



The Conference Board
of Canada

CASE STUDY 18

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

Program

Partnership

Date Established

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Name of Program

*Association of
Canadian Community
Colleges' Work Keys®
System (Canada)*

Skills Developed

- *Academic*
- *Personal
Management*
- *Teamwork*
- *Science Literacy*

Assessing and developing employees' employability skills

THE ACCC'S WORK KEYS® SYSTEM (CANADA)

Assessing Generic Employability Skills Within Specific Workplace Settings

BY KURTIS KITAGAWA

August 1998

The Association of Canadian Community Colleges' Work Keys® System assesses generic employability skills as they are used in specific workplace settings.

Overview

The Association of Canadian Community Colleges' Work Keys® System is an assessment tool that links the generic skills contained in the Conference Board's Employability Skills Profile and Science Literacy for the World of Work Profile to specific workplace situations.

The Conference Board's employability skills and science literacy profiles can themselves be used as simple assessment tools to identify general areas of skill deficiency and, therefore, to highlight skill areas for improvement. There is also a widespread need for developing a more sophisticated assessment tool that will enable employers, educators and individuals to identify employee skill levels in the various categories highlighted in these profiles.

Work Keys® is a systematic approach to recruiting, training, managing and developing people based on (1) an assessment of their skills in applied technology, applied mathematics, academic work, personal management and teamwork and (2) an

assessment of the skill level in these areas required in specific workplace situations.

More specifically, Work Keys® enables employers to compare skills in eight key areas required to perform specific jobs with the actual skills of individuals wanting to work in those areas. These eight areas fall into three broad categories: comprehending communications (listening, reading for information and writing), problem solving (applied mathematics, applied technology, locating information and observation) and interpersonal (teamwork) skills.

Work Keys® gives employers the means to identify the current skill deficiencies of individual employees and to arrange for appropriate retraining. It also gives educators the information needed to tailor instructional programs to meet business needs. Finally, it helps individuals develop focused education and training plans for themselves. This is particularly important for secondary school graduates who are not going on to postsecondary education; these represent some 60 per cent of all secondary school graduates.

Objectives

- Enable employers, educators and individuals to work together to develop an innovative, productive and competitive workforce.

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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.

Visit us on the Web:
www.conferenceboard.ca/nbec

- Help individuals to identify and acquire the skills they need to get and keep their jobs by providing a common language for communication between individuals, employers and educators.

Groups Served

- Employers, individuals, educators.

Activities

Work Keys® has three main components: job analysis, skills assessment and instructional support.

1. Job Analyses

College job profilers, who have been trained to prepare job analyses using the Work Keys® job profiling procedure, produce job profiles with the input of employees who identify tasks and skills that are important to their jobs. Job profiling requires the participation of six to eight employees for a minimum of 12 hours each if all eight skill areas are included in the profile.

2. Skills Assessments

Trained personnel carry out skills assessments by evaluating the skill levels of job candidates using tests developed in collaboration with business and industry. These tests incorporate problems encountered in actual workplace situations.

3. Instructional Support

Colleges provide instructional support to client firms by comparing students' competencies with job profiles and providing Work Keys® competency-based instructional courses to develop the skills graduates will require for specific jobs/occupations.

Resources Required

Start-up

- A community college can expect to make a strategic investment of \$10,000 up front to acquire, be licensed to use,

and be trained in the use of Work Keys® software.

- This initial investment can produce returns fairly quickly once the program is operational, since businesses pay colleges to produce job profiles, and colleges, in turn, charge interested individuals about \$150 to administer eight tests, prepare a report card and provide a debriefing.
- Colleges can offer volume discounts and other discounts depending on the nature of a given project. Discounts to schools start at 25 per cent.
- Client firms are also eligible for volume discounts, which are introduced progressively on multiples of 100 assessments (in other words, there would be a discount on 100 assessments, a bigger discount on 200 assessments and so on).

Human Resources

- In addition to the initial cash outlay, establishing a Work Keys® program requires a human resources commitment to market the product to potential clients, whether students or employers.
- Tests for individuals can be administered by personnel with half a day of training.
- Profiles of the skill levels required for specific jobs must be prepared by certified profilers, for example, people who have a postgraduate degree and who have qualified for, and successfully completed, Work Keys® job profiling training. Certified profilers can take between half a day and three days to complete a job profile, depending on the amount of information they have to start with.

Materials

- Profilers provide the necessary software, and the data collected from the tests are stored centrally. However, the college must be equipped with appropriate technology to communicate with the database.

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.

