

WorkUp!

A model for Workplace Essential Skills training



Final report
June 2012



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Acknowledgments

Funding for the WorkUp! project was provided by the Office of Literacy and Essential Skills (OLES), Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC).

This was an exciting, inspiring project and I was very happy to be working on it. First of all, it was a privilege to be working with Terri Peters. Her superb organizational skills, vision for the project, people skills and plain hard work were the ground work for WorkUp's success. Also, Terri and I worked with an incredible team of women who brought their own experience, knowledge and enthusiasm to share with everyone. At the same time, the knowledge base around Workplace Essential Skills deepened and expanded at an amazing rate. Consequently, it was as much of a learning experience for me as for the participants. Our training days were full and thought-provoking; the needs assessment was eye-opening and instructive; and the practicums – well, they allowed all of the skills of the participants to really shine. But the final evaluation interview with the employers really was the “icing on the cake”. They were so enthused about the whole project and so grateful for the work that was done in their organization. It really highlighted the whole purpose of the project.
– Lorene Anderson

I am deeply indebted to Lorene Anderson of AWES for her knowledge and expertise in helping me co-facilitate the WorkUp! project. There is no way it would have been a success without Lorene. The women who worked with us on the project brought incredible enthusiasm to everything we did. Even when half of the trainees had to leave part way through, the remaining trainees welcomed the three new recruits with open arms and shared all of their experiences and knowledge. Although Lorene and I were the ostensible managers and mentors of the project, the level of cross-mentoring that happened between the WorkUp! women (as we affectionately called them) was truly inspiring. I can't thank you all enough for making this a fantastic group learning experience.
– Terri Peters

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Need for the project

Alberta's economic boom and bust cycle presents unique challenges for the province. In order to maintain its economic advantage, Alberta requires a labour pool that can carry out and support mega-projects. A shrinking labour pool, due in part to an aging population and lower birth rates, is increasing pressure on employers.

While some Alberta employers are advertising and attracting workers from other provinces, other employers are hiring Aboriginal and immigrant workers from within Alberta. Many workers, including those born and schooled in Alberta, require more skills training to keep Alberta's labour pool flexible and efficient. This is true not only in larger urban centres, but also in smaller communities and remote areas of the province.

As workers enter the job market, employers are encountering problems with training, production, staff turnover, and safety. Employers may not recognize that there is a relationship between limited Workplace Essential Skills (WES) and the problems they are experiencing. There is a great need to raise awareness about how improved Workplace Essential Skills can mitigate some of the problems employers face.

However, workplace training can be a challenge. Workers in companies that are short staffed work longer hours and there is less downtime at the workplace for training. Also, Alberta's boom periods demand ever-increasing skills from workers. Those who haven't been able to upgrade or improve their skills at work find their jobs becoming tenuous. When the bust periods arise, these are the first employees laid off and the last ones hired back in the next boom cycle. These employees become the "first fired, last hired" in Alberta's labour force.

Once employers become aware that they may be experiencing a literacy and WES problem in their workforce, they begin to look for solutions. It is important to assess the WES needs in the workplace and develop targeted training plans.

Meeting the need for effective WES training has always been a challenge. While employers in urban areas, especially large- and medium-sized businesses, may have had some access to training that addresses workplace literacy, language and Essential Skills, this has not been as true for businesses in rural areas. With the influx of workers from other parts of Canada and the world, employers are frequently turning to community organizations to find solutions to their training needs. Some of these organizations have the knowledge and expertise to provide the necessary solutions, but more are needed. Creating a model for training WES specialists will help meet the needs of more employers, no matter which area of Alberta they come from.

Major activities of the project

WorkUp! trainers

- Recruit six literacy or adult learning practitioners to become WES specialists (also called WorkUp! trainees in this document).
- Conduct fourteen WES specialist training sessions with WorkUp! trainees.
- Mentor recruited WES specialists during their workplace practicums.
- Interview employers from practicum worksites to evaluate the WES training model and the performance of the WorkUp! trainees.

WorkUp! trainees

- Recruit a workplace in their community in which to conduct a practicum.
- Conduct needs assessments to determine the WES gaps and therefore the training needs for a variety of employers or worksites.
- Use the results of the needs assessments to determine the training plans for a variety of employers/worksites.
- Design and deliver WES training plans to meet Essential Skills needs in workplaces.
- Evaluate their WES delivery in practicum workplaces.

External evaluator

- Interviews WorkUp! trainers and WorkUp! trainees to evaluate the WES training model.

Consultant

- Develop a marketing tool kit for practitioners to use with a variety of employers, which will raise awareness of WES and involve employers in thinking about his or her workplace issues as potentially being WES issues.

“This is a new model for training and we really liked it. We have attended lots of training, but it has always been prescribed and not in response to a direct need.”

