
The 9 Essential Skills

Overview

All nine Essential Skills are used in different combinations, in different applications, in every occupation. They are the foundational skills you use to carry out your work tasks and they're the building blocks you use to learn new ones. The importance of - and need for - employees to have appropriate levels of workplace Essential Skills is clear and strong

What specifically are the Essential Skills needed in the workplace?

To help answer this question, the federal government, since 1994, has surveyed more than 3000 Canadians in workplaces in all sectors and of all types and sizes of organizations. All were asked what workplace Essential Skills they felt were needed in order for workers to be most effective, efficient and productive.

The result has been the identification of the following nine workplace Essential Skills:

- 1.) Reading
- 2.) Document Use
- 3.) Numeracy
- 4.) Writing
- 5.) Oral Communication
- 6.) Working With Others
- 7.) Thinking
- 8.) Digital Technology
- 9.) Continuous Learning

Skill 1: Reading

Reading Text is the ability to read and understand written information in many different types of workplace documents, e.g., work instructions, emails and memos, health & safety manuals & policies & reports. We use this skill to scan for information, skim for overall meaning, evaluate what we read and integrate information from multiple sources.

How we use this skill

- Scanning for information
- Skimming for overall meaning
- Critiquing or evaluating what's read
- Integrating information from multiple sources

Resistance to change or an Essential Skills need?

Despite a 25-year positive employment record at a medium-sized company, Bev had become increasingly uncooperative with the assignment of new tasks. Absenteeism became an issue and she started filing a large number of grievances.

A union representative determined that Bev's problem was likely literacy related. Based on a skills assessment, a training program was put in place and within three months Bev's improved skill level and resulting change in attitude allowed her to be a capable part of the new work process and routine.

Skill 2: Document Use

Document Use is the ability find & use the information you need, put in information where it is needed, and construct information displays: these are all document use tasks. Icons, labels, lists, tables, forms, graphs, signs, maps, gauges, images, schedules, schematics, touch screens & technical drawings are examples of documents or information displays used in a workplace. We use this skill when we read signs, labels, lists, as well as when we interpret graphs and charts.

How we use this skill

- Reading signs, labels or lists
- Interpreting graphs or charts
- Reading or creating schematic or assembly drawings

Essential Skills training key to productivity improvements

A large manufacturing firm planned to increase productivity by moving to a production line process called Demand Flow Manufacturing (DFM). This required workers to move from station to station when bottlenecks in production occurred in order to keep the line moving.

Supervisors realized that in order for a move to DFM to be successful, a number of workers on the line would need improved Essential Skills including reading and interpreting documents at each new work station. The manufacturer provided training to enhance these skills, resulting in a successful transition to their new production process.

Skill 3: Numeracy

Numeracy is the ability to use numbers and think mathematically to measure and make calculations, to estimate, to work with money, to analyze numerical trends and to create schedules and budgets.

How we use this skill

- Numerical estimating
- Money math
- Scheduling or budgeting math
- Measurement and data analysis

A training need can present itself at any time

Samantha's employer, a small service-based company, gave her a new project assignment that involved creating, tracking and reconciling the project's budget. Samantha was eager for this increased responsibility.

The project costs were calculated and adequately funded. However, when faced with creating a detailed budget including scheduling payments and tracking the cash flow, Samantha was stumped. These tasks required numeracy skills she didn't have.

Upon evaluation, Samantha's employer found that her value to his company was worth the investment in skills upgrading. He brought in an Essential Skills coach who was able to guide Samantha through the process of designing and implementing a detailed project budget, periodically offering support in tracking its activity over the project's successful duration.

Skill 4: Writing

Writing is the ability to use the written word to create a clear message. It includes non paper-based writing such as typing on a computer. We use this skill when we organize, record, document, provide information to persuade, request information from others and justify a request.

How we use this skill

- Organizing, recording or documenting
- Providing information to persuade
- Requesting information or justifying a request
- Presenting an analysis or comparison

Brief, targeted training can have a big impact

A manufacturing company recently adopted a commitment to promoting from within to fill vacant supervisor and management positions. Employees previously working in operations made the move to these senior positions but the company soon discovered a problem with their written communications skills.

These rising stars had superb technical knowledge but struggled with spelling, grammar, punctuation and clear writing. This resulted in reports and documents that frustrated the reader, were difficult to understand and carried the potential for costly or even tragic errors.

Workplace Education Manitoba conducted an assessment and determined that what was needed was brief instruction in business writing techniques with a focus on clear language. It took just 10 hours of instruction to equip the employees with the skills they needed.

