



According to a 1979 Ford Foundation report, 25 million Americans can't read at all and 35 million more could be considered functionally illiterate. The inability of 60 million native-born Americans to cope with the routine paperwork of life — a classified job ad, an instructional manual — is a problem with far-reaching consequences.

The illiteracy crisis is particularly sharp in business and industry, especially in banking, telecommunications and data processing, where huge labor pools having competent reading skills are most in demand. Unless the private sector addresses the problem by promoting mass-literacy pro-

Illiterasee att Wurk

By William McGowan

grams, corporate profits will slip and the vitality of American industry will eventually pale before stiffened competition from countries such as West Germany and Japan, where higher rates of literacy and productivity march hand-in-hand.

The impact of illiteracy on the corporate bottom line is hard to calculate, but it's generally agreed that productivity and profits suffer significantly. Mutual of New York estimates

that 70 percent of its dictated correspondence has to be redone at least once because of errors. In 1975, a herd of prime beef cattle was killed accidentally when a Chicago feed-lot laborer misread a package label and gave the cattle poison instead of food.

Every day, sales orders are botched, bank transactions bungled, messages scrambled and things by the million misfiled — all, to some extent, because of substandard reading skills. Just how vital will the much vaunted "information age" be if people simply can't read? A General Electric computer executive said, "We must remember that computers process error at the same bewildering speed at which they process truth."

An estimated 800,000 adult illiterates live in the New York area. "Educational mismatching" — the situation in which jobs exist but qualified manpower does not — was cited by the Regional Planning Association of New York as the area's chief industrial problem for the next two decades. One corporate executive asks, "Where will the workers come from to operate complicated gear if they already make mistakes with a drill press?"

If left unarrested, rampant illiteracy will intensify the disjunction between available jobs and qualified manpower and will create an unlettered underclass that will be locked out of tomorrow's predominantly high-technology economy. It will deepen existing social inequities, perhaps with explosive repercussions. Black women, the only breadwinners in many inner-city households, are more illiterate as a group than any other in the nation. As the work place grows more reliant on sophisticated technologies such as robots with artificial intelligence, they will grow more unemployable, especially in the service and clerical positions where they now cluster. Their joblessness is bound to spur further urban troubles.

Several decades of Federal efforts to eradicate illiteracy have largely lacked funding and commitment. The Reagan Administration wants to cut the \$100 million now pledged to illiteracy programs down to \$86 million, a figure far short of the \$5 billion to \$25 billion demanded by some literacy activists like Jonathan Kozol, the author of a penetrating study on illiteracy, "Prisoners of Silence." Mr. Kozol and others in his camp have given up on Government programs in favor of remedies that the private sector may propose in the new spirit of "voluntarism." Their hopes are now pinned on corporations seeing that they have a stake — or as an International Paper Company executive put it, a "commercial motivation" — in developing a labor force able to read at minimum standards.

While the private sector hasn't yet mounted any coordinated assault on illiteracy, Dow Chemical, General Motors and Philip Morris are among two dozen major companies that are sponsoring reading improvement programs for employees or for students in public schools who might someday be on their payroll. The National Coalition for Literacy and the National Advertising Council plan a joint publicity campaign in 1983, hoping to draw energy and initiatives from a broad spectrum of affected businesses. But so far, not enough leading corporations have recognized that they have a vested interest in ridding the country of a specter that is darkening future economic prospects.

When asked how he managed all his life without being able to read, Johnny

Cash, playing an illiterate man in a film called "The Pride of Jesse Halam," answered, "You lie a lot, you get cheated some and you fake it." As foreign competition grows stronger, and as the economy vaults into the 21st century, American industry will no longer be able to fake it, and unchecked illiteracy will surely take its toll on social stability and industrial productivity. It will grab a share of corporate profit, too.

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