



# Meeting the Challenge

A Guide to Working  
with Essential Skills



Government  
of Canada

Gouvernement  
du Canada

Canada

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## ESSENTIAL SKILLS...ARE EVERYDAY SKILLS

Ideas, talent, experience and drive. Canadians have the attributes to participate successfully in a knowledge society and a global economy. In order to successfully put all these qualities together for enjoyment and productivity in our life and in our work, we need another vital ingredient—Essential Skills.

We use Essential Skills every day without even thinking about them: to take part in activities of daily living and to do the tasks required in our job. Essential Skills are the basic building blocks we use to learn other, more complicated skills. Having a grounding in Essential Skills helps us to adapt to life and workplace changes. That is why they are called Essential Skills.

Essential Skills are needed in virtually all daily activities and occupations—however, they may not all be used at the same time. They are different from technical skills because they are transferable from occupation to occupation, from school to work and from one task to another. For example, both a computer programmer and a child care worker need and use writing skills. If they decide to change jobs, they would not have to learn new writing skills. The skill itself does not change—however, the complexity and how often the skill is used may vary. The child care worker may fill out attendance forms every day, while the computer programmer may update the company's annual technical manual.

Just as this Essential Skill—writing—is adaptable to many different situations, so too are all the other Essential Skills. Canadians who equip themselves with Essential Skills have a better chance of succeeding at any endeavour they undertake.

### The Importance of Integrating Essential Skills

This guide provides information on a number of programs, tools, best practices, applications, initiatives and pilot projects from across Canada. They have been brought together in a working guide to show the broad-ranging applications of Essential Skills for a variety of user groups and their usefulness for day-to-day living and the workplace.

#### Nine Essential Skills:

- Reading text
- Document use
- Writing
- Numeracy
- Oral communication
- Thinking skills, including:
  - Problem solving
  - Decision making
  - Critical thinking
  - Job task planning and organizing
  - Significant use of memory
  - Finding information
- Working with others
- Computer use
- Continuous learning

It is important to consider and integrate Essential Skills not only into self-improvement courses, but educational curricula, skills-upgrading projects and on-the-job training. Today's knowledge-based society and dynamic workplaces demand continuous skills development. Learning methods that recognize the importance of Essential Skills help bridge the gap between job and life requirements and a person's existing knowledge and skills.

#### How many?

Log on to your computer, check all the late night sport scores and talk about them with your friends.

Which Essential Skills are you using?

*Reading text, document use, numeracy, oral communication and computer use.*

## THE GOVERNMENT'S SKILLS DEVELOPMENT COMMITMENT

The Government of Canada has recognized the importance of Essential Skills and how vital they are in day-to-day life and for participation in a competitive global economy. By working in partnership with a variety of stakeholders, the government is promoting awareness of Essential Skills and addressing investment in skills development throughout the Canadian workforce and learning system.

There is a need to improve Canadians' skill development opportunities. Therefore, the Government is focused on addressing issues in a practical and easy-to-implement way.

### How many?

You are applying for entrance to your college of choice. You have to download an application from a Web site, fill out the application, prepare a cover letter and arrange for an interview with an academic counselor.

Which Essential Skills are you using?

*Reading text, document use, writing, oral communication, job task planning and organizing, and computer use.*

### About Essential Skills

The notion of Essential Skills is not new. Our earliest schools were established to teach the basic "3 R's"—Reading, Writing and Arithmetic. As knowledge grew about the importance of Essential Skills, Canada began to examine how it could identify, measure and describe the skills that people use every day, at work and in daily life.

How can we describe the difference between simple and complex tasks? What do these skills look like in different jobs? How do people know if they have the skills they need to do the job they want? Those were the questions the Essential Skills Research Project (ESRP) set out to answer in 1994. The result was the identification of Canada's nine Essential Skills, found to be common to virtually all occupations and workplaces.

The ESRP conducted more than 3000 interviews and gathered a collection of Authentic Workplace Materials—real-life materials such as forms, tables, graphs and contracts—in workplaces across Canada. Essential Skills Occupational Profiles were developed which explain how these skills are used in different jobs in Canada. The occupational profiles and the Authentic Workplace Materials form the core of the Essential Skills framework.

### The Essential Skills and Workplace Literacy Initiative

The newest Essential Skills investment—the [Essential Skills and Workplace Literacy Initiative](#)—aims to enhance the skill levels of Canadians who are entering—or are already in—the workforce. To achieve this, the Initiative increases awareness and understanding of Essential Skills, supports the development of tools and applications, builds on existing research, and works with other Government of Canada programs.

#### Who uses information about Essential Skills?

- Educators
- Curricula developers
- Cooperative education and work experience supervisors
- Prior learning and assessment (PLAR) evaluators
- Researchers
- Governments
- Adult literacy instructors
- Adult learners
- Employers
- Trainers
- Career counsellors and human resources managers
- Workers
- Job seekers
- Students
- Apprentices
- Labour organizations and unions
- Parents
- Writers and publishers of career resources

## ESSENTIAL SKILLS IN ACTION

### Putting Essential Skills to Work

All jobs and walks of life in Canada are requiring increasingly higher levels of numeracy, thinking skills, oral communication, computer use and other Essential Skills—to participate in job-related training or move up to the next level at school.

The workplace is becoming more complex. More environmental and safety regulations, less supervision and the requirement to prepare written reports make the development of Essential Skills a must. Thus, everyone with an interest in developing skills for life, learning and work will find this guide to be a practical and useful resource.

“Boeing Canada recognizes the need to identify and strengthen Essential Skills programming in the workplace. We have created programs which identify particular needs of our employees including our Deaf and ESL populations and address those needs through gap training in order to elevate the levels of Essential Skills which are necessary for employees to perform their jobs. We have experienced solid success with these special programs, which have resulted in increased employee confidence and morale and overall in a more productive workforce. We view the focus on Essential Skills as an integral part of our continuing success.”

Herman Hansen, Manager of Training & Development, Boeing Canada Technology

The Essential Skills framework recognizes that people are our greatest resource, and that their skills and knowledge are our greatest leverage. But no one government, group or organization can build the workforce and the skills we need on its own. That is why we are inviting all stakeholders—business, industry, the learning system, other levels of government, commercial enterprises and individual Canadians themselves—to work in an energetic new partnership to take the skills challenge head on.

