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The Impact of literacy and numeracy on health and safety outcomes

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Why?

- Why didn't they get it?
- Did we teach it in a way they could understand?



48% of adults have low literacy skills



50% have low numeracy skills



Half of NZ have poor health literacy



Data source: Analysis of New Zealand Data from the International Adult Literacy Survey, July 2025

- These are not “dumb mistakes”
- They are predictable outcomes when literacy, numeracy, and spatial awareness gaps go unaddressed.
- Getting by can mean getting hurt



A construction worker wearing a white hard hat, safety glasses, and an orange high-visibility vest stands in the center of a quarry. He is looking directly at the camera. Two glowing green concentric circles are centered on him, creating a target-like effect. The background shows the rocky, tiered landscape of a quarry under a cloudy sky.

If someone
doesn't
understand a
risk, they can't
control a risk.

Adult learners LIKE

- **Active involvement**
- **Specific, relevant training**
- **Immediate application**
- **Interaction & questions**
- **Sharing experiences**
- **Self-directed learning**
- **Fun, practical activities**



Adult learners DISLIKE

- **Passive learning**
- **Vague theory**
- **Being lectured at**
- **Trainers who love the sound of their own voice**
- **Tests**
- **Future focused material with no current relevance**

Learner centered safety leadership

Meeting people where they
are and building knowledge
from what they already
know.



Case study Recycling plant

Spatial awareness and estimation
are essential

Skills vary hugely between
individuals

Requirement for numeracy

Assumed they had the skills

Case study Casting factory workers

If they don't understand
safety training ... they
can't apply safety training.

Not a worker failure it's a
system failure.

Source: Health Literacy Level of Casting Factory Workers and Its
Relationship With Occupational Health and Safety Training, June 2019

It's fixable

This isn't just about safety
its about lifting capability,
lifting culture, and lifting
performance

Source: Tertiary Education
Commission, May 2024, Literacy
and numeracy in your workplace





Leaders of Safety

- Shift to a learner centered approach
- Identify literacy and numeracy gaps
- Improve training resources
- Upskill trainers and leaders
- Use technology



- <https://pathwaysawarua.com/pathways/numeracy>
- <https://minex.org.nz/training/microlearnings/>

Free resources



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Key message

- Our workers don't fail safety systems
- Safety systems fail our workers



A challenge to leaders

- Training the way it's always been done?
- Or lead the shift to training that truly works for everyone?





For a copy of

The Impact of literacy and numeracy on health and
safety outcomes paper

or key notes

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