

People • Partnerships • Knowledge

HUMAN RESOURCES AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT CANADA

Living and Learning

Essential Skills Success Stories



These case studies and 10-step guide were written by The Conference Board of Canada with financial support from Human Resources and Social Development Canada (HRSDC). The views expressed in this report are not necessarily those of HRSDC or of the Government of Canada.

© Her Majesty the Queen in Right of Canada 2006

INTRODUCTION

Taking time to work on Essential Skills often leads to success in the workplace and at home. It offers workers a bright future, while greatly improving day-to-day life.

Essential Skills help people to carry out different tasks, give them a starting point for learning other skills, and help them adjust to change. The nine Essential Skills are:

- **Reading:** understanding materials written in sentences or paragraphs (e.g. letters, manuals).
- **Document Use:** using and understanding labels, graphs, signs and other similar materials.
- **Numeracy:** using and understanding numbers.
- **Writing:** writing text or typing on a computer.
- **Oral Communication:** using speech to share thoughts and information.
- **Working with Others:** working with others to complete tasks.
- **Thinking:** reviewing information to make decisions.
- **Computer Use:** using computers and other technical tools (e.g. word processor, fax machine).
- **Continuous Learning:** participating in an ongoing process of gaining skills and knowledge (e.g. workplace training).

This booklet includes six real stories about Canadian workers who have taken time to work on their Essential Skills. They show that by improving their skills, they were more successful at work and at home. Hopefully these stories will inspire you to work on your own Essential Skills. A guide to improving Essential Skills is included. It is based on what was learned from the workers' stories.

TAKING ON NEW CHALLENGES IN CHILDCARE:

Marie Morris' Story



I started working for a childcare centre nine years ago as an assistant supervisor and with hard work, I became a full-time supervisor. This is the story of how investing in Essential Skills helped me gain self-confidence and advance in my career.

Continuous learning has always been important to me. I have participated in many training courses to improve my Essential Skills. When I started working in the childcare business, I never thought I would become a supervisor. I didn't think I had the skills needed to do the job. However, my boss strongly encouraged me to take risks in my career. She inspired me to continue my education. I went back to school to pursue a diploma in Early Childhood Education Supervision and Administration at night school.

As a supervisor, I have many responsibilities. I prepare staff schedules, and oversee payroll and invoicing. I also make adjustments to billing when fees change, and ensure that employees are paid correctly. This requires strong numeracy and computer use skills, which I have developed in company-sponsored courses and workshops.

Oral communication skills are important for me as well. I have to solve conflicts among staff members and meet with parents to discuss their wishes for and concerns about their children. I participated in Toastmasters to develop and improve my communication skills. I am now comfortable speaking to small and large groups.

I never thought I would be in charge of a childcare centre, but by improving my Essential Skills, I am. Now a confident worker, my goal for the future is to help set up a new childcare centre and continue developing my skills.

A ROLE MODEL FOR A MECHANICAL MILLWRIGHT:

Cathy Lewis' Story



After attending Fanshawe College in London, Ontario, I became an apprentice at an automotive manufacturing company. This is the story of how I developed and used my Essential Skills to overcome challenges on the job and become an industrial mechanic millwright.

Working with others is an important skill, but it is not always easy to do. I was the first female tradesperson to work at the company, and gaining the respect of some of my colleagues was a challenge. I had to prove that I was highly skilled and able to work in the industry. I learned how to handle difficult workplace situations by being an active listener and tactful with my colleagues. I eventually became a welcome member of the team because I could respect my co-workers' feelings, while being assertive at the same time.

Continuous learning from some of my colleagues also played a role in my success. They taught me lessons and skills that helped my career in the skilled trades. One co-worker helped me improve my thinking skills by giving me advice on decision making and problem solving. Another role model taught me how to be proud of my work and to be a confident worker. They inspired me to mentor other new employees. I used my oral communication skills to give direction and guidance to a new apprentice.

