



The Conference Board
of Canada

CASE STUDY 1

*A core product of the
Employability Skills
Forum, National
Business and
Education Centre*

Program
Government

Date Established
1995

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Name of Program
*CORCAN's Offender
Employability Skills
Project*

Skills Developed

- *Academic*
- *Personal*
- *Management*
- *Teamwork*

Assessing and developing offenders' employability skills

CORCAN'S OFFENDER EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS PROJECT

The Civilizing Power of Skills

BY MICHAEL R. BLOOM & PENNY BRADY

August 1998

CORCAN is rehabilitating offenders by developing their employability skills.

Overview

CORCAN's innovative Offender Employability Skills Project addresses one of the major problems confronting offenders when they seek to re-enter society as contributing citizens: their lack of the generic skills, attitudes and behaviours needed to find and keep a job.

CORCAN has modified and extended The Conference Board of Canada's Employability Skills Profile for this project to fit the needs of its client group of offenders. As a Special Operating Agency within the Correctional Service of Canada, CORCAN helps offenders prepare for employment as part of their rehabilitation. One of its goals is to help offenders gain the skills that will help them successfully re-enter the community by getting and keeping a job.

The Agency uses its modified version of the Employability Skills Profile in two ways:

- to demonstrate to offenders the positive impact of enhancing generic skills such as those outlined in the Employability Skills Profile, and
- to measure and evaluate the employability skills of offenders who

participate in the program, using the Profile as the basis for a performance assessment tool.

CORCAN's focus on generic employability skills represents a significant shift from developing job-specific skills (through programs such as apprenticeship) to developing non-job-specific generic skills and behaviours (through work experience) that can apply to many different jobs. Developing generic employability skills has always been a program objective, but traditionally it has received less emphasis than job-specific skills development. With generic skills such as a positive attitude toward work and good work habits, offenders are more likely to find and keep a job.

Work experience training is particularly important for offenders, who typically have a poor job record and few employment experiences from which they can acquire generic employability skills. Employability skills increase through work, and by working offenders can gain higher levels of employability skills that will make them even more employable in the future.

Objectives

- To provide offenders with the employability skills necessary to successfully re-enter society.

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NBEC Mission

We help business and education leaders work collaboratively to promote the development of a learning society that will prepare Canada's young people for a changing world.

- To provide work experience for offenders to assist in their rehabilitation.
- To develop the leadership ability of staff to assist offenders in developing employability skills.
- To equip staff with the ability to monitor and assess offenders' employability skills.

Groups Served

- Offenders.
- Society at large.

Activities

Skills development, life skills and the education system are the three key areas of employability skills development for offenders. CORCAN'S Offender Employability Skills Project works in the area of skills development, focusing on developing employability skills on the job rather than in the classroom.

The Offender Employability Skills Project has two main components:

- training shop instructors on how to demonstrate employability skills to offenders and helping them to develop those skills, and
- implementing a performance assessment tool to measure and document offenders' employability skills.

Shop Instructors

Shop instructors (who each work with an average of 10 offenders) participate in 10 leadership training modules that develop active leadership styles. These modules train them to act as role models and to mentor offenders on how to develop employability skills. By demonstrating positive attitudes toward work and other generic skills such as adaptability and responsibility, instructors instill these skills in offenders.

Offenders

On average, 2,000 offenders are employed by CORCAN at any one time, representing about 14 per cent of the federal incarcerated population. Offenders

are referred to the program by their case managers. On average, offenders remain in the program for six months.

Offenders improve their employability skills through work experience in five different business lines:

- manufacturing (tables, office furniture),
- agriculture (farming),
- service industry (data input),
- construction, and
- textiles (clothing, laundry).

CORCAN trainees are expected to treat their assignments as a job: to report for work on time, dress appropriately, and be ready to apply themselves to the demands of their position. CORCAN employees are paid a base wage of \$5.25 to \$6.90 per day. Some locations also offer incentive pay based on production.

