

Skills Canadian employers are looking for — A national program

Kurtis Kitagawa, Principal Research Associate¹
The Conference Board of Canada

For offenders, a key part of successfully reintegrating into the community is the ability to get and keep a job. Getting and keeping a job, in turn, depends on having and using what The Conference Board of Canada² identified as employability skills. Employability skills are the skills, attitudes and behaviours employers look for in members of their current and future workforce. Conference Board research begun in the early 1990's and shows that employers expect their employees to demonstrate a combination of fundamental, personal management and teamwork skills. Fundamental skills include communicating, managing information, using numbers, thinking and solving problems. Personal management skills include demonstrating positive attitudes and behaviours, being responsible, being adaptable, learning continuously, and working safely. Teamwork skills include working with others and participating in projects and tasks.

Employability skills are enabling skills that:

- Help individuals perform the tasks required by their occupation and other activities of daily life;
- Provide individuals with a foundation to learn other skills; and
- Enhance individuals' ability to adapt to workplace change.³

The skills crunch

Now, more than ever, Canadian employers are recognizing that human capital, including the employability skills of all workers is crucial to increasing innovation, enhancing productivity and ensuring competitiveness and growth.

At the same time, these same employers are quickly realizing that Canada is on the brink of a major skills crisis. The demographic pressures created by flat birth rates, an aging workforce, the rising skill requirements for all workers that have accompanied the infusion of information and communications technologies into all jobs and the increasing competitiveness of the global marketplace have conspired to produce an unprecedented skills crunch.

For the first time in living memory, Canada is facing a decline in the size of its labour force. Demographic

pressures resulting from the declining birth rate and an aging workforce have contributed to greater-than-ever competition for skilled people. The Conference Board is forecasting a labour force deficit of 1.2 million skilled workers by 2025, even assuming aggressive immigration policies. Canadian employers are facing shortages of workers with the right mix of essential skills, employability attitudes and behaviours, education and job-specific competencies. Some of these shortages relate to newly emerging jobs. Others relate to vacancies created by retirees. Still, other shortages relate to existing jobs that have been transformed by the pressures of competition, technological change and rising skill requirements.

Jobs that are in high demand in the economy require not only education and experience, but also essential skills and employability attitudes and behaviours, which are increasingly associated with high performance in the workplace.

Human capital: The challenge

Looming skills shortages present multiple challenges and opportunities. The ability of Canadian organizations to win in a fiercely competitive global marketplace depends on an adequate supply of highly skilled people. The pressure to compete and show value puts pressure on *organizations* to play to their strengths in the market (e.g., by focusing on their core competencies or by closely aligning all of their activities with their mission, vision and values). The pressure to compete and show value also puts pressure on *individuals*, who must constantly benchmark their skills (including their essential skills and their employability attitudes) against the performance expectations of their roles in the workplace.

The issue of skill shortages becomes even more complicated when we factor in the skill requirements of workers who are expecting to remain in the workforce. The pressure to reduce costs, to enhance quality and to innovate raises the skills bar for all workers. Now, more than ever, business success depends on the ability of employees to actively communicate, work in teams, and take responsibility for their own performance in the workplace.

In other words, increasing competition, a shrinking labour force and rising skills requirements means that individual Canadians will need to enter the workforce with a full array of skills (including essential skills and employability attitudes). Individual Canadians will also need to refresh and extend their essential skills and their employability attitudes to keep their jobs and to progress in the world of work. This point applies equally to the public sector and to the private sector. With regard to the public sector, a recent (2002) Conference Board survey of governments across Canada (*Building Tomorrow's Public Service Today: Challenges and Solutions in Recruitment and Retention*) showed that the top six skills in need of improvement (in order of priority) are:

1. Communication skills
2. Creativity and innovation
3. Ability to manage stress
4. Adaptability / flexibility
5. A focus on results (i.e., outcome orientation)
6. Emphasis on customer service

