

————— **Research Report** —————

**Increasing Employability Related Skills Among
Federal Male Offenders: A Preliminary Analysis
Of the National Employability Skills Program**

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**Increasing Employability Related Skills Among Federal Male Offenders:
A Preliminary Analysis of the National Employability Skills Program**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study was a preliminary investigation into the effectiveness of the Correctional Service of Canada National Employability Skills Program (NESP). The NESP is an institution based program developed specifically to target employability skills, attitudes, and behaviours such as communication, problem solving, managing information, positive attitudes and behaviours, adaptability, and working with others. The goal of the NESP is to better prepare offenders to find and maintain employment in the community by equipping them with these generic employability skills. The program is comprised of 15 sessions of 2 to 2.5 hours each, delivered 3 to 4 times per week, for a total program length of 30 to 37.5 hours. The program is composed of over 100 exercises completed either in session as a group or as individually completed homework assignments. These exercises are intended to help offenders reshape their attitudes towards themselves, others, and the workplace. Program participants take an active role and work with each other, the program facilitator and their work supervisors in order to integrate classroom learning with the workplace.

The study participants consisted of 29 male adult offenders from four federal institutions. The first objective of the study was to examine whether participation in the NESP produced a positive change in the targeted attitudes and beliefs related to employment and the workplace. The second objective of the study further examined whether participants developed their employability skills and knowledge. The third objective was to examine the degree of correspondence or agreement between participants self-rated employability skills and their work supervisor evaluations of those skills.

Overall, the NESP appears to have had a positive effect on the participants. Results indicated a positive increase in participants' employability attitudes and beliefs. As well, results showed that offenders improved their skills to keep or advance in employment. Finally, results showed a good overall level of agreement between participants and work supervisors ratings on the final employability skills evaluation. Participant feedback regarding the NESP indicated that the program may benefit from a modification in the delivery format. Overall, the program successfully met its targets by increasing the non-specific generic employability skills, attitudes and behaviours of the NESP participants. The gains made in these areas apply to numerous work environments both inside the institution and in the community and therefore should increase the likelihood of post-release employment.

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INTRODUCTION

Employment is identified as an important risk factor within the offender population (Andrews & Bonta, 2003; Gillis, Motiuk, & Belcourt 1998). Research indicates that 75% of offenders (76% of men and 74% of women) were identified as having employment needs upon admission to the federal correctional system (Gillis, 2000). Furthermore, offenders with a history of unstable employment are at a much greater risk of re-offending than offenders with a history of constant employment (Motiuk, 1996).

Research shows that many offenders have varied patterns of work experience apart from institutional employment (Gaes, Flanagan, Motiuk, & Stewart, 1999; Gillis et al., 1998). Motiuk (1996) reported that two-thirds of male federal offenders (n = 12,422) were unemployed at the time of their arrest. Furthermore, the study revealed a consistent pattern between levels of employment need as determined by the Community Risk/Needs Management Scale and suspended conditional release. The Community Risk Needs Management Scale is used by parole officers to systematically identify the needs of offenders, their risk of re-offending, and any other factors which may influence successful community re-integration. Employment patterns are one of the twelve need areas assessed and is rated from “factor seen as an asset to community adjustment” to considerable need for improvement”. Specifically, there was a positive linear relationship between offender employability need and failure on conditional release. Finally, offenders themselves identify employment difficulties as contributing to their criminal behaviour and recognize the importance of employment training and employability skills for successful reintegration into society (Gillis, Robinson, & Porporino, 1996).

Employment and Recidivism

While the nature of the relationship between unemployment and the onset of criminal behaviour remains unclear, several studies found a link between continuing criminal behaviour and unemployment. May (1999) studied the records of over 7000 offenders in England and Wales starting community sentences in 1993. The results revealed that unemployed offenders were significantly more likely to be reconvicted within two years than offenders who were employed. Similarly, Motiuk and Brown (1993) reported nearly half (47.4 percent) of the federally released male offender sample (n = 573) they examined had an unstable job history.