Timeline for project (January 2010 – May 2012)

January – April 2010

- Recruit, interview and choose six WorkUp! trainees from various areas of Alberta
- Hire external project evaluator

May – October 2010

Training sessions with WorkUp! trainees covering:

- Orientation to WorkUp! project
- Introduction to Essential Skills and complexity levels
- Introduction to HRSDC Essential Skills resource series
- Needs assessments
- Common Ground: English in the Workplace training
- Language at Work training; this is a Canadian Language Benchmarks resource
- Tour of Manufacturing company in preparation for needs assessment in fall
- Promoting WES to employers
- Document use in the workplace
- Introduction to plain language
- Needs assessment by all WorkUp! trainees at the Manufacturing company
- Debrief of needs assessment and discussion of what to include in a needs assessment report to the Manufacturing company
- Understanding curriculum development in the workplace
- Collaborative evaluation in the workplace

November 2010 – March 2011

- External evaluator interviews all WorkUp! trainees and WorkUp! trainers as part of the formative evaluation for the WorkUp! training model
- WorkUp! trainees begin recruiting practicum work placements

April – July 2011

- Three WorkUp! trainees need to leave project
- Recruit, interview and choose three new WorkUp! trainees
- One WorkUp! trainee begins a workplace practicum in her home community

August 2011

- Training of three new WorkUp! trainees

September 2011 – May 2012

- All six WorkUp! trainees complete their WES training practicums and submit their case studies
- External evaluator assesses WorkUp! training model through summative evaluation interviews with all the WorkUp! trainees
- WorkUp! trainers evaluate the WorkUp! training model through interviews with WorkUp! practicum employers

model for WES training

Recruiting WES practitioners

The project had funds to recruit and train six people from across Alberta to become WES specialists. The WorkUp! trainers created a Call for Participants (see below) and posted it on Literacy Alberta's online conferencing system and through the WorkUp! trainers' other literacy and Essential Skills networks.

Potential WES practitioners were interviewed in person, by phone, and by videoconference. Applicants were from all areas of the province. Six WorkUp! trainees were identified in spring of 2010. However, in spring of 2011, three of the trainees had to leave the project, two for health reasons and one because of a job change. Three new trainees were recruited and began their training in August of 2011.

Some of the key skills and abilities identified to become an effective WES practitioner, as outlined in the Call for Participants, were:

- Degree, diploma or certificate in teaching English as a Second Language, Education, or Human Resources; equivalent training or experience considered
- Familiarity with HRSDC (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada) Essential Skills
- Experience in designing and delivering training and workshops; experience in workplace training an asset
- Group facilitation experience
- Good research and writing skills
- Ability to work with a mentor and as part of a team
- Ability to work cooperatively and collaboratively with employers
- Computer skills in word processing, email, and online conferencing
- Ability to meet the training, time and work requirements of the project



Training topics and resources

Note: A complete bibliography of training resources is available on page 25.

Topic	Resource	
Introduction to Essential Skills	HRSDC materials	www.hrsdc.gc.ca/eng/workplaceskills/LES/index.shtml
Complexity levels and Essential Skills profiles	Essential Skills profiles	www10.hrsdc.gc.ca/English/ES_profiles.aspx
Canadian Language Benchmarks and Essential Skills	Relating Canadian Language Benchmarks to Essential Skills: A Comparative Framework by Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks	www.itsessential.ca
Cycle of WES	Collaborative Needs Assessment: A Handbook for Workplace Development by Jurmo and Folinsbee	www.nald.ca/library/research/abc/colnee/colnee.pdf
English in the workplace	Common Ground : Guide to English in the Workplace by NorQuest College	www.norquest.ca/cfe/intercultural/proj_commonground.asp
	Language at Work series by Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks	www.itsessential.ca
Case Studies	Various case studies on building Essential Skills in the workplace.	www.conferenceboard.ca/e-library/search.aspx?q=workplace++case+studies
Interviewing Workers: focus groups, interviews, document review	Collaborative Needs Assessment: A Handbook for Workplace Development by Jurmo and Folinsbee	www.nald.ca/library/research/abc/colnee/colnee.pdf
Promoting WES to employers	HRSDC resources on marketing WES to employers	www.hrsdc.gc.ca/eng/workplaceskills/LES/index.shtml
	Essential Skills – Worth the Investment	www.hrsdc.gc.ca/eng/workplaceskills/LES/videos/videos.shtml

