

Briefing: Putting Number Confidence to Work

November 2021

Boosting numeracy levels in the UK is key to building a skilled nation able to recover from the pandemic after a period of immense instability in our job markets. The crisis of low numeracy is costing the UK up to as much as £25bn a year ⁽¹⁾. But despite growing evidence highlighting anxiety around numeracy, the role that number confidence plays has not been adequately acknowledged or addressed.

Since the beginning of May 2021, National Numeracy has tracked the reasons 26,000 people have given for wanting to improve their number confidence and skills when using our National Numeracy Challenge online tool. The leading reason given is 'to get on in work'. That data informs this briefing about number confidence - how able people feel to understand and work with numbers.

Summary

- Number confidence plays a stronger role than number skills in making people feel better able to get a qualification, find a job or get on at work.
- Women feel significantly less confident with numbers than men, even when they have a high skill level.

Improving number confidence makes people feel better able to get a qualification, find a job or get on at work, so it is therefore crucial that greater attention is paid to improving confidence as a stepping-stone to improving skills, opening up access to learning and progression opportunities, and the benefits for employment that improved numeracy can bring.

1. Improving number confidence for work

Number skills, coupled with the confidence to use them, are essential in every job from healthcare to construction, retail to tourism. Over the past six months we have been asking people who register for the National Numeracy Challenge about their motivation for improving their numeracy, so that we can better support their learning journeys.

There were 13,320 people who visited the National Numeracy Challenge and told us they would like to improve their numeracy to get on in work, between 5 May 2021 – 13 September 2021. Of that group, 4,159 have since improved either their confidence and/or their skills. There were 1,379 people who improved both confidence and skills, and of them, 61% said they feel more able to take next steps in to work.

We found that:

- Improving both number confidence and skills gives a bigger boost than skills or confidence alone when it comes to feeling more able to take next steps in to work - 61% of confidence and skill improvers (1,379 people) told us they felt more able to get a qualification, find a job or get on at work.
- But improving confidence alone was enough to give a big boost to feeling better able to get on at work - 48% (892 people) who improved their number confidence, but not their skills, feel better able to get a qualification, find a job or get on at work.
- While improving skills, but not confidence, boosts feelings of being better able to get on in work, it's to a much lesser degree than when confidence is also improved - 20% (192 people) of people who improve their number skills, but not confidence felt better able to get a qualification, find a job or get on at work.

These new findings supplement research we carried out in May 2021 of a nationally representative survey of 2,000 adults (18+) ⁽³⁾ that found nearly one in five people (18%) avoid applying for a job or qualification because it, or the interview process, involves maths. The data reflects what National Numeracy has found working on the ground – with employers and employees reporting problems with number confidence and maths anxiety blocking the pipelines to key progression routes, such as apprenticeships.

By contrast, the May 2021 survey found nearly two-thirds of people (63%) said their confidence in numbers has helped them progress at work or in their career. Pointing to the vital role employers can play, over two-fifths (42%) say if their workplace offered help to improve their numeracy confidence and skill, they would give it go.

Furthermore, a report - *Counting on the recovery: the role for numeracy skills in 'levelling up' the UK* ⁽¹⁾ published in April 2021 by charity Pro Bono Economics and commissioned by KPMG for National Numeracy - said that 59% of those who had lost their jobs in the pandemic up to that point are likely to have low numeracy skills and put the cost of this to the UK at as much as £25 billion per year.

Case Study: Low number confidence and career progression in Health & Social Care

In Health & Social Care, employers need to 'grow their own' and develop staff in lower paid positions to fill roles in key areas such as nursing. Most career progression routes require adult level 2 maths qualifications, but staff often hold themselves back because they don't feel number confident. This issue is prominent across other sectors, too.

Healthcare support workers have told us:

- *"I have wanted to be a nurse since I was in my early twenties, I am still a healthcare assistant in my 50s because I know I couldn't do the maths"*
- *"I was trying to get on the Nursing Associate programme, but when I saw you needed maths, I was terrified."*

Employers report widespread difficulties in supporting people to progress:

- *"We have appalling non-pass rates, it's shameful for us as a trust. People either delay their career progression or often just don't move on at all."*
- *"Some of our maternity support workers have long been aspiring midwives. The midwifery degree apprenticeship would be perfect, but maths is holding them back. It's sad."*

2. Women and Number Confidence

That women feel less confident about numbers than men was highlighted in our 2019 report *Building a Numerate Nation* (2) and is borne out by this new analysis of National Numeracy Challenge users. Everyone can improve their numeracy, regardless of gender. But as low number confidence acts as a barrier to applying the skills that people have developed, this 'number confidence gap' affects many women's lives. Analysis of our new data of National Numeracy Challenge users over the past year shows that women are over-represented in both the population of users with low confidence and low skills, and those with low confidence and high skills.

So, a lack of confidence is more apparent in women, even when coupled with high skills. Our data indicates that a lack of confidence with numbers is disproportionately impacting women. This means that number confidence as a significant additional barrier to progression is having a larger effect on the career prospects of women, widening inequality in access to work. This can only be having a detrimental impact on lives and livelihoods, as well as UK productivity.

What needs to change?

1. UK government and businesses need to empower people, and women in particular, to boost their number confidence as a gateway to skills-building for the UK workforce.
2. Interventions exclusively around attitudes, mindset and confidence need to be implemented before skills learning, to allow adults to feel confident enough to engage with skills provision.
3. Resources chosen to support workplace learning must be designed with the needs of low confidence learners at their heart. This includes allowing learners to work confidentially, supporting different learning styles, and actively reducing pressure.
4. The qualifications which hold the key to many job opportunities and career progression routes need to be brought closer to those with low confidence with numbers via a stepping-stone approach to enable people to overcome maths anxiety and develop positive attitudes.
5. The UK needs to shed its maths stigma – we need a cultural shift led by government, education providers, employers, communities and others to give people permission to seek support for their number confidence.

Any intervention to improve skills that does not address confidence as an integral element is likely to be far less effective, according to our data.

We believe it is vital to improve number confidence as a first step on the journey to improving numeracy. The National Numeracy Challenge is a great place to start. We have launched new confidence-focused resources such as videos and exercises within the National Numeracy Challenge and throughout our work to address this issue.

National Numeracy supports people to take the next step into work, or progress in their career by helping them boost their numeracy confidence and skills. This makes formal qualifications such as Functional Skills or GCSEs feel within reach, often for the first time, unlocking routes to progression.

About National Numeracy

National Numeracy is a charity dedicated to helping people feel confident with numbers and using everyday maths. Our mission is to empower children and adults in the UK to get on with numbers so they can fulfil their potential at work, home and school. Our work improves how people understand and work with numbers in daily life, sparking better opportunities and brighter futures. www.nationalnumeracy.org.uk

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References

1. [Counting on the recovery: the role for numeracy skills in 'levelling up' the UK. 2021. Pro Bono Economics](#)
2. [Building a numerate nation: confidence, belief and skills. 2019. National Numeracy](#)
3. [New research: It's National Numeracy Day, let's make it count. 2021. National Numeracy](#)