



**Canadian Apprenticeship Forum**  
**Forum canadien sur l'apprentissage**

# Raising Awareness of Essential Skills with Employers who Hire Apprentices

September 2011

## INTRODUCTION

The Canadian Apprenticeship Forum – Forum canadien sur l'apprentissage (CAF-FCA) is an inclusive, national body that brings together all the players in Canada's apprenticeship community. A not-for-profit organization, CAF-FCA works under the guidance of its Board of Directors, representing apprenticeship stakeholders including business, labour, education, provincial/territorial apprenticeship boards, and equity-seeking groups.

In the spring of 2010, CAF-FCA undertook a project to increase employer awareness of Essential Skills and to provide guided support for implementing Essential Skills upgrading within their organizations. The need to engage employers in Essential Skills programs and activities came about as a result of previous CAF-FCA work on employer engagement in apprenticeship and the role of Essential Skills in apprenticeship<sup>1</sup>. CAF-FCA has since further explored the important topic of Essential Skills with the Canadian apprenticeship community through its February 2011 [National Forum Dialogue](#) and its online publication, the [Canadian Apprenticeship Journal](#).

CAF-FCA research indicates that some employers are reluctant to take on apprentices because they believe that apprentices lack the necessary Essential Skills.<sup>2</sup> A lack of Essential Skills in apprentices negatively impacts everyone. If an apprentice is unable to successfully complete training, obtain certification, or perform effectively on the job, both apprentices and employers are affected. Research also demonstrates that employers are beginning to recognize the need to create opportunities to ensure that all employees, including apprentices, have the necessary workplace skills to adapt to workplace change and participate actively in apprenticeship and workplace training. Employers have a vested interest in ensuring that apprentices possess the Essential Skills necessary to successfully complete apprenticeship training.<sup>3</sup>

Employer engagement is critical for developing skilled workers within apprenticeable trades. CAF-FCA seeks to conduct work that enhances and supports the ability of employers to participate in apprenticeship training. At the February 2011 National Forum Dialogue, participants suggested that employer awareness and acceptance of the importance of Essential Skills development is key in creating and maintaining strong apprenticeship programs since such a large percentage of an apprentice's time is spent in the workplace.

With this in mind, CAF-FCA developed a strategy to support employer awareness of Essential Skills and to provide guidance on implementing Essential Skills training in the workplace. The key objectives of the strategy were to:

#### Essential Skills include:

- understanding and using workplace-related information;
- being able to complete necessary paperwork and reports;
- having the ability to work with numbers;
- communicating orally and participating in all aspects of the workplace; and
- participating successfully in workplace training.

- Promote the value of Essential Skills within the context of apprenticeship;
- Support employers who employ apprentices in learning more about Essential Skills, their impact on workplaces and the benefits of addressing them; and
- Conduct a series of webinars with employers to provide:
  - an overview of Essential Skills to increase awareness;
  - discussion opportunities with champion employers who have implemented Essential Skills programs and activities;
  - a step-by-step approach to implementing Essential Skills upgrading; and
  - guidance on the use of the Office of Literacy and Essential Skills (OLES) Essential Skills tools and resources.

1 The Business Case for Essential Skills in Construction, a study CAF-FCA completed in partnership with the Construction Sector Council and SkillPlan in January 2010, and The Link Between Essential Skills and Success in Apprenticeship Training, a study by CAF-FCA completed in June 2007.

2 It Pays to Hire an Apprentice: Calculating the Return on Training Investment for Skilled Trades Employers in Canada, CAF-FCA, 2009.

3 Essential Skills Workshop, Construction Sector Council, May 2010 and Investigating Apprenticeship Completion in Canada: Reasons for Non-Completion and Suggested Initiatives for Improving Completion, CAF-FCA, 2011.



