

The National Employability Skills Program for offenders: A preliminary investigation

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Offender employment has played a pivotal role in correctional programming since the introduction of prisons. While offender employment originally served as a punitive mechanism, it is now recognized as a potential means of rehabilitation and community reintegration.² Research indicates that offenders with a history of unstable employment are at an elevated risk for re-offending compared to offenders with a history of stable employment.³ Employment constitutes a major need area among incarcerated Canadian federal offenders. Approximately 75% of offenders are identified as having employment needs upon admission.⁴ As a result, addressing the employment needs of offenders is an integral component in assisting offenders with their reintegration efforts.

Employability skills

The prevalence of offender employment needs and the link between unstable employment history and re-offending show the importance of providing offenders with employment-specific programs. Research demonstrates that employment programs for offenders are successful in reducing negative offender behaviour during incarceration, reducing post-release recidivism, and increasing employment opportunities in the community.⁵ Traditionally, employment programs in prisons focused on teaching offenders trade-specific skills. In recent years, the focus has shifted to helping offenders develop or improve general employability skills that can be applied to diverse job and work situations.⁶ Teaching offenders these skills increases the probability that they will successfully procure and retain employment upon release into the community.

Employability skills refer to a set of proficiencies, attitudes and abilities considered by employers when examining potential job candidates. These skills include communication, problem solving, managing information, using numbers, working with others, leadership abilities, adaptability, demonstrating positive attitudes and behaviours, being responsible, participating in projects and tasks and working safely. National surveys with employers of all types have identified these skills as relevant to any work situation. Companies of

all sizes and types emphasize the importance of possessing these generic proficiencies as they represent a set of skills and a level of flexibility that are necessary in today's diverse and constantly evolving market place.⁷ Furthermore, survey results indicate that generic employability skills are typically valued above job-specific skills.⁸ In response to these findings, the Correctional Service Canada (CSC) established the National Employability Skills Program (NESP) to help offenders acquire or improve their level of generic employability skills.

Program characteristics

Under the auspice of Corcan, the NESP was created by the Conference Board of Canada to assist offenders with developing their generic employability skills in accordance with the Employability Skills 2000⁹ and accepted community standards. In the program, major emphasis is placed on the areas of communication, problem solving, managing information, developing positive attitudes and behaviours, workplace adaptability, and working with others. The NESP is delivered to incarcerated male federal offenders in a group format composed of approximately ten offenders. The program is divided into 15 sessions of 2 to 2.5 hours for a total duration of 30 to 37.5 hours. Typically, the program is delivered 3 to 4 times per week. As part of the program, over 100 exercises are completed during group sessions or as homework assignments. These exercises are intended to help reshape offender's attitudes towards themselves, others, and the workplace, as well as improve related interpersonal skills and behaviours.

Offenders' work placement supervisors have an integral role in the program. They provide feedback to participants concerning their current level of functioning with regards to employability skills and they suggest areas where improvement may be needed. Furthermore, the supervisors provide an independent assessment and corroboration of the offenders self-ratings of their employability skills. As a result, it is necessary for the offender to be employed prior to and for the whole duration of the program.

Methodology

The 2004 NESP demonstration project included 29 male offenders from four institutions across Canada. Of the 29 offenders who began the program, 24 successfully completed all 15 sessions. Offenders were selected for the program on the basis of grade 9 functioning in English and mathematics, eligibility for release within 5 years, and a need in the area of employment. The majority of NESP participants were rated as high (54%) criminal risk and high (75%) criminogenic needs at intake. Seventy-five percent of the participants were identified as having some or considerable difficulty with respect to the employment need domain, while a minority (25%) were rated as having no current difficulty. Specifically, 19 participants did not have a specific employment skill, trade or profession, 17 were unemployed at the time of arrest, and 18 had an unstable work history.

Each participant was interviewed by the program facilitator to explain the purpose of the NESP and to increase motivation and interest in the program. Once the offender accepted to participate, the *Program Interview Assessment* was completed. The *Program Interview Assessment* is a semi-structured interview completed by the program facilitator. It assesses offenders' understanding of employment planning, knowledge, skills and preparation. Each question is rated on a 3-point scale ranging from "poor" to "good" based on the level of detail and relevance of the offender's responses. Higher scores are indicative of a greater understanding of issues related to post-release employment. The interview was conducted prior to the start of the program to establish the offender's level of employment-related knowledge and preparation. Following program completion, the interview was re-administered to each participant to evaluate gains.