Great strides are already being made. The Essential Skills framework has inspired groups across Canada to develop complementary tools and applications. Today, these innovations are helping Canadians to close the skills gap, and obtain, maintain and advance in their jobs.

### Making use of this Guide

*Meeting the Challenge: A Guide to Working with Essential Skills* highlights why Essential Skills are pertinent and practical for:

- Educators.
- Employers.
- Governments.
- Human resources and career professionals.
- Sector councils.
- Students, job seekers and workers.

The **Essential Skills in action** scenarios show how various organizations and groups across the country have already taken on the Essential Skills challenge. These scenarios—from industry, the learning system, provincial governments, the private sector and others—demonstrate the wide array of applications that Essential Skills have for daily life, for learning opportunities, and for meeting the changing needs of Canadian workplaces.

If you are interested in initiating or adapting an Essential Skills innovation of your own, Web sites and E-mail addresses have been provided to learn more about the developers or the projects. We hope their ideas spark yours!

Note: Some tools highlighted in this guide are commercial products and are identified with an asterisk (\*).

## ESSENTIAL SKILLS IN ACTION...for Educators

Essential Skills can help teachers and community- and workplace-based trainers connect what they teach to careers, work opportunities and work environments. Essential Skills can also help them to develop curricula and activities for the learning system, the community and the workplace.

For example, educators might want to find out how a skill they teach (e.g. math) is used in a particular occupation, to get ideas for developing classroom activities, or to prepare for visits to workplaces, guest speakers, career fairs and internships. Community and workplace-based trainers may also add to their existing curricula with task-based activities taken from workplaces to show the relevance and applicability of the skills they teach.

### *Essential Skills Occupational Profiles*

Teachers and community- and workplace-based trainers use profiles to find information on how the nine Essential Skills are used in occupations. You can use this information to help develop curricula, or prepare students for visits to workplaces, career fairs, panels, guest speakers and internships, and to help identify and select a potential work site.

Profiles provide example tasks and their complexity levels. These descriptions use standard categories such as the type of materials that are read (e.g. memos, regulations and books) or the mathematical foundations used (e.g. decimals, ratios and geometry).

You will also find real work examples to give you ideas for classroom activities and to show the relevance of what you are teaching. They are also useful when helping to set targets for a learning plan in relation to a specific occupation.

[www.hrdc-drhc.gc.ca/essentialskills](http://www.hrdc-drhc.gc.ca/essentialskills)

### *AWAL—Spreading Coast to Coast*

Initiated in British Columbia, [Applications of Working and Learning \(AWAL\)](#) is now a national program that works with Canadian educators and employers to make connections between the knowledge and skills acquired in classrooms, and how to apply them to succeed in the workplace. More than 1000 employers across the country have welcomed AWAL educators into their workplaces. Through AWAL, those workplaces have become a natural place for the employment and learning systems to connect.

Educators receive training and go AWAL for a day to local business or industry workplaces. They conduct structured interviews with employers and employees about their work activities and the skills needed to carry them out. They then build activities that show how the nine Essential Skills are used in the workplace and bring this knowledge back to the classroom.

Information about the interviews and the teaching activities developed are available on the [AWAL](#) Web site for anyone to download.

[www.awal.ca](http://www.awal.ca)

### *What Some Educators are Saying About AWAL*

“AWAL was a great experience! I now feel much better equipped to answer a student who asks, ‘Why do I have to know this?’ It’s great to see the strong Essential Skills connection to the classroom.”

“I had never really stopped to think about how important these skills are in today’s workplace and how many opportunities there are for me as a teacher to foster these skills in my students. It was great to see the skills in action in the workplace.”

### *Inspiring Practices Within the Canadian College and Institute System*

150 colleges, institutes of technology, cégeps and university colleges in over 900 communities across Canada have been teaching Essential Skills for many years now. Recently, the [Association of Canadian Community Colleges](#) undertook a survey of what was being done throughout the system. Eight case studies were produced along with a set of national recommendations for the future.

The case studies offer inspiring stories about how colleges have met the Essential Skill needs of their communities. Highlights from the studies include:

- The advantages of integrating Essential Skills into community-based trades training programs or college-wide learning outcomes.
- How Essential Skills programming can facilitate labour market integration for Aboriginal learners and recently-arrived immigrants who have been trained as professionals abroad.
- How students benefit when colleges work closely with employers to better prepare graduates for the Essential Skill expectations and demands of the world of work.
- How colleges have developed effective tools to rapidly assess the competency level of the existing workforce in relation to the Essential Skills necessary for a knowledge economy.
- Reflections on the challenges of equipping college students in applied, professional and university-transfer programs of study with the required Essential Skills for their future studies and professions.

[www.accc.ca/ftp/pubs/studies/200311-EES.pdf](http://www.accc.ca/ftp/pubs/studies/200311-EES.pdf)

### ***Making the Links***

Standard learning curricula do not always instill the Essential Skills required in the workplace. The [Workplace Education Development \(WED\)](#) project was a Canada-wide effort to mesh standard curricula with Essential Skills. Researchers worked with over 70 programs covering a wide range of workplace settings. The aim was to capture the strategies used by practitioners to integrate academic learning with work tasks, so that learners would not only pass tests, but also gain skills they could apply at work and in their personal and community life.

The [WED Practitioner's Guide: Customizing Accreditation Curricula in Workplace Education Programs](#) was the end product of the project. This guide provides information on the process of customizing accreditation curricula and a matrix that links academic skills to Essential Skills. The guide also has sample lessons and an annotated list of 50 curricula resources.

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### ***Putting it all Together—for Mature Student Apprentices***

Mature student apprentices' grasp of Essential Skills requirements in trades can make them more successful both on the job and in technical training. However, their learning needs can vary widely. [Manitoba Apprenticeship](#) has a new intake process that provides mature student apprentices with user-friendly trade-related assessment tools, and gives upgrading providers guidance on the Essential Skills that apprentices need to develop.

The process provides fact sheets that outline the Essential Skills needed for each trade based on the National Occupational Analysis and Essential Skills Occupational Profiles. Students then go through a self-assessment checklist designed to indicate their strengths and weaknesses in the Essential Skills required for their trade. Finally, they can test those skills in trade-related math and reading. [Manitoba Apprenticeship](#) is currently piloting trade-related Essential Skills upgrading courses, and plans to create a new trade upgrading course for adult high school. In addition, [Manitoba Apprenticeship](#) will develop a prior learning assessment and recognition process to reward Essential Skills gained during an apprenticeship with advanced standing for high school credit.

