

# Essential **Skills**



## **Workplace Essential Skills Manual for Employers**

Understanding and implementing Essential Skills Training in the workplace.

This Employment Ontario project is funded by the Ontario government.

**EMPLOYMENT  
ONTARIO**

 *Adult Basic Education Association*  
Hamilton's Connection to Lifelong Learning

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## What are Essential Skills?

Essential Skills are the fundamental skills that make it possible to learn all others. These skills help people participate fully in the workplace and in the community. They include

• Reading Text	• Writing	• Thinking Skills
• Document Use	• Oral Communication	• Computer Use
• Numeracy	• Working with Others	• Continuous Learning

**Reading:** understanding materials written in sentences or paragraphs.

**Document Use:** using and understanding labels, graphs, signs and other 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:** interacting with others to complete tasks.

**Thinking:** reviewing information to make decisions.

**Computer Use:** using computers and other technical tools.

**Continuous Learning:** participating in an ongoing process of gaining skills and knowledge.

## Workplace Skills Reality Sampler

The following chart provides examples of how Essential Skills are used in the workplace.

<b>Essential Skill</b>	<b>Application</b>
Reading Text	Reading Health and Safety manuals. Reading the fire alarm procedures or standard operating procedures.
Document Use	Reading blueprints or schematics.
Numeracy	Handling cash, calculating measurements and analyzing financial statements.
Writing	Accurately completing forms and composing and responding to email messages.
Oral Communications	Asking for clarification from a manager regarding a work order. Expressing ones views and opinions in a meeting.
Working with Others	Working collectively with members of a team in order to finish a project.
Thinking Skills	Solving problems, making decisions, and planning and organizing tasks. Taking the initiative to make suggestions for process improvement.
Computer Use	Using computers to meet business needs such as using email and software to prepare reports and presentations.
Continuous Learning	Quickly adapting to the changing nature of the workplace that can occur with new technology, processes and restructuring.

Adapted from Essential Skills: Linking Employee Skills to Your Bottom Line. Hamilton Training Advisory Board, March 2008.

## The Business Case

The Canadian Council on Learning reveals that there is a low level of investment in Essential Skills development in Canada.

In spite of the fact that 4 out of 10 working Canadians do not have the literacy skills to participate in the knowledge economy, investments in Essential Skills training accounts for only 2.2% of all training costs.

*(Connecting the Dots...Linking Training Investment to Business Outcomes and the Economy. Canadian Council on Learning, April 2007.)*

There is generalized concern that Canadian industry on the whole is not making the investments in training it needs to in order to meet the challenges of intense competition, rapid innovation, and economic restructuring.

*Developing Skills in the Canadian Workplace  
Canadian Policy Research Network*

Investing in Essential Skills in your business can result in:

• higher productivity	• greater employee retention
• reduced error rates	• enhanced communication and teamwork
• improved safety	• improved employee morale
• reduced absenteeism	• enhanced corporate image

A survey compiled by The Conference Board of Canada supports these benefits along with a number of positive outcomes that include effective HR processes, such as creating job descriptions, and identifying training needs and plans.

**Essential Skills – Skills that work for your Business.**

## **Dispelling the Myths**

Most people underestimate the importance of Essential Skills and feel that these skills are targeted at low skilled positions.

Human Resources and Social Development Canada have countered the 10 most common myths people have about Essential Skills.

Adapted from [http://srv108.services.gc.ca/english/general/Myths\\_e.shtml](http://srv108.services.gc.ca/english/general/Myths_e.shtml)

### **1. You either have an Essential Skill or you don't.**

There are varying levels of complexity for each Essential Skill, ranging from level one (lowest) to level five (highest).

### **2. Essential Skills aren't necessary if their employees are already functioning well in their jobs.**

Research shows that the Canadian labour market is ill-equipped to compete in the global knowledge economy which requires lifelong learning. Employers need to keep pace with change in order to remain competitive. Employees who have the Essential Skills necessary to learn new skills will help employers move forward.

### **3. If there's a problem with basic skills in Canada, it's because of our high level of immigration.**

In 2001, approximately 55% of the total number of immigrants who came to Canada were classified as skilled workers. They are a vital contributor to the Canadian economy, and it is forecasted that by 2011 immigration will be our only source of net labour force growth.