To achieve these objectives, webinars were developed for employers with apprentices who are interested in implementing Essential Skills upgrading programs in the workplace. They provide a step-by-step guide for employers on the importance of Essential Skills, what tools are available to them, how to implement a program and how evaluation should occur. The webinars will soon be available online and are intended to support employers as they undertake to enhance Essential Skills among apprentices, particularly Reading, Writing, Document Use and Numeracy. Voice-over functionality facilitates long-term use of these learning resources.

## CHALLENGES TO OBTAINING EMPLOYER ENGAGEMENT IN ESSENTIAL SKILLS

Although some employers and members of the apprenticeship and skilled trades community embrace the idea of Essential Skills upgrading, they are often unsure of how to go about implementing Essential Skills programs and activities. On the other hand, a number of employers remain unaware of their existence and importance, and often ask the following questions:

- What are 'Essential Skills'?
- Why are they important?
- How do they apply to employment and apprenticeship?

Employers tend not to identify Essential Skills issues as an immediate challenge since they are focused on business issues arising from their operating environment. However, these issues, which include low productivity, poor safety records and high error rates, may mask underlying Essential Skills challenges. Moreover, Essential Skills challenges are often not identified specifically until employers begin to grapple with implementing solutions to address their business issues. In

"This process takes a while to think through. It will not happen overnight. I need to take this back to my training group and develop a strategy. This information will be very helpful as we move forward. But there are definitely things that I see we can do now."

- Employer

such situations, awareness of Essential Skills is just the first step. Providing employers with information on assessment, encouraging them to consult the appropriate experts and supporting them during the implementation of an Essential Skills program are also necessary.<sup>4</sup>

## WHY IMPLEMENT ESSENTIAL SKILLS SUPPORTS FOR APPRENTICES

People are motivated and learn better when they develop and practice Essential Skills in situations and on tasks that are meaningful. Research shows that apprentices who have taken part in Essential Skills training have increased pass rates and reduced dropout rates during the technical training component of their apprenticeship, as well as increased employment success.<sup>5</sup> For employers, there are many advantages and benefits to developing workplace Essential Skills, including:

- Improved workplace safety;
- Improved communication;
- Increased productivity;
- Fewer errors;
- Increased employee retention, motivation, morale and job satisfaction; and
- Improved training outcomes and benefits.

<sup>4</sup> Feedback from participants at CAF-FCA's February 2011 National Forum Dialogue "Essential Skills in Apprenticeship."

<sup>5</sup> The Business Case for Essential Skills in Construction, a study CAF-FCA completed in partnership with the Construction Sector Council and SkillPlan in January 2010



Participants at CAF-FCA's February Dialogue also discussed the potential for workplace Essential Skills programs to be promoted to employers as an effective way to recruit and retain apprentices. Furthermore, it could be suggested to employers that they should invest in this kind of training not for fear of an apprentice leaving, but for fear of keeping an employee who is not appropriately equipped to perform tasks to the level required in the workplace. By upgrading an apprentice's Essential Skills, employers develop more engaged employees who are better able to contribute to the workplace, leading to greater success for the organization.

Once Essential Skills gaps have been identified and Essential Skills training has been developed and implemented, businesses often notice soft returns in addition to business results. The combination of improved Essential Skills and other softer benefits (including increased participation, improved morale, enhanced employee engagement and improved team performance) not only equip organizations to address future challenges, but also raise employer awareness of how to identify Essential Skills challenges and when to address Essential Skills head-on. The bottom line? Essential Skills training and supports can have a strong positive effect on an organization, its apprentices and employees.

## WHAT DO THE WEBINARS OFFER EMPLOYERS?

The four webinars provide valuable information for identifying potential Essential Skills gaps and implementing Essential Skills activities and programs.