[www.edu.gov.mb.ca/tradecareers](http://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/tradecareers)

### ***Putting Numeracy and Writing to Work\****

[Numeracy at Work](#) and [Writing at Work](#) incorporate stories from workers across Canada about how they use Essential Skills to carry out their workplace tasks. Activities and lesson suggestions make these publications a practical resource for educators in adult basic education settings, career or workplace education and the K-12 system. In developing these publications, SkillPlan, a joint labour–management initiative of the BC construction industry, drew on extensive experience in applying Essential Skills in a broad range of occupations.

[www.skillplan.ca](http://www.skillplan.ca)

### ***Taking Lessons Learned to the Community***

The [Saskatchewan Labour Force Development Board \(SLFDB\)](#) has piloted several workplace Essential Skills projects directed at small workplaces (fewer than 10 employees). As a follow-up to these pilots, the [SLFDB](#) has been promoting the use of Essential Skills in the community to improve existing training programs. The experience has produced the following lessons learned:

- Start with public awareness around Essential Skills issues.
- Pay attention to when training can be accessed and for how long.
- Use specialized trainers who understand the workplace and a style of training to suit the audience.
- Be prepared for a lot of set-up time and follow-up.
- Create local champions who can help promote and organize training to meet local needs.
- Maximize resources by forming partnerships.
- Use the workplace as the context for training.
- Develop both general and specific training options and a variety of delivery modes.

[www.slfdb.com](http://www.slfdb.com)



## ESSENTIAL SKILLS IN ACTION...for Employers

Essential Skills are an important investment for those employing and managing a workforce. Employers are interested in obtaining useful information about the skills employees bring to the workplace and how these fit with the jobs. This fit is especially important, as the introduction of new technology has raised the bar in many workplaces, and the type of jobs on the market are increasingly requiring employees to have higher skills levels. Improved skills create a more confident, more safety conscious and more productive workforce. They also lead to better communication and teamwork among employees and managers. No matter what the size of your business—from a multinational company to a local contractor—paying attention to Essential Skills can improve your business performance.

“Because of new customers and expanded product line, there were changes to what employees had to do. We found that our employees needed to use different math calculations, read new blueprints, verify estimates and talk to other staff about work orders more frequently. We gave everyone short-term Essential Skills classes and it’s made a great difference in our efficiency and quality numbers.”

Doug Howell, Branch Manager, Russel Metals

### Essential Skills Occupational Profiles

As an employer, you want and need to know:

- Do your workers have the skills required for the job they are doing?
- Do workers have the skills they need for the jobs they may want?

The [profiles](#) examine each of the nine Essential Skills, and provide:

- A general description of how each of the skills is used.
- Information on the complexity of the tasks performed, such as the level required for employees’ reading or decision making.
- Information on whether specific jobs use the different skills, such as writing reports, calculating ratios or rates, or using scale drawings.

This information can help you understand more about the skills needed for the types of work at your workplace, and select good candidates for jobs.

[www.hrdc-drhc.gc.ca/essentialskills](http://www.hrdc-drhc.gc.ca/essentialskills)

### Assessing Essential Skills\*

The [Test of Workplace Essential Skills \(TOWES\)](#) assesses workers’ skills in reading text, document use and numeracy. With [TOWES](#), employers can zero in on skill gaps and do away with blanket testing and training that is not required. [TOWES](#) uses authentic workplace documents such as catalogues, schematics, manuals, and regulations to assess how well the test taker can handle workplace situations.

[TOWES](#) provides employers with useful information about the skills their workforce brings to the job and about their need to provide training. Employers can also use [TOWES](#) to help screen candidates based on the occupational requirements of the job. Instructors, trainers and literacy practitioners also use [TOWES](#) results to place workers in learning programs and to design programs to meet individual needs.

The creators of [TOWES](#)—Bow Valley College and SkillPlan—also developed curricula and training plans that can be delivered in a classroom, one-on-one, through independent study or via the Internet. [TOWES](#) is an effective assessment. Effective assessment leads to effective training.

[www.towes.com](http://www.towes.com)

### BEST: Going AWAL in New Brunswick

[Applications of Working and Learning \(AWAL\)](#) lets students and educators alike see what the real world is really like by bringing the classroom to the workplace.

Taking the idea a step further, School District 6 and the New Brunswick Department of Education piloted [Business & Education Sharing Together \(BEST\)](#). The pilot gave business and community leaders a view from a school principal’s perspective. Visitors spent a day in the school getting a front-row look at how schools operate. At the end of the [BEST AWAL](#) day, business and community leaders met with the District Superintendent, Director of Education and School-to-Work Transition Coordinator to go over the day’s activities and discuss the connections between Essential Skills needs on the job and classroom applications.

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### Communication for Pharmacy Interns

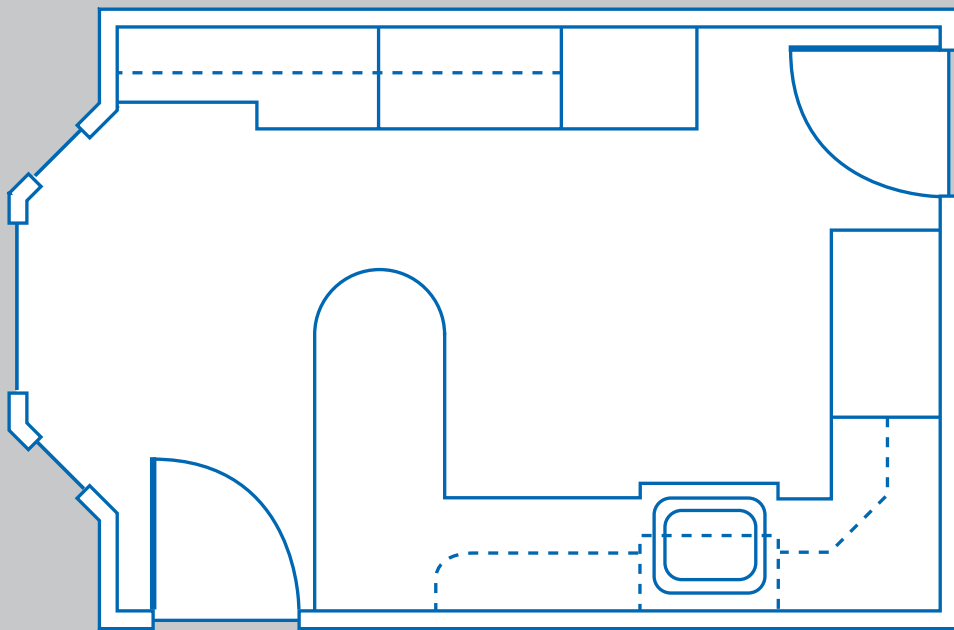
Foreign-trained professionals usually have excellent technical skills but may lack some Essential Skills, particularly writing, decision making, problem solving and oral communication. Facing this challenge in the pharmacy area, the [Workplace Education Manitoba Steering Community](#) developed a specialized course to teach communication skills to international pharmacy graduates in internship programs.