**4. If you can hide it, a lack of Essential Skills will not affect your life.**

Essential Skills are used in almost all aspects of daily life (i.e., counting change for bus fare, or reading a prescription). It is very difficult to hide a lack of Essential Skills.

**5. It is a better investment to train the best and forget the rest.**

Ensuring that all employees have the necessary workplace skills is a good investment for an employer. It makes good business sense as a well trained labour force will improve productivity, and be better equipped to capitalize on business opportunities.

**6. Employers don't have to worry if they hire graduates only.**

Though formal education is beneficial, many graduates lack the essential skills and management skills that most employers seek. Graduates may have under-developed communication and team work skills.

**7. There are only and will only ever be nine Essential Skills.**

More may be added as research continues by Human Resources and Skills Development Canada.

**8. Essential Skills research is done only on low-skill level occupations.**

There is ongoing research being carried out to create Skills Profiles of senior level and high skilled positions.

**9. Essential Skills are the same as employability skills.**

Though similar, they are not the same. Essential Skills include complexity levels and occupational profiles, while employability skills

include other factors, such as attitudes and behaviours, which are equally as important.

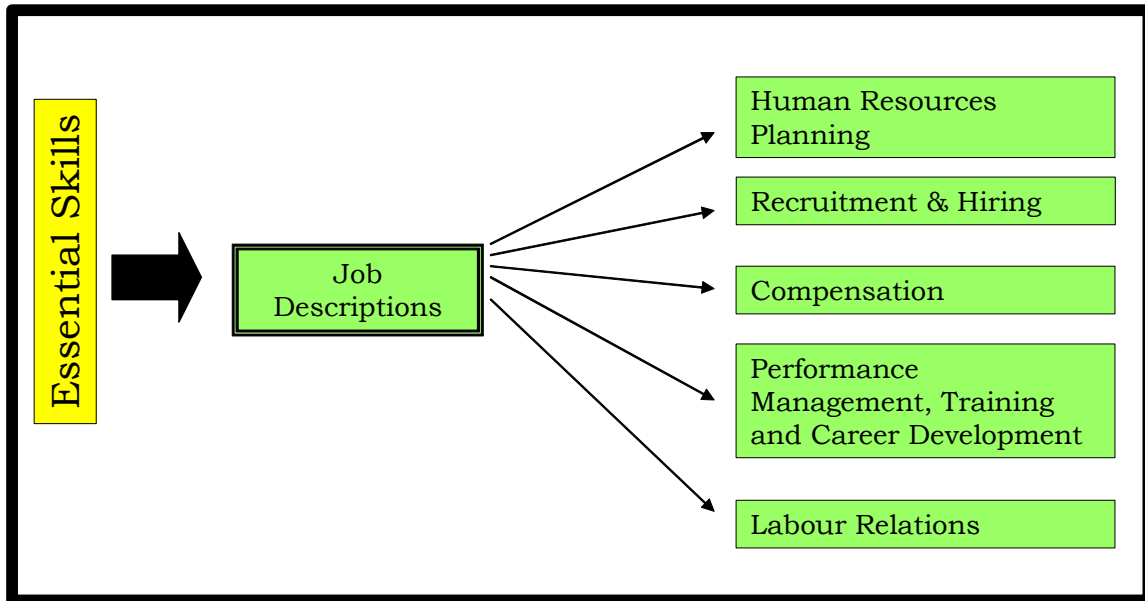
**10. Employers shouldn't have to train employees. This is the responsibility of schools.**

As the economy continues to change, employees must learn to adapt and have the skills that are needed to be productive in this economy. Learning is a life long process.



## Linking Essential Skills to Your HR Practice

Understanding Essential Skills in the Workplace can help you standardize your HR practices.



### Job Descriptions

Detailed job descriptions are a good business investment because it is the foundation of best practices in Human Resources. They explain

- key responsibilities of the position
- appropriate reporting relationships
- daily work environments

The first step in writing or rewriting job descriptions is job analysis. One step in the job analysis process is to identify key Essential Skills or competencies that are required to do the job.

Human Resources and Social Development Canada have compiled a list of Essential Skills Profiles that describe how each of the nine Essential Skills is used by workers in a particular occupation.