Employee Skills Performance

CORCAN is introducing trainee evaluation, which will be administered every three months using an Offender Employability Evaluation Form. The form's performance measures are embedded with the generic skills outlined in the Employability Skills Profile. Offenders are assessed on:

- quality of work,
- teamwork,
- responsibility,
- communication,
- initiative,
- safety awareness,
- academic skills,
- problem solving,
- positive attitude and behaviour, and
- adaptability.

Employability skills are measured on a five-point scale ranging from "strong asset" to "severe deficit." There are also descriptive performance criteria for each skill. The CORCAN model demonstrates how the Employability Skills Profile can be modified to fit the environment in which it is being used. To assess offenders, supervisors use community standards of employment as their guide to ensure that the trainee has the skills needed to compete outside the penal system.

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www.conferenceboard.ca/nbec

The Employability Skills Forum Mission

We are committed to improving the productivity and quality of life for individuals, organizations and society by enhancing the employability skills of the current and future workforce of Canada.

This study was made possible through funding by members of the Employability Skills Forum.

Forum Members

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Resources Required

- The Offender Employability Skills Project is funded from CORCAN's 1996–97 revenue of \$67,206,000.
- Revenues come from the sale of goods and services, and from an annual training fee paid by the Correctional Service to offset the costs of training offenders and operating in a correctional setting.

Achievements/Outcomes

Research is under way to examine the short- and long-term impact of the Offender Employability Skills Project. Some of the questions being examined in the short-term research are: What benefits has the leadership training produced? Do offenders improve their employability skills? Do offenders change their work attitudes in a positive direction? If so, what kinds of work attitudes and employability skills are strongly associated with positive change?

Long-term research will focus on linking work attitudes and employability skills to post-release employment and recidivism. By isolating dimensions of work attitudes and employability skills, CORCAN can determine the correctional impact of each. Based on its findings, revised approaches to training and new employability dimensions may be considered. New aspects of employability will be examined as required.

CORCAN expects that offenders will:

- have a clearer understanding of the skills expected of them when they enter the workforce,
- be better able to establish well-defined goals for their personal development,
- develop stronger intrinsic values associated with work,
- interact better with supervisors and co-workers,
- increase productivity levels,
- be more prepared to enter the workforce and maintain employment on release, and
- offend less often as a result of their more stable social environment and enhanced social status.

Benefits

Offenders

- Employability skills that enable them to get/keep a job.
- On-the-job training that develops their job-specific skills.
- More positive attitudes about work. As one "graduate" commented: "I know I can work and I enjoy working, which surprised me. . . . Now I look forward to going to work."

Society

- Reduction in the social and economic costs of recidivism.

Innovation

- By modifying the Employability Skills Profile for the offender population, CORCAN has extended the profile's reach to include highly at-risk adults.
- By adapting the Employability Skills Profile to an easy-to-use format for instructors, CORCAN has created a practical tool for assessing offenders' generic skills.
- The Offender Employability Evaluation Form is a template for dialogue and discussion between the CORCAN instructor, case manager and offender.

Keys to Success

- Well-trained instructors, who are active and effective leaders, are a key to successfully developing offenders' employability skills.
- Formalized expectations, expressed as performance criteria, are commonly agreed upon by offender-participants, instructors and case managers.
- Expectations are reinforced through regular evaluation of offenders against these criteria.
- Information is shared between instructors and case managers about offenders' skills performance; the Offender Employability Evaluation Form, with its performance scale, is a key to managing offenders' re-entrance into the workplace and community.

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*Our grateful thanks to our
interviewees and to others
who provided comment,
including:*

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NBEC Publications Relating to Employability Skills Development and Assessment

Employability Skills Profile

Science Literacy for the World of Work

*Best Practices in Assessing and Developing
Employability Skills—20 Case Studies (Sept. 98)*

*The Economic Benefits of Improving Literacy in
the Workplace, 206-97 Report.*

*Enhancing Employability Skills: Innovative
Partnerships, Projects and Programs, 118-94 Report.*

*Linking Teachers, Science, Technology and Research:
Business and Education Collaborations That Work,
144-95 Report.*

1998 100-Best Partnerships IdeaBook

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ISSN 1205-1675

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