Two noteworthy studies carried out by the Canadian Federation of Independent Business underscore the same trend among small- and medium-sized enterprises in the private sector. *On Hire Ground* concluded that a “disturbingly high proportion” (45 per cent) of firms indicated that “worker indifference and poor work attitudes” were at least partially responsible for firms having difficulty finding the right people to fill available jobs.⁴ A second report dealing with small- and medium-sized enterprises, *Hire Expectations*, found that;

“More important than education, to many small business employers, are specific character traits. Regardless of sector or level of skill required, almost all small businesses contacted during the follow-up phone calls cited ‘enthusiasm’ and ‘willingness to learn’ as key qualities they look for when hiring young people.”⁵

The opportunity: Employability skills

However, in every challenge lies an opportunity. This is especially true for Canadians — including offenders — seeking employment or preparing themselves to enter the labour market. The *National Employability Skills Program* (NESP) combines classroom-based employability-skill-building exercises with employability-skill-focused workplace feedback. The NESP is designed to help offenders identify the employability skills they already have, understand how to use them effectively in the workplace, receive feedback on their employability

skills based on their workplace performance, and make and carry out plans to improve their skills — all while they are still incarcerated. As such, the NESP provides an opportunity for offenders to equip themselves for success as they prepare to re-enter the world of work, and strive to keep a job and advance in employment.

The NESP helps prepare offenders for employment by developing their employability skills, by improving their judgment, building respect, and by strengthening the connection in offenders’ minds between effort and achievement, between achievement and reward, and between reward and the ability to accomplish other life purposes. This approach to preparing offenders for employment is further elaborated below.

Improving judgment

The NESP is built on a philosophical model of human development according to which having and using employability skills depends on improving individuals’ capacity for judgment in practical workplace situations. In pedagogical terms, offenders work individually and collaboratively (in pairs, in small groups, and as a class) through problem-based examples that challenge offenders to reflect on typical workplace situations, identify potential causes of conflict, brainstorm and evaluate options for action, and test solutions.

Improving judgment is different from imparting information about “hot jobs” and the educational requirements to get them, although raising individuals’ awareness of labour market prospects can greatly aid decision making in regards to finding a job. Improving judgment is also different from matching individuals’ interests with potential career paths, although aligning aptitudes and interests with known qualities of high performers in different kinds of jobs can certainly contribute to producing solid job fits.

Improving judgment is more about changing behaviour, or rather helping individuals transform themselves by taking ownership of their futures, developing their knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviours — their intellectual and their active powers — and by applying these powers of the mind in action to being the best they can be.

With the help of the NESP, offenders are given opportunities to integrate employability skills development into their correctional plans. They learn how to build on the strengths they have, address their challenges openly in light of feedback received from their instructors and work supervisors, and deliberately develop their employability skills.

Through the NESP, offenders are encouraged to mark their progress by building their own Personal Employability Skills Portfolio, which is an important contribution to their work record. When offenders successfully complete the requirements of the NESP they are eligible to receive an Employability Skills Certificate from The Conference Board of Canada.

While the portfolio and the certificate attest to offenders' employability skills achievements, the real payoff is the change offenders see in themselves as they become more self-confident, better able to deal with life's "curve balls", and better equipped to take control of their future.

Building respect

The NESP emphasizes the connection between demonstrating employability skills and meeting workplace expectations. The assumption is that strengthening this connection in offenders' minds will help them develop a *sense of purpose* and to *value* employment as a means of achieving their own personal potential while they are incarcerated. Further, we assume that when offenders take *ownership* of their own skills development, they will be more capable of sustained employment and successful reintegration into the community, and less likely to re-offend once they have been released.

Developing a sense of purpose and valuing employment are essential to building respect and to equipping offenders for *true freedom*. True freedom⁶ and *real empowerment* are not static concepts or one-time-only grants or *acquisitions*; they are the *work* of a lifetime actively employed in developing and deploying one's skills, in achieving one's goals and potential, and in contributing to the sustenance and well-being of oneself and of all those who depend on oneself, whether family, friends, co-workers, employers, or the wider public, whose preservation, maintenance and improvement oblige us all. As human beings, we enjoy freedom best when we *respect* ourselves and others and when we use our skills to achieve our full *potential* as human beings, as members of a family, and as contributing members of society.