I have developed personally and professionally over the years. I am ready to take on any challenge. Since I earned my millwright licence, the company I work for has hired three other female employees. I am sure that my success is the result of my Essential Skills and perseverance.

FIGURING ON THE FUTURE:



Brendon McAskil's Story

Working in Prince Edward Island with little education, I relied on part-time seasonal jobs for work. When I became a husband and father, my career-path changed. This is the story of how improving my Essential Skills has led to a better future for my family.

From counting cars to making pre-cast concrete, I have had a variety of jobs. None of them led to a permanent position. After I married, I decided to improve my Essential Skills in the hopes of finding higher paying, permanent work.

Continuous learning has played an important role in my career development. I was not keen on formal education when I was younger. As an adult, I see it as a personal investment. I decided to go back to school to improve my numeracy skills. To earn my Grade 12 math and physics credits, I had to start at a Grade 7 level. With perseverance, I earned the credits.

Following this success, I spent two years earning all of the prerequisites needed for a construction technology program offered at a local college. I completed the program and became a site foreperson for the city.

My job requires strong document use skills. I transfer information gathered on the field during sewer and water maintenance or repairs onto a master drawing. This keeps the city aware of the state of its water and sewer systems.

I continue to improve my skills in courses such as a Workplace Hazardous Materials course. The city requires all permanent full-time water and sewer employees to have a high school diploma. My goal is to earn my Grade 12 high school equivalency through the General Educational Development program. I plan to continue my skills development so that I can obtain a permanent job and better support my family.

THE SEQUEL TO TREE CUTTING:



Mel Lively's Story

There's not much in the lumber business that I haven't seen or done. As a young boy, I decided to become a woodsman. Sadly, a major accident forced me to leave the woods and look for other work. This is the story of how Essential Skills helped me cope with this sudden change and make my life better.

Continuous learning has always been a part of my life. When I was very young, I went to work in the woods to help support my family. My brother and I learned how to cut fence posts and firewood. I learned all there was to know about the logging business, from building a brow at the side of the road to the science of tree cutting.

At 43, my life changed completely. I had a major accident which forced me to get a job indoors. That's when I learned about Essential Skills. With the support of my employer and the Nova Scotia Department of Education, I learned how to read and write. Now I can read documents and graphs at work, and contribute to the company newsletter.

I have even written a book about my life in the woods, which is very popular with the local Grade 3 students. They love to read about how I chopped down trees. I'm even planning a sequel - something my grandchildren are really looking forward to.

Improving my Essential Skills has given me more than I had ever dreamed of. Even though I can no longer work as a woodsman, I have a new way of sharing my passion and love for life in the woods with others.

LIFTING THE LID OFF THE CANNING INDUSTRY:

Anne McKenna's Story

While I was working on a production line at a canning factory, I found my key to success. This is the story of how Essential Skills training opened new doors for me and my career.

I left high school after Grade 10 and went to work on a production line at a local canning company. After a few years, I applied for a job in quality control. The manager let me try it out to see if I could do it. Based on my experience and the fact that I'm a quick learner, I got the job. But in order to keep it, I had to work on my Essential Skills.

The company-sponsored continuous learning program was there to help me. I earned my high school diploma through the General Educational Development (GED) program. Like many people who have been out of school for a long time, I was scared of going back to the books. Even so, I knew that I was ready and I enjoyed it.

After graduating, I focused on improving the skills that were important in my job. I took a night course at a local college to improve my reading, numeracy and oral communication skills and earned a certificate from the American Society for Quality. I felt more confident and better prepared when talking to union representatives and Head Office.

Having improved some of my Essential Skills, I had a good understanding of what I was good at. I have always loved history and was fascinated by stories about the old building where I worked. I began working with a



local writer and historian to find out more about the building and put my writing skills to work. We eventually finished a manuscript which many of my co-workers enjoy reading.

Today, I have a new job with a major food company. I'm here because I got over my fear and opened new doors by investing in Essential Skills. I look forward to the future, and know my life will always be full of learning.

