

News Release

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New literacy and numeracy initial assessment tools help healthcare providers unlock staff talent and deliver better care

The drive to raise literacy and numeracy skill levels within the healthcare sector has stepped up a gear with the launch of the first sector-specific initial assessment tools from Skills for Health.

The free-to-use online tools are designed specifically for staff working in healthcare in the UK and draw on 'real-life' scenarios to maximise their relevance to users. Examples include listening to messages from patients, interpreting instructions, tables and charts and calibrating equipment.

Another key feature is 'intelligent' software that analyses users' responses and modifies questions according to the level they are working at – meaning that the tools can be used across a range of healthcare grades and roles.

Staff who use the tools receive an assessment indicating their literacy and numeracy levels, which can be used to support skills development activities and a route into career progression.

For healthcare employers, potential benefits of using the tools as part of staff development procedures include improved patient care, better clinical governance and higher staff retention levels.

Skills for Health Divisional Manager Rosemarie Simpson said: "The importance of literacy and numeracy skills in healthcare can't be understated. They're key to delivering high quality patient care, as well as improving the career prospects of staff."

“Healthcare staff generally have higher literacy and numeracy levels than some other workforce sectors, but many people will not have checked their skills for some time.

“The tools provide an effective way to identify skill levels, show what people are good at and identify what they might need to brush up on.”

Skills for Health recommends that the tools be used as part of a ‘whole organisation’ approach in which literacy and numeracy assessment is embedded in staff development processes.

The tools can be used as part of induction, a personal development review or prior to or as part of training. They can also be used alongside an NVQ/SVQ or Adult Apprenticeship, and can be carried out on an individual basis or in a group setting.

They were commissioned by the Extending Participation team within Skills for Health, and can be accessed via www.skillsforhealth.org.uk/IATool

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Notes to editors

1. The Initial Assessment Tools are designed to indicate the approximate skills levels of an individual between Entry Level 1 and Level 2 in the English qualification framework, and SCQF levels 2 to 5 in the Scottish framework. Each tool takes approximately 25 minutes to complete, and individuals may be supported by a manager, trainer, or Union Learning Representative. Alternatively they may access the tools themselves. The initial assessment can be used as part of a learning programme, following on from a skills check and leading on to diagnostic assessments.
2. Evidence suggests that almost everybody in an organisation will have some literacy and numeracy development needs, whatever role they are currently undertaking :
 - Within NHS England alone, 26 per cent of staff have literacy skills below Level 2 (equivalent to a GCSE at A* - C) while a greater proportion would benefit from refreshing their numeracy skills [*NHS Skills for Life survey, 2005: DfES/NIACE*]

- More than half of health sector staff have a higher education qualification but a third of these will not have achieved a level 2 qualification in either numeracy or literacy [*Learning for a Change in Healthcare*, 2006: Department of Health, England]
 - Estimates suggest that in organisations employing over 1,000 people, the cost to employers of staff with low or basic skills could be as much as £500,000 per annum [*Learning for a Change in Healthcare, as before*]
3. Skills for Health is the Sector Skills Council for the UK healthcare sector, encompassing the National Health Services, independent healthcare providers and voluntary organisations. Its purpose is to help the whole sector develop a skilled, flexible and productive workforce, to improve the quality of health and healthcare.