

SUBJECT: Essential Skills Training for Employment Readiness and Retention

SUBMITTED BY: Youth, Education, and Training Committee

BACKGROUND

Through extensive research, the Government of Canada and other national and international agencies have identified and validated key essential skills for the workplace. These skills are used in nearly every job at different levels of complexity. They provide the foundation for learning all other skills and enable people to evolve with their jobs and adapt to workplace change. These essential skills include: reading, writing, document use, numeracy, thinking (includes problem-solving, decision-making, critical thinking, job task planning and organizing, significant use of memory, and finding information), oral communication, working with others, continuous learning, and computer use.

The Conference Board of Canada has conducted a variety of case studies of small, medium and large companies that have invested in essential skills training for their employees. Benefits for employees noted in these studies included: increased initiative and innovation, increased independence and decision making capabilities, increased ability to adapt to change, increase in transferrable skills and work opportunities, and increased opportunities for promotion. Benefits for employers included: increased productivity, improved safety, improved employee retention, and reduced absenteeism. Within education, some benefits of workplace essential skills training have included an increased ability for educators to connect curricula to careers, work opportunities, and work environments; these connections bridge the gap between education and employment.

The Workplace Essential Skills Saskatchewan (WESS) initiative supports business and industry to train low-skilled job seekers and existing low-skilled employees in the workplace to gain the workplace essential skills needed for long-term employment and/or advancement. WESS provides funding to employer, industry and training institution partnerships for the development and delivery of essential skills training that is tailored to their workplace. Service Canada allocates funding (at the federal level) for training programs seeking to enhance transferrable, or soft skills development in youth entering the workforce.

For at least 10 years, a variety of training institutions have delivered essential skills training in Saskatchewan through various streams of funding. Current programming formats include classroom, online, and workplace based training. Within the tourism sector, Tourism Saskatchewan/STEC's Ready to Work program provides a combination of essential skills and occupational skills training to up to 300 participants a year, with close to 80% of graduates finding long term employment in tourism occupations. In

sectors with high job vacancy and a higher rate of employee turnover, results such as these show that the investment in essential skills training can translate to higher skill, labour market participation, and retention rates within the Saskatchewan labour force.

ISSUE

Canada-wide, there is concern about a “skills crisis” as well as a rising concern about transitioning youth from an educational environment to the job market. While Saskatchewan employers are challenged with a labour shortage, the unemployment rate in the province remains at 4.5%. The current workforce available in Saskatchewan needs more advanced skills training to allow them to match the demands of the provincial job market.

The Manley report to the Canadian Council of Chief Executives (2013), suggests that it is not only low skilled job seekers who require essential or “soft skills” training to increase participation and retention in the workforce. Almost 70% of Canadian companies surveyed by the Canadian Council of Chief Executives (2013) identified skill shortages as a moderate to large issue. Although workers with technical skills in a variety of areas were identified as most difficult to hire and retain, companies identified soft skills as being the qualities most important when evaluating potential new hires. The top five qualities identified by business--often termed “soft” or essential skills--were, in order of importance: people skills, communication skills, problem solving skills, analytical abilities, and leadership skills. Sixth on that list was industry specific knowledge and experience.

Saskatchewan employers are facing changing times. The experienced workers are coming up to retirement, and there are not enough skilled workers to replace them. Technology is continuing to change rapidly, and there is increasing global competition. Employers need employees who can adapt to change and quickly learn new skills and effectively use the changing technology. Employers and employees need to invest in the development of skills to meet these current and future challenges.

There are skills shortages in a variety of fields across the country, most notably, technical, IT, and skilled trades. However, a common denominator for all fields is that employers are seeking new recruits with a strong complement of “soft skills”, such as the ability to communicate, think critically, and work in teams. It is safe to say that government and education systems, as well as the business community, could play a role in preparing youth for a successful transition to the Saskatchewan workforce.

RECOMMENDED

That the Government of Saskatchewan:

- 1) Elevate the priority of essential skills and advanced skills training within the government and mobilize the whole education system for action, including efforts to enhance adult learning opportunities.

- 2) Ensure that the importance of essential skills and advanced skills training is clearly communicated to and acted upon within all relevant government ministries.
- 3) Ensure that the importance of essential skills training is clearly communicated to the public with an emphasis on secondary and post-secondary learners.
- 4) Extend the WESS initiative to provide essential skills training to all participants of secondary and post-secondary programming in Saskatchewan.
- 5) Promote the use of existing, industry developed workplace essential skills curricula with the intent of increasing a skilled Saskatchewan labour force which meets current labour market requirements.