The 50-hour course addresses communication with an emphasis on issues facing Canadian pharmacists in commercial and health care facility workplaces. The program involves a practising pharmacist as a mentor who visits worksites to ensure transfer of learning from the classroom and to provide feedback to the international pharmacist. The classes include role play, group discussions, guest speakers and case studies, and core areas of studies include culture of the Canadian workplace, communication, problem solving and written communication.

[www.wem.mb.ca](http://www.wem.mb.ca)

#### How many?

You are a cabinetmaker preparing an estimate to build a custom kitchen counter for a client. The client wants a sketch of the counter and a complete cost estimate, including tax.



Which Essential Skills are you using?

*Writing, document use, oral communication, decision making, numeracy, and job task planning and organizing.*

#### **EKATI Diamond Mine Strikes Gold**

The [BHP Billiton EKATI Diamond Mine](http://www.bhpbilliton.com), located north of Yellowknife, Northwest Territories, noticed a gap between educational levels of the local labour force and high occupational demands. It set about creating Essential Skills profiles for four entry-level occupations, and then a customized pre-assessment Test of Workplace Essential Skills to identify learning gaps. The adult educators developed and implemented a Workplace Learning Program to respond to these gaps. The Workplace Learning Program performs literacy assessments, personalized tutoring, small group instruction, and computer-based training using content relevant to the workers' occupational duties. The program assists [EKATI](http://www.bhpbilliton.com) with its hiring in communities where levels of education may be too low to meet traditional grade-based hiring criteria.

[www.bhpbilliton.com](http://www.bhpbilliton.com)

#### **Essential Skills for Work and the Community**

Since 1989, Nova Scotia's [Workplace Education Initiative](http://www.gov.ns.ca) has been partnering and creating public awareness around skill development issues. This partnership initiative builds training capacity within an organization and fosters a learning culture in business, industry and labour. More specifically, the Initiative helps workers upgrade their Essential Skills for work and community living. Essential Skills job profiling is used to integrate skills training into work-specific curricula.

The [Workplace Education Initiative](http://www.gov.ns.ca) serves about 1200 people a year, and is delivered on-site and is customized to the needs of the organization. This long-standing program has earned success by focusing on better communications, increased participation in training opportunities, improved labour management relations and increased productivity.

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# HIRING ASSESSMENT

## Essential Skills Checklist

**Note to Employer:** Please use this as a guide to help you assess the entry-level skills of an employment candidate. Once completed, attach it to the person's resume as an additional resource when making your hiring decision.

Essential Skills Needed for this Job	Has the person demonstrated that he/she is skilled in this area? <b>Observations</b>
<b>Reading Text</b> <i>Refers to company's brochure, mission statement, other written documentation.</i>	
<b>Writing</b> <i>Easily fills in written information while in your presence.</i>	
<b>Numeracy</b> <i>Answers questions of a numerical nature during interview (e.g. hours related to job, wages, etc.)</i>	
<b>Oral Communication</b> <i>Speaks with confidence, making eye contact and using correct grammar.</i>	
<b>Thinking Skills</b> <i>Takes appropriate amount of time to process a question during the interview and responds creatively.</i>	
<b>Problem Solving</b> <i>Answers with thought when presented with a hypothetical crisis situation.</i>	
<b>Decision Making</b> <i>Is able to answer adequately when presented with an interview question that requires a decision.</i>	
<b>Job Task Planning &amp; Organizing</b> <i>When presented with a sample list of tasks for a typical day, is able to list them in appropriate order with little direction.</i>	
<b>Significant Use of Memory</b> <i>Refers to your name often during interview; repeats information heard during the interview; does not ask questions that have already been answered.</i>	
<b>Finding Information</b> <i>Brings information to interview that was requested; supplies information requested during interview.</i>	
<b>Working with Others</b> <i>Speaks highly of others and the importance of team work, especially when talking about past jobs.</i>	
<b>Computer Use</b> <i>Speaks with confidence and understanding when referring to computer-related tasks; resume and cover letter prepared in a professional manner by the applicant.</i>	
<b>Continuous Learning</b> <i>During the interview refers to eagerness and necessity for on-going training; resume shows involvement in professional and personal development.</i>	

### Essential Skills at the Interview

**Hire Value** is an information package designed to help employers in Ontario assess candidates for entry-level positions. Developed by the QUILL Learning Network and BGHPGT Training Board, the package includes information about the local labour market and workplace preparation programs. The package also includes a Hiring Assessment Essential Skills Checklist. With the checklist, employers can perform an initial assessment of candidates' Essential Skills during interviews.

[www.quillnet.org/hire\\_value.html](http://www.quillnet.org/hire_value.html)

### Increasing the Pass Rate

Experience has shown that journeypersons who are well grounded in Essential Skills perform better in both the technical and academic portions of apprenticeship programs.

"The union members at New Flyer Industries know first hand the importance of demonstrating all the skills essential to the workplace. A lay-off in the recent past illustrated that workers didn't know what level of skills they could put forth to apply for other positions. We are currently developing a skills passport which documents the Essential Skills of workers, to open the door to skills improvement. Other benefits include increased awareness of safety issues, workers' mobility and workers' ability to participate in other activities like the union movement or the broader community. All manufacturing companies in Canada should help workers acknowledge and increase their Essential Skill levels. This would enable governments to market Canada with a well-educated and skilled workforce."

