

Skills for Life

and why they
matter to Usdaw



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'Skills for Life' are about reading, writing and using numbers. Sometimes they are referred to as basic skills or essential skills or even functional skills. They cover a range of levels and abilities – from simply reading a poster, checking your change, writing lengthy letters, taking minutes of meetings and working out interest on a loan.

The Government thinks that around seven million people in Britain fall below the national standard for Skills for Life. Using these figures about 80,000 Usdaw members have Skills for Life needs.

There are many reasons for this. Some people's English and maths skills are rusty because they haven't had a chance to use them since leaving school. Others never really developed these skills at school for one reason or another. And some people suffer from dyslexia, a condition which makes it difficult to make sense of written information and affects their reading, writing and spelling.

But why does it matter? Many people who fall below this level seem to manage well enough because of their experience and knowledge – and it's true – people do cope. But there are still many drawbacks for those with Skills for Life needs. They often:

- Struggle to cope as jobs change, and new technology or new working practices are introduced.
- Find it more difficult to get new work if they lose their job.
- Suffer from stress and anxiety when faced with situations where their lack of skill may be exposed.
- Have low self esteem and lack confidence in themselves and their own ability so never fulfil their true potential.

And Skills for Life problems cost money too. Poor quality work, waste, lost production and bad communications costs the country around £10 billion a year.

So Skills for Life is a union issue because it threatens our members' job security, promotion prospects and long term employability. If Usdaw does not take this up, our members will have an increasingly insecure future in the world of work.



"I undertook a series of tests which analysed my IQ, reading and comprehension abilities. To my relief they established that I was dyslexic. This explained my problem at school. I now use a coloured filter which can help."

George Cain
Usdaw Area Organiser
North Eastern Division

"The Lifelong Learning initiative opened our eyes to the importance of Skills for Life. It gave us a real insight into some of the issues for the company and the evaluation showed its potential impact on the business. So when Usdaw raised the issue of matched time off for Skills for Life learning, we made a case to the senior team and got it agreed."

Janine Goodwin
Boots HR Project Manager

Making sense of Skills for Life

The official definition of Skills for Life is 'the ability to read, write and speak English and use maths at a level needed to function and progress at work and in society in general. Without them Usdaw members will face increasing difficulty in the world of work, at home and even in aspects of their union work.

Skills for Life cover three main levels: Entry Level, Level 1 and Level 2.

- ➔ Entry level often covers people who did not really develop their Skills for Life at school.
- ➔ Level 1 involves the literacy or numeracy skills needed to get a GCSE at Grades D-F.
- ➔ Level 2 involves the skills needed to get a GCSE at grades A-C.

At Levels 1 and 2, people have a good level of skills but have gaps in some areas or subjects. So they may be good at reading but poor at spelling, or good at adding and subtracting but poor at percentages.

It's impossible to tell a person's level without a proper assessment.

Usdaw Union Learning Reps (ULRs) can help members to identify their Skills for Life needs using a process called initial screening. But only properly qualified professionals can carry out the detailed assessments needed to identify a programme of learning.

Members can also achieve nationally recognised qualifications in Skills for Life at Level 1 and Level 2. And don't forget that the Level 2 qualification is at the same level as a GCSE grade A-C in English or Maths.



Dyslexia

Dealing with members who may have dyslexia is more involved but equally important. It's estimated that one person in 10 is mildly affected by dyslexia and one person in 25 is seriously affected by the condition. That means that more than 12,000 Usdaw members are seriously affected by dyslexia, and more than 30,000 affected to some extent.

Only experts can identify the extent of the condition and members with dyslexia may need specialist teaching from a tutor that understands their needs (see the *Usdaw Guide to Dyslexia* Booklet).

Delivering Skills for Life in the workplace

In the past, individuals were very reluctant to attend Skills for Life courses, especially in the workplace. They didn't want the employer to know and were worried about their job security.

However Usdaw ULRs have changed that and in many workplaces have been enormously successful in setting up workplace courses. ULRs can provide the peer support, encouragement and the guarantee of confidentiality which most people need to take that first step.

Usdaw ULRs have gained invaluable expertise in setting up Skills for Life learning for members – both as an Usdaw initiative and in joint initiatives with employers. In the last two years over 6,000 people have improved their Skills for Life through Usdaw and over 3000 have gained a nationally recognised qualification.



Skills for Life benefits employers too!

Traditionally, employers have not seen it as their responsibility to improve their staff's Skills for Life – even though it cost them a great deal of money in waste materials, loss of productivity and resistance to change. But this is changing too and Usdaw now works in partnership with many employers.

The chances of success in a joint initiative are very high – especially when the employer provides real support like time off to learn. On the other hand, employers who prefer to tackle it on their own without the support of Usdaw reps often find it difficult to win their staff's confidence.