**Webinar 1:** Provides an overview of Essential Skills and illustrates, using a case study, the benefits of building the Essential Skills proficiency levels of all apprentices

**Webinar 2:** Describes the key activities required to perform a successful workplace assessment to identify individual and organization-wide training needs

**Webinar 3:** Suggests Essential Skills training and activities

**Webinar 4:** Discusses the "how to's" for getting started and a review of Essential Skills tools and resources

The webinars' step-by-step approach for implementing Essential Skills in the workplace can help employers identify and prioritize needs, develop solutions and prepare a training plan. They suggest methods for identifying workplace education training needs and desired skill levels; determining apprentice skills levels and training goals; and comparing actual performance with standards. Once training needs are prioritized, Essential Skills solutions can be planned. Suggested solutions include implementing Essential Skills training, job restructuring to provide opportunities for apprentices to upgrade Essential Skills levels, training for mentors and/or the provision of in-house trainers. The webinars also include case studies from employers who have undertaken proven Essential Skills upgrading initiatives.<sup>6</sup>

The webinars introduce employers to Essential Skills. They cover such topics as how Essential Skills are defined, the importance of enhancing the Essential Skills of apprentices, and the benefits to employers of implementing an Essential Skills program. To illustrate these key points, the first webinar includes a presentation from the Essential Skills coordinator from ArcelorMittal Dofasco, who speaks about the company's Essential Skills experience and continuing activities. The webinars outline good practices for implementing Essential Skills, providing practical tools that help employers plan an Essential Skills upgrading program. To facilitate this process, links to the tools and resources are embedded directly into the webinars.

The webinars include a sound business case for implementing Essential Skills into the workplace, ensuring employers are well-equipped to proceed with the implementation of a program that is right for their organization and apprentices.

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<sup>6</sup> ArcelorMittal Dofasco has successfully implemented and adapted an Essential Skills program since the mid-1990's. As a result of the program, they have been able to develop employee skills sets by focusing on literacy, comprehension and technology. "Within the Dofasco program, essential skills are the basic skills necessary for our employees to make the best contribution possible."



## CONCLUSIONS

Outcomes from this project suggest that employers, although aware of the need for strong Essential Skills in employees and apprentices, often hesitate to integrate skills upgrading programs until they can see the direct impact on their organization. Many employers still see this as an individual issue and do not recognize the significant benefits of assessment and upgrading. One of the key messages arising from the February Dialogue was the need to raise awareness of the importance of Essential Skills in apprenticeship training with all stakeholders including apprentices, employers, training providers, the K-12 system and others. Recognition was identified as the first step to addressing any gaps or challenges.

This project suggests that it is important to continue to raise employer awareness of the benefits of ensuring all apprentices possess the required level of proficiency in each of the Essential Skills relevant to work performance. It is also valuable to continue promoting the OLES Essential Skills tools and resources available to employers.

“More marketing/broadcasting is required about Essential Skills and [their] benefits as well as the available tools and resources; people in the industry or even the company were not aware of this program.”

- Employer

## NEXT STEPS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Moving forward, the four voice-over webinars, as well as the links to the OLES tools and resources, will be available on CAF-FCA’s website. The webinars are especially recommended for individuals responsible for human resources and training. Each audio webinar is approximately 30-45 minutes in length. The audio webinars maintain the original project objectives to raise employer awareness and outline a step-by-step approach to implementing Essential Skills in the

“I will be adjusting training to include more upfront document use and computer skills as part of technical training for apprentices and journeypersons. In addition, I will work with some apprenticeship mentors to make sure they integrate numeracy, document use and computer skills into their training activities and demonstrations.”

- Employer

workplace. A select number of OLES tools are used in the webinars to demonstrate how they can be applied to support the development of Essential Skills activities and programs. Employers with questions can contact CAF-FCA for additional support.

The webinars will be promoted through employer engagement activities, Essential Skills work and other apprenticeship-related events. For example, CAF-FCA’s monthly e-newsletters, which are distributed to apprenticeship stakeholders across the country, will contain descriptions of the webinars and links to the CAF-FCA webpage on which they are hosted. CAF-FCA’s online Canadian Apprenticeship Journal has also profiled the webinars in its special issue on [Essential Skills in Apprenticeship](#). Presentations at events are another key venue through which the webinars will be promoted.

“Makes you think about what you might have to do to help out employees.”

- Employer



This project was funded by the Government of Canada's Office of Literacy and Essential Skills.