Michael Dealey, Unit Chair, CAW Local 3003, New Flyer Industries

The Northern Alberta Institute of Technology (NAIT) ran a pilot project with its carpentry apprentice program. In the first week of the program, students were given a Test of Workplace Essential Skills to assess their reading, document use and numeracy skills, and their training needs were directly addressed within the training blocks of the program. Traditionally, these blocks involved technical training only. However, by offering Essential Skills training in addition to the technical training, students showed astonishing results. The pass rate in the first-year carpentry program jumped from 73 to 100 percent with the introduction of the pilot Essential Skills intervention.

The NAIT pilot demonstrates that Essential Skills helps journeypersons succeed both in technical training in college and trade training on the job.

[www.nait.ab.ca](http://www.nait.ab.ca)

### ***Mastering the “Soft” Touch***

Training on computer software can be a path for learning Essential Skills such as numeracy and literacy. The [Computer Workplace Training](#) program in Manitoba helps employees get the basic knowledge in popular software and improve other job-related skills. Learners start each class by developing writing, numeracy, thinking or document use skills and then transfer these skills to learn software such as Excel, Microsoft Word and PowerPoint.

The program has proved to be practical and a good motivator. Learners complete the program showing more leadership skills and are more willing to take on new assignments and look for enhanced job opportunities. Many participants have been spurred on to complete formal education now that they have improved their Essential Skills.

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## **ESSENTIAL SKILLS IN ACTION...for Governments**

Government departments that work to ensure Canadians have the tools they need to be successfully employed can use the Essential Skills framework to design programs. For example, work is ongoing with Citizenship and Immigration Canada to apply Essential Skills to aid immigrants entering the Canadian labour market. Provincial and territorial government departments working in the areas of education, post-secondary education, training and apprenticeship are also interested in the added value Essential Skills bring to classroom learning.

### ***Essential Skills Occupational Profiles***

Governments are concerned with the challenges Canadians face as they enter and remain involved with the labour market. They provide leadership in helping Canadians find work, whether they are transitioning from the learning system to an entry-level job, facing multiple barriers to employment, or are unemployed or underemployed.

Governments use the [profiles](#) to explore the particular characteristics of the nine Essential Skills observed in the workplace, and to examine the relationship between occupational skill level and Essential Skill complexity. The [profiles](#) also help governments find out how learning system-based curricula and standards relate to workplace requirements.

[www.hrdc-drhc.gc.ca/essentialskills](http://www.hrdc-drhc.gc.ca/essentialskills)

### ***Helping Those Out of Work, into Work***

[One Journey-Work and Learn](#) is a program for social assistance and employment insurance recipients that helps build labour attachment. The Nova Scotia Departments of Community Services and Education work in partnership with employers and community groups and respond to an identified skills need. The program involves a job profiling process, followed by a customized Essential Skills course, further specific skills training and guaranteed employment.

An early success was the ‘Sheraton project’ (now the Casino Nova Scotia Hotel), where over a three year period 70% of participating social assistance clients have remained employed. The Essential Skills component included reading text, document use, numeracy and teamwork skills as well as job shadowing opportunities, self-esteem building and guest service components to prepare participants to successfully enter room attendant positions. The [One Journey](#) model is now being expanded to other sectors, such as construction, automotive, maintenance and health care.

brownjd@gov.ns.ca (E-mail)

### **Opening Doors After Grade 12**

School systems prepare students for further education, but they also need to provide skills to those students who want to directly enter the workforce after graduation. The Ontario Ministry of Education coordinated the [Pathways to Employability](#) pilot project with a consortium of five Ontario school boards (District School Board of Niagara, Limestone District School Board, Thames Valley District School Board, Toronto Catholic District School Board and Waterloo Region District School Board).

The project's objective was to provide a seamless transition for students into entry-level employment, and ensure that these students had the skills and attitudes to continue their personal and professional development. The consortium analyzed research on labour demand for entry-level occupations and researchers interviewed employers to compile a list of Essential Skills required for success in entry-level employment. It also developed a generic template for school-to-work transition programs and nine sector-specific models. The consortium is currently implementing these models and the tools will be shared with other Ontario school boards.

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### **Reaching Out**

Developing Essential Skills goes beyond workers and job seekers. Improving Essential Skills can also help citizens benefit from government services. In 2003, the Prince Edward Island Literacy Alliance produced [A Guide to Social Assistance](#), a plain-language book designed for people applying for social assistance benefits. Workplace Education PEI developed an instructor's manual to accompany the guide. The manual helps learners in adult education settings develop their Essential Skills and also gain a better understanding of the content. Workplace Education PEI also created learning activities involving each of the Essential Skills to correspond to each section of the guide.

### **Section 4.1: Finding help if you need it**

#### **Oral communications:**

Write and practice the script for a telephone conversation with the Catholic Family Services Bureau (Pownal House) to get information about a Family Life Program that was advertised in the newspaper.

Sample activity, [A Guide to Social Assistance](#)

[www.nald.ca/wepei.htm](http://www.nald.ca/wepei.htm)

### **Working Beyond Our Borders**

One of the goals of the Canadian International Development Agency is to improve basic education in developing countries. To help meet this goal, [Bow Valley College](#) developed an entrepreneurial training model—the Linkage Model—that integrates technical skills, business skills and Essential Skills.

The college uses a modified version of the Essential Skills occupational profiling process to capture the Essential Skills used by the small and medium enterprise sectors in developing countries. Trainees then address these skills by working through a five-phase, project-based, problem-solving approach to learn how to estimate, use workplace documents, determine cost and price, plan production and perform calculations. The program started in Zimbabwe and is now being introduced in Namibia and Malawi.

[www.bowvalley.ab.ca/International](http://www.bowvalley.ab.ca/International)

## ESSENTIAL SKILLS IN ACTION... for Human Resources and Career Professionals

Essential Skills play an everyday role in the work life of human resources and career professionals. They often use tools to help them assess the existing skill sets of clients who are looking for help with retraining, or advice on changing careers. With this information, they can help clients explore careers that are a good match to their existing skills or help them focus on developing their skill levels so they can pursue their careers of interest.

With more automation, more technology and more cognitive skills demanded by worksites today, Essential Skills can be the bridge between non-employment, employment and promotability. Human resources and career professionals are increasingly taking advantage of the benefits that Essential Skills have to offer to help them better serve their clients.

### *Essential Skills Occupational Profiles*

The [profiles](#) are based on interviews with workers across Canada and provide an accurate and relevant description of how workers use Essential Skills.

By using the [profiles](#), you can investigate applicants' career options, build confidence in your client's ability to succeed in the workplace, and determine how their current level of Essential Skills can be applied in a particular workplace.