During the six month follow-up period, approximately 30 percent of this subgroup was suspended on release.

Recent meta-analyses confirmed employment as a moderately strong predictor of offender recidivism (Gendreau, Goggin, & Gray, 1998; Gendreau, Little, & Goggin, 1996). Gendreau and his colleagues (1998) reported a mean correlation of $r = .13$ between the overall employment domain and recidivism. The employment domain is composed of seven sub-categories. Of these sub-categories, education/employment ($r = .26$), employment needs at discharge ($r = .15$), and employment history ($r = .14$) proved to be among the most powerful predictors of post-release recidivism (Gendreau et al., 1998).

Offender employment has played a significant role in corrections from the inception of prisons (Gaes et al., 1999; Townsend, 1996). While offender employment originally functioned as a means of punishment, in the last 15 years it became recognized as a potential means of rehabilitation and community reintegration (Gillis et al., 1996). In their review of meta-analyses and primary research studies, Gaes et al. (1999) concluded that employment programs for offenders are effective in reducing negative offender behaviour during incarceration, reducing post release recidivism, and increasing employment opportunities in the community. For example, Saylor and Gaes (1992) used a longitudinal design to determine the effects of institutional employment, vocational training, or apprenticeship training on subsequent offender behaviour. Offenders were selected as part of the study group if they had participated in industrial work within prison for a minimum period of six months prior to release, or had received in-prison vocational training, or apprenticeship training. The results revealed that offenders belonging to the study group were more likely to be employed following release, to succeed in a half-way house, and to remain in the community when compared to a matched control group. Saylor and Gaes (1997) further showed that male offenders who had participated in institutional employment were 24 percent less likely to recidivate and those who had participated in either apprenticeship or vocational training were 33 percent less likely to recidivate during the follow-up period of eight to twelve years post-release.

Employability Skills

Employability skills refer to a set of generic skills, attitudes and abilities considered by employers when examining potential job candidates. These skills include such things as

communication, problem solving, managing information, working with others, leadership abilities, adaptability, demonstrating positive attitudes and behaviours, and working safely. Employers are increasingly searching for candidates who demonstrate generic employability skills knowledge and are asking their current employees to develop them to perform their jobs more effectively (Bloom and Kitagawa, 1999). Moreover, survey results completed with Fortune 500 companies confirm that employers value generic employability skills above job-specific skills (Cotton, 1993). This finding holds true across small and large companies, the private and public sectors, regardless of the type of product or service being offered (Cotton, 1993).

Research also reveals that employability skills can be taught and learned with appropriate programming that specifically targets skills related to general employment (Cotton, 1993). The focus on teaching offenders general employability skills as opposed to job specific skills, has become increasingly important in the Canadian correctional employment program (Fabiano, LaPlante, & Loza, 1996). Mastering job specific skills are important for the offender's existing institutional employment, however, many offenders will not be able to find identical employment outside of the institutional setting. As a result, they require a set of generic occupational skills applicable across a diverse range of employment contexts. Therefore, in order to increase the probability that offenders will be successful in securing employment after release into the community, it is essential to provide development in employability skills that are transferable to diverse work environments. The National Employability Skills Program was created to help offenders improve their generic employability skills.

Program Description

The Correctional Service of Canada's (CSC) National Employability Skills Program (NESP) was designed by The Conference Board of Canada to assist offenders with developing their employability skills, attitudes and behaviours. The curriculum is designed in accordance with the skills, attitudes and behaviours outlined in the Employability Skills 2000+ (Employability Skills Toolkit, 2000) and accepted standards in the community. These areas include communication, problem solving, managing information, positive attitudes and behaviours, adaptability, and working with others. The NESP is divided into 15 sessions of 2 to 2.5 hours for a total program length of 30 to 37.5 hours. The program is composed of over 100

exercises which are completed as in session activities and homework assignments during the 3 to 4 scheduled sessions per week. These exercises are intended to help reshape offender's attitudes towards themselves, others, and towards the workplace. The NESP is intended to be delivered within the federal institutions to small groups of approximately 10 offenders. Offenders must have concurrent employment to be eligible for the NESP as the work supervisor plays an integral role in successful completion of the program. Other NESP participation criteria include: grade 9 functioning in English and mathematics, eligibility for release within 5 years, and a need in the area of employment.

