

## Employability: From research to practice

The arguments for continuing or even expanding prison industry programs are based on the role of these programs in preparing offenders for successful reintegration into the community. For example, a recent U.S. Federal Bureau of Prisons study suggests that prison work and training programs have a significant positive impact on offenders.<sup>(2)</sup>

The results suggest that inmates who work in federal prison industries adjust better to prison, are less likely to return to prison within their first year of release, are more likely to find a post-release job, and are likely to earn slightly more money in their real-world job than offenders with similar characteristics who did not participate in work or vocational training programs while incarcerated.

However, this research has not only demonstrated the potential positive effects of correctional work programs, it has also provided some insight into why they are effective.

This article examines how recent research has prompted the Correctional Service of Canada to shift the focus of its offender employment programs from simple shop participation to encouraging offenders to acquire employability skills. The article also describes the mechanics of this shift, as well as its potential implications.

### What do employers want?

Several recent initiatives have tried to define and understand the employability skills that are required and most desired by real-world employers. Employability refers to generic skills, attitudes and abilities that employers consider when looking for potential employees.

For example, the Conference Board of Canada compiled a list of the critical skills required in the Canadian workforce.<sup>(3)</sup> Their Employability Skills Profile outlines basic skills for employability—the skills needed to get, keep and progress in a job. This list has three categories: academic skills (such as thinking and learning), personal management skills (such as responsibility and adaptability) and teamwork skills.

A similar list was developed by the U.S. Labour Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills.<sup>(4)</sup> The commission divided necessary skills into two groups: foundation skills (such as personal qualities) and workplace competencies (such as interpersonal skills and managing information). This breakdown is currently being widely used to examine links between education and the workforce.

### The CORCAN experience

The increased use of employability concepts by both the academic community and private industry<sup>(5)</sup> has prompted CORCAN to closely examine the effects of the Canadian Prison Industries Program on offenders.

Several studies were, therefore, launched in 1993 to develop a better understanding of offender work attitudes and behaviour in the CORCAN work environment. The goal was to link these attitudes and behaviours to competency skills, measure offender work performance more meaningfully and determine how supervisors can positively affect offender attitudes and behaviours.

### Assessing work attitudes and values

The initial study examined the work attitudes of offenders employed by CORCAN.<sup>(6)</sup> It also examined the relationship between work attitudes and offender work performance. Offenders should be better prepared to find and keep a job in the real world if they develop attitudes that make them effective employees.

If positive work attitudes result in better work performance, this should also lead to improved CORCAN production. In short, positive work attitudes should result in both effective correctional intervention and good business practices.

Work attitudes were found to be interrelated. Offenders who found work motivating also tended to feel more involved in their job, responsible for their work and confident in their capabilities and competence. Further, feelings of involvement, responsibility and competency decreased the likelihood that offenders would express criminal sentiments (such as identifying with other criminals and tolerating law violations).

The study also indicated that the more offenders felt responsible for their work and endorsed a work ethic, the higher they were rated by supervisors as to their dependability, cooperation, safety awareness and quality of work.

These results are important as they demonstrate a link between offender attitudes and independent observations of their work performance. The results also focus and define "work attitudes" in a correctional industries context-it means attitudes specifically related to work competencies, rather than opinions about work in general. This is an important first step toward understanding the offender work attitudes that work supervisors should focus on.

### Profiles of work performance

A second study identified the general work skills that contribute to offender work performance and developed measures that could be applied consistently to work in CORCAN.<sup>(7)</sup>

The goal was to identify a base set of performance measures that could then be used to communicate effectively with offenders about their work performance.

The collective experience of more than 150 CORCAN supervisors was used to define quality of work, cooperation, dependability, communication, safety awareness and initiative. CORCAN supervisors provided actual examples that were used to construct rating scales for each of the six performance

measures.

CORCAN supervisors can now use these performance measures to help offenders better understand what behaviours are important to doing a good job and to help offenders meet these work performance goals.