Career practitioners can also use [profiles](#) in conjunction with assessment tools to see if their clients have the skills they need to get the jobs they want.

[www.hrhc-drhc.gc.ca/essentialskills](http://www.hrhc-drhc.gc.ca/essentialskills)

### *Essential Skills for Human Resources Professionals\**

"Over the past decade there has been a quantum leap with respect to what we know about Essential Skills in the world of work," says [Carol MacLeod, President, Carol MacLeod & Associates Inc.](#) "The management of human resources should include a strategic focus on Essential Skills yet, understandably, many human resource professionals are only in the early stages of exploring how to harness that power."

Are you willing to invest two hours of your time in becoming more competent and confident in the field of Essential Skills? The following activities are offered as a starting point on your voyage of discovery.

#### Step 1:

- Build an introductory-level knowledge of Essential Skills terminology, methodology, occupational profiles and international research findings: [www.hrhc-drhc.gc.ca/essentialskills](http://www.hrhc-drhc.gc.ca/essentialskills) and [www.nald.ca/nls/ials/introduc.htm](http://www.nald.ca/nls/ials/introduc.htm).
- Consider registering for Essential Skills training.
- Prepare a handout summarizing key points.

#### Step 2:

- Recognize that identifying Essential Skills requirements and related learning needs are linked to a variety of human resource interests, such as recruitment, training, retention, succession planning, equity, safety and quality management.
- Prepare a list of Essential Skills issues that may relate to important human resource challenges facing your organization or industry.
- Pull together an internal focus group. Introduce Essential Skills information using the handout prepared in step 1. Identify the three most significant human resource challenges facing your company or industry. Brainstorm Essential Skills issues that may relate to these challenges. Facilitate related discussions and next-step planning.

[www.carolmacleod.com](http://www.carolmacleod.com)

### *Helping Unemployed Adults Market Their Skills*

"I love it! It is very user friendly and organized in a way that makes it flow very smoothly. I wish more practitioner resources were prepared so thoroughly."

These words sum up what one practitioner thinks about [Open Doors](#), a workshop package that facilitators can deliver to adults looking for employment. Now being integrated as part of regular programming by more than 100 trainers, it was originally piloted to 50 unemployed adults who were looking for work and who were enrolled in upgrading programs that emphasized improving their Essential Skills.

Each of the five modules below contains facilitator notes, individual and group activities, overheads and handouts.

- Highlighting Your Essential Skills in Employment Portfolios.
- Matching Your Essential Skills with the Right Job.
- Branding Your Image: Résumés, Cover Letters and Applications.
- Marketing Your Essential Skills in Person: Interviews and Hiring Tests.
- Marketing Your Essential Skills in the New Economy.

The resource helps adults learn how to articulate and demonstrate to employers the Essential Skills they have that will make them ideal candidates for entry-level positions. Several participants have indicated that, for the first time, they were able to see that they had valuable skills and that they had the confidence to promote them when looking for work.

[www.quillnet.org](http://www.quillnet.org)

### *How Do Your Skills Measure Up?*

[Measure Up](#) is a self-assessment tool available on the Test of Workplace Essential Skills (TOWES) Web site where individuals can assess skills in reading text, document use and numeracy. [Measure Up](#) provides over 100 problem sets similar to the ones used in TOWES. Each problem is based on a document—a memo, catalogue, regulation, work order—associated with workplace contexts. [Measure Up](#) has three choices for learning opportunities:

- Test Your Skills: individuals can assess their level of ability in the three skill areas.
- Practice: individuals can build their competency levels by completing problem sets in specific skill areas, or prepare for writing a TOWES test.
- Explore Careers: individuals can experiment with typical workplace tasks in any one of 28 occupations.

[www.towes.com](http://www.towes.com)

## ESSENTIAL SKILLS IN ACTION... for Sector Councils

Canada's sector councils bring together key stakeholders in specific industrial sectors. They can represent traditional industries like oil and gas, steel and textiles, and the auto repair industry. Or they can represent emerging industries like environment, biotechnology and software. Non-industry groups, such as early childhood care and education, and Aboriginal human resources are also active.

No matter who their stakeholders are, sector councils all have one thing in common—they share a commitment to tackle human resource issues together. Not only have sector councils developed innovative approaches that improve workplace learning, but they have improved responsiveness of the learning system to industry skills needs.

Many sector councils have used the Essential Skills framework for designing needs assessment and training programs for use in their industries. They are proven innovators in meeting emerging skills requirements, addressing skills shortages, and building Essential Skills into their industry workplaces.

### *Essential Skills Occupational Profiles*

By tackling human resource issues for entire sectors across Canada, sector councils bring greater understanding of the needs of different-sized companies—from multinational organizations to small businesses. This broad knowledge allows colleges, universities and workplaces to develop tailored exams, apprenticeships, career advice and training to meet the skills needs of entire sectors of the Canadian economy.

Sector councils can use [profiles](#) to:

- Help ensure that curriculum integrates the Essential Skills used in their sector's occupations throughout Canada.
- Publish information about skills that is practical and useful for their sector.
- Produce additional career and occupational information for their sector.
- Integrate real work examples into their sector's support materials.
- Help ensure that learning-based standards for Essential Skills relate to workplace requirements.

[www.hrdc-drhc.gc.ca/essentialskills](http://www.hrdc-drhc.gc.ca/essentialskills)

### ***CASTING FOR THE RIGHT MIX OF SKILLS***

Canada's seafood processing industry has transitioned from a traditional resource industry into a complex food sector. New technology and food safety regulations, such as the Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point System, have changed the skills required, especially for supervisors.

The [National Seafood Sector Council](#) developed an Essential Skills program for the seafood processing industry that includes oral communications, thinking skills and document use. Supervisors can now be assessed against the standards of the Essential Skills profile of their position, where learning needs are identified and upgrade training or coaching is offered to help fill the gap revealed by the assessment.

Although directed toward supervisors, the assessment tool can also be used for recruiting and assessing the skills of new employees and to set up training and development programs.

[www.nssc.ca](http://www.nssc.ca)

### ***TEXTILES SECTOR WEAVES THE WEB INTO LEARNING***

Between 1998 and 2000, the [Textiles Human Resources Council \(THRC\)](#) developed 10 Essential Skills pilot sites in textile facilities. The pilots created customized curricula and reported increased readiness for advanced learning, greater confidence and ability, and improved literacy skills.

