

Governments Investing in Essential Skills and the Skilled Trades

Abstract

Federal, provincial and territorial governments are working together to improve apprenticeship systems across Canada. This article provides an overview of what is happening across the country to integrate Essential Skills into apprenticeship training. Included is information on an initiative led by the Canadian Council of Directors of Apprenticeship and examples of how five provinces are integrating Essential Skills to meet the needs of the skilled trades workforce.

A pan-Canadian approach

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Understanding Essential Skills

Essential Skills are the skills needed for work, learning and life. They provide the foundation for learning new skills and completing workplace tasks. Through extensive research, the Government of Canada, along with other national and international agencies, identified nine skills that are essential in every job and throughout daily life. These nine skills are reading, writing, document use, numeracy, oral communication, working with others, thinking, computer use and continuous learning. For definitions of the skills, see the [Office of Literacy and Essential Skills](#) website.

A need in the skilled trades

Apprentices and tradespeople face Essential Skills challenges both in the classroom and on the job. Low Essential Skills has been identified as a barrier to in-class training and certification success. Additionally, rapidly evolving technology is putting more pressure on skilled trades workers to improve their ability to adapt.

Strong Essential Skills have been demonstrated to help apprentices and tradespeople succeed in training and in the workplace. Employers also benefit from investing in these skills through increased productivity, improved workplace health and safety, and better team performance.

Working collaboratively to improve the Red Seal Program

Developing and implementing new initiatives to strengthen apprenticeship systems is a priority for all governments. It is also an important part of the

Government of Canada's commitment to create the best educated, most skilled and most flexible workforce in the world.

As part of this focus, the Canadian Council of Directors of Apprenticeship is leading an initiative to integrate Essential Skills into apprenticeship systems in all provinces and territories. This initiative is supported by a federal, provincial and territorial working group that includes representatives with expertise in Essential Skills and apprenticeship from seven jurisdictions (British Columbia, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland and Labrador) and Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC). All members were appointed by the Director of Apprenticeship within their jurisdiction.

Collectively, this group works to help improve the Essential Skills tradespeople need to complete their apprenticeship program and succeed on the job. Additionally, the group aims to create an Essential Skills culture within apprenticeship that will enable apprentices and trade qualifiers to reach their full potential. Drawing on expertise and leadership from across the country, this initiative supports a collaborative approach while respecting diversity and encourages the sharing of knowledge and good practices more broadly.

Putting it into action

Early in the process, the federal, provincial and territorial working group developed a framework to provide a more systematic approach to integrating Essential Skills. The framework identifies common contact points where provinces and territories could incorporate Essential Skills activities into their existing apprenticeship processes (e.g. prior to formal registration, entry into technical training) and support services that are appropriate to their apprenticeship system.

Following the framework development, a mapping exercise showed that provinces and territories employ different approaches to Essential Skills activities. Accordingly, the working group decided to develop practical tools to support further efforts and ensure consistent messaging in this area. The tools can be used across all jurisdictions to help apprentices and tradespeople

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- understand how Essential Skills are used in specific trades
- assess their Essential Skills strengths and identify areas for improvement
- improve their Essential Skills

Tools for engagement

The Essential Skills and Apprenticeship tools were officially launched in January 2010 by the Canadian Council of Directors of Apprenticeship. Demand for these resources is growing, with almost 225,000 copies ordered and downloaded in 2010. To date there are 34 Essential Skills tools available for the skilled trades. Some of the tools include

- definitions of Essential Skills and workplace examples
- “On the Job” stories to show how Essential Skills are used by tradespeople
- a checklist to identify Essential Skills training needs
- a trades math workbook to practise numeracy skills
- tips and ideas to prepare for training and exams

Preliminary feedback has shown that the tools are being used in a variety of settings, including career counselling, skills upgrading programs, and skilled trades courses. The tools are available for order and/or download on the [Red Seal website](#) and the [HRSDC website](#).

Moving forward, the working group will continue to focus efforts on increasing awareness of these tools with apprentices, employers, trainers and educators in the trades. In addition, work is being undertaken to collect performance data to better understand how the tools are being used and their impact.

Knowledge exchange

As federal, provincial and territorial governments continue working together to share knowledge, significant investments are being made to improve apprenticeship systems across the country. The following five articles highlight provincial success stories for integrating Essential Skills.