Current Study

This preliminary investigation explored whether the NESP effectively teaches employability related skills and attitudes. The following short term research questions were considered in determining program effectiveness.

1. Did the program produce change in the attitudes and beliefs related to employment?
2. Did the program increase employability knowledge and skills as measured before and after the program?
3. Did the participants' self evaluations of employability skills correspond to their work supervisors' evaluations of those skills?

METHOD

Participants

The NESP demonstration project was conducted in July and August 2004 and included 29 male offenders from four institutions across Canada. Of the 29 offenders who began the NESP, 24 successfully completed the 15 session program and 5 dropped out. The participants' demographic information is presented in the Results section.

Data Sources

Data was made available from two sources, the Offender Management System (OMS) and from interviews and assessment instruments. The OMS is an automated database used to compile and maintain offender records by Correctional Service Canada (CSC). The database includes offender information ranging from demographics to institutional conduct and intake risk and needs assessment. Although the OMS is maintained mostly for administrative purposes, the database allows for the extraction of essential information for conducting research. The interviews and assessment measures were completed at the NESP program site by the participants, work supervisors and program facilitators. All forms including assessment measures, activities and homework assignments were forwarded to NHQ upon completion of the NESP. Descriptions of the assessment measures are provided below.

Program Assessment Measures

Employability Skills Evaluator

The Employability Skills Evaluator Instrument was designed as part of the NESP to measure the offender's level of attainment with regards to the employability skills, attitudes and behaviours (ESABs) targeted by the program. The measure is completed by the work supervisor at the mid-point of the program and contains three subscales; Fundamental Skills, Personal Management Skills, and Teamwork Skills. The eleven skills included in the instrument are measured on six common dimensions: awareness; understanding; comfort level; personal commitment; consistency of application; and leadership using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from novice to distinguished. Higher scores indicate advanced skill level. Psychometric data is unavailable for this newly developed measure.

Employability Skills Evaluator (Self-Assessment)

The Employability Skills Evaluator Instrument (Self-Assessment) measures the offender's self-perceived level of attainment with regards to the skills, attitudes and behaviours (ESABs) targeted by the program. The participant is asked to provide a description for each of the 11 skills (e.g. communicate, manage information, use numbers, etc.) and then to rate their competence on that skill ranging from "need to improve" to "really good". The self-rated scale is completed at the beginning, mid-point, and end of the treatment program. Psychometric data is unavailable for this newly developed measure.

Occupational Self-Efficacy Index

The Occupational Self Efficacy Index Instrument is a self-rated, twenty-nine item measure concerning the ability to learn, adapt, and be productive in a flexible work environment. Responses are provided on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from worse than most workers (1) to better than most workers (5). Excellent internal reliability ($\alpha = .94$) and construct validity has been reported for this questionnaire.

Program Interview Assessment

The Program Interview Assessment is a semi-structured interview assessment composed of four questions related to employment planning, knowledge, skills, and preparation. Questions are rated on a 3-point scale by the program facilitator. Higher scores indicate increased understanding and detailed responses with regards to post release employment.

Procedure

Each participant was initially seen for a screening interview during which the treatment facilitator explained the purpose of the NESP and attempted to build-up motivation and interest in the program. Participants were asked to read and sign the consent for research form if they wished to participate in the NESP. The program interview assessment was conducted for those offenders who agreed to participate in order to determine the participant's level of employment related knowledge and preparation before entering the program. In addition, the facilitator

discussed the expectations related to program participation and the times and dates for the fifteen sessions.

