

Generic and employability skills for inmates

A 1991 draft proposal for the revitalization of vocational programs in the Correctional Service of Canada's Prairie Region called for a re-examination of institutional vocational programs. It argued that program resources were being cut, so more cost-effective approaches were required. The proposal also pointed out that most vocational programs were devoted to trade certification, yet very few inmates ultimately seek employment in the trade areas in which they have been trained.

The proposal's ultimate thrust was straightforward—either abandon vocational programs or change them so that they are resource-efficient and effective. The proposal further recommended that vocational programs shift their emphasis away from job-specific skills toward generic employability skills, attitudes and knowledge.

Such an approach makes a great deal of sense in a rapidly changing labour market. Since diverse values and interests can lead to hundreds of occupational options, the role of the Service could be to help inmates establish the groundwork for such flexibility.

This approach does not preclude the possibility of offering job-specific training. It merely shifts the programming emphasis to transferable skills that can be applied to a variety of jobs.

This article chronicles this shift in philosophy by setting out the goals and structure of the new Skills for Employment Program, and examining its results thusfar.

Background In response to the draft proposal, the Correctional Service of Canada decided to pursue an innovative approach to providing vocational programming and employment skills to inmates. In 1993, the Service contracted the Centre for Career Development Innovation (Concordia College, Edmonton) to develop a series of on-the-job training guides for Drumheller Institution. Twenty-seven training guides were developed for a variety of occupational roles that currently exist within the institution. The centre also developed an employment skills and career planning workbook for classroom use. This workbook would assist inmates in identifying and developing the skills needed to make a successful transition back into the community.

The resulting Skills for Employment Program was piloted for approximately one year at Drumheller Institution. Following this pilot, it was decided that other institutions in the Prairie Region (Edmonton Institution, Bowden Institution and Saskatchewan Penitentiary) would adopt the model and modify it to suit their needs.

Program goals The main goal of the Skills for Employment Program was to develop a package of on-the-job training guides for various occupational roles within Drumheller Institution. These guides would outline the job-specific skills needed by inmates to be effective on the job and competitive in the Alberta labour market.

As the trainee demonstrates competence in each skill, the work supervisor and the trainee agree on the trainee's level of competence. When all the skills in the guide have been mastered, the trainee is awarded a certificate of competency from Concordia College.

Another goal was to give inmates the opportunity to study and practise basic employability skills in a classroom-based employment skills and career planning program.

Methodology The Centre for Career Development Innovation and J. A. Smith Research and Consulting Services recently completed a major study on entry-level employability skills for Alberta Career Development and Employment. This study contains the most current Alberta-specific information on employability characteristics.

The study was used to identify 42 employability competencies for the Skills for Employment Program's employability curriculum, as well as the skills, attitudes and knowledge required to achieve those competencies.

The employability curriculum included components from an existing centre curriculum, a curriculum developed for (and tested in) Drumheller Institution, and components that emerged from the entry-level study. The curriculum was designed so that inmates can proceed at their own pace and review their own progress. Each module contains instructions, activities, review exercises and self-test materials.

Generic vocational competencies were targeted by analyzing the work of a variety of authors and researchers and by analyzing generic competencies identified by the centre in diverse areas such as tourism, environmental sciences and business services. The results of these analyses were validated by a regional committee.

The generic skill curriculum was developed in the same manner as the employability curriculum. However, since the centre did not have existing curriculum materials that could be modified to suit the incarceration context, all booklets were developed directly from the competencies identified through profiles of individuals who display and use generic skills.

The facilitator guides for each curriculum included descriptions of the program philosophy, group activities, on-the-job activities, and competency assessment tools and procedures. The facilitator guides were targeted at both the proposed vocational development coordinator and the on-the-job institutional supervisors.

Outcome Occupational profiles were developed for 27 occupational roles or jobs in the various areas of inmate employment, such as CORCAN, Education and Training, and Food Services (see Table 1).

Table 1

Areas of Inmate Employment at Drumheller Institution	
Autobody worker	Baker
Bricklayer	Bulletin/Sign painter
Cabinet maker/Carpenter	Cleaner
Electrician	Food server
Food preparation worker	Groundskeeper
Inmate committee member	Laundry worker

Library	Garage service worker
Meat cutter	Office clerk/Manager
Peer counsellor	Plumber
Industrial painter	Printer/Graphic artist
Recreational worker	Retail clerk
Sheetmetal worker	Warehouse worker
Upholstery worker	Welder
Instructional assistant in adult education	

These profiles were written after in-depth interviews with experts identified by employers in the community. The profiles identified the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to obtain employment in each area at the *entry level*.

In addition, the experts identified a wide range of skills for each occupational role. To help determine an appropriate order for teaching and development, the experts split the skills into three categories:

- Essential skills: skills that an individual must have to be considered for a job vacancy.
- Competitive skills: skills that the employer expects potential employees to have in addition to essential skills. An individual with such skills is in a competitive position for a job vacancy.
- Very competitive skills: skills that the majority of applicants do not have, but that give a job seeker an advantage over other applicants.

After developing the occupational profiles, the institutional program supervisors most involved in teaching and supervising inmates in each occupational area reviewed the profiles to determine whether these roles had any unique aspects in the institution.

This feedback was used to finalize the occupational profiles. Training guides for each profile were then developed. In addition, supervisor resource materials and an inmate information sheet were produced.

The workbook for the employment skills/ career planning course of study was also developed at this time.

This workbook identifies five groups of skills that are needed by inmates to make the transition into the community and find employment:

- Human relationship skills: self esteem, communication, assertiveness, and the ability to establish a support system, help others, work with others and overcome unfairness.
- Self-management skills: problem-solving, decision-making, appearance and dress awareness, and the ability to recognize limits, balance work and lifestyle, deal with life, and manage addictions, time, stress, anger and money.
- Planning and goal-setting skills: the ability to set career goals, try new things, accept setbacks and adapt.

- Employment skills: basic skills, job-specific skills, a positive work attitude, independence, initiative, dependability, integrity, concern for quality, motivation, commitment, and the ability to develop personal strengths and use training opportunities.
- Job search skills: preparation for the job search, job interview skills, and the ability to identify and understand the job and obtain volunteer work experience.

Program results Achievement certificates (from Concordia College) have been awarded to inmates for three levels of competence: essential skills, competitive skills and very competitive skills. A certificate is presented if the inmate trainee demonstrates the appropriate skills, knowledge and attitude in the workplace over a three-month period.

From January 1994 to July 1995, 191 skills achievement certificates were awarded: 98 for essential skills achievement, 50 for competitive skills achievement and 43 for very competitive skills achievement.

Further, roughly 225 employment skills/ career planning certificates were awarded (from Concordia College) to inmates for the completion of a three-week classroom-based training program using the employment skills / career planning workbook.

Implications for the future The Skills for Employment project is quickly becoming established in the Prairie Region as a result of its acceptance by both inmates and the staff who supervise them in the workplace.

Given the significant results of both the on-the-job training and classroom components of the Skills for Employment Program, research is needed to study short- and long-term program effects.

The National Headquarters Correctional Research and Development Sector is, therefore, currently working with field practitioners to determine the impact of this program. Certain questions must be answered. For example, are inmates obtaining employment upon release and, more important, are they maintaining employment? Further, is this program reducing recidivism?

The answers to these questions will, in large part, determine the future structure and utility of the Skills for Employment Program.

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