To date approximately 250 Essential Skills Profiles have been developed for various occupations of the National Occupational Classification. These profiles are a useful tool in performance management and training and are found at [www10.hrsdc.gc.ca/es/english/ES\\_Profiles.aspx](http://www10.hrsdc.gc.ca/es/english/ES_Profiles.aspx)

Essential skills are used in nearly every occupation and throughout daily life in different ways and at different levels of complexity. These levels of complexity are explained in greater detail at [www.hrsdc.gc.ca/eng/workplaceskills/essential\\_skills/general/complexity.shtml](http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca/eng/workplaceskills/essential_skills/general/complexity.shtml)

More information on writing job descriptions can be found at [www.hrmanagement.gc.ca/gol/hrmanagement/site.nsf/eng/index.html](http://www.hrmanagement.gc.ca/gol/hrmanagement/site.nsf/eng/index.html)

Well constructed job descriptions can help you in other HR activities such as

- Recruitment & Hiring
- Compensation
- Performance Management, Training and Career Development
- Labour Relations

### **Recruitment & Hiring**

Thorough and accurate job descriptions provide the basis of job advertisements, postings, and a guide to inclusive hiring decisions. They also form the basis of verbal or written employment contracts when you make offers of employment.

## **Compensation**

Accurate job descriptions allow you to assess the value of the jobs in your organization so that you can design a fair and equitable compensation and reward system based on objective issues such as job duties, employment requirements and working conditions.

## **Performance Management, Training and Career Development**

Accurate job descriptions provide the basis for communicating expectations to employees, and measuring how well employees meet or exceed expectations. They also provide information on who requires training or career development.

## **Labour Relations**

Accurate job descriptions provide an objective basis for discussion and fair practice in communications, negotiations, collective bargaining and contract administration when your employees are represented by a union.

## **Additional Helpful Link – The Hiring Checklist**

The Hiring Checklist will allow you to determine if the skills a candidate demonstrates match the skills required for the position. Completing this checklist will also allow you to compare applicants who have interviewed for the same position. The hiring checklist can be found at [www.hrsdc.gc.ca/eng/workplaceskills/essential\\_skills/hiring\\_checklist.shtml](http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca/eng/workplaceskills/essential_skills/hiring_checklist.shtml)

## Workplace Essential Skills Survey

Before you embark on an Essential Skills Program in your workplace, it is a good idea to diagnose the “health” of your organization in regards to its Essential Skills level by using the Workplace Survey below.

Once you have completed the survey, contact a Learning Network to perform an in depth organizational needs assessment. The network can either perform the needs assessment or hire someone to provide the service. To learn how a Learning Network can work for you, refer to How Does the Learning Network Work for You on page 18.

## Workplace Survey

Human Resources and Social Development Canada has developed a Workplace Survey that will allow you to identify potential Essential Skills issues or areas of strength in your workplace.

It also provides you with a rating system that will help you determine whether or not you need an Essential Skills Program in your workplace.

### A. Reading

Test	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Employees are comfortable dealing with written materials.	1	2	3	4
Employees can read and understand emails and/or memos.	1	2	3	4
Employees are comfortable receiving written instructions.	1	2	3	4
Employees make few or no mistakes when following written instructions.	1	2	3	4
Employees can read and understand safety directions	1	2	3	4

in manuals and/or signs posted around the workplace.				
<b>Subtotal</b>				

B. Document Use

Test	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Employees are comfortable using workplace documents.	1	2	3	4
Employees can use and understand charts and graphs.	1	2	3	4
Employees understand timesheets and pay stubs.	1	2	3	4
Employees make few or no mistakes when entering information in documents.	1	2	3	4
Employees understand gauges, clocks, manuals, blueprints or schedules.	1	2	3	4
<b>Subtotal</b>				

C. Writing

Test	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Employees can request information or services in writing.	1	2	3	4
Employees are comfortable writing production reports or other reports necessary for the job.	1	2	3	4
Employees communicate effectively through written materials when appropriate.	1	2	3	4
Employees make few or no grammar and spelling mistakes when preparing written material.	1	2	3	4
Employees use appropriate sentence structure, punctuation, wording and tone when preparing	1	2	3	4

written material.				
<b>Subtotal</b>				

#### D. Numeracy

Test	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Employees can complete numerical tasks such as calculations, measurements and estimations.	1	2	3	4
Employees make few or no mistakes when doing financial transactions such as handling cash, preparing bills or making payments.	1	2	3	4
Employees can take measurements and record the results.	1	2	3	4
Employees are willing to participate in training sessions related to numeracy.	1	2	3	4
Employees understand calculations on pay stubs.	1	2	3	4
<b>Subtotal</b>				

