

EMPLOYER PROVISION OF EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS

Prepared for the
Northern Labour Market Information Clearinghouse

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Employer Provision of Employability Skills

Introduction

The Northern Labour Market Information Clearinghouse Project was created in 1995. Partners in the Clearinghouse, a consortium of four northern Alberta colleges and the Northern Alberta Development Council require ongoing research relevant to the northern Alberta labour market to keep them abreast of training and employment needs and trends. The college partners are Fairview College, Grande Prairie Regional College, Keyano College and Northern Lakes College.

The examination of issues around the provision of employability skills was a priority research topic for the college partners.

Background

In the past decade, the Canadian workplace has undergone many significant changes. These changes have occurred in the nature and manner of work performed, employers' view of their workforce and, within the workers themselves.

The impact of technology in the workplace has required workers in all occupations to apply new tools to their work. Truck drivers carry on-board computers, industrial construction sites use a computerized safety program for all workers. The way of working is changing from a top-down supervisor controlled situation to a team approach that requires collaboration and communication.

Employees are more and more being viewed as valuable resources. As the population ages and the availability of new, skilled workers lessens,

employers are more likely to invest in workforce training to ensure a match between the requirements of the work and the skills of the staff.

Individual workers, faced with new skill requirements, are finding that they have lost skills through lack of use or that they need to acquire new ones in order to perform at work.

These factors led to a growing interest in research and program development in adult literacy. While increased literacy addressed some of the concerns, it became apparent that additional workplace skills needed to be in place to meet the productivity and technological requirements of the workplace. Thus, a movement to develop workplace essential skills emerged among workplace educators.

A simplistic approach to the relationship between employability skills and essential skills is as follows: employability skills are those that employers require to get their work done and essential skills are those that the employees must have in order to do the work.

Definitions

Employability Skills

The Conference Board of Canada defines employability skills as “the critical skills you need in the workplace – whether you are self-employed or working for others. Employability skills --- include communication, problem solving, positive attitudes and behaviours, adaptability, working with others, and science, technology and mathematics skills”.

Essential Skills

Essential skills are those skills that allow people to perform the tasks required in their occupations and provide them with the foundations for learning job-specific skills.

There are six distinct, but related, skill sets associated within the definition of essential skills. They are: reading skills, writing skills, math skills, document use skills, oral communication skills and English as a Second Language (ESL).

Essential Skills Models

Essential Skills – Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC)

HRDC has developed a number of services and projects based on a large body of research around adult literacy and a definition of essential skills. The National Literacy Secretariat, within HRDC, has worked with the development of profiles for the National Occupational Classification (NOC) project and has embedded the essential skills for at least 150 occupational profiles. The profiles work began with all jobs in the NOC that require secondary education or less. Work is continuing to complete the same information in higher-skill occupations.

The HRDC Essential Skills website also contains a collection of authentic workplace materials. These materials were gathered during interviews with workers to provide examples of how skills such as reading, document use, and writing are actually used on the job. Tips for using these and other authentic documents in classroom learning activities are also included.

Test of Workplace Essential Skills (TOWES)

TOWES is a new test of workplace essential skills which has been developed in Canada. The assessment tool differs from other literacy tests in

that it claims to have sufficient items to discriminate across the full range of skill levels demanded by jobs in Canadian workplaces. The test content is based on workplace documents and the item responses mimic workplace tasks.

TOWES enables employers to assess the skills of their workforce. By comparing the overall test results to the skills required, employers can clarify their training needs. TOWES also allows them to address their concerns around the returns on investment for training. Finally, TOWES enables employers to assess the skills of job applicants in terms of their employment readiness. The methodology and scales developed for the Essential Skills research project allow the skill content of jobs to be rated uniformly, thus enabling workplace practitioners to give employers useful information about how the skill set of their workforce fits with job requirements.

Who Uses TOWES?

Several users and applications are listed below. Other applications will evolve as the number of users increases.