Document Use in the Workplace	Document Use at Work by SkillPlan, B.C.	www.skillplan.ca/English/publications.htm
	Authentic documents from various work and community locations	
Curriculum Development in the Workplace	Understanding Curriculum Development in the Workplace: A Resource for Educators by Jurmo and Folinsbee	www.nald.ca/library/research/abc/undcur/cover.htm
Evaluation of Workplace Training	Collaborative Evaluation: A Handbook for Workplace Development Planners by Jurmo and Folinsberr	www.nald.ca/library/research/abc/coleva/p4.htm
Plain Language	Opening Doors: A Literacy Audit Tool Kit for Customer Service Excellence by Literacy Alberta	http://literacyalberta.ca/sites/default/files/samplpgs.pdf
Essential Skills Needs Assessment	Essential Skills Organizational Needs Assessment by OLES	www.hrsdc.gc.ca/eng/workplaceskills/LES/pdfs/assessment/ona.pdf
	Collaborative Needs Assessment: A Handbook for Workplace Development by Jurmo and Folinsbee	www.nald.ca/library/research/abc/colnee/colnee.pdf
	Essential Skills Training Audit	Literacy Alberta
Resources around each of the nine HRSDC Essential Skills	HRSDC Learning and Training Supports for various Essential Skills	www.hrsdc.gc.ca/eng/workplaceskills/LES/tools_resources/learning.shtml
	Writing	Making Choices: Teaching Writing in the Workplace by Diane Millar Workwrite: Workplace Communications, Book 4
Mentoring	Mentoring and Essential Skills	www.hrsdc.gc.ca/eng/workplaceskills/LES/pdfs/training_supports/mentoring.pdf

“The whole process made sense to us. We liked that it was not canned, but was specifically tailored to the needs of our workplace.”

Evaluation of training

What the WorkUp! trainees told the external evaluator about the training

Successful components

- The various tours of and needs assessment at the Manufacturing business was key for trainees in understanding the process of needs assessments and the concept of Workplace Essential Skills training. The needs assessment is a benefit to employers and for Human Resources in terms of providing a training plan and showing learning gaps in the organization.

Quotation:

- I really needed to visit a prospective workplace site. The needs assessment was powerful in giving me information to do the next steps.

- The recommended readings and resources on needs assessments provided background information for the needs assessment process.
- Common Ground: English in the Workplace training helped raised awareness of the intercultural nature of the Canadian workforce.

Quotation:

- I found the “Common Ground” and intercultural awareness training to be incredibly interesting. I also found it very disturbing. The whole area of cultural awareness is a concept that needs more thought and conversation.

- Marketing WES to potential employers.

Quotation:

- With increased knowledge on marketing, my confidence has increased ten-fold and I am more comfortable in the community talking about Essential Skills because of the process we are going through. I learned that you speak to employers about the benefits of WES training rather than promoting the Essential Skills per se.

- Learning about the nine Essential Skills. Trainees are able to talk about the and can articulate much more about what they are and can confidently discuss them at a higher performance level.

Quotations:

- I have a much better grasp of Essential Skills and what this project will look like and what resources are available. By session 3, it was beginning to integrate and I felt capable.
- I think I have a better feel for how WES play out in the larger workplace settings and how to market this product to employers.
- I have a better general understanding of Essential Skills complexity levels and some of the tools that are needed to do workplace literacy.

- Learning about how Canadian Language Benchmarks and Essential Skills co-relate.

Quotation:

- The exposure to the Essential Skills framework and resources as well as the Canadian Language Benchmarks and focus on English language learners has been useful to me personally as well as in the context of this project.

Less useful or meaningful components

- Facilitation skills training – all of the WorkUp! trainees were chosen because they were already experience facilitators, so some of the facilitation skills were already known to the trainees.

Quotation:

- The section on facilitation skills wasn't as helpful since I have done a lot of this. Even so I do get something from everything.

- Training in ESL facilitation techniques and content.

Quotation:

- I had this background already or it has little relevance to the rural area I work in. Any experience I have had with teaching ESL students has focused around their practical, conversational needs. It has been very difficult to slot our learners into any one CLB level. I am sure I will have more exposure, as my work with tutors and learners continues.

What the external evaluator had to say about the training

"I think the topic choices were appropriate and the materials were comprehensive and provided for a wide range of exposure to content, issues, methods, practices and challenges in developing and delivering a workplace program. The program was inclusive and instructive and helped to build on trainees' existing knowledge base and fill in gaps.

I particularly liked the inclusion of the Needs Assessment practicum at the Manufacturing company as part of the program; it was a valuable addition and one that helped to build understanding, experience and confidence. In retrospect, in my own training, the practicum would have been an extremely appreciated component to the program. The tasks would not have been such a 'scary' undertaking."

"We need to put a budget case forward to have more Essential Skills training in our programs and to look at existing programs to integrate Essential Skills."

“It was good to have someone from outside doing the needs assessment. Workers could be more honest since they didn’t have to speak to management. The trainer was very nice and also very direct.”

Suggestions for improving the WES practitioner training from the WorkUp! trainees

Essential Skills

One trainee suggested she would like to learn more about thinking skills since she did not have a background in this area and felt she needed more work in.