### Supervisor leadership characteristics

A third study examined the CORCAN supervisor leadership characteristics and the effect of these characteristics on offenders.<sup>(8)</sup> This study built on earlier research<sup>(9)</sup> that demonstrated the positive effects of leadership training for shop supervisors.

Twenty-seven supervisors were asked to rate their leadership behaviour and their attitudes about working with offenders and corrections in general. More than 100 offenders were also asked to rate a variety of factors including their supervisor's leadership behaviour and credibility.

Both supervisors and offenders stated that CORCAN supervisors used active and effective forms of leadership more often than other forms of leadership.

The more supervisors indicated that they used active leadership behaviours, the more positive their attitudes about corrections. Further, the more active the supervisor's leadership behaviour, the more offenders were motivated by work, found work meaningful, felt responsible for their work and were absorbed in their jobs.

Finally, the more offenders believed that their supervisors used active leadership behaviours, the more supervisors were considered to be credible, trustworthy and competent, and the more willing the offender was to exert extra effort.

The study, therefore, suggests that the role of CORCAN supervisors can be more than just managing the work of offenders. Supervisors can influence the meaning of work. As such, the study argues that CORCAN supervisors should receive leadership training, with an emphasis on active leadership.

### Moving from research to practice

The skills required for any job can be organized into a three-layer pyramid. The base is made up of adaptive skills, which are learned through work and life experience. These skills include many of the factors identified in the Conference Board of Canada's Employability Skills Profile, such as being a reliable worker or a team player.

The second level focuses on functional skills. These skills allow a person to relate effectively to information (analytical skills), people (interpersonal skills) or things (technology skills).

The top level of the pyramid is made up of job-specific skills, such as trade- and occupation-specific skills.

The levels of the pyramid reflect the degree to which the skills are transferable. The job-specific skills at the top are the least transferable, while the adaptive skills at the base apply to most jobs. The employability skills discussed earlier would be located in the two lower levels of the pyramid, as they are the basic skills needed for job success.

There is no guarantee that offenders with specific job skills will find jobs. However, if they have good work habits, are adaptable and can learn quickly, they are likely to find jobs somewhere and receive on-the-job training.

As such, CORCAN's focus has shifted from merely employing offenders in CORCAN shops to helping offenders acquire employability skills.

CORCAN is, therefore, considering using a behaviour-based instrument to measure offender performance, as well as leadership models that encourage offenders to use their newly developed skills, work habits and attitudes on the shop floor and beyond.

CORCAN also plans to increasingly share information with the Service's case manager to work toward the safe and successful re-integration of offenders into society.

CORCAN supervisors are the key

CORCAN supervisors have important personal relationships with offenders. As such, they are in a position to have a significant positive impact on offenders.

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**Figure 1**

**Employability**

Using the above rating on work performance and your observations, rate the offender's progress on employability. Where you indicate that the offender requires improvement within the category, circle the item(s) that require improvement. Any suggestions you have or information you wish to include that would help the offender's progress can be noted in the observation section. The rating "Progressing well" within any one category indicates that the offender is generally able to meet the spirit of all indicators. At the least, within a specific category, he/she is working and showing improvement on all dimensions.