THE JOURNEY FROM AN AFTER-SCHOOL JOB TO A SUCCESSFUL CAREER:



Nicole Linde's Story

When I was 16, I got a part-time job answering phones at a call centre. Now, at 22, I lead the Information and Communications Technology operations at the same place. This is the story of how I worked my way up by improving my Essential Skills.

When I started working at the call centre, one of my first tasks was to learn how the company's high-tech phone and computer system worked. I began by improving my computer use skills. The tools were always changing, and I needed to keep up.

This was a challenge. Many long-time employees were leaving the call centre, and important information was not being passed on to newer employees. My manager saw the problem and decided the team needed training to develop our working with others skills.

Continuous learning on the job and through courses helped us work better together. We saw the value of sharing information and best practices. Our thinking skills improved. It was easier to solve problems and make decisions, and we learned how to deal with conflict at work. Within a couple of years, people were happier at their jobs and less likely to leave. I used all these skills to eventually become a team leader and manager.

Now I'm in charge of system and client care, account set-up and sales. I find that every day leads to new challenges. I know there is a lot to learn in the high-tech industry. But I feel that my Essential Skills have given me the confidence and ability to do well in this exciting, fast paced setting.

KEY FINDINGS

Workers choose to work on their Essential Skills for many professional and personal reasons. They may want to earn a promotion, read to their grandchildren, adjust to workplace change or make sure that they are productive in their jobs.

No matter what their reasons are for taking part in training activities to develop their Essential Skills, workers feel it is important and can see and feel the benefits in their every day lives.

As the following table shows, workers who invest time, energy, and resources in their Essential Skills often experience many benefits. They can include getting better jobs, making more money, having more confidence and self-esteem, and wanting to tackle new challenges in their jobs and in their personal lives. Overall, working on Essential Skills can lead to a better life.

BENEFITS

Worker	Benefits
Marie	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Pursued a diploma in Early Childhood Education Supervision and Administration ✓ Became a full-time supervisor ✓ Improved her self-confidence and motivation
Cathy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Earned a licence to be an industrial mechanic millwright ✓ Improved her self-confidence and pride in her work
Brendon	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Earned Grade 12 math and physics credits ✓ Became a site foreperson ✓ Can better provide for his growing family
Mel	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Learned to read and write ✓ Adjusted to an unexpected career change ✓ Wrote a book about his life experience
Anne	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Earned a certificate from the American Society for Quality ✓ Earned a Grade 12 high school diploma ✓ Improved her self-confidence
Nicole	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Learned to use a complicated telephone and computer system ✓ Earned a position as team leader and manager ✓ Improved relationships with co-workers

A GUIDE TO IMPROVING ESSENTIAL SKILLS

The following guide will help you think about how to improve your Essential Skills. There are many ways, however, this guide is based on what was learned in the worker's stories.

1. What are the challenges or opportunities you are facing that make you want to improve your Essential Skills?

2. What are your personal and/or professional goals?

3. When will you work towards your goals and reach them?

4. What steps will you take to reach your goals?

5. How will you reward yourself along the way?

6. Who can help you reach your goals?

7. What support do you need?

8. How will you ask others for help or support to reach your goals?

9. How will you know when you have reached your goals?

10. How will your life be different when you have reached your goals?

CONCLUSION

These workers have all followed different paths on their journeys to improving their Essential Skills. From a woodsperson to a childcare provider to a call centre manager, each has a story. But, together, they show that no matter their age, job, or previous experiences, Essential Skills are important in everything they do—at work and at home.

When talking about Essential Skills, the focus is often on how businesses can make more money. They need skilled workers who are well-organized and productive to keep up with a fast-paced, knowledge-based economy. However, it is just as important to know that improving Essential Skills will not only help the business, but it can lead to promotions, better pay, and increased confidence for the individual.

Each of these workers made a decision to improve their Essential Skills. Through their dedication, they have gained rewards that will last a lifetime.

If you have your own Essential Skills success story to share, please contact Kurtis Kitagawa at [**kitagawa@conferenceboard.ca**](mailto:kitagawa@conferenceboard.ca).