Needs assessment debrief

Trainees wanted more time to debrief the needs assessment conducted at the Manufacturing worksite. They said they could have used an extra day in discussion with others to reflect and recap what happened and to think about the group’s recommendations.

Finding WES practicum workplaces

Initially, the plan was to do a full cycle of WES training with all six WES specialists working in one Manufacturing company. The group was able to do a WES needs assessment at the Manufacturing company and it was an integral piece of learning for all of the WorkUp! trainees.

Unfortunately, one of the key contacts at the Manufacturing company left soon after the needs assessment was completed and the company wasn’t able to continue with the project at that time.

Additionally, because the WES specialists came from so many different locations across Alberta, it was decided that each WES specialist would find a workplace practicum in her home community. Each WES specialist had the option, and funding, to conduct one or two workplace practicums throughout the life of the project. All of the WES specialists chose to do one extended practicum, providing extra workplace training than originally planned, in their home communities.

Because the need for WES exists in every workplace, the WorkUp! trainees felt that they didn’t have to make “cold calls” to recruit employers. They were able to use their personal networks and past business relationships to recruit WES practicum placements. Alberta Job Corps was the exception. That organization was recruited by Literacy Alberta at the beginning of the WorkUp! project.

WorkUp! trainees’ main tools for recruiting WES practicum placements were the “What are the Essential Skills?” document from HRSDC and the flow charts on collaborative workplace training within the Folinsbee and Jurmo texts (see bibliography).

Mentoring throughout the practicums

Below are the key areas for support that WorkUp! trainees identified throughout their workplace practicums:

- Talking through the initial meetings with employers
- Needing more information about plain language
- Sources for learning materials for each of the Essential Skills
- Talking through the needs assessment process, what kind of information to look for in particular, and get feedback on needs assessment questions
- Preparing and presenting the needs assessment findings to employers
- Analyzing the needs assessment findings and decide on appropriate training
- Managing the expectations of employers and employees since WorkUp! trainees could not meet all of the needs expressed during the needs assessment focus groups and interviews
- Resources for training
- Evaluating training in the workplaces and tracing the transfer of learning from the workplace training sessions into employee behaviour and task management once back on the floor
- Examples of formative evaluation tools and methods
- Balancing the training needs as perceived by the employers with the WES needs of the employees

What employers appreciated about the WES training they received

Training was excellent and occurred during times that were convenient for the workplace:

“This was a really good partnership. Asking questions, giving feedback. It included all of the staff.”

“The WorkUp! facilitator was very good. Kept things on topic, encouraged participation, kept everyone involved and controlled. Enabled good honest discussion.”

“Training was facilitated during the morning huddle twice a week for 12 weeks. It was extended from 15 minutes to a half hour on these days. It was covered by paid time for the employees.”

“The WorkUp! process took a long time, but it needed to because of the varying availability of our employees. The WorkUp! trainer was always flexible and was available to meet us at times that fit with our schedule.”

“Made some of our clients want to go to tutoring. One client in the program didn't know how to send an e-mail with an attachment, now he can. He's very excited. He also looked up a fishing camp that he'd worked at and could navigate the Internet. He's about three feet off the ground with excitement! Now he's going to NorQuest for upgrading because he has the confidence that he can learn.”

“One surprise was that the needs were very similar between different work units. Everybody needed conflict management and communication strategies. Some of the more senior people also need computer skills.”

“The training was well-received, especially by the English-as-a-Second-Language speaking staff. The participatory process of the needs assessment helped the staff feel engaged with the training when it was delivered.”

Confidence increased after the training

“There has been a very quick increase in confidence, more open communication.”

“Staff have responded really well. There are some really neat things happening. Staff are using the ‘buzzwords’ in their talk around the lunchroom. They talk about viewing their conversations at home differently. Some have become more tolerant. They would really like to see some follow-up and maybe a refresher course.”

“The WorkUp! training made some of our clients want to go to tutoring. One client in the program didn’t know how to send an e-mail with an attachment, now he can. He’s very excited. He also looked up a fishing camp that he’d worked at and could navigate the Internet. He’s about 3 feet off the ground with excitement! Now he’s going to NorQuest for upgrading because he has the confidence that he can learn.”

“People learning together in the classroom really bonded. They are more accepting of each other. They have an increase in self-confidence. There is less stress. Learning together is an important part of the WorkUp! training model.”

The process for needs assessment was new for some employers and added value to thinking about staff needs

“We were really satisfied with the needs assessment. There was some scepticism in the group because this was a new approach for the work floor people. Everyone was very pleased with the WorkUp! facilitator. She really drilled down and did a really good job.”

“One surprise was that the needs were very similar between different work units. Everybody needed conflict management and communication strategies. Some of the more senior people also need computer skills.”

“It was good to have someone from outside doing the needs assessment. Workers could be more honest since they didn’t have to speak to management. The WorkUp! facilitator was very nice and also very direct.”

