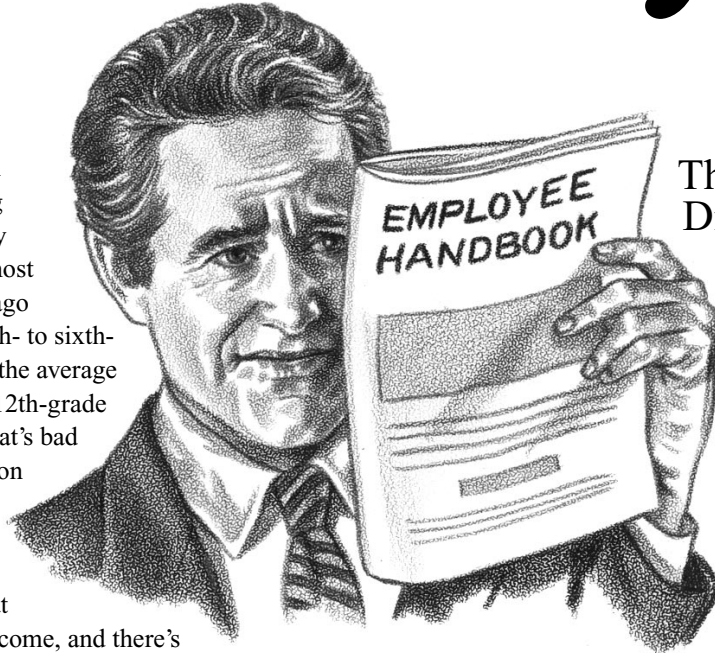




Illiteracy

In today's high-tech workplace, reading skills are increasingly important. Though most workers of 30 years ago could get by on fourth- to sixth-grade reading skills, the average job today requires a 12th-grade reading level. And that's bad news for the 25 million adult Americans who can't even read the daily newspaper. The good news is that illiteracy can be overcome, and there's plenty of help out there for those who seek it.



The Hidden Disability

Not surprisingly, many illiterates are deeply ashamed of their condition and go to great lengths to hide it. Some symptoms of a hidden reading disability include:

- unexplained, often illogical work errors.
- poor attendance during

training sessions or other activities where they may be "found out."

- defensiveness or a feeling of being "different."
- errors in forms or charts, especially those recently revised.
- resistance to new procedures.
- the need for excessive verbal or hands-on instruction.
- poor performance in new assignments involving written materials.
- avoidance of promotion, even if it means changing jobs.

Smart People Can Be Illiterate

The reasons for illiteracy are many. Some people suffer from dyslexia, a learning disorder often unrecognized in the classroom, that makes learning to read difficult without special help. Other reasons for illiteracy include poor schooling, a troubled childhood or traumatic experiences during the school years. It's a mistake to assume that an illiterate person is simply not smart enough to read; in fact, workers who are illiterate often have to be extra smart to get by without reading. Many rely on memorizing written material with the help of a family member or trusted friend, or simply on being able to figure out what's needed by careful observation.

Where to Get Help

If you suspect a coworker has a reading problem, or you have a reading problem yourself, talk to someone from your employee assistance program about where to get help. Many companies offer a literacy program for their employees.

It may seem hard to get started and follow through on a skill as complex as reading. But for those who do, the success rate is high. Teachers of adult reading are trained to get results, even with students who suffer from dyslexia and failed to learn through the school system. And most employers are eager to help, because a literate work force is a more productive work force.