

elevate

Testing new delivery models to better meet the needs of adults



INTRODUCTION TO ELEVATE

OVER THE LAST DECADE, A SUBSTANTIVE AND STRUCTURAL transformation has been occurring in the global economy, changing the technology demands of industry and the nature of work. These changes have impacted all individuals, but none more so than adults with low educational attainment levels. Some economists and labour market analysts see a bleak future for the over two and a half million working age Canadians with neither a high school diploma nor the literacy levels necessary to access postsecondary education or the apprenticeship systems.

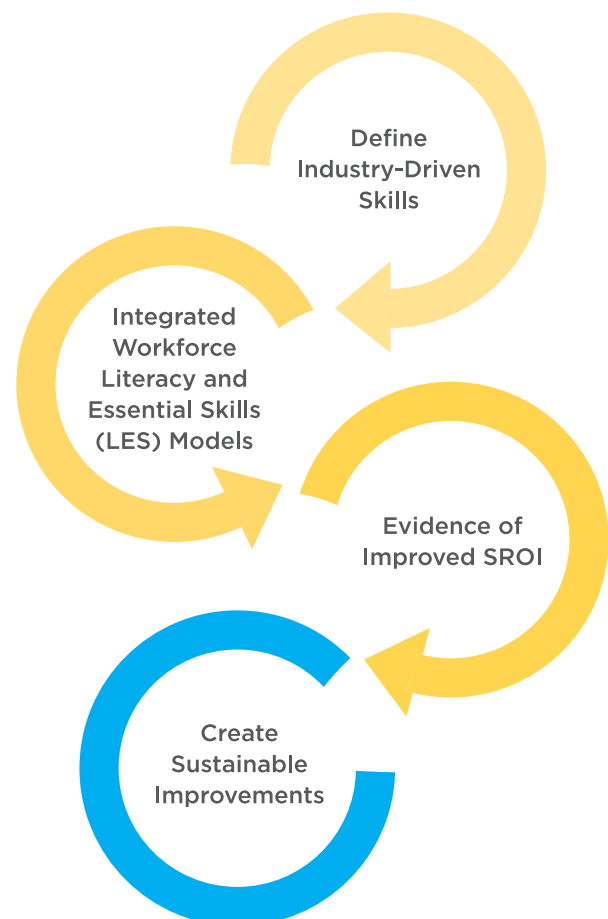
The mission of *Elevate Canada: Raising the Grade for Food Processing (Elevate)* is to create a clear line of sight between the essential skills participant and the employer who needs workers with unique skill sets. This brief points towards the kind of solutions that could provide a better alignment between the needs of those who **want to work** with those sectors who have **work to offer**, so that Canadian industry can grow while providing vulnerable individuals with the opportunity to increase their labour force attachment. Funded by Employment and Social Development Canada under the Adult Learning, Literacy and Essential Skills Program, *Elevate* will examine and test the effectiveness of workforce training models that integrate job-specific skills, as well as literacy and essential skills (LES) in the food processing industry.

The project is comprised of two phases: the first phase will use an enhanced Job Requirement Approach (JRA) – the first time such an approach has been tested in the Canadian context – to investigate the relationship between traditional literacy and essential skills and entry-level job requirements. This new approach will allow us to attempt to determine the existing, new and emergent skills that are required for current and future workers in the food processing sector.

The second phase of the *Elevate* project will test several industry-shared delivery models that incorporate entry-level job skills, traditional literacy and essential skills, as well as complex communication and problem solving in technology-rich environments (PS-TRE) through workforce demonstration projects across ten different sites in the food processing

industry. This initiative will train approximately 250 job-seekers receiving income support. Lastly, the project will examine potential replication and scalability of the delivery model as a lever for workforce development across other industry sectors.

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THE NEW GENERATION OF ENTRY-LEVEL EMPLOYMENT

RAPID TECHNOLOGICAL CHANGE AND INCREASING competition are delivering economic benefits to Canadians through lower prices for consumer goods, advances in logistics that ensure our food products are fresh, available, and safe, as well as through improvements to the quality and capabilities of everyday customer service. Many of the technological impacts that are being felt in these sectors and occupations have not been part of our traditional postsecondary institutional offerings, adult basic skills programs, or conventional workforce development programs. The challenge partly resides in the fact that the occupations associated with these industries have historically been filled by recent immigrants or by those without a high school diploma. There is, however, increasing evidence that the definitions of what constitutes ‘high-end’ jobs and ‘low-end’ jobs are eroding rapidly as information technology advances. At one time, a repetitive job may have implied standing on an assembly line. As specialized technology applications are improved, however, routine and repetitive manual tasks become integrated into a variety of digital devices and complex information management systems. Many of the traditionally lower-skilled occupations in areas like food service, retail, logistics, hospitality and resource sectors are now relenting to the kind of technological revolution that started in manufacturing twenty years ago.