“The needs assessment was another piece of the puzzle. It has the potential to influence people. It showed staff how to apply skills and gain confidence by being able to name the skills they have acquired.”

“It was good to have a third party come to do the needs assessment. You get a more objective viewpoint. Especially for the temporary foreign workers we hire – they get nervous talking to the employer sometimes. Sometimes as the manager you don’t know if your staff know what you’re asking because of potential language barriers. A third party point of view helps with that.”

“The needs assessment brought to light what was a high priority for our staff. We were able to pick and choose what kinds of training we wanted based on the recommendations from the needs assessment report. It was a very thorough report and helped us choose our priorities carefully.”

The Essential Skills training provided a new way for employers to think about training

“The WorkUp! training rounded out our clients’ skill set with information we don’t currently offer. We don’t have the expertise to do this kind of training.”

“The WorkUp! training gave us a better awareness around how to present things, such as plain language for our signage.”

“The WorkUp! training rounded out our clients’ skill set with information we don’t currently offer. We don’t have the expertise to do this kind of training.”

project evaluation



Why this model works

What WorkUp! trainees had to say

About the model

- Flexibility is built into the model. Discussions and reflection on what is working or not and, if need be, revamping the training program where necessary.
- Appreciated that the trainers were aware of the trainees' different learning styles.
- The structured way that the trainers designed the training – there was a logical progression to the topics learned.
- Two- and three-day training events. The sessions were concentrated and have encouraged intense reflection and created excitement.
- Using SHARE as a networking tool. SHARE is Literacy Alberta's online conferencing system.
- Using technology to connect with each other, such as videoconferencing and Skype.
- The challenging activities that promote thinking.
- The mock interviews, role-plays, and classroom practice.
- Homework to reinforce what was learned in class.
- Role playing activities are exceptionally valuable. One trainee felt it had helped her "face her fears doing this with others in the workshop".
- The training program was of high quality and was effective in terms of the content, process, structure and resources in rounding out practitioners' knowledge base, preparing them for their practica and contributing to their understanding of program implementation.
- The practica – first at the Manufacturing company and then participants' individual workplace practica – were successful in developing experience and awareness of the needs assessment process and it's criticality in program development.

The team atmosphere

- The combination of the competent training leaders and recruitment of the right people.
- Getting together with others and working well as a team of cohorts (both trainees and trainers).
- Learning from each other to understand the project.
- The two trainers modelled working together and created a team bond. The trainees came to trust each other and became knowledgeable about each other's strengths.
- The trainers' facilitation style:
- The trainees said that the trainers created the right atmosphere for successful learning.
- The trainers are good role models of the adult learning principles.
- The trainers' respect and sensitivity to the trainees has created a climate for being open and for encouraging questions, discussion and working through concerns, problems and fears. Trainees felt heard and respected.
- The trainers' approach is very flexible and experiential in nature. Being flexible and learning from each other has been part of the process.
- The trainers' conversational style allowed trainees to go back and re-look at pieces that they thought they had understood, but discovered that they didn't have as good a grasp as they thought.
- The two different delivery styles of the trainers complemented each other. This was conducive for engaging the group.
- The trainers' availability – they were always just a phone call away.
- The mentoring process provided by the trainers both in the classroom and in the workplace was supportive and encouraging.
- The trainers made their PowerPoints available to WorkUp! trainees so that they could be customized and used in workplace training.
- Observation from the external evaluator: I believe that critical for a successful training program is competent and capable trainers/mentors who model the principles of adult learning. The WorkUp! project trainers were outstanding and have the lived and learned experiences to give trainees effective strategies, advise, and assurance on all aspects of workplace development and implementation. The classroom delivery and process were interactive and participatory and the supportive environment assisted in the trainees' professional growth. The human element spoke to the high level of exceptional leadership and facilitation.

“Employees responded really well to the training. There are some really neat things happening. They are using the ‘buzzwords’ in their talk around the lunchroom. They talk about viewing their conversations at home differently. Some have become more tolerant. They would really like to see some follow-up and maybe a refresher course.”

“This was a really good partnership. Asking questions, giving feedback. It included all of the staff.”

Transferability of Essential Skills training for employees into their work, home and family lives

- Employees have taken children’s books home to read to their kids.
- There is evidence that the workers’ reading (bulletin boards, posters) and filling in documents has improved.
- The plain language workshop has had an impact in the workplace and in the community.
- Workers increased their confidence and were more willing to take risks. They were making an effort to speak only English at their work breaks.
- Workers wanted more opportunities to learn and the same group of workers came back for more classes. There was very little attrition and good attendance for the workshops.
- Workers developed good people skills such as dealing with customers.
- Communication skills between workers improved.
- Workers used the same communication skills at home with their families.
- Workers felt confident enough to pursue other learning opportunities.
- Workers were able to identify the skills that they were using.