There is no one way to deliver Skills for Life learning, it has to be tailored to suit the individual and the workplace. For example, whilst most people prefer to learn with their colleagues in the workplace some people will be reluctant to let others know of their need and prefer to attend evening class on their own. Union Learning Reps know how to provide for both groups.

But regardless of how they are delivered all Skills for Life courses and qualifications should be free to learners.

Getting started

Skills for Life should not be promoted in isolation. It needs to form part of an all round learning initiative. To do this you need to identify some Union Learning Representatives (ULRs) and get them trained on the five day ULR course (you can obtain more information from *The Usdaw Union Learning Rep LLL RS2* in this series).

To get more information on how to become a ULR, contact your Area Organiser, Lifelong Learning Project Worker or Usdaw's Education department. You can also get more information from the Usdaw website.

If you have already got trained Usdaw ULRs onsite and want to promote Skills for Life, there are lots of ways to get started. It's a good idea to talk to your Lifelong Learning Project Worker about ideas for new initiatives or perhaps to link it with learning that is already taking place. Examples of Usdaw successes include:

- Linking Skills for Life Learning with National Vocational Qualifications.
- Family learning initiatives which involve members helping their kids with their homework.
- Linking Skills for Life with Usdaw's Check Out Learning Campaign.
- Courses which combine basic computer skills with English and maths.
- Financial awareness skills courses which also develop maths skills and help members understand mortgages, interest rates and pensions.
- Self managed courses in Usdaw run Learning Centres where people work on their own individual programme at their own speed.

Usdaw recommends that all ULRs get specialist training in Skills for Life by attending a local two/three day unionlearn course on Skills for Life Awareness. This is a normal follow-on course for all Usdaw ULRs and it is the first step towards tackling Skills for Life.

Top tips on getting Skills for Life started

- Make sure Skills for Life are promoted positively and recognised qualifications can be achieved.
- Ensure that providers offer Skills for Life assessments at the beginning of any course including NVQs.
- Think about the Skills for Life needs of the organisation as well as the individual (even if the employer doesn't) and discuss the organisational needs with management.
- Try to negotiate paid time off for Skills for Life assessments and learning.
- Find out what other ULRs from different sites/ companies have done to promote Skills for Life.
- Contact the Government sponsored 'Get On' campaigns via the website: <http://geton.direct.gov.uk/> or look at the Move-on pages <http://www.move-on.org.uk/getonatwork.asp> where you can take an initial assessment.
- Find out more about the 'Six Book Challenge' and the 'Quick Read' initiatives from your Lifelong Learning Project Worker to encourage members to improve their reading skills.



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Stephen is in his early twenties and is a keen Leeds United football club fan. Stephen has a learning disability called dyspraxia which is word blindness and messages from the brain are not properly transmitted to the body. Stephen takes up the story:



"I had already done the English course which helped me. Maths is not just straight forward sums anymore. You need to read the question to find the sum then remember the formula to work it out, so you need an understanding of English as well.

I had to do a mini test to find out what level I was in maths. When I started my maths entry level three I was a bit nervous, not about going to College – I have been going there for over two years thanks to my ULR – it was the maths itself! The class had small numbers so most weeks we almost had one-to-ones which I took full advantage of. I had remembered a bit from school but not a lot.

On the day of the test I felt fine but I was really anxious about the test results. When I phoned the college to find out my results they told me I'd not just passed, but I had a 100% pass mark! I was over the moon – this is my biggest achievement – I was so proud.

I went on to do my Level 1 which was much harder but I had the confidence in myself now. I was studying two courses a week the other being Usdaw's Return to Learn. Combining the two gave me greater confidence and self-belief. I passed national Level 1 first time round and now I am working towards my national Level 2."

Stephen was the first ever student at York College to pass his entry Level 3 Maths with a 100% pass rate.

Sharon Dee 53 is a full-time clothing assistant from Coulby Newham Tesco. She is a single parent of Josh aged 17, but still finds time to provide respite foster care. "I have supported over 26 children and have been fostering for over six years."

But whilst Sharon is dedicated to helping the children, she found 'homework' a real struggle as the education sector is constantly changing.

Sharon takes up the story:

"Whilst at work I took part in a Lifelong Learning awareness day with Usdaw. I had a long chat with Jayne, my Usdaw ULR, and Skills for Life tutors from Baltic training, who convinced me to brush up on my basic English and maths skills, to help the children who are in my care."

As a result I enrolled on a Skills for Life course. I really enjoy the course and I have found it useful not only to help with 'homework' but in budgeting my household bills. I have found more confidence and am spreading the word to help others in a similar situation as me. It's not as hard or frightening as you think, the tutor helps you to understand things in a easier and less complicated way.

My personnel manager has supported me by providing me with a time-for-time match to allow me to fit the course in my busy work and home life. Now I would like to do more courses. Computers is my next challenge; I want to make sure the children in my care are safe on the computer. I wouldn't have even thought about learning if Usdaw hadn't come in the store.