#### E. Oral Communication

Test	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Employees communicate information or instructions clearly and accurately.	1	2	3	4
Employees can follow detailed oral instructions or explanations.	1	2	3	4
Employees speak professionally when communicating with suppliers or clients.	1	2	3	4
Employees use workplace-appropriate terminology.	1	2	3	4

Employees participate actively in staff meetings or training sessions.	1	2	3	4
<b>Subtotal</b>				

#### F. Thinking

Test	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Employees can resolve common workplace problems when required.	1	2	3	4
Employees can make decisions independently.	1	2	3	4
Employees' planning skills lead to quality work, accomplished deadlines or decreased costs.	1	2	3	4
When faced with a problem, employees conduct research to find information or solutions.	1	2	3	4
Employees can remember routine procedures to follow.	1	2	3	4
<b>Subtotal</b>				

#### G. Working with Others

Test	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Employees coordinate work or share information with others.	1	2	3	4
Employees are successful in accomplishing tasks that require organized co-operation.	1	2	3	4
Employees participate in group projects or team meetings.	1	2	3	4
Employees can set aside personal differences.	1	2	3	4
Employees display behaviour that is conducive to good teamwork.	1	2	3	4
<b>Subtotal</b>				

#### H. Computer Use

Test	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Employees accept changes in technology such as new computer software.	1	2	3	4
Employees are competent when performing computer-related tasks.	1	2	3	4
Employees take an acceptable amount of time to complete tasks using computer software.	1	2	3	4
Employees are comfortable using an electronic device when appropriate, instead of performing a task manually.	1	2	3	4
Employees are comfortable operating computer accessories such as printers, fax machines and scanners.	1	2	3	4
<b>Subtotal</b>				

#### I. Continuous Learning

Test	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Employees are willing to participate in various forms of training (i.e., classroom, on the job, etc.).	1	2	3	4
Employees acquire knowledge and skills by learning from co-workers.	1	2	3	4
Employees are interested in developing learning plans for personal or professional development.	1	2	3	4
Candidates for higher-level positions are recruited from within the organization.	1	2	3	4
Employees are receptive to	1	2	3	4



changes in the workplace.				
<b>Subtotal</b>				

## RESULTS

SECTION	TOTAL
A. Reading	
B. Document Use	
C. Writing	
D. Numeracy	
E. Oral Communication	
F. Thinking	
G. Working with Others	
H. Computer Use	
I. Continuous Learning	

### Analysis

If each section total is between 1 and 15, this can indicate vulnerability in the particular skill or it may be lacking in your organization which is a significant Essential Skills issue in your organization.

Go to the Getting Started chapter on page 19 for your next steps.

If each section total is between 16 – 20, good job! Essential Skills are present in your organization and are effectively being used. Check out the Toolbox chapter for more information that may help you as you continue in Essential Skills training.

## **How Does the Learning Network Work for You?**

The Learning Network acts as a broker or intermediary between you, the employer and service providers (the ones who will deliver the training and provide instructors) to negotiate and promote Essential Skills training in your workplace. They will

- perform an in depth organizational needs assessment that can help you pinpoint your gaps and needs
- provide recommendations
- help you start the negotiation process
- work with your Essential Skills team in initiating Essential Skills training
- place a call out for service providers and third party evaluators

## **Advantages of the Learning Network**

Learning Networks can

- save you time and money by short listing service providers
- provide unbiased, impartial information
- provide guidance as you develop your Essential Skills Program

To find a Learning Network in Ontario visit

[www.on.literacy.ca/find\\_a\\_program](http://www.on.literacy.ca/find_a_program)

## GETTING STARTED...

5 Steps to implement an Essential Skills program in your workplace

### Step 1: Assess your Organizational Essential Skills Needs

- i. Make a list of the current jobs within your workplace. What future jobs will be needed?
- ii. Determine the tasks that are required by your employees for them to effectively perform their jobs
- iii. Ask your employees what they feel are the skills needed for specific jobs within their area of responsibility
- iv. Match your job descriptions and task requirements to the Essential Skills Profiles. This exercise will help you see if your workforce is in line with national standards.