Preparing for employment

By helping offenders develop their employability skills, improve their capacity for practical judgment, and generate a meaningful work record while they are still incarcerated, the NESP helps offenders prepare for employment. The NESP's more than 100 problem-based exercises help offenders enhance their "job readiness" by improving their work

performance in supervised employment experiences and by helping offenders bring their employability skills, attitudes and behaviours up to the standards accepted in the wider community outside of the prison system.

Special exercises in the NESP are intended to help reshape offenders' attitudes towards themselves, others, and the workplace. Enhancing or engendering positive attitudes is crucial because an offender can be "job ready" without being "job willing". An offender becomes job willing when he/she respects himself/herself and others, positively values the opportunity to work for a living and believes they have a unique contribution to make in the work world.

Skills have a cognitive as well as an emotional dimension. In other words, successfully demonstrating a skill requires that a person not only understand what a skill is (including when, where, why and how to use it), but also be inclined or motivated to perform effectively, or in a skilful manner. A crucial link in the chain that connects at one end *having the knowledge* (know-how and ability) to use a skill effectively, and at the other *being disposed to apply* one's skills effectively (work ethic and adaptability) is actively *showing respect* and empathy. Other links in this chain include *sympathy* and *interest*.

Accordingly, the NESP emphasizes the importance of respecting oneself and others, as well as investing in, or committing to the success of a joint undertaking (work, for example). Investing in workplace or business success requires a person to be attuned to, or *respectful* of, the needs of internal and external customers. To help offenders develop an awareness of the power and dynamics of respect, the NESP uses skills development techniques that balance self-reflection and peer coaching with formal or informal support from a classroom instructor or workplace supervisor.

Conclusion

The NESP is designed to help offenders take advantage of employment opportunities opening up in the labour market due to skills shortages. It does this by providing offenders with a focused and integrated set of strategies for developing their employability skills, improving their judgment, building respect, and strengthening the connection in their minds between effort and achievement, achievement and reward, and reward and the ability to accomplish other life purposes. ■

¹ 255 Smyth Road, Ottawa, ON K1H 8M7

² The Conference Board of Canada is the foremost independent, not-for-profit applied research organization in Canada. The Conference Board helps to build leadership capacity for a better Canada by creating and sharing insights on economic trends, public policy issues, and organizational performance. The Conference Board forges relationships and delivers knowledge through learning events, networks, research products, and customized information services. The Conference Board's members include a broad range of organizations from the public and private sectors. The Conference Board of Canada was formed in 1954, and is affiliated with The Conference Board, Inc. that serves some 3,000 companies in 67 nations.

³ The Conference Board's (CBoC) employability skills are closely related to Human Resources and Skills Development Canada's (HRSDC) *essential skills*. The common skill set on which HRSDC and the CBoC agree, and the skill set that forms the basis of the valuable tools and

resources developed by HRSDC and the CBoC, consists of the following nine skills: Reading Text; Document Use; Numeracy; Writing; Oral Communication; Working with Others; Thinking Skills; Computer Use; and Continuous Learning. The CBoC's *Employability Skills Profile and Employability Skills 2000** contain five additional employability attitudes. The CBoC's own research and other survey-based data suggest that both essential skills and employability attitudes are necessary for workplace success.

⁴ Willowdale: Canadian Federation of Independent Business, 1996, pp. xi, 29.

⁵ Willowdale: Canadian Federation of Independent Business, 1998, pp. 32-33.

⁶ Freedom is not the opposite of being in jail or "getting caught"; freedom is a positive way of life. And unlike the line in the popular song *Me and Bobby McGee*, *freedom* is not "just another word for nothing left to lose"; freedom is a gift that repays effort.

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