Following the fifteen sessions each participant was seen for a post-program interview during which the program interview assessment was re-administered. All forms including assessment measures, activities and homework assignments were forwarded by the program facilitator to NHQ for research purposes.

RESULTS

Offender Profiles

Descriptive information is provided in this section for all offenders who started the NESP pilot study and for whom information was available. Offender profile information was extracted from the offender management system and is subdivided into three sections, demographic information, employment information, and criminal history. The demographic variables of the NESP participants are compared to the general population of offenders who were in prison in 2001 (National Comparison Group) in order to determine if our sample was representative of federally incarcerated offenders.

Demographic Information

The NESP participants were 55% Caucasian, 31% Aboriginal, and 14% Black. Compared to the National Comparison Group, Caucasians were under-represented (55% vs. 72%) and Aboriginals were over-represented (31% vs. 17%). Slightly less than half (44%) were married or living common law, 41% were single, 7% were divorced, and 7% were either widowed or unknown. Marital status of the NESP participants at intake was comparable to that of the National Comparison Group. Information concerning education was available for 25 of the 29 participants. Approximately half (48%) of the 25 offenders had completed grade 10 at the high-school level. The current age of the participants ranged from 21 to 47 years of age, with a mean age of 32.

Table 1: Racial Composition and Marital Status of NESP Participants

	Number	% Percent
Racial Composition		
Caucasian	16	55
Aboriginal	9	30
Black	4	14
Marital Status		
Common Law / Married	13	45
Single	12	41
Married	3	10
Divorced	2	7
Widowed / Unknown	2	7

Criminogenic Needs

The majority of the 28 participants for whom information was available were rated as high criminal risk (54%), followed by medium (29%) and low (17%) criminal risk. Most NESP participants were classified as having high (75%) criminogenic needs at intake, thus targeting the appropriate offenders with regards to the risk and need principles. In terms of specific dynamic domains, 79% were identified as having some or considerable difficulty with substance abuse and 71% for associates.

In terms of employment needs, 75% were rated as having some or considerable difficulty. Specifically, nineteen of the twenty five participants (76%), for which data was available, did not have a specific skill area, trade, or profession. Seventeen of twenty five (68%) were unemployed at the time of arrest and eighteen of twenty five (72%) had an unstable work history.

Table 2: Criminogenic Need Domains of NESP Participants

	No current Difficulty	Some Difficulty	Considerable Difficulty	Considered an Asset
Employment	25%	43%	32%	-
Substance Abuse	21%	32%	47%	-
Marital / Family	43%	25%	32%	-
Associates	28%	36%	36%	-
Community Functioning	50%	39%	7%	4%
Personal / Emotional	7%	29%	64%	-
Attitude	32%	43%	21%	4%

Criminal History

With regards to criminal offences, approximately eighty percent had committed a violent offence (82.8%) and just over seventy five percent had committed a property offence (75.9%). A marginal number of offenders had committed either a drug (17.2%) or sexual (6.9%) offence.

Pre-Post Program Assessment

Program Interview Assessment

The program interview evaluation was analyzed with a series of Wilcoxon Paired tests. This test allows for comparisons between scores on the interview questions obtained before and

after participation in the employability skills program. These questions provide an index of relative improvement in employment planning, knowledge, skills, and preparation. The mean ranks on the pre and post program interview evaluation for each of the four questions were analyzed as a paired sample. Mean rank scores for the post program interview questions were found to be significantly higher for three of the four employment related questions (see Table 3), indicating positive changes for post release employment plan, resolving problems with employers and colleagues, and necessary skills to keep or advance in current employment.