- Entry-level assessment of skills

TOWES gives employers a way to set reasonable and valid entry-level job requirements. Many employers have been using years-in-school or other credentials proxies for ability. This is a disadvantage to individuals, some of them foreign-born, who have the skills but not the educational credential obtained in Canada.

- Educational Assessment

Instructors, trainers and literacy tutors can use the information from TOWES to place workers in their programs and to design programs to meet individual educational needs.

- Work/Worker Adjustment

Rapid changes in technology and work processes, together with plant closures and down-sizing have created the need for effective adjustment programs. A wide-ranging test, keyed to essential skills descriptions for jobs listed in the National Occupational Classification gives workers a nd

program developers a valid way to assess present skills and compare them to the requirements of a variety of possible jobs. Individual workers can use TOWES results to make decisions about future training.

- School/work transition programs

A valid and reliable test of the essential skills needed for work is useful to high school teachers and administrators. TOWES provides a basis for certifying students' levels of competence, and a way to promote employability skills to teachers and students alike.

- National standards development

An essential skills assessment tool may be used to set standards and specify competence. It allows companies to assess workforce skills and make comparisons with other groups of workers.

Demonstration Projects

In the Spring of 2000 four national demonstration projects got underway. Each project was intended to focus on a participants facet of test design, test administration or reporting.

In Calgary, the goal was to see if TOWES could be modified to fit the broad assessment needs of employers and employees working in a particular sector. Entry-level workers in the manufacturing sector were chosen for this project.

A Northwest Territories project required the development of special test items to assess the skills of populations such as Aboriginal workers. The northern mining industry has a commitment to hiring and training Aboriginal workers. The project used the newly developed test items to assess the baseline skills of workers in order to design effective training. Staff are currently working with industry trainers to develop curriculum and learning materials for their respective workforces.

In Atlantic Canada, for example, the TOWES role was to provide an entry-level standard for essential skills that employers, union and workers could all agree was fair.

On the prairies, small-town grain elevators are being replaced with giant concrete silos. TOWES was used to determine employee skill levels so worker-appropriate training and placement services could be offered in the course of industry restructuring.

Many of the demonstration project's partners intend to continue to use TOWES after the demonstration projects are finished.

Experience has shown that TOWES is most effective in partnership situations involving workplace learning practitioners and local industry. The use of TOWES as a diagnostic instrument is growing. There are existing industry/college partnerships all across Canada in diverse industries such as aerospace, wastewater works, mining, construction and health.

The Alberta Framework of Essential Competencies to Working, Learning and Living (ECF)

The Alberta Framework is the result of the collaborative efforts of individuals representing colleges, government departments, business people and community members.

The ECF identifies minimum essential workplace competencies. These include employability, academic and generic occupational competencies stated as a series of performance indicators that can be taught, learned, observed and measured. The framework includes the opportunities for growth and ongoing learning beyond work entry within the essential competencies.

The ECF was designed to be used in a number of applications.

Educators can use the framework in a number of ways:
Curriculum and program developers in academic, technical, artistic or workplace settings can integrate the essential competencies in curriculum and support materials;

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Teachers, facilitators and instructors of adult learners and students in grades 7-12 can include essential competencies in their instructional planning and can provide explicit feedback to students as they develop their competencies.

Career and guidance counsellors can use essential competencies to help learners prepare career plans, action/learning plans and employability portfolios.

Governments can use the ECF for various applications:

Program managers can identify the employability competencies to be developed as well as their appropriate levels;

Contract managers can use them to establish program standards;

Policy makers can establish credentials requirements.

Employers may use the competencies to develop job descriptions, plan corporate training, recruit and appraise workers.

Union, labour and industry associations can use the competencies to develop job profiles for their members; to do gap analysis and identify training needs and to support continuing learning.

Institutions and private trainers can use the ECF to set program standards and to develop consistent diploma requirements.

