

Project: *Integrating Essential Skills into
Human Resources practices in the workplace*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF THE FINAL REPORT

Anchored in Canada's economic reality, the Association of Canadian Community College's project to integrate Essential Skills (ES) into the workplace was intended to contribute to the federal government's efforts to develop a highly skilled workforce. In responding to the growing needs for qualified workers, businesses are raising their level of quality, output and safety, to secure Canada's place as a modern, high-performing nation.

Specifically, this project, which began on February 1, 2006 and ended on December 31, 2007, was intended to persuade businesses to use ES for the continuing development of their human resources. To this end, five ES experts prepared practitioners from 19 colleges to introduce practical ES approaches to employers in their regions. The practitioners worked with 325 businesses of various sizes from a range of economic sectors, and supported almost a hundred of these companies as they integrated ES into their workforce.

These interventions achieved many successes. Whether in Quebec or in the West, with small Aboriginal businesses or multinational corporations, recruiting new employees or upgrading existing staff, we were able to measure the impact of a quality relationship between colleges and their partners in the work world. Beyond the concept of ES, practical actions by college practitioners won favour with business decision makers concerned about hiring and retaining employees capable of performing and adapting to the ups and downs of the labour market.

Through project implementation, we realized that sharing ES information and tools through the college network and with the industry partners – especially Sector Councils – benefited everyone. A number of practical instruments are therefore available on the ACCC ES Web site at www.accc.ca/essentialskills/resource_db/index.htm.

Based on an initial analysis, this project will have a longer-term impact right across Canada. We can already see greater recognition of the benefits of ES integration by many companies interested in continuing the work begun during this project. In addition, through their direct participation in the project, several colleges have enhanced their understanding of the tangible use of ES with employers. Their example has inspired other colleges to adopt this approach as well.

ACCC is pleased with the project's solid outcomes which, combined with those of its other ES projects, reinforce the development and accessibility of ES for the Canadian workforce.

Conclusions and recommendations

Conclusions

Some projects achieve the desired results, while others not only achieve the stated objectives but also identify new approaches and show promising long-term impact. We believe that this project falls into the second category.

Participating college representatives met with a large number of businesses and developed adapted tools; shining successes were also disseminated and some achievements became model case histories. Quebec colleges opened up to ES and these initial successes led to a fundamental shift toward ES development in the province.

By conducting several national projects simultaneously, ACCC was able to create an effective dynamic for establishing and heading a network of colleges and partners as well as information-sharing. The presence of college representatives, industry partners (sector councils) and funding bodies (HRSDC) on the same committee generated productive exchanges. Furthermore, champions of the cause emerged from among participants in the project, creating a succession for the promotion of ES integration in the workplace.

The colleges and some of the partners involved continue to cooperate with ACCC through other ES projects that extend and complete this project. One factor facilitating this cooperation is the care taken to understand local realities and the flexibility of actions in an approach focused primarily on attaining the desired results.

However, a number of points merit attention and might guide us in a vision of ES development for Canada's workforce.

Small- and medium-sized enterprises must be given special attention because they are under even greater constraints than larger companies. A current ACCC project is targeting this category of partners.

The Essential Skills for Reading text, Document Use, Numeracy, Writing, Oral Communication and Computer Use are generally well covered and fairly easy to assess. There is little material on Working with Others, Continuous Learning and Thinking Skills, and these ES are more complex to assess. Yet the needs voiced by industry for these skills are just as great as for the first group of ES. Thus, a special effort is required in this area and ACCC has launched a project to develop appropriate tools.

Specific business settings and clients are sometimes poorly served because their needs demand adaptation or creation of new practices or tools. One solution would entail supporting local practitioners by adapting their existing achievements to an approach more closely linked to ES.

If, through this project, we managed to contribute to the development of ES for Canada's workforce while opening new avenues for development, then participants in this project will be able to say: "Mission accomplished!"

Recommendations

The lessons learned from this project led to the development of recommendations that should serve all current and future ES partners. These recommendations also expand on and complete those set out in the report we recently submitted to HRSDC for the ES network project completed on March 31, 2008.

Recommendation 1: Continue to share knowledge with our partners

To build on the results from the work of our colleges and other organizations such as sector councils, so each can draw inspiration from best practices and foster cooperation.

Recommendation 2: Develop a comprehensive vision and an approach that facilitate continuity

To reinforce actions, ensure re-investment, anchor practices and optimize investments and effort.

Recommendation 3: Maintain action in the field

To adapt to the realities of those on the front line, achieve tangible results, and effectively reach remote areas and special clientele.

Recommendation 4: Recognize expertise

To identify leaders and champions, capitalize on local achievements and ensure recruiting of practitioners.

Recommendation 5: Ensure sustainability of results

So that ES can continue to be developed in Canadian industry, while ensuring that this aspect is factored into the regular activities of partners (colleges, businesses, sector councils, organizations involved and HRSDC).