

TO DIVERSIFY OUR ECONOMY, WE MUST BUILD WORKERS' ESSENTIAL SKILLS

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We all know, often through experience, of people who have been promoted to a supervisory position but just can't handle that higher-level job. They know the basics of the business and can do the entry-level position adequately. However, when faced with having to write clear e-mails, solve problems or reduce workplace conflict, they just aren't up to the job.

When a supervisor lacks the communication or problem-solving skills to be effective, it causes friction, increases frustration for all and often leads to poor job performance by the people being supervised.

It is an essential-skills problem.

Recently, on a building construction site in Calgary, concrete columns that had been poured in the wrong place had to be removed at great cost, causing delays in the construction schedule. That was probably caused by a document-use problem.

Running out of materials needed to complete a job is usually caused by poor numeracy skills - basic arithmetic.

These kinds of workplace problems abound. They're caused by a shortage of essential skills.

There are a lot of people who lack the skills to do their jobs well. In Canada's four Western provinces, an average of 40 per cent of the work force in common occupations have skill shortages. They are likely to be technically competent (or they would not be employed), but they lack enough of some basic workplace skills to communicate and interpret at the level required for their jobs' most demanding tasks.

While the numbers for the rest of the country have not been crunched, there is no reason to believe other regions fare any better. After all, British Columbia and Alberta have some of the best-educated work forces in the country.

Essential skills are really just the basic skills everyone needs. What is different for each

occupation is the level of skills required to do the job well. Reading to understand, clear writing, basic math, using computers, speaking and listening, thinking, working with others, continuously learning and using documents like maps and forms - these are the nine essential skills*. As with all skills, the essential skills build on one another.

In every occupation, skills demands are rising as a result of the universal use of computers and the knowledge economy's growing dependence on excellent interpersonal communication. Even people who have been in their jobs for a long time often need new and higher levels of existing skills.

There are ways to improve the skills of our work force. Canada's postsecondary institutions are at the forefront of the solution to the problem. Changes to curricula, instructional methods and assessment tools are already being incorporated.

However, in the short and medium term, it will be up to employers to upgrade their workers' essential skills. They can do this in the workplace or partner with a postsecondary institution. This will improve job satisfaction and overall productivity.

Much has been made about the need to diversify provincial economies across the country. Diversification, if and when successful, will produce new industry sectors and advanced technologies. There will be exciting new jobs. But even if there is some success in diversifying the economy (and the jury is out on how likely renewed efforts to accomplish this will be), new jobs in new industries are going to need even higher levels of essential skills.

When Ontario was faced with massive numbers of unemployed manufacturing workers who had lost their jobs in the 2009 downturn, the province instituted programs to retrain them for other types of work. Many trainees had to upgrade their essential skills - especially literacy and numeracy - before they could learn any higher-level job skills.

If we do manage to diversify, there will be a huge need for the existing work force to learn how to do new jobs. If people are to be successful, now and in the future, many need to improve these essential skills first.

[Compare the Essential Skills in the Ontario Skills Passport](#) to the 9 Essential Skills.

Check out the [Ontario Skills Passport](#) for clear descriptions of the Essential Skills and work habits important for work, learning and life, and for videos and tasks that show how these skills are used in everyday life and in over 400 occupations from all pathways. You can use the OSP tools and resources to assess, build, document and track your skills and transfer them to further education, training, the workplace and everyday life. The OSP also links to reliable sources of information on occupations, education, training and volunteer opportunities, as well as employment and other labour market information at the provincial and local levels to support you in your education, training and employment decisions.