Organization of the Competencies

Dimensions	Sub-competency areas	Behaviours
Building Personal Capacity	Personal management Managing transitions	Self-development, risk management' lifelong learning, adapting to change, career development
Interacting and Communicating	Working with others Communicating	Interpersonal communications, building community, teamwork, listening, speaking, reading, writing

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Planning and Managing	Thinking Achieving results	Problem solving/decision making, finding information, creative thinking, providing service, making products, ensuring quality
Using Data and Computer Technology	Numeracy Computer Technology	Basic operations, patterns and relations, shape and space, statistics and probability, computer operations, computer applications

The competency areas are described in competency bands each with five performance indicators that become increasingly challenging and complex. The following verbs are used to describe the performance indicators:

Identify: gather necessary information and understand requirements for a task.

Connect: link to related contexts and concepts

Apply: demonstrate or perform a task

Reflect: analyze performance, considering the impact on self and others

Transfer: extend the benefits of the competency to others

A number of materials are available. An instructor guide contains the details of each of the competency bands. The information is presented in a manner that is easily translated into lesson plans and a complete student workbook is also available. In its present form, it is suitable for secondary level students.

The Conference Board of Canada Employability Skills 2000

The Conference Board Employability Skills approach includes the essential skills outlined above. In addition, it contains attitudes and behaviours employers look for. The conference Board's additions are as follows:

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Self-esteem and confidence	Recognition of and respect for people's diversity and individual differences
Honesty, integrity and personal ethics	The ability to identify and suggest new ideas and to get the job done - creativity
Initiative, energy and persistence to get the job done	The ability to set goals and priorities in work and personal life
Accountability for actions taken	The ability to plan and manage time, money and other resources to achieve goals
A positive attitude toward change	A positive attitude toward learning, growth and personal health

Essential Skills/Employability Skills Resources

In addition to resources available through use of any of the above models, a number of industry specific materials and programs are available.

Effective Reading in Context (ERIC) is a higher level program intended to increase the learner's critical reading skills. The program was developed by staff at Keyano College for workers in the oil and gas industry. It has since been modified for a number of other industries including construction and petrochemicals. A companion piece is Working in Numeracy (WIN), also designed for supervisors and those entering a supervisory situation.

The Construction Craft Labourer program available through Bow Valley College was designed to assist experienced construction labourers to successfully challenge the Apprenticeship and Industry Training certification examination. The program includes practice exercises, reading skills exercises, practice multiple-choice questions and answer key. The program is in modular format and can be instructor taught, independently learned or distance delivered.

A number of Alberta training organizations have formed the Construction Industry Network for Essential Skills Training in Alberta (CINESTA).

There are six organizations in the CINESTA network:

- Bow Valley College
- Calgary Catholic Immigration Services
- MCC Employment Development
- Metro Community College
- Norquest College
- Keyano College

Programs available include the above mentioned construction labourer preparation course and an apprenticeship reading program. Calgary Catholic Immigration Services offers an electrician upgrading and certification program for immigrants. The Mennonite Central Committee in Calgary offers a trades entry program that includes technical and “soft” skills. As well, job retention workshops are offered.

The Metro Community College Gateways to Apprenticeship is a full-time program that provides English language upgrading and math and science skills for those wishing to enter the trades.

Norquest College offers ESL Trades and a pre-trades math and science program.

Keyano College provides the above-mentioned ERIC program for construction and the WIN program is also tailored for construction.

SkillPlan

SkillPlan is the BC Construction Industry Skills Improvement Council. Established in 1991, the Council is industry’s response to an evolving workplace that requires greater reading, writing, math, problem solving and oral communication skills. Some of the Council’s materials are available on their website.

Alberta Workforce Essential Skills Steering Committee (AWES)

The AWES Committee is composed of membership from postsecondary institutions, industry, organized labour and government. The approach to drawing attention to the benefits of essential skills training is through cooperation and strategic partnering. Funding for the Committee is provided by the National Literacy Secretariat, Human Resources Development Canada and Alberta Learning.