Academic Skills	Problem Solving	Creative Thinking	Positive Attitudes and Behaviours	Responsibility	Adaptable – Able to Learn	Teamwork – Working With Others
<p>Offender is literate:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>offender can read and understand written material such as incoming mail, orders for goods, graphs, displays, etc.</li> <li>offender can write work orders, can write out instructions, recommendations, record observations, etc.</li> </ul>	<p>Able to recognize and define problems:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>can effectively evaluate situations</li> <li>can solve problems, make decisions</li> <li>can effectively use technology/instruments and tools (i.e., computer systems)</li> <li>can effectively access and apply specialized knowledge (specific information) to solve problems</li> <li>can implement solutions and knows how to track and evaluate findings or outcome</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>able to come up with new approaches to solve problems/new approaches to product development</li> <li>able to come up with creative solutions that enhance productivity of work teams.</li> <li>able to plan and manage time, dollars and other resources to achieve goals</li> <li>thinking is directed towards increasing quality, directed towards learning how to work together, helping others grow</li> <li>uses "worker creativity" to solve problems</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>has positive self-esteem – confident</li> <li>positive attitude towards work, likes to learn, good self-image, takes pride in work, motivated</li> <li>is energetic, shows initiative, and is persistent — likes to get the job done well</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>assumes responsibility willingly</li> <li>is responsible, and can set goals and priorities in work</li> <li>is accountable for actions taken</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>adaptive learner</li> <li>performs well in all situations, even when things are unpredictable or constantly changing</li> <li>has short learning curve, learns fast, can understand and manipulate new information quickly and confidently</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>has good sense of how organization works and how actions of each individual affects organization</li> <li>sees team approach as appropriate</li> <li>understands and works well within the culture of the group</li> <li>can plan and make decisions with others and can support the outcomes</li> <li>can exercise "give and take" to achieve results</li> <li>can lead when appropriate and willing to motivate co-workers to better performance</li> </ul>

Progressing well	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Needs some improvement	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Needs a lot of improvement	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

For example, they can provide offenders with a sense of purpose, increase their awareness of positive values and beliefs, and promote problem-solving.

Attention is, therefore, now being focused on the important role of CORCAN supervisors (and CORCAN itself) in responding to the overall needs of offenders.

For example, the Offender Work Performance Scale was designed to give CORCAN supervisors a simple way of communicating offender progress to case managers.

The Offender Work Performance Scale expands on the six performance measures identified earlier to include a broader range of employability skills. These include academic, problem-solving, teamwork and creative thinking skills, as well as positive attitudes and behaviours such as responsibility and adaptability.

The scale is made up of the six essential performance measures, a general employability scale and a section where the supervisor can make observations about the offender's on-the-job behaviour.

Development of employability skills is measured on a behaviourally anchored three-point scale (see Figure 1). Ratings can range from "progressing well" to "needs some improvement" to "needs a lot of improvement." This instrument should ease the exchange of information between CORCAN supervisors and Service case managers.

A training program is also being developed for CORCAN supervisors that will familiarize them with other correctional programs and train them in active (transformational) leadership and interpersonal skills.

Greater supervisor participation in the management of offender correctional plans should help develop "employees" who can produce more and become more involved in the work process. Many employability skills are similar to those taught in various Service programs. The shop floor is the perfect place to put them into practice.

An important shift

Offenders play a key role in helping CORCAN meet its business objectives- they are CORCAN's labour force. As such, their skills, attitudes and behaviour in the workplace are vital to maintaining reasonable levels of productivity.

However, positive attitudes and behaviours can only be developed in an environment where offenders can practise living skills and where training designed to reduce recidivism is given in positive and credible ways. CORCAN's shift to a focus on employability skills should help create this environment.

Perhaps most important, CORCAN's shift in focus is a great opportunity for CORCAN and the Service's case managers to work together to demonstrate how a focus on employability can allay offender criminogenic factors and to incorporate this approach into overall offender treatment plans.

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(2)W. G. Saylor and G. G. Gaes, "The Post-release Employment Project: Prison Work Has Measurable Effects on Post-release Success," *Federal Prisons Journal* (Winter, 1992).

(3)*Employability Skills Profile* (Ottawa: Conference Board of Canada, 1993).

(4)The Secretary of Labor's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills, *Learning a Living: A Blueprint for High Performance* (Washington: U.S. Department of Labor, 1992).

(5)A. P. Carnevale, L. J. Gainer and A. S. Meltzer, *Workplace Basics* (U.S.A: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1990).

(6)M. Getkate, *The CORCAN Offender Work Attitude Survey* (Ottawa: Correctional Service of Canada, 1994).

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