Table 3: Wilcoxon Signed Rank Tests on the Program Interview Assessment

	Pre (Mean Rank)	Post (Mean Rank)	z
Program Interview Assessment			
Post Release Employment Plan	8.50	9.11	2.59*
Teamwork (Application and understanding)	4.50	5.93	1.51
Resolving problems with employer /colleague	3.50	7.10	2.56*
Skills to keep or advance in employment	7.50	8.57	3.29*

* $p < .01$.

Occupational Self-Efficacy Index

The Occupational Self-Efficacy Index (OSEI) was analyzed in an analysis of variance (ANOVA) with time of measurement (pre-test vs. post-test) as a within-subjects factor. The main effect of time of measurement was not significant, $F(1,23) = 0.12$, $p < .70$. This insignificant increase in the total OSEI score from pre to post test (113.94 to 114.92) may be explained by the participants' initial self-ratings. The participants rated themselves highly on the initial OSEI measure, and this left very little room for improvement when the OSEI was re-administered after program completion.

Employability Skills (Self-Assessed)

The total scores on the self-assessed employability skills evaluator were analyzed in an ANOVA with time of measurement (initial vs. intermediate vs. final) as a within-subjects factor. The main effect of time of measurement was significant, $F(1,20) = 8.56$, $p < .01$. Post hoc

comparisons using the Fisher LSD test revealed that scores on the final assessment were significantly higher than scores on the intermediate and initial assessments, and scores on the intermediate assessment were significantly higher than those on the initial self assessment.

Table 4 presents results on the eleven subcomponents of the self-assessed employability skills evaluator analyzed with a series of Friedman Tests. This test allows for comparisons between the means of each subcomponent of the Employability Skills Evaluator administered at the beginning, middle and end of the NESP. Mean rank scores were significantly higher for the final assessment than for the intermediate and initial assessments for 3 out of the 11 subcomponents: Communicate; Manage Information; and Demonstrate Positive Attitudes and Behaviors. These positive increases in scores from beginning to the end of the NESP are indicative of participant gains in employability skills. While the remaining eight subcomponents did not reach significance, most likely due to the small sample size, they also demonstrated increases in the expected direction.

Table 4: Friedman Tests on the Eleven Subcomponents of the Employability Skills Evaluator (Self-Assessed)

Employability Skills Evaluator (Self-Assessment)	Mean Rank		
	Initial	Intermediate	Final
Communicate	1.58	2.05*	2.38**
Manage Information	1.86	1.86	2.29*
Use Numbers	1.75	2.13	2.13
Think and Solve Problems	1.94	1.86	2.19*
Demonstrate Positive Attitudes and Behaviours	1.71	2.11	2.18
Be Responsible	1.89	1.89	2.22
Be Adaptable	1.87	1.89	2.24
Learn Continuously	1.75	2.00	2.25
Work Safely	1.82	1.97	2.21
Work With Others	1.80	2.20	2.00
Participate in Projects and Tasks	1.71	2.24*	2.05

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$

Level of Agreement Between Self and Supervisor Rated Assessments

Analyses were conducted to determine whether there was an acceptable level of agreement between participants’ self-evaluations of employability skills and their work supervisors’ evaluations. These findings are presented in Table 5. The results indicated an overall significant positive correlation between the participants total scores on this final employability skills self-evaluation and the total score on their supervisors’ ratings ($r = .53$, $p > .05$). In other words, towards the end of the program the offenders’ self-perceptions of their own employment skills ability were in agreement with the ratings provided by their work supervisors.

The eleven individual subcomponents of the Employability Skills Evaluator were also examined to specifically determine the areas of agreement between participant and supervisor ratings. The results indicated less agreement when examining the separate components of the measure. Although most of the correlations between the participant and supervisors ratings were

increasing in the positive direction from the initial to the final self-rating, due to the small sample size only four of the eleven subcomponent correlations reached significance.