Skill 5: Oral Communication

Oral Communication is the ability to talk with others to give and exchange information & ideas, such as: ask questions, give directions, coordinate work tasks, explain & persuade.

How we use this skill

- Greeting people and taking messages
- Reassuring, comforting or persuading
- Seeking information & resolving conflicts
- Facilitating or leading a group

Training can deliver unanticipated positive results

Within the extremely competitive call centre industry, one local company frequently reviews staff training needs as part of its goal of continuous improvement. Even though there were no glaring performance concerns, the company decided to include Essential Skills training for their new hires.

A needs assessment determined that effective call centre work requires a full range of oral communication skills, including speaking with confidence and providing clear and concise information using listening, questioning, reiteration and problem-solving skills.

Unexpectedly, incorporating Essential Skills into the existing training for new hires resulted in a decrease in customer dissatisfaction rates. Company officials were doubly pleased because increased customer satisfaction is often associated with higher employee satisfaction and retention.

Skill 6: Working With Others

Working With Others is the ability to lead, coordinate or collaborate with others on work activities. We use this skill when we work as a member of a team or jointly with a partner (whether in person or at a distance), and when we engage in supervisory or leadership activities.

How we use this skill

- Working as a member of a team or jointly with a partner
- Engaging in supervisory or leadership activities

Improved skills can provide tools for discovering efficiencies

A large high-tech manufacturing firm planned to launch a High Performance program to improve efficiencies across the company. This program involved forming teams of employees representing expertise from all levels to focus on improving productivity and adaptability.

Management realized staff would need Essential Skills training for this program to be truly effective. Teams would need skills such as effective listening, note taking, facilitation, problem solving and management of group dynamics.

In partnership with Workplace Education Manitoba a 30-hour training curriculum was developed and delivered. In just six months, company officials report, one team's work resulted in a \$250,000 savings to the company.

Skill 7: Thinking

Thinking is the ability to engage in the process of problem solving, job task planning and organizing, finding information, critical thinking, significant use of memory and decision-making. We use a thinking process to solve problems, organize and plan, find needed information, be logical, remember things and make decisions.

How we use this skill

- Problem solving and decision making
- Critical thinking
- Planning and organizing job tasks
- Memorizing and finding information

Recognizing a needed skill can aid job transition

After many successful years as a delivery driver for a large distribution company, George was facing a layoff. As a valued employee, management supported George's wish to move into a shipper/receiver position for the same company.

The transition was a rocky one. George found the multiple, often conflicting demands from insistent customers difficult to deal with and began experiencing symptoms of extreme stress. An Essential Skills assessment revealed that problem solving and communication training could help.

Along with communication techniques, George learned a systematic approach to sorting out problems and evaluating priorities, enabling him to cope more effectively with the demands of his new position.

Skill 8: Digital Technology

Digital Technology is the ability to use information and communication technology. We use this skill when we use a smartphone, operate cash registers, use word processing software, send emails and create and modify spreadsheets.

How we use this skill

- Operation of cash registers
- Using word processing software
- Sending e-mails
- Using a smartphone
- Creating and modifying spreadsheets

The right type of training is crucial to success

A large Manitoba company wanted to improve the efficiency of their information management system to reduce costs. The company decided to computerize processes and create electronic versions of documents such as drawings as well as equipment and specification manuals.

Three years later an internal review questioned staff's ability to effectively store, retrieve and use information electronically. Even though employees had access to in-house training sessions, progress was slow. A number of employees at all levels were still using and circulating hard copy documents, while only a handful of people were accessing materials electronically.

When Workplace Education Manitoba was contacted, their Essential Skills assessment soon determined that many of the employees did not have the baseline computer skills required to be able to absorb the new training procedures and software. A custom training curriculum designed specifically to meet the company's needs was developed and the company was quickly able to reach its goal.

Skill 9: Continuous Learning

Continuous Learning is the ability to apply strategies which support learning and the ability to adapt to change. We use this skill when we learn as part of regular work or from co-workers and when we access training in the workplace or off-site.

How we use this skill

- Learning as part of regular work activity
- Learning from co-workers
- Accessing training offered in the workplace or off-site

It's never too late to learn

Carl has a wealth of experience after more than four decades of employment as an ironworker. That's why some were surprised when he jumped at the opportunity to take optional certification training when ironwork became a recognized trade.

Carl took the training because of his desire to know the logic behind the procedures and safety precautions he had come to rely on through experience. As a foreman, Carl is responsible for devising the easiest, most efficient way to get the job done. But, he states, "Before the certification training, I wasn't always able to explain to my crew why it was the best way to do it, I just knew. Now I can explain it and that will help them to make those decisions themselves next time."