Jim Warnock, Chief Operating Officer of Tiger Brand Knitting, states: "We see it as a continuum—you start with the basics and then you move on to the specialized skills of the industry itself. Eventually, you've got a highly trained and confident workforce—an invaluable resource for any company that wants to succeed."

The Council has since begun work on a Web-based Training Needs Assessment tool that will allow companies to identify their training needs with no need for costly, time-consuming assistance. The tool will also feed this information back to [THRC](#) for a sector-wide perspective on immediate and emerging skills needs.

[www.thrc-crhit.org](http://www.thrc-crhit.org)

### ***THE TICKET TO SUCCESS***

The Canadian tourism sector relies heavily on immigrants, Aboriginal people and young people to fulfill its jobs needs. However, many of these employees lack formal education or did not get what they need from formal schooling. Since the 1980s, the [Canadian Tourism Human Resource Council \(CTHRC\)](#) has worked to bring Essential Skills to the workplace, creating more than 20 profiles to identify needed skills and develop training. The [CTHRC](#) also created a customized assessment tool to diagnose a candidate's suitability and preparedness for the sector and to gauge a candidate's mastery of technical knowledge.

The [CTHRC's](#) training modules are delivered through a vast network, including the Council itself, high school internship programs, and government-sponsored return-to-work internships. The tourism sector has shown how the unique Essential Skills requirements of a particular sector can be effectively delivered by taking a multi-pronged network approach.

[www.cthrc.ca](http://www.cthrc.ca)

### ***TOWES FOR TRUCKING***

The [Canadian Trucking Human Resources Council \(CTHRC\)](#) recognizes that there are major Essential Skills learning needs in the trucking industry. The CTHRC has developed eight types of pilots for customized Test of Workplace Essential Skills (TOWES) tasks and upgrading. It is also developing a suite of curricula resources for low-level reading skills, document use and numeracy. The skill development suite will be adapted to on-line use.

"The CTHRC customized TOWES assessment tools measure individual skill against the occupational standards for Essential Skills. Our goal is to have the trucking industry fully integrate the Essential Skills assessment and upgrading into its human resource plans for recruitment, training and retention."

Linda Gauthier, Executive Director, CTHRC

"The importance of Essential Skills to safety, training, recruiting, retention and economic sustainability cannot be overstated. They are the fundamental academics of human resource management in general and industrial education in particular."

Robin Doherty, Director Safety, Training and Compliance, Westcan Bulk Transport Ltd.

TOWES allows the trucking industry to fully integrate the Essential Skills assessment and upgrading it into human resources plans for recruitment, training, and career planning, safety, retention and Aboriginal inclusion. Partnerships with Aboriginal stakeholders, industry partners and community colleges have evolved from this initiative.

[www.cthrc.com](http://www.cthrc.com)



## ESSENTIAL SKILLS IN ACTION... for Students, Job Seekers and Workers

Do I have what it takes? is a question commonly asked by people looking for a job, or those thinking about a new job. Essential Skills can help them determine the skill levels they already have or ones that may be needed to prepare for their dream job. By comparing the skill levels they have to the ones needed in the jobs that interest them, students, job seekers and workers can set their own skill development targets. As their skills grow, they can watch their career options multiply!

Information technology and automation have permeated the workplace and raised the level of skill that workers need. Many workplaces have also replaced manual work with cognitive work. For example, in today's trucking industry, being a top-notch professional requires ongoing commitment to learning about and applying new technologies and driving practices. On the road, most truck drivers are now responsible for following an extensive engine and exterior inspection, and inside-the-cab checklists to make sure everything is running smoothly.

Current Essential Skills tools and applications contain a wealth of information useful for job hunting. They also provide links to help with occupation searches, from contacting employers to preparing for internships. In addition, they give workers the ability to master new technology, and help with job protection and promotability.

### Essential Skills Occupational Profiles

Students, job seekers and workers use [profiles](#) to:

- Research specific occupations.
- Identify occupations that suit their areas of strength.
- Find out how skills they are learning are used in the world of work.
- Get help in thinking about their skills.
- See whether they have the skills they will need to enter the labour market.

Search for occupations that require skills where you think you are strong, or occupations where skill levels may be lower in areas where you think you are not as strong. Using the complexity scales and examples provided, you can identify the strongest examples from your experiences for each of the nine Essential Skills, which can help you develop your résumé or portfolio.

You can also compare your skills to those required in various occupations that interest you, so you can set your own skill development targets.

[www.hrdc-drhc.gc.ca/essentialskills](http://www.hrdc-drhc.gc.ca/essentialskills)

### A Focus on Canadian Workplaces

[Authentic Workplace Materials](#) are an important piece of the Essential Skills toolkit. The materials are a collection of real-life documents (forms, tables, graphs, brochures, etc.) that show how Essential Skills are actually used in Canadian workplaces. Over 100 sample documents are available which illustrate reading text, document use and writing in workplace-based tasks. Users can search for material by occupation, key word, skill or type of material.

[www.hrdc-drhc.gc.ca/essentialskills/awm](http://www.hrdc-drhc.gc.ca/essentialskills/awm)

### A Ticket to the Future

The [Ontario Skills Passport \(OSP\)](#) pilot project helps secondary school students and participants in provincial employment placements make a successful transition to work. The Ontario Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities developed the [OSP](#) to provide a consistent way for employers to assess and record Essential Skills and work habits demonstrated in the workplace. The passport shows the skills the students and participants have demonstrated and their level of complexity. An employer's signature verifies the application of the skills.

The provincial government piloted the [OSP](#) in 2002 at various locations throughout Ontario so students, job seekers, employers, teachers and job developers could gain first-hand experience in using the [OSP](#) to assess its value. Proving its usability, the developers have designed an electronic version of the [OSP](#) which will be pilot tested in 2004.

[skills.edu.gov.on.ca](http://skills.edu.gov.on.ca)

### Keeping Traditional Skills Teaching Up-to-Date

Apprenticeship is a traditional method of learning in which practicing experts or journeypersons pass their skills to apprentices in a workplace setting. Today, many apprentices have excellent job skills but may need strengthening of their communication, math and science skills. Having strong Essential Skills will help apprentices to complete their training in a more timely and meaningful way.

