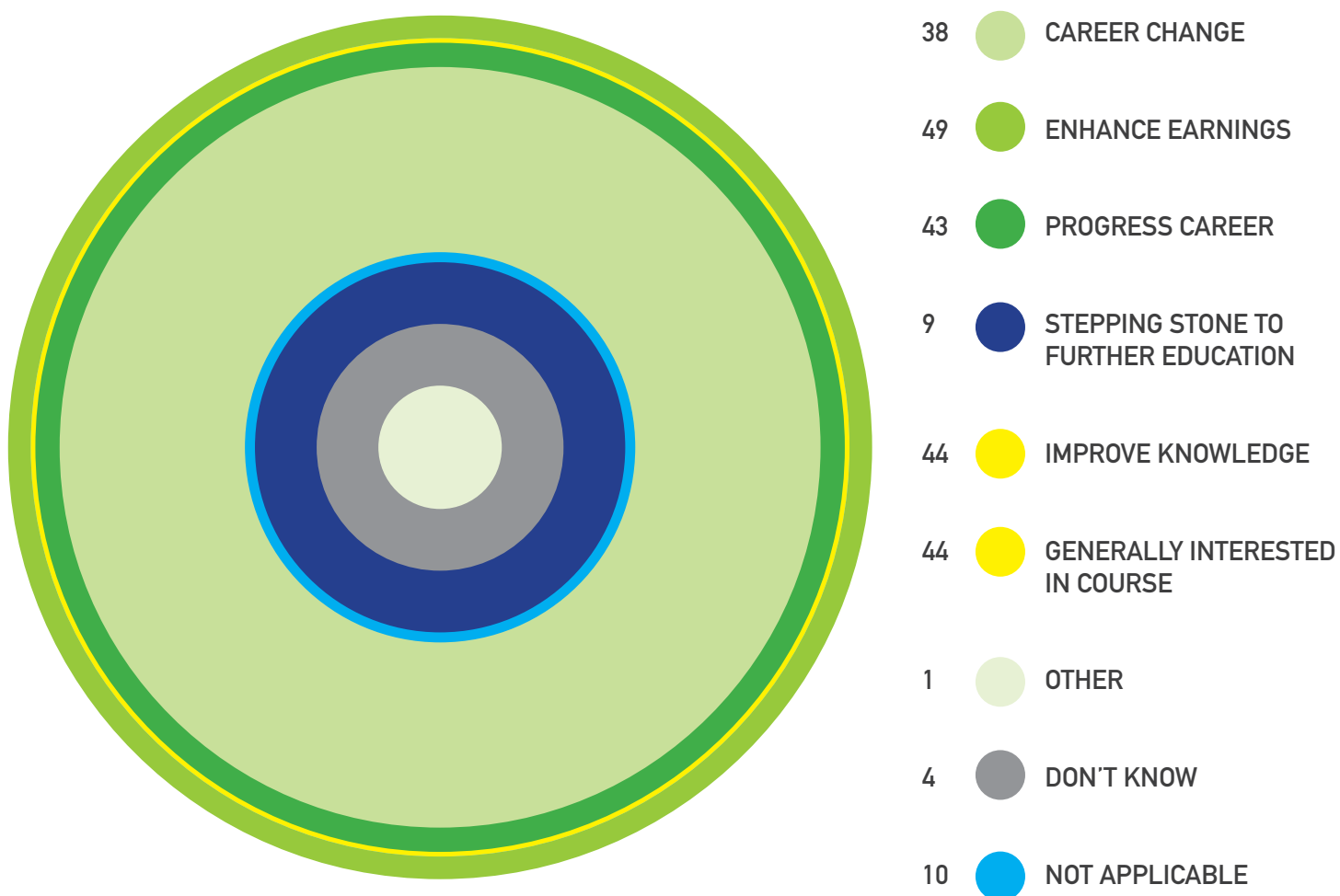
## WHAT MOTIVATES PEOPLE TO TAKE FURTHER EDUCATION?

*The participants were also quizzed about which factors, if any, would motivate them to take further qualifications – both academic and professional. As well as shedding light on what people expect to get out of completing a course, these responses may help employers to tailor their own development and training programmes according to what their employees want and need.*

The most popular response overall for providing motivation to take further qualifications was to enhance earnings (49%), although a similar proportion (44%) would undertake further study simply to improve their knowledge or find out more about a subject area they were interested in. 43% of respondents indicated that they would consider additional learning as a means of progressing their careers, while 38% would do it to support a career change - and women were more likely to choose this option than men (43% vs. 34%).

The least popular answer was as a stepping stone to a higher qualification (9%). Taken together, these results might suggest that office workers are, broadly speaking, settled into the world of work and don't plan to return to university, instead preferring to do any further learning within their working environment to benefit their careers.

### MOTIVATIONS FOR TAKING FURTHER ACADEMIC OR PROFESSIONAL QUALIFICATIONS (%)



## CONCLUSION

*If the YouGov survey is indicative of the attitudes of office workers UK-wide, the results suggest that while there is no perception of an immediate crisis in literacy or numeracy levels in the sector, there is an issue with people's confidence in their broader skills and their opportunities to improve them within their current roles.*

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In general, office workers have a good opinion of their own and their colleagues' literacy and numeracy capabilities. However, a large proportion think a broader "lack of skills" plays a role in preventing them from advancing their careers; coupled with a general unwillingness to return to full-time study evidenced in another question, this makes a compelling case for employers to offer more time and support for their employees to undertake courses and qualifications while on the job.

With a recent report from the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES) indicating that skills shortages in the UK are accelerating, and may indeed be hampering the country's economic recovery, Oxford Open Learning is encouraging businesses to put a greater emphasis on skills and learning as part of their offering to employees.

The UKCES report also included the welcome news that job vacancies are increasing, and the number of establishments offering training is now back to pre-recession levels. A focused commitment to improving the right skills in the right people would help to address this shortage, and bolster the UK's comeback from the recession.

<http://www.oecd.org/newsroom/boosting-skills-essential-for-tackling-joblessness-and-improving-well-being.htm>

<http://www.ukces.org.uk/news/Press-releases/2014/Jan/SKILLS-SHORTAGES-ACCELERATE>

*All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 2,071 UK adults (aged 18+) of which 927 were office workers. Fieldwork was undertaken between 30th - 31st January 2014. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all UK adults (aged 18+).*