

British Columbia: Industry Training Authority and the Essential Skills Initiative

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Making the grade in a trade career depends on having certain Essential Skills. In fact, extensive research indicates that apprentices without these skills are far less likely to successfully complete their technical training. With this in mind, the Industry Training Authority (ITA) has developed an online Essential Skills product suite. This free tool will provide apprentices with the opportunity to develop the Essential Skills required to complete levels one and two of their technical or work-based training, and will allow sponsors and training providers to support apprentices in developing Essential Skills.

In the latter part of 2009, ITA began the development of the Essential Skills initiative by engaging stakeholders, industry training organizations, and national Essential Skills experts to develop a solution. This process was done in partnership with the Essential Skills Group.

The development of the ITA Essential Skills tool was not only intended to address entry into and continuation in the trades, but also to address barriers experienced by women, immigrants and Aboriginals due to underdeveloped Essential Skills.

The tool requirements included ease of use, direct relationship to trades, a gap analysis of Essential Skills, and a way for users to address identified gaps at low or no cost. With these requirements in mind, the ITA Essential Skills tool was developed. Officially launched in December 2010, the online tool includes Essential Skills outlines for 50 trades and an individualized gap analysis based on an online assessment. It also includes an individualized learning plan that directs users to free online resources to help them develop the Essential Skills required for levels one and two of the relevant trade.

Since the launch, ITA has profiled both the ITA Essential Skills online tool and the federal, provincial and territorial working group's Essential Skills and Apprenticeship tools to address the "Why Essential Skills" topic during training and information sessions.

The use and application of the tools have garnered support from service providers and various school districts. Here are a few examples that demonstrate the scope of strategies utilized:

- The BC Construction Association set up an Essential Skills pilot for its Immigrants in Trades Training Program, using electronic methods such as Skype

and webinars, to coach participants who required gap training that was identified through the ITA Essential Skills online tool.

- Okanagan College has been using the ITA Essential Skills tool for approximately one year. Not only is the college amazed by how well its students are progressing by using the tool, but it has commented on other encouraging results observed, particularly in the Women in Trades classes and the Aboriginal Trades Training Initiative, where participants are taking ownership of their own learning, demonstrating success and really owning it.
- School District 83 North Okanagan-Shuswap has integrated the use of the ITA Essential Skills online tool as a way to identify gaps in the skills of high school students who are entering industry training programs. Essential Skills training has also been incorporated into a number of learning situations, such as Apprenticeship and Trades math training, Auto Service technical training, college exam preparation, and skills upgrading in preparation for entering school district trades training programs.

In looking to the future, ITA will begin to solidify a 2011/2012 Essential Skills strategy that engages stakeholders in working proactively with their current and potential apprentices. The focus of the strategy will be on

- raising awareness of the impact that increased Essential Skills can have on the productivity of skilled tradespersons
- identifying successful practices that incorporate Essential Skills training and development in the workplace and in technical training
- engaging employers to identify gaps in the Essential Skills of their apprentices, and to work with employees to increase Essential Skills acquisition
- engaging trainers to integrate Essential Skills training into technical training delivery

To learn more about the ITA Essential Skills product suite, go to <http://essentialskills.itabc.ca> or contact Jessi Zielke at jzielke@itabc.ca.