AWES takes a sectoral, rather than a company-by-company approach. The sectors chosen experienced steady growth, worker shortages and continuous introduction of new processes. As well, labour and business leaders showed a strong desire to know more about how essential skills training could improve performance and productivity.

AWES has developed a guidebook on how to undertake a sectoral needs assessment. The publication is targeted to employer associations, sector councils, labour unions, community colleges, government and essential skills consultants. It includes information on how to design and implement assessments, interpret findings, shape recommendations, develop action plans and evaluate outcomes.

The AWES Committee can conduct needs assessments, share best practices and provide referrals to essential skills practitioners. It has a repository of related research and can provide information on possible funding sources.

Partnerships

A number of successful partnerships to deliver essential skills training have been formed in Alberta. The partnerships generally involve an industry sector, one or more postsecondary institutes and at least one order of government.

The Construction Owners' Association of Alberta was the prime sponsor of the Building Capacity project that began in 1997. The first step was a needs assessment that resulted in a number of recommendations for development of materials and several pilot programs that were offered around the

province and subsequently evaluated. Some of the programs and materials described in a previous section are products of this partnership.

Support was provided by labour unions, individual construction companies and the National Literacy Secretariat. The Alberta Government also provided advice and facilitation.

Alberta's food and beverage processing industry is involved in an ongoing undertaking to create a workforce with the right skills to support industry growth. In June, 1998, The Alberta Food Processors Association entered into a three year local labour market partnership with Alberta Human Resources and Employment. Funding was provided for three years to research, plan and develop a human resource development strategy. One of the first outcomes of the research was the establishment of the Workplace Training and Development Program at Norquest College. Funded by Alberta Learning, the program provides access to existing training programs and to the services of a professional language training consultant. Through the program, companies access assistance with in-house training, language training and plain language revision of training materials and company documents. A second year will be funded by the National Literacy Secretariat.

The Forestry Industry worked with the AWES Committee beginning in 2001 to examine the relationship between essential skills and health and safety training in the forestry industry. The research found the need for a "clear language" safety training program. The result is a plain language training CD intended for a workforce of 53,000 instructing in industry occupational health and safety. The Alberta Forest Products Association facilitate distribution on behalf of the industry.

The oil and gas industry laid the groundwork for much of the activity in the provision of essential skills for its workforce. The joint efforts of the industry and Keyano College produced the now widely-used ERIC and WIN programs.

Preferred Employability Skills Models

The Conference Board of Canada Employability Skills research began long before other similar efforts. The 2000 update is easily accessible and has provided the basis for the development of additional resources such as the on-line Employability Skills for the Self-Managed Learner. Additional research has produced Attitudes and Behaviours Employers Look For (See Appendix A). This employability skills literature is all based on the requirements of employers.

Human Resources Development Canada has approached the issue from the perspective of the individual. The work focused on the skills needed for an individual to be successful on the job. The ongoing research to incorporate essential skills into NOC occupational profiles is used by training facilities and human resource practitioners.

The Conference Board and HRDC view their work as being interconnected. Employability Skills show what employers are looking for; essential skills show what these skills look like in different jobs. Employability skills and essential skills are the same skills used beyond the workplace in a broad range of daily activities.

The Test of Workplace Essential Skills was developed with the assessment of individuals as its prime function. The research findings from the Conference Board have been incorporated into the TOWES model. That the incorporation has been successful is evident in the wide-spread use of TOWES as an entry-level screening instrument. The resource industry in Fort McMurray has endorsed TOWES as the screening instrument of choice for its purposes.

TOWES is the prime instrument used in remedial instruction in a number of additional sectors including petrochemical and mining.

The Alberta Framework of Essential Competencies also used the earlier Conference Board work as one of the resources as the framework was developed. The results are highly credible and presented in an easily accessible format. The approach is likely to be of more interest to educators

than to industry trainers. Unfortunately, the package has had only limited promotion and thus is not widely known.

