

# Turning the spotlight on shortage of basic skills

SU CLARK

**A** PART from sport, school held little interest for Carrie Brown, so when she left school in the mid-90s, it was with few qualifications and only a basic grasp of literacy and numeracy. Despite this, Brown managed a series of jobs in the Territorial Army, the Ministry of Defence and as a lifeguard. All suited her extrovert personality and, better still, none required much reading or counting.

Fifteen years ago, it was possible to get a job without those basic skills; it is less so today. What jobs do not require use of a computer, simple arithmetic and pretty fluent reading or writing? As Brown's 30s loomed, she began to reassess her life and what she'd done with it. A long-held hankering to join the police reasserted itself.

"I love the idea of being active, working as part of a team and really helping the community," she explains. "I enjoyed various jobs throughout my 20s, but as I approached my 30s I realised that I really wanted to get into a career with good future prospects, so I applied for the police."

But getting into the police force takes more than a clean slate; you also need to pass arduous exams. "I was totally unprepared for how hard I would find the entry exams," says Brown. "When I received the letter informing me I had failed, I was absolutely gutted. For the first time, I realised my lack of skill with maths and English could really hold me back from achieving the life I wanted."

Brown is not alone. The Scottish Government estimates that as many as one in five Scots has low literacy and numeracy skills, which fits with the repeated complaints of Scottish businesses that too many of their employees have to use their fingers to add up and struggle with the most basic of English. A recent summit of Scottish business people in Edinburgh found that it cost the economy millions in lost productivity and training. The cost to the individuals is also immense: it is humiliating and frustrating to be

held back from advancement because of an inability to read even the Yellow Pages.

Brown decided her weaknesses had held her back too long, so she sought aid. Answering an ad in a local paper, she got in touch with a tuition company, Step Ahead. Its avuncular managing director, George Hawkins, soon had her studying.

"I get a lot of adults who, for one reason or another, have just never learned to read or write properly," he says. "They have managed to muddle through life, but they get to a point where they can't apply for jobs they want or go for that promotion because they don't want people to know about their weaknesses."

Most of Step Ahead's referrals come from parents determined their little angels are going to pass entrance exams for independent schools. But for the past six or seven years, Hawkins has seen the number of enquiries from adults rise. So much so, that last year he formalised provision by setting up Step Ahead Means Business, targeting adults who wanted to improve certain skills or companies that wanted to enable their employees to take on greater challenges or new working practices.

"You could say we launched this at the wrong time, at a time when companies are clawing back on their training budget," says Hawkins, who charges between £32 and £50 an hour. "But it is a false economy not to continue to invest in your people and ensure ongoing training. Any business organisation will say the same."

Despite the bad timing, the cramming company has had some major successes. One large media business with multiple sites in Scotland brought in Step Ahead Means Business to work with some of its employees. According to Hawkins, these were not people from the factory floor, but from within lower management.

"We had one chap who was managing 30 or 40 people, but his English skills were such that his e-mails read as if they were in double Dutch. He was practically illiterate," says Hawkins.

Step Ahead has been around for nearly 12 years since Hawkins



As many as one in five Scots has low literacy and numeracy skills - tuition company Step Ahead has seen inquiries from adults increase

headed home after a protracted stint in the Middle East, where he had been heading up an international school. But rather than go back into the Scottish school system, he began offering his services to anyone who needed help, including adults.

"It is harder today to get by without basic skills; any weaknesses are becoming more visible as work practices change," says Hawkins. "It is embarrassing when employers discover you can't read or add up or understand a basic graph."

Over the years, he has expanded his business, recruiting other qualified teachers so that his company can respond to any need. But for adults, the main demand is for help on basic skills.

"I can provide lessons in a company, but most want us to be discreet and prefer to offer employees single sessions," explains Hawkins. "I get people phoning me who but who are still reluctant to let me see how bad they are at maths. However, I think it is getting easier for people to admit they have difficulties because it is recognised now that so many do."

Earlier this year, Hawkins attended the wedding of one of his students, Gary. A one-time biker and general rebel, Gary had contacted Step Ahead after he began dating a nurse. The effort

obviously paid off as he got his bride, but in the process he also discovered that he had a talent for writing. With better language skills, Gary has the confidence to try to take this further.

For Brown, the tuition has also helped with her confidence and development of other skills.

"As well as supporting me with the maths and English, George

helped me with interview techniques and my application form, which helped me feel more confident," she says.

Better prepared and bolstered by Hawkins' support, Brown recently re-sat her police entrance exam. "The second time I was so nervous. This sort of thing really tests your personality. I had to wait two weeks for the results, but when

I found out I had passed, it was the best feeling in the world.

"I was one step nearer to achieving my dream but I was also so proud of what I had achieved."

First-time round, Brown failed her English exam by one point, and maths by seven points. One year on, she passed the same exams; her English by seven points and her maths by two.

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## Life's no longer a beach for graduates

THE recession, crippling debt and competition among a large pool of students means that only one in five of this year's final-year graduates can expect to be employed by the time they qualify this summer, according to new research.

Many of the 16,000 students surveyed hope to ride out the slump abroad, though lounging around on the beach should not be their top priority. Instead, volun-

teering at a charity or organisation in the field in which they plan to work will make them stand out in the crowd when they return, says career coach Jenny Ungless.

"Sunsets on beaches are all very nice, but be sure that you're still looking through job posts, that your CV is still on a recruitment website, that you network with anyone you meet while travelling. You never know who might help

you find a job," she advises. "Think about how you can make yourself more attractive to potential employees. Do that charity work, take up that language you wish you could speak, run that marathon or take up tight-rope walking. That one thing on your CV could make you stand out."

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