Two years ago, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) published a report noting that, “jobs which previously required low educational attainment for entry are now being filled by people who have completed high school or even possess degrees. An increase in the relative supply of higher skills, in turn, alters the job content to increase the complexity of tasks and knowledge required of these occupations.”¹ Essential Skills Ontario’s Collaborative Development Approaches (CODA) demonstration project, which provided

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essential skills training to entry-level employees in 16 workplaces, fully echoed the OECD findings. New forms of technology are radically altering the landscape and definition of what is entailed in entry-level or (previously) low-skilled work. Many of these jobs are in locales and (occupational/industry) clusters of increased labour market activity where shortages are already occurring and are projected to reach

more serious levels in the near future. After exploring the evidence about the changing nature of skills in these industries, there is a growing consensus that such occupations and industry sectors now require higher-level skills. In order to meet these requirements, we need

to better define the combination of necessary skill sets in these positions and determine how they can be delivered most effectively and efficiently within the context of potential literacy and essential skill models.

INDUSTRY-SHARED APPROACHES TO TRAINING

IN TODAY'S KNOWLEDGE-DRIVEN ECONOMY, EVEN entry-level or lower-skilled employment requires reasonable levels of literacy and essential skills. Many industries have invested heavily in technology in order to attain higher levels of productivity. Yet, the promise of productivity increases from technological change assumes the ability of the labour force, as much as industry, to incorporate those changes into everyday work practices. In Canada, these requirements are leading to a dual shortage: on the one hand, large segments of the population lack higher skills and consequently struggle with low labour market attachment; on the other hand, many industries struggle to meet their skilled labour requirements. Because adult basic skills training programs

place greater emphasis on the 'supply side' of labour with little attention to the 'demand side' of industry, they have proven to be largely ineffective in bridging the gap between workforce development programming and customized programming for local industry. This issue is made even more complex by the implications of changing work practices and rapid advances in workplace technology. While there are occasional literacy program forays into workforce training in these sectors, there have been no sustained institutional commitments to these industries or the types of individuals who could, with appropriate and effective training, enter these occupations.



Literacy and Essential Skills programs have to be more closely attuned to the changing labour needs of employers, which are highly differentiated by industry and occupation.

Industry-shared approaches to workforce development, which aim to address the mismatch of supply and demand in labour markets, offer promising alternatives to current Canadian literacy and essential skills model designs. This approach directly involves employers and service providers in the co-design and delivery of training in order to leverage employment opportunities for low-skilled adults. At a program level, they shift the focus from educational and community-based aspirations, towards labour market and participant-driven outcomes, for job-seekers and employers alike. Approaches that incorporate industry-shared literacy and essential skills have been designed and implemented in other jurisdictions including the United States and Australia, and are in the process of being developed in Great Britain, Scotland and New Zealand.

In Canada, both federal and provincial governments have played important roles in workforce literacy training; yet, for the most part, these efforts have focused on customizing

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programming towards supply-side labour adjustment activities, and not around local economic development. Clearly, literacy and essential skills programs have to be more closely attuned to the changing labour needs of employers, which are highly differentiated by industry and occupation.

From the evidence Essential Skills Ontario has directly gathered from over twenty employers and industry associations, a strong majority have a clear understanding of the importance of literacy and essential skills in the workplace. However, none identified or anticipated that literacy and essential skills could act as a recruiting mechanism or facilitate their recruiting processes. More succinctly, employers see literacy and essential skills programs as educationally-oriented (i.e. focused on further education) and not as a workforce pipeline.

The rationale for testing industry-shared approaches is clear: we anticipate large labour market shortages due to demographic shifts, regional labour market growth, as well as a shift to a knowledge-based economy. *Elevate* will seek to assess whether effective industry-shared literacy and essential skills approaches can be replicated across Canada to the benefit of local industry clusters and underutilized labour pools. A critical element in the *Career Pathways* initiatives in the United States was the authentic participation of employer groups, not only for the curriculum design of the initiative, but also in the delivery of programming. Indeed, most state-funded projects require the explicit participation of an employer or industry cluster, and currently this approach is being replicated in both the U.K. and Australia. The program model designs in *Elevate* will purposefully incorporate the following industry-shared approaches with the following elements:



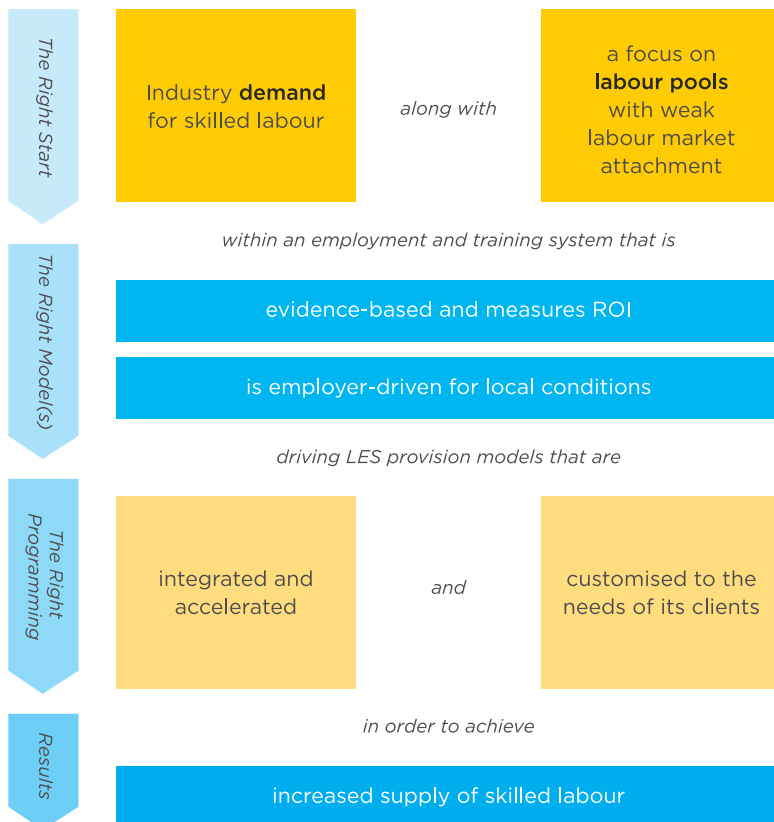
1. Target a specific entry-level occupation or set of occupations within an industry, based on the potential that exists for providing employment opportunities in specific Canadian regions.
2. Actively engage with and add value to local industry by being geared and flexible towards fluid labour market needs and operations of employers.
3. Aspire to leverage employment opportunities that meet the workforce needs of local industry and the supports needed for clients.
4. Act as a lever to benefit emerging and growing industries, with an eye to creating regional economic development through a larger skilled labour pool.

DEVELOPING EFFECTIVE MODELS OF INTEGRATED LITERACY AND ESSENTIAL SKILLS DELIVERY

THE EVIDENCE GAPS IDENTIFIED IN OUR PREVIOUS research makes a compelling case for practical studies in specific industry/occupation clusters of entry-level jobs; studies that provide clear and rich descriptions of the ways in which complex communications and problem solving in technology-rich environments are integrated with both traditional literacy and sector-specific vocational skills.

There is evidence from other jurisdictions about how purposefully-designed adult basic education delivery models can address the dual challenge of a) increasing the

employability of those with weak labour force attachment in tandem/conjunction with b) an economic development approach that seeks increases in literacy and essential skills (LES) as an integral component of increased productivity and innovation. Clearly, certain design features, including industry involvement, result in better outcomes for both learners and employers. These models point the way to needed changes in the orientation of Canadian LES workforce delivery systems, which have been neither effectively employment-focused nor sufficiently engaged with industry and employers.



Several models of integrated programming merit purposeful empirical testing in Canadian contexts so that we are able to learn about the extent to which they may deliver the necessary elements of successful and effective LES programming. The approach proposed here builds on the best practices identified by successful workforce development programs, particularly those aimed at clients with weak labour force attachments. These include initiatives such as *SkillWorks* and *I-BEST* initiatives. The *Elevate* demonstration project will incorporate the following foundations of effectiveness elsewhere:

- Content of training will provide for a range of LES (as conventionally understood), as well as job specific-skills and, in particular, problem solving and complex communications in technologically-rich environments.
- Content will be determined through an enhanced Job Requirements Approach (JRA) which includes the active involvement of both the industry sector and specific employers.

- Delivery will integrate and accelerate LES, problem-solving in technology rich environments (PS-TREs) with job-specific skills.
- Design and delivery will integrate the necessary supports (e.g. counselling and childcare) essential for client success.

The importance of testing models through demonstration sites in cooperation with industry is critical to developing a practical research mechanism that is explicitly aimed at addressing several practical challenges that require concrete solutions. Innovation and effectiveness can be achieved by testing new approaches to what are often seen as intractable problems in the education and training system. An example of such an approach is the highly acclaimed Pathways to Education Program which was designed a decade ago in

direct response to the high dropout rate among young people in one low-income community and has since been replicated in similar communities across Canada. As with other programs that have followed such an approach, a key focus of the proposed work is on the challenge of producing what the US National Institute for Literacy termed “results that matter”, or more specifically, results that demonstrate the efficacy of the intervention in meeting the stated objective and in changing the life chances of those who are the subject of the work.