### Step 2: Identify Skills Gaps

Questions that you can ask to see if there are gaps in the skill level of your employees

#### Skills Gap Checklist

Question	Answer / Action
Do my employees have the Essential Skills to do their jobs adequately?	
Are they able to learn new tasks?	
Where are the productivity issues?	

What Essential Skill(s) are required to do the job and which of the skills within the job set require improvement?	
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**Step 3: Implement a Plan of Action**

- i. Determine training needs and desired outcomes for your workforce based on your identified skills gaps. What are your hard and soft outcome targets?
  
- ii. Determine organizational resources, budget and human resources capacity in order to start an Essential Skills Program
  
- iii. Select appropriate assessment tools. Identify resources available for training- job specific materials, method of delivery etc. Utilize your local Learning Network as a Broker for Essential Skills training in your workplace.
  
- iv. Market Essential Skills training to employees. Show employees that you have a vested interest in their professional and personal development.
  
- v. Build time into work schedules to accommodate employee training.
  
- vi. Develop measurable benchmarks for evaluations. How will you measure success?

#### **Step 4: Track Results (Individual/Organizational)**

i. Evaluate benefits and outcomes of training.

What are the measurable hard/soft outcomes for your business? For your employees? For example

- increased productivity
- improved safety records
- better communication
- improved morale

Collect employee feedback through survey and/or interviews.

Have they used the skills they've learned?

Was training effective?

Are there gaps not yet addressed by training?

Use the Return on Investment ROI worksheet to help you calculate your return on investment. ROI is one of the best ways to benchmark the effectiveness of an investment in training by providing you with tangible proof that investing in human capital development improves business performance, profitability, or national economic competitiveness.

#### **Return on Investment (ROI) Worksheet**

(Adapted from Canadian Council of Learning. Connecting the Dots...Linking Training Investment to Business Outcomes and the Economy.)

#### **5 Stages of Evaluation**

Stage 1: Reaction

Did participants like the training?

Stage 2: Learning

Did they learn and what did they learn?

### Stage 3: Behaviour

Did participants' behaviour change as a result of the training program?

### Stage 4: Results

Did the training have positive business measures such as increase in sales, reduced defects, cost control and time savings or intangible results?

### Return on Investment Formula

ROI	=	$\frac{\text{Total Program Benefits} - \text{Total Program Costs}}{\text{Program Costs}}$	X	100%
-OR-				
ROI	=	$\frac{\text{Net Program Benefits}}{\text{Program costs}}$	X	100%

### Sample:

A sales training program was delivered to 34 sales associates resulting in an increase in sales. This led to an increase in profit of \$120,000 per year for the organization. The cost of the sales program was \$90,000.

The ROI of the program is:

ROI	=	$\frac{\$120,000 - \$90,000}{\$90,000}$	X	100%
	=	$\frac{\$30,000}{\$90,000}$	X	100%
	=	33%		

Therefore, for every dollar spent on training, it was returned along with an additional \$0.33 left over as profit.

### **Intangible Measures**

It is important to note that some outcomes cannot be quantified and converted to monetary values. These outcomes can include

- customer satisfaction
- a less stressful work environment
- employee satisfaction

### **Step 5: Evaluate and Follow-up**

Implement strategies for continuous monitoring and evaluation of employee skill levels and effectiveness of training initiatives.

## **Toolbox**

Additional information that may be of use to you as you invest in Essential Skills.

### **A. Essential Skills in the Workplace**

Essential Skills: Linking Employee Skills to Your Bottom Line. A Guide for Employers in Hamilton. Hamilton Training Advisory Board, March 2008.

This resource also applies to organizations outside of Hamilton.

Essential Skills, Human Resources and Social Development Canada  
Use this site to search approximately 250 profiles that describe how Essential Skills are used in the workplace. Also, use the Essential Skills Toolkit, containing a series of tools and resources to help employers, practitioners and learners assess and/or improve Essential Skills.

[http://srv108.services.gc.ca/english/general/home\\_e.shtml](http://srv108.services.gc.ca/english/general/home_e.shtml)

Essential Skills and Workplace Literacy Initiative

A series of tools developed in order to facilitate the identification of Essential Skills needed by employees in the workplace.