Other benefits or comments about the WorkUp! project experience

From the WorkUp! trainees’ point of view:

- Trainee practitioners are cognizant of applying their knowledge of WES to their daily work and to the community in general. They have become WES specialists in their communities and their individual workplaces. They have created a community consciousness about WES.
- Trainees demonstrated an appreciation of the importance, need and value of WES learning and training and the need to educate and bring awareness of Essential Skills to workplace personnel, professionals and the general public.
- Trainees increased their motivation, enthusiasm and even passion for WES.
- Learning about the generic Essential Skills and the activities around the Essential Skills were interesting and clarified concepts about topics that one trainee had intuitively been doing in her daily work.
- One trainee realized that she has been addressing essentials skills in her full time job, but now has a name for her work and resources to access. She can look up the Essential Skills Job Profiles and match the skills of the job to see what gaps exist for her learners.

From the workplace employee and employer point of view:

- The WorkUp! trainees' presence in the workplace generated interest in the training. Human Resources was successful in getting workers from one work area to attend class when initially they were not interested.
- Trainees felt gratified from the concerted effort that workers were putting into their learning to overcome barriers and in turn, the workers appreciated the trainees' care and concern for their learning.

What employers had to say

Not all employers had a concrete idea of what Essential Skills were at the outset. Now they do and the training has had positive impacts on the attitude and confidence level of workers.

The WorkUp! facilitators were great partners for the workplaces

"She was always available when I wanted to talk to her."

"This was a really good partnership. Asking questions, giving feedback. It included all of the staff."

"The WorkUp! facilitator was very good. Kept things on topic, encouraged participation, kept everyone involved and controlled. Enabled good honest discussion."

"What we got was awesome. We have nothing to compare it to."

"The WorkUp! facilitator did an excellent job of marketing Essential Skills to us. She came to talk to us, toured our facility, and discussed the needs assessment in her first visit. All of this work legitimized the process for us."

This was a new model for delivering workplace training, which employers appreciated:

"I liked that it was customized and planned to be delivered in the workplace."

"This is a new model and I really like it. I have attended lots of training myself, but it has always been prescribed and not in response to a direct need."

"I like that it was not canned, but was specifically tailored to the needs of my workplace."

"This is a new model in our workplace. I like the process of first understanding the need through a needs assessment and then doing the training."

"We need to put a case forward to have Essential Skills in our programs and to look at existing programs to integrate Essential Skills."

"This process is very thorough. We don't always have time to deliver training in this way, with a thorough needs assessment before training, but it was much more effective for us – especially because an outside trainer was focused on it."

"There has been a very quick increase in confidence, more open communication. When one of the employees who was on leave during the training returns, she will find a different workplace. It was very timely training as the manager had requested communication skills training."

“There has been a really positive impact on our employees. There is more tolerance visible between people on the floor and between management and people on the floor. This leads to less stress. People have a better understanding of individual styles and the importance of non-verbal communication.”

Essential Skills training has value for employers, but the logistics to provide it can be challenging:

“We would be interested in repeating this training in another work unit, but we have no budget for this kind of thing. If I had my own business, I would do this.”

“We would like to repeat this training in another work unit. However, it would have to be negotiated corporately. Or we could request it if our team changed significantly.”

“When working with a small company that is linked to a larger company, both parts of the company should participate in the training.”

“Most of our training dollars are spent on First Aid training and orientation for new staff because we have significant turnover in our industry. We’d like to repeat the WorkUp! training, but it would have to be scaled down a bit because of cost. Because the needs assessment process was so thorough and we have an excellent report of the findings, we’ll be able to carefully choose what WorkUp! training we want to repeat and what new training we might need.”

What the WorkUp! trainers had to say

- Having all trainees come together first face-to-face as a group helped to establish trust and a bond amongst them. Cross mentoring was happening all the time.
- Trainees need ample time to share experiences and ideas during training.
- Trainees need hands-on activities like mock WES marketing employer interviews and the pilot needs assessment that was done at the Manufacturing company.

What the external evaluator had to say

- “In my view as I reflect and compare to my field experiences and my participation in a practitioner-training program (so many years ago), this is an effective and comprehensive program for developing WES practitioners. It’s encouraging to see the high quality of the WorkUp! training and the strides made in practitioner training.
- For me, it was edifying and enjoyable to discuss workplace issues (and relive my WES workplace commitments) with the projects’ talented and enthusiastic trainees. It brought my WES experiences into play because I, too, could identify with what the trainees have been undergoing – the overwhelming amount of information, the numerous options, the stress and the uncertainties of WES program implementation.”