The approach proposed by *Elevate* builds on the best practices identified by successful workforce development programs in other jurisdictions (who have strong evidence of measurable outcomes and positive impacts), particularly those aimed at clients with weak labour force attachments.



SUPPORTING OTHERS TO IMPROVE OUTCOMES

CLEARLY, A KEY ELEMENT OF THE CURRENT FISCAL environment is the importance of programs and interventions supported by measurable outcomes. A number of provinces and territories fully understand that the results from current adult basic education delivery mechanisms are uneven and do not provide the necessary evidence-based results to better inform the kind of policies necessary to yield efficiency and effectiveness.

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A major premise of this project is that a shift to industry-shared approaches with integrated programming has the potential to be both more effective and efficient. Conversations with policy makers at all levels of government indicate an imperative to deliver services in ways that maximize resources and share investments. There is also an understanding of the importance of having strong evidence of positive and measurable impacts. This initiative will have a commitment towards evidence-based and data-driven evaluation that includes indicators and tracking of client and employer outcomes including Return on Investment (ROI). The nature of the efficiencies is anticipated to include:

- increased LES skill gains for clients,
- increased employment outcomes for clients,
- reduced costs for, and dependence on, social assistance,
- shorter training times, thereby reducing costs for providers and program funders, and
- greater access to skilled labour for employers.

While it is difficult at this early juncture to consider the scale of such savings, it is an explicit objective of *Elevate's* work to determine this. The experience of similar projects in the United States suggest potential savings in each of these areas, several of which point to both a reduction in unit costs as well as absolute dollar savings to the training funders.

If demonstrably effective, integrated and accelerated LES models can become the predominant form of training through which there is a clear line of sight between the essential skills learner and the employer who needs workers with unique skill sets. Our objective is to provide guidance to provinces towards more effective labour market approaches. It is in provincial, territorial and municipal governments' interest to reduce training expenditures and reliance on income support for lower-skilled citizens while supplying industries that have acute labour shortages. *Elevate* will provide clear guidance to others on how these models can be replicated and scaled across communities and jurisdictions.

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PURSuing TRANSFORMATION THROUGH STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS

THE CONSIDERABLE SIZE, COMPLEXITY AND IMPORTANCE of the initiative necessitates a clear, targeted and, above all, strategic approach to communications. Important policy initiatives (such as *Shifting Gears*, *Jobs for the Future*, and *Achieve the Dream*) combined evidence-based research and strategic communications in order to build awareness, cultivate support and encourage better institutional practice while fostering policy change. Utilizing a theory of change methodology, the proposed initiative seeks to mobilize support, collaboration and consensus among the multitude of stakeholders/sectors in order to create awareness in advance of the potential policy and system changes, while building a lasting constituency.

The communications around the initiative will be tailored towards the six key stages of our work:

- **Clarifying the *why* behind the initiative:** Signalling what works elsewhere (United States, United Kingdom, and Australia) and what the implications are for Canada.
- **Explaining *how* the demonstration sites work:** The model design, where the projects are being done as well as what is being measured and why.
- **Early indicators *from* the project:** What are we finding thus far? What adjustments have been made?
- **Leading indicators of success:** To be extracted from the overall results and may be derived from such tangibles as number of participants, demographics of those enrolled, etc.
- **What did we learn:** Lessons from across the demonstration sites to examine what can be replicated and how.
- **Document *what* skills** are included in “enhanced” LES in technology-rich environments.

The addition of a vibrant communications process to a research project will help key stakeholders (including provinces, territories and municipalities) normalize strategies towards creating a workforce literacy and



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essential skills delivery model that better meets the needs of both industry and the workforce.

A recent policy paper from *Corporate Voices* raised a number of important questions asking, “where will our future workers come from? How will they get the skills and experience they need to thrive in the workplace in a knowledge driven economy?”² They also issue a challenge to workforce preparation programs to bridge the great divide between what lower-skilled individuals have to offer and what industry expects and demands. We have heard the same questions from employers and a diverse range of industry groups across Canada. The shortage of potential workers is an impediment to growth. The skills employers are looking for are not just at the top or even the middle of the employment skills spectrum.

We are entering an era where almost every potential Canadian worker will be needed. The *Elevate* initiative should help answer these questions by providing a roadmap for policymakers, industry, and service providers with the promise of real and lasting returns over time.

The mission of *Elevate* is to create a clear line of sight between the essential skills learner and the employer who needs workers with unique skill sets.

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