[www.ic.gc.ca/epic/site/cts-scf.nsf/en/sl00033e.html](http://www.ic.gc.ca/epic/site/cts-scf.nsf/en/sl00033e.html)

ABC Canada

Learn about Workplace Literacy

[www.abc-canada.org/en/workplace\\_literacy](http://www.abc-canada.org/en/workplace_literacy)



### Test of Workplace Essential Skills, TOWES

An effective testing and training that uses workplace documents to accurately measure the three essential skills that are needed for safe and productive employment: Reading Text, Document Use and Numeracy.

[www.towes.ca/home.aspx](http://www.towes.ca/home.aspx)

### Workplace Literacy Central

A free online resource with information, tools and advice for Canadian organizations and employers who want to raise literacy and basic skill levels in the workplace.

[www.conferenceboard.ca/workplaceliteracy/default.asp](http://www.conferenceboard.ca/workplaceliteracy/default.asp)

### Canadian Council on Learning

Connecting the Dots...Linking Training Investment to Business

Outcomes and the Economy, Allan Bailey. April 2007.

This report provides a strong case for training for the betterment of businesses and the national economy.

[www.ccl-cca.ca/NR/rdonlyres/F6226BEA-0502-4A2D-A2E0-6A7C450C5212/0/connecting\\_dots\\_EN.pdf](http://www.ccl-cca.ca/NR/rdonlyres/F6226BEA-0502-4A2D-A2E0-6A7C450C5212/0/connecting_dots_EN.pdf)

## **B. Human Resources for Employers**

### HR for Employers

A comprehensive website covering various HR topics including: hiring employees, departing employees, keeping employees, training and managing employees, payroll/benefits, HR Planning and Health & Safety.

[www.hrmanagement.gc.ca/gol/hrmanagement/site.nsf/en/index.html](http://www.hrmanagement.gc.ca/gol/hrmanagement/site.nsf/en/index.html)

## National Occupation Classification

The authoritative resource on occupational information in Canada. It is used daily by thousands of people to understand the jobs found throughout Canada's labour market.

[www5.hrsdc.gc.ca/NOC-CNP/app/index.aspx?lc=e](http://www5.hrsdc.gc.ca/NOC-CNP/app/index.aspx?lc=e)

## Strengthening your Workforce: A Guide to Human Resources

### Fundamentals

This guide explores topics such as workforce planning, recruitment & selection, retention, mentoring, and diversity management. Though the guide is directed to Hamilton employers, its application is broad based for all employers. Hamilton Training Advisory Board, July 2008

## Employment Ontario

A good resource to help employers

- hire employees
- forecast labour market supply
- learn about programs that pertain to training, apprenticeship, downsizing and layoffs

[www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/tcu/employmentontario/employers/](http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/tcu/employmentontario/employers/)

## Skills Upgrading for Laid Off Workers

This video was produced to increase awareness of the role that adult learning programs can play in labour adjustment situations. Along with stories of displaced workers, the potential for success within an upgrading program, and partnerships between Literacy and Basic Skills programs and Action Centres is explored.

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=7zGeIGiESy0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7zGeIGiESy0)

## **C. Literacy**

### Ontario Literacy Coalition

An organization that promotes and supports all levels of literacy in the province of Ontario. They work with literacy organizations, literacy learners, and other individuals and organizations committed to literacy.

[www.on.literacy.ca/](http://www.on.literacy.ca/)

### NALD @ Work (National Adult Literacy Database)

NALD@Work is your link to the world of workplace literacy and essential skills.

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

### Canadian Council on Learning

Provides current information about effective approaches to learning for learners, educators, employers and policy-makers.

[www.ccl-cca.ca/CCL/AboutCCL/?Language=EN](http://www.ccl-cca.ca/CCL/AboutCCL/?Language=EN)

## **D. Case Studies**

The following case studies from The Conference Board of Canada provide background, details, and outcomes for building Essential Skills in the workplace.

Essential Skills: The Dofasco Way. October 2005

<http://sso.conferenceboard.ca/documents.aspx?DID=1409>

Empowering Employee-Learners with Essential Skills at Durabelt Inc. March 2005

[http://sso.conferenceboard.ca/Libraries/EDUC\\_PUBLIC/DurabeltCS.sflb](http://sso.conferenceboard.ca/Libraries/EDUC_PUBLIC/DurabeltCS.sflb)

Essential Skills for Multi-skilling at National Silicates. March 2005.

<http://sso.conferenceboard.ca/documents.aspx?DID=1195>