To measure the level of gains in employability skills, program participants and work supervisors completed the *Employability Skills Evaluator*. This instrument was specifically designed for the NESP to provide an assessment of the eleven essential generic employability skills described earlier. There are 2 versions of this instrument. One version is a self-report completed by program participants at the beginning, mid-point, and end of the program. The participant is asked to provide a description for each of the 11 skills and then to rate their competence on that skill ranging from "need to improve" to "really good". The other version is completed by work supervisors at the mid-point of the program. The eleven skills are rated by the supervisors on six common dimensions: awareness; understanding;

comfort level; personal commitment; consistency of application; and leadership. The instrument is scored on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "novice" to "distinguished". Higher scores are indicative of advanced skill levels.

Results

Results from the *Program Interview Assessment* revealed significant increases from pre to post program for three of the four employment areas. Offenders demonstrated gains on their understanding of the importance of planning for post-release employment, resolving problems with employers and colleagues, and developing necessary skills to keep or advance in current employment.

With regards to gains on employability skills, there was a significant increase from pre to post program on 3 of the 11 subcomponents of the participant rated Employability Skills Evaluator. Specifically, offenders showed significant improvement on communication, management of information, and the demonstration of positive work-related attitudes and behaviours. Results on the remaining 8 subcomponents showed an increase in the expected direction but did not reach statistical significance. This lack of significance was most likely due to the small sample size.

Further analyses were conducted to examine the level of correspondence between the offenders' self-ratings and their work supervisors' ratings of their employability skills. The results indicated an overall significant positive correlation between the participants' total scores on their final employability skills self-evaluation and the total scores on their work supervisors' ratings. In other words, towards the end of the program, the offenders' self-perceptions of their own employability skills were in agreement with the independent ratings provided by their work supervisors.

Discussion

The results from this preliminary investigation into the effectiveness of the NESP indicate that the program was successful in helping participants improve their employability skills. Participants demonstrated positive increases in the areas of post-release employment planning, resolving problems with employers and colleagues, and understanding of the skills they need to keep or advance in their current employment. In addition, participants showed gains on all the eleven essential generic employability skills that were determined by employers as necessary to succeed in today's work place.

An important preliminary result is the independent corroboration by work supervisors of the offenders' level of employability skills. There was an increasing level of correspondence from program start to finish between work supervisors assessments and offenders self-assessment of employability skills. This result indicates that in addition to actual improvement in their skills, offenders also became more accurate in their self-evaluations of their employability skills. This preliminary finding indicates that offenders became more realistic in their self-assessment of employment abilities and expectations and consequently better prepared for their future employment.

Conclusion

While preliminary, this investigation showed that the NESP achieved its intended results. Future research is required to ascertain whether these improvements in generic employability skills, attitudes and behaviours will be maintained over time. As well, additional research is still required to determine the ultimate effect of the program on the ability of offenders to secure and retain employment upon their return to the community. At this time, however, the positive results of this preliminary investigation into CSC's National Employability Skills program indicate that it is a valuable intervention to help offenders improve their ability to successfully reintegrate into the community. ■

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² Gaes, G. G., Flanagan, T. J., Motiuk, L. L., & Stewart, L. (1999). Adult correctional treatment. In M. Tonry & J. Petersilia (Eds.), *Prisons* (pp. 361-346). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

³ Motiuk, L. L. (1996). Targeting employment patterns to reduce offender risk and need. *Forum on Corrections Research*, 8(1), 22-24.

⁴ Gillis, C. (2000). Reconceptualizing offender employment. *Forum on Corrections Research*, 12(2), 32-35.

⁵ Op. Cit., Gaes, G. G., et. al. (1999).

⁶ Cotton, K. (1993). Developing Employability Skills. School Improvement Research Series. Regional Educational Laboratory. www.nwrel.org/scpd/sirs/8/c015.html

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Fabiano, E., LaPlante, J., & Loza, E. (1996). Employability: From research to practice. *Forum on Corrections Research*, 8(1), 25-28.

⁹ Employability Skills Toolkit for the Self Managing Learner. (2000). The Conference Board of Canada. www.conferenceboard.ca

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