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For program deliverers, this program is most cost effective with large populations of students/employees. For purchasers, a \$150 per capita charge is cost effective (1) where recruiting costs are substantial and it is necessary to cut job turnover rates, reduce overtime and assembly line faults, and increase the retention rate of new employees, and (2) where there is a significant need to systematically upgrade the employability skills of the workforce over time.

Achievements/Outcomes

Work Keys® provides employers, individuals and educators with a scientifically validated assessment tool.

Employers

Employers gain the tools to:

- profile the skills required for specific jobs/occupations,
- evaluate job applicants' skills and make hiring decisions based on bona fide requirements,
- refocus job advertising and recruiting materials to attract the right applicants, making the hiring process more efficient and reducing administrative costs associated with screening out unsuitable candidates,
- evaluate employees' and job applicants' skills and make hiring decisions more expeditiously by testing groups or individuals in the morning and providing test scores in the afternoon,
- determine individual and organizational skill deficiencies, and
- provide focused education and training to improve skills. Creative Extruded Products in Tipp City, Ohio, reported, for example, that Work Keys® enabled them to fully staff their machine operator job with properly qualified personnel, which cut the job turnover rate from 33 per cent to 5 per cent, slashed overtime by 82 per cent and reduced the scrap rate by 40 per cent, saving them tens of thousands of dollars.

Individuals

Individuals are helped to:

- formulate informed career plans and explore appropriate career paths,
- document their employability skills and skill development,
- provide employers with evidence of the skill levels they have attained,
- identify their educational and training goals and make personal training plans, and
- locate jobs for which they have the required skills.

Georgian College and the Barrie office of Human Resources Development Canada show, for example, that 120 of the 125 individuals who participated in Work Keys® assessments found employment under the Targeted Wage Subsidy program and kept their jobs after the subsidies were withdrawn.

Educators

Educators are able to:

- revise and develop curricula to meet business and individual needs,
- guide students' career planning and document the effectiveness of instructional programs, and
- bridge the communication gap relating to expectations of employers and individuals.

Benefits

- Helps individuals to find and keep jobs.
- Enhances job performance and increases productivity:
 - Employees are happier; they have clearer goals and a sense of purpose and are provided with training to achieve their goals.
 - Overtime, staff turnover and fault reports from assembly lines are reduced. Trimble Navigation, an American high technology tracking device manufacturer reported, for example, a decrease in fault reports from 11 per cent to less than 0.1 per cent as a result of a Work Keys®-assisted workforce training program.

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Our grateful thanks to:

Terry Anne Boyles
Gilles Séguin

- Improves human resource planning:
 - More focused training plans.
 - Shorter training periods.
- Improves communication between educators, employers, individuals and governments.
- Yields economic development payoffs for communities.

Innovation

The innovation in Work Keys® lies in its capacity to open up a constructive dialogue between business and education. This dialogue facilitates the creation of a culture of learning in which employees can be prepared for future jobs in addition to being trained for their current jobs.

Work Keys® is also innovative in its systematic approach to job profiling, employee assessment and skills development. Work Keys® focuses on definable, observable and measurable skill requirements in relation to specific jobs and has direct instructional benefits—educators can customize curricula to suit individual or organizational training needs. Employee participation in Work Keys® job profiling, skills assessment and instructional support activities gives individuals a sense of ownership and contributes to productivity. Work Keys® thereby produces organizational efficiencies. As well, by providing individuals with portable, universal report cards describing the skill levels they have achieved in key employability skill areas, it may also enhance job mobility.

Work Keys® is an objective assessment tool whose focusing of human resource development expenditures needs to be compared with the virtues of self-assessment tools based on performance criteria.

Keys to Success

- Ensure that business, educators and employees or potential employees are clear about the purpose of using the Work Keys® tool and understand the uses to which the data gathered will be put.
- Ensure that employees are comfortable with Work Keys®—by having a third party come in to talk with them about it and by involving them in profiling their own jobs.
- Give employees the opportunity to take tests at times that will fit into their day.
- Have a policy in place whereby people can be retested to document their skill development.

Greatest Challenges

- Developing a culture of lifelong learning committed to an ongoing cycle of employability skills assessment, training and education.
- Helping current employees overcome anxieties over the possible negative consequences of poor test performance (e.g., dismissal). Instead, emphasize the opportunities skill identification, assessment and development offer for getting and keeping jobs.
- Emphasizing to employers that Work Keys® is not a replacement for, but a value-added complement to, the suite of human resource tools they already have.
- Assuring unions that Work Keys® as an assessment and training model is compatible with the principles of performance, experience and knowledge on which the concept of seniority is based.

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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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