Suggestions for improving the model

What WorkUp! trainees had to say

Modelling

- Trainees indicated that it would be helpful to see a trainer do an interview with employees because the trainer had lots of employee interview experience and could demonstrate how to probe to a deeper level.
- Marketing
- Trainees would like to practice delivering WES messages to employers as a “speed dating” exercise where several employers come to training so they can give their “WES marketing speeches” to them to get feedback.

Partnering to conduct workplace needs assessments

- In a large organization, it might be useful to do the needs assessment with a partner to bounce off ideas. With a partner, practitioners can be more flexible in meeting the needs of the employers. Because practitioners also have other jobs, it is good to have a partner so that if need be, they can take turns going to the company to do the training. Doing the needs assessment with someone else gave one WorkUp! trainee pair the opportunity to discuss different angles of employee needs and to satisfy the employer’s needs.
- If trainees are to work with a partner, have a first meeting to set boundaries, establish each partner’s role and to ensure that their styles are compatible and complementary. In a team (partnership) setting, have the roles better defined.

Other suggestions for improvement

- Provide a pre-reading schedule ahead of time with a bibliography of all the information and resources.
- Having a set training schedule. Dates set in advance where possible would make it easier since the WorkUp! trainees were from all areas of the province.
- Talking more with some others who have worked in this field.
- Including more on complexity levels in Essential Skills.
- Including more on instructional strategies for working with Essential Skills.
- Having more workplace tours to observe different Essential Skills in action and different work flows in another company.
- Want to know more about ROI (Return on Investment) for employers of WES training and how to evaluate the transfer of learning from WES training sessions in workplaces to the work floor for employees.

“This training exceeded everything that was expected.”

“What we got was awesome. We have nothing to compare it to.”

- Regionalizing the training sessions so that those in the northern part of Alberta could meet in a smaller group and likewise with the southern WorkUp! trainees.
- Have a chat room for the purpose of becoming informed about what transpired when unable to attend a videoconference group session.

What employers had to say

Comments about marketing Essential Skills

“Capitalize on the model of needs assessment and customized training. It’s pretty unique to the work force.”

“Sell it twice. Once when companies are developing their budget and then the second time at a later date for delivery. If we haven’t budgeted for it, we can’t find the money later.”

Comment about conducting a needs assessment

“It’s very important to look at the whole company. We couldn’t do it this time, just did the remote company. But if we could do the whole company, the remote unit that has to interface with the larger company would really benefit.”

Comments about training in workplaces

“Only the workplace scheduling was difficult. We are a small operation and couldn’t pull people off the floor, so had to look at before and after hours for training.”

“Timing was tricky, both of the facilitator and the plant. We have a lean workforce and it was difficult to get release time for the employees for training.”

“The classes worked, but the lunch and learn wasn’t as successful. We have a staggered lunch hour, so there were always people coming and going in the computer area. One of the problems was setting up the equipment, getting enough laptops and desk top computers in one room to have a class. It took a while to get this organized. Next time we would do the computer classes on a more formalized basis, not during lunch and in a more controlled area that did not have so many interruptions from external people.”

“Might look at doing training offsite just to avoid distraction.”

“Do the Essential Skills training over a 6 month period with ongoing monthly evaluation. We don’t presently evaluate if they acquire skills. We only evaluate training attendance, attitude, do they take directions, can they work with others or work alone. We don’t measure anything that we don’t provide.”

What the WorkUp! trainers had to say

- Facilitate a demonstration on conducting focus groups and interviews. Could also find a video about this online to show trainees.
- Have the trainees role-play conducting their own focus groups and interviews.
- Review the needs assessment process in class a day before conducting one in a workplace together as a trainee group.
- Include a section on learning styles because this may be important for future groups. This group identified their own preferred learning styles and informed the trainers what works and what doesn't work for them right in the first training session.

What the external evaluator had to say:

“WES practitioners largely work in isolation so I do hope that AWES or Literacy Alberta will offer periodic professional development sessions, or an organized tech venue for connecting. When I was active with AWES, the regular professional development meetings were invaluable in connecting practitioners, offering updates and speaker events, and providing a forum for discussion on concerns, questions and challenges as WES practitioners.”

“They gave clients skills they needed that we didn't have the expertise to do. They gave us a better awareness around how to present things, i.e. plain language for our signage.”

summary of project



Key lessons learned

Experience counts for everything

- Experience teaches more than any front-loading that trainers can do in terms of training.
- Doing the needs assessment together at the Manufacturing company was the best way to learn how to do one. The WorkUp! trainees had a chance to observe and learn from each other and it was an active way to become engaged in what it means to become a WES practitioner.
- Observing workplace processes and conducting needs assessments helped the WorkUp! trainees understand the collaborative and flexible approach that is needed to work successfully with an employer to deliver WES training.
- Trainees need hands-on activities like mock WES marketing employer interviews and the pilot needs assessment that was done at the Manufacturing company.
- Many of the trainees were nervous about the first meeting with their companies, but learned they were there to get information as much as to give it.