The [Nova Scotia Apprenticeship Essential Skills Initiative](#) addresses Essential Skills needs. An informal assessment is available for each trade based on trade-specific Essential Skills profiles. Based on the results, a learning plan is developed for the apprentice and is supported by the employer and the Department of Education. The [Apprenticeship Essential Skills](#) project is available at workplaces, at the Nova Scotia Community College, through the Internet and by one-on-one instruction.

Many large employers, trade unions and First Nation organizations have embraced this method of ensuring that there is a solid foundation of Essential Skills in the workplace.

[apprenticeship.ednet.ns.ca](http://apprenticeship.ednet.ns.ca)

### ***Leading Job Seekers to Jobs They Like***

Many people have acquired workplace Essential Skills through school or work, but cannot show employers that they have those skills. [Essential Skills-Computerized Occupational Readiness Training \(ESCORT\)](#) is a Web-based system that helps job seekers identify a job that suits them and demonstrate to employers that they could do that job.

The process begins with an interest inventory based on the National Occupational Classification codes. Next, participants do a self-assessment of their Essential Skills. Based on the self-assessment, [ESCORT](#) generates a gap analysis that compares users' skill levels with the requirements of the occupations they selected. [ESCORT](#) then helps users prepare learning plans to develop the Essential Skills for the occupations they choose. Finally, [ESCORT](#) generates skills-based résumés and cover letters that can be E-mailed to employers.

[portfolio.telecampus.com/demo/promo/](http://portfolio.telecampus.com/demo/promo/)

### ***Math Refresher: Numeracy on the Job***

Numeracy is one of the Essential Skills that is often difficult to transfer from the classroom to the workplace. Nova Scotia is developing a flexible teaching tool called the [Math Refresher](#) so that non-trade community tutors and apprentices themselves can learn important mathematical concepts in a trade environment.

Experienced math trade instructors are developing the program, which includes options to help instructors place math in a trades context. In addition, the program includes math refresher test banks that allow learners to go on-line and answer a set of 15 questions. Each time learners will log on, they will be presented with a new set of generic and trade-specific questions.

[apprenticeship.ednet.ns.ca](http://apprenticeship.ednet.ns.ca)

### ***Navigating Workplace Documents***

Using and understanding workplace documents has become a daunting task for many employees. Complex technology, more regulations and the sheer volume of documentation has changed the workplace. Employees who have difficulty in this environment are often classified as having poor reading skills. In many cases, what the employees lack is the Essential Skill of document use.

The [Navigating Workplace Documents](#) program sponsored by the Workplace Education Manitoba Steering Committee helps learners analyze the structure of documents and use a systematic process to find and verify the information they are looking for. Learning document navigation usually takes four to six hours, a much shorter time than a general reading program. Experience has shown that instruction on document navigation can be incorporated into all different kinds of Essential Skill and technical workplace training.

[showell@gov.mb.ca](mailto:showell@gov.mb.ca) (E-mail)

### ***Essential Skills at School and Work***

Learning about the world of work is not just for those about to enter the workforce. Students in senior elementary and high school can learn the importance of Essential Skills through [Applications of Working and Learning \(AWAL\)](#) projects. A consortium of Ontario English and French School Boards is piloting a [student-focused](#), bilingual [AWAL](#) pilot project for students in Grades 7 to 12. The program goes beyond simply presenting the theory of Essential Skills: it will develop classroom resources and applications to observe, practice and apply the theory. The language of Essential Skills becomes commonplace for the students through continual practice at school, work, home and through volunteer experience. This pilot shows that [AWAL](#) can be used to develop Essential Skills in many settings.

The resources, best practices and lessons learned related to the student [AWAL](#) pilot initiative will be shared with boards across Ontario as well as with the [AWAL](#) network across Canada.

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In New Brunswick, [AWAL](#) Facilitator Diane O'Connor at Quispamsis Middle School also piloted the [student AWAL](#) idea. Teams consisting of a teacher and three students went to local workplaces to see first hand how Essential Skills were used. Upon returning from the workplace, teams complete a reflection activity that includes an analysis of Essential Skills and develop a classroom "seed idea" which connects what they learn in their classroom with its application in the workplace.

oconncd@nbed.nb.ca (E-mail)

"The closer you get to the workplace, the more you see the importance of Essential Skills and it's good to recognize this early on in school."

Grade 8 student from Quispamsis Middle School, New Brunswick

## UPDATING ESSENTIAL SKILLS IN ACTION

By adopting and adapting more Essential Skills knowledge and techniques into your learning and work environments, you can help address current skills shortages and learning gaps so Canadians have the tools needed for equality of opportunity, to build on these opportunities, and to adjust to changing life and work situations.

In this guide, you have read stories that show the benefits of Essential Skills on a company's bottom line and on productivity. Essential Skills training also has a positive impact on employees' self-esteem and drive, and confidence in their ability to succeed in learning. Case studies on apprenticeship models demonstrate that embedding Essential Skills training into technical training yields tangible results for both the training institution and apprentices.

Essential Skills are also an invaluable ally to tackle human resources issues and produce benefits for individuals and entire sectors of the economy. This guide has also highlighted innovative tools and applications developed for all types of learning activities, as well as for human resources and career practitioners that help Canadians enter the labour market and secure sustainable employment.

Now that you have had an opportunity to read about some of these effective tools and applications user groups across Canada have developed, we invite you to contribute your own ideas. Programs, projects, best practices and lessons learned—we would like to hear about your innovations and successes!

To get in touch with us, please visit the contact us section of our Web site: [www.hrdc-drhc.gc.ca/essentialskills](http://www.hrdc-drhc.gc.ca/essentialskills). The Web site also contains up-to-date information on work the Government of Canada is doing in the area of Essential Skills and supports the information found in this guide.

**Evaluation**

We would like to know if you found this guide useful so we can address your needs in future publications.

I found this guide useful to learn about Essential Skills and Essential Skills resources.

Strongly agree       Agree       Disagree       Strongly disagree

Please explain: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

I found the user categories (e.g. educators, employers, human resources and career professionals) useful.

Strongly agree       Agree       Disagree       Strongly disagree

Please explain: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Have you visited any of the Web sites or sent E-mails to the contact persons included in this guide?

Yes       No

Which ones? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
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Other comments: \_\_\_\_\_  
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Please fax this evaluation at (613) 957-1523 or complete it online at [www.hrdc-drhc.gc.ca/essentialskills](http://www.hrdc-drhc.gc.ca/essentialskills). You may also mail it with the postage paid envelope included in this booklet.