Table 5: Correlations Between Supervisor and Participant Rated Scores on the Employability Skills Evaluator

Employability Skills Evaluator (Supervisor Assessment)	Employability Skills Evaluator (Self-Assessment)		
	Initial	Intermediate	Final
TOTAL SCORE	-.03	.34	.53*
Communicate	-.05	.00	.12
Manage Information	.38	.64**	.47*
Use Numbers	.09	.47*	.41
Think and Solve Problems	.44	.31	.58*
Demonstrate Positive Attitudes and Behaviours	-.11	.03	.31
Be Responsible	.19	.07	.05
Be Adaptable	-.15	.28	.41
Learn Continuously	-.43	.36	.21
Work Safely	-.26	.27	.21
Work With Others	.06	-.16	.43*
Participate in Projects and Tasks	.20	.16	.22

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$

Post Program Participants Feedback

A review of participant feedback was conducted to ascertain whether or not the program was well received by the participants and if improvements to the NESP should be considered. A total of 16 NESP participants submitted the questionnaires concerning program content, delivery, and improvement. In general most of the respondents found the exercises to be burdensome while only a few found them to be beneficial. In particular, 14 said they were repetitive or lengthy, whereas only 5 found the exercises to be good or useful. The majority of the respondents reported the “group-work” activities as being an enjoyable (n =7) or good (n =2) aspect of the program. A minority found the activities to be repetitive (n =2). Homework assignments were generally viewed as a positive component of the NESP. The respondents

described the assignments as easy to complete (n =4) and providing insight (n =3) into the relevant applications of their newly acquired skills. A few of the participants considered the homework difficult (n =1), confusing (n =1), or repetitive (n =2).

The delivery of the NESP material by the program facilitators was reported as good or excellent (n =10) by most of the respondents. A minority (n =2) indicated that the program facilitator “did the best he could” within the circumstances of delivering a new program. A variety of suggestions were made concerning program improvement. The most common proposal was to reduce the overall repetition (n =7) and reducing paperwork was also commonly reported (n =4). Other suggestions included adding more activities (n =2), condensing the program material (n =1), integrating the NESP with another program (n =1), having a speaker come in (n =1), and making the program more job specific (n =1).

DISCUSSION

Overall Assessment

Overall, the NESP appears to have had a positive effect on the participants. The outcome measures rated by both participants and facilitators demonstrated a significant increase from pre to post program. Specifically, the results revealed positive changes in the areas of post release employment plan, resolving problems with employers and colleagues, and necessary skills to keep or advance in current employment. Furthermore, positive gains were demonstrated by NESP participants on all eleven subcomponents and total scores of the self-rated Employability Skills Evaluator. The increase on these measures are indicative of positive change in the NESP targeted attitudes and beliefs regarding employment and an increase in employability skills knowledge. These positive changes are not due to a self rating bias as results also indicated a moderate and increasing level of overall correspondence between self ratings of employability related skills by the participants and the corresponding work supervisor ratings from beginning to the end of the NESP.

The participant feedback on the NESP indicated that the program may benefit from an overall reduction in repetition of material and exercises. In class, group activities were regarded as a positive means of learning and may increase active program involvement and participation. Some minor modifications to the NESP should be considered in light of participant comments in order to make the program more fluid and less repetitive.

Study Limitations

There are several limitations to the present study which need to be mentioned, bearing in mind that this was an initial pilot study and the program is still undergoing refinements. The sample size was small and was composed of volunteer participants. The questionnaires and interview assessments utilized to measure change following program completion are newly constructed and therefore the validity and reliability have not yet been established. There is also a possibility of experimenter bias concerning the pre and post program interview assessments as they were both rated by the treatment facilitators.

Future Research

Future studies assessing the NESP would need to utilize a larger sample size and a comparison group. In addition, intermediate and long term measures relating to both

institutional and community outcome would need to be introduced to further assess program effectiveness. Future research undertakings should examine such things as institutional misconducts before and after program completion, and post release employment in the community.

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