Discussion

In those industry sectors where industry members were united in the view that increasing the skills of the workforce was essential to increased productivity, support for employability/essential skills training has grown. Upon completion of a formal needs assessment, the results provided sufficient evidence to mobilize more training events. This has been the case for the oil and gas industry, forest products, petrochemicals, food processing and mining.

The report from the food and beverage industry indicated that many industry members were too small to undertake in-house training. Further, small employers face a dilemma concerning the relationship between employee training and an already slim profit margin. Where there has been outside financial support, participation has been easier to gain.

The existing situation is that the National Literacy Secretariat support industry-wide projects with the goal that demonstrated success will encourage continuation of self-supporting projects in the future. There appears to be no source of start-up support for individual companies unless a case can be made that there will be a longer term benefit to the entire industry.

The Saskatchewan Labour Force Development Board, with the support of the National Literacy Secretariat undertook a multi-phase project to develop a framework for the planning and delivery of sustainable essential skills workplace training. One of the key recommendations in the outcome of the third phase referenced the need for a concerted effort in promoting awareness of the need and the benefits of the training. Unfortunately, Alberta does not have a provincial agency outside of government to respond to the needs of employers and their employees.

All of the essential/employability skills projects reported in the preceding sections have involved practitioners from community colleges and

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accredited training facilities. These institutions have highly skilled staff who are proficient in the instruction of adult learners. What is needed is a workshop approach to coach instructors through a transition to incorporate essential skills into their teaching. The AWES Committee has undertaken the responsibility of providing such service.

It is certainly true that colleges have adopted an employability skills approach to many of their programs. However, instruction specifically addressing remediation for essential skills deficits is limited to only a few of the province's colleges. Because of Alberta's tight labour market, aging workforce and a continued need for increased productivity, there are very real, new opportunities in the field.

Appendix A

Sources

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Appendix B

Contacts

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Appendix C

The International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS)

The IALS, a seven-country comparative study of adult literacy released in 1996, incorporates the most sophisticated definition of literacy to date. The IALS promotes the definition of literacy as a skill-based proficiency continuum – that is, literacy is a relative rather than an absolute concept. The IALS defines literacy as: “Using printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one’s goals, and to develop one’s knowledge and potential.”

Because the definition of literacy cannot be narrowed down to a single skill or an infinite set of skills able to address every type of text, the IALS defines three distinct literacy types – prose literacy, document literacy and quantitative literacy – and five levels of proficiency within each type:

Prose literacy – the knowledge and skills needed to understand and use information from texts, including editorials, news stories, poems and fiction.

Document literacy – the knowledge and skills required to locate and use information contained in various formats, including job applications, payroll forms, transportation schedules, maps, tables and graphics.

Quantitative literacy – the knowledge and skills required to apply arithmetic operations, either alone or sequentially, to numbers embedded in printed materials, such as balancing a cheque book, figuring a trip, competing an order form or determining the amount of interest on a loan from an advertisement.

At Level 1, people have great difficulty with reading. They have few basic skills available to them to interpret and work with text. Most are aware that they have problems; 22 per cent of Canadians are at this level.

At Level 2, people have limited skills – they can read, but not very well. Canadians at this level can deal only with material that is simple and clearly laid out. They often do not recognize their limitations; 26 per cent of Canadians are at this level.

At Level 3, people read well, but they might have difficulties with more complex tasks. Many countries consider Level 3 to be the minimum desired skills level; 32 per cent of Canadians are at this level.

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Levels 4 and 5 are the highest levels on the scale. The two levels were combined because there were too few Canadians at Level 5 to be statistically differentiated from Level 4. Here, people have very high levels of literacy. They have a wide range of reading skills and can deal with complex materials; only 20 per cent of Canadians are at this level.

(The Conference Board of Canada)