Collaborating with employers takes time and effort

The trainees learned from the needs assessment at the manufacturing company that it takes a great deal of time to set up and schedule a needs assessment, training plans, and a training schedule. Taking the time, through many phone calls and emails, to do so helps to establish a positive working relationship.

The trainees needed to fit into the employers' and organization's timelines and be flexible in order to adapt when workplace processes or needs interfered with their training plans. They also needed to be flexible when collaborating with workplace personnel.

The trainees also felt that there was a reciprocal exchange between themselves and the employers. Employers have content expertise for their workplaces and the WorkUp! trainees became experts in skills development. This back and forth sharing of expertise created positive results in the WES training in each workplace.

A needs assessment is a service in itself

As outsiders, WES specialists sometimes have a unique perspective on what is happening within companies and businesses. Because their needs assessments are thorough, and include questions about work processes, at times WES specialists felt that they could offer some insights to employers about how to create more efficient work systems. Or at least talk about how employees felt about those systems.

In general, WES specialists were able to gain the trust of employees and, thus, were privy to ideas and information that employers were not always able to get through other workplace feedback activities. In fact, the WorkUp! trainees felt that the needs assessment in itself was a valuable service to the company, even without the full complement of WES training afterward.

Background experience is helpful before becoming a WES practitioner

- Trainees observed that the trainee candidates need a high level of experience, expertise and background coming into this project.
- The trainers noted that it is helpful for the practitioner to have a background in ESL and literacy before taking WES practitioner training. Though trainees must then be open to recognizing the difference between these areas and Workplace Essential Skills and adjust their methods accordingly.

External evaluation of WES practitioner training is a must

The WorkUp! trainees felt this was important because they couldn't always say the same things to the trainers. This was an opportunity to speak candidly. The evaluator's questions made them stop and think. They felt that external evaluation is a good process and a useful exercise; otherwise the same thing will be done over without any improvements.

The trainers felt this was important because it helped reinforce some of the training areas. It brought honest feedback to them so they could adjust the training if need be. It allowed the trainers the opportunity to reflect on the process as well.

Use authentic workplace texts in training activities

This was a difference for some of the trainees and required them to use new skills. The materials couldn't be adapted, only the strategies. It reinforces how relevant Workplace Essential Skills are to learners.

“Training has improved active listening and everyone is paying closer attention.”

“Communication is much more open. Staff have mentioned that they are also using these strategies at home.”

In their own words – WorkUp! trainees’ experiences

“The skills I am developing through this process are lifelong skills.”

“This is not like teaching a subject at school that is set in its curriculum.”

“I know I am learning because it is hurting!”

“You see the light bulb after reading the Essential Skills information and stats and then putting it into practice.”

“The feeling of fellowship that has been achieved between the members of the group is one aspect that I had not considered. Conversations at our last training session indicate we are all a little dazed and confused at this point. In some ways, it is helpful to recognize that I am not the only one questioning my value to the group, and my ability to bring value to employers and their workplaces.”

“This is very exciting, getting together with others and understanding how the project and my WES work will be beneficial to my community.”

“I had a massive headache at the training sessions and was feeling overwhelmed. But I learned so many aspects to workplace learning, program implementation and about the resources that will enhance my work in the practicum and my daily work tasks.”

“This has been a wonderful experience. Can’t say enough about how good it was. The hope is that it can be made sustainable and be replicable.”

“This has been an exciting opportunity from the beginning.”

“The training was a core piece.”

“The program is a real benefit for my organization...very valuable. Good to work with an organization that is familiar with what I am doing.”

“I have walked away with more than I thought.”

“I have realized that there is a huge need in my organization and in the community to educate on WES.”

“It is a great project. It’s exciting to see progress and that the workers are doing what they want to do, not what somebody else wants them to do. It has been fun with my learners.”

“There are lots of applications to all three of my jobs, which require a leadership role, and this has given me the skills.”

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Building essential skills in the workplace.
Computer use practice and learning exercises.
Computer use self-assessment.
Computer use tip sheet.
Continuous learning self-assessment.
Defining essential skills.
Document use indicator.
Document use practice and learning exercises.
Document use self-assessment.
Document use tip sheet.
Essential skills case studies.
Essential skills organizational needs assessment.
Essential skills self-assessment for the trades.
Essential skills training activities.
Job enhancement and essential skills.
Mentoring and essential skills.
Numeracy indicator.
Numeracy self-assessment.
Oral communication practice and learning exercises.
Oral communication self-assessment.
Oral communication tip sheet.
Passport.
Portfolio.
Problem solved! A guide for employees and learners.
Problem solved! A guide for employers and practitioners.
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Reading tip sheet.
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Taking action: An introduction.
Taking action: A guide.
Training activities.
Vocabulary building workbook.
What are essential skills?
What is the essential skills research project?
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