

# **Employment Readiness Addressing Critical “Soft Skills”**

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## **Context**

Finding effective ways to build employment readiness and help clients become successfully employed has been a central focus for career and employment service providers over many years. Increasing pressures to achieve results more efficiently, with fewer resources, has led to a growing emphasis on being able to assess client needs quickly and accurately and to discover methods of addressing them that enable clients to become “employment ready” and find employment as quickly as possible. The quest for service efficiency and effectiveness – calling for greater precision in focus – has led to increased interest in measuring client needs and outcomes and served as an important impetus for the development and launching of the Employment Readiness Scale™ (ERS) in 2001 (Ward & Riddle 2001).

This article places particular emphasis on the critical role of “soft skills” in employment readiness, using ERS data on 118,055 Canadians in diverse service delivery settings. Patterns of need with respect to “soft skills” will be outlined, and the effectiveness of different types of interventions in strengthening “soft skills” will be explored. A summary of the Employment Readiness Model underpinning the ERS is provided in Appendix A.

## **Why Focus on “Soft Skills”?**

The vital role of “soft skills” to work-life success has been gaining increased attention in the popular press and media providing advice to job-seekers (e.g., Lorenz 2009; Klaus 2008) as well as to those who are currently working and seeking to advance (e.g., Awe 2012; Reh 2012). Experts in many fields have been stressing the importance of “soft skills” for employment success and advancement in general and for specific fields. Jide Awe (2012), for example, offers valuable insights for those working (or seeking work) in Information Technology (IT), insights that are relevant well beyond the IT field.

The Conference Board of Canada was an early advocate – and remains a continuing voice – for communicating employers’ views on the crucial role that “soft skills” play in ensuring that workers are successful. As a part of that effort, an Employability Skills Profile reflecting non-technical skills was developed, enumerating skills that employers want workers to already have prior to being hired (Conference Board of Canada 2000).

Leaders in the career development and employment service field have built a number of other important taxonomies and frameworks of desired learning outcomes

that place a variety of non-technical skills as core success factors, such as The Blueprint for Life-Work Designs (Haché, Redekopp & Jarvis 2000; Hiebert 2011). These skills sets have been variously named as “life skills” (Smith 1981), “soft skills” (e.g., Lorenz 2007) and “employability skills” (Conference Board of Canada 2000). Whatever term is used, all appear to be referring to a core set of non-technical skills broadly related to interpersonal relations and self-management, including emotional intelligence. Some frameworks add ethical judgment as one of these (e.g., *iSeek*). These success factors are considered by some to be skills, while others conceive of them as personal attributes (CRWG; Neault 2012).

With regard to the factors measured by the ERS, five factors are considered “soft skills” and they include:

- *Self-Efficacy*, or one’s confidence in one’s ability to manage one’s life effectively
- *Social Supports*, or the development of a support network
- *Job Maintenance*, or the ability to keep work, once found, particularly the ability to work effectively with others
- *Work History*, especially the ability to identify transferable skills
- *Outcome Expectancy*, or one’s optimism about one’s chances of success

The four ERS employability factors that are not considered “soft skills” include Career Decision-Making, Skills Enhancement, Job Search, and Ongoing Career Management.

The three years of field research undertaken in developing the ERS showed that self-sufficiency in Job Maintenance was the single best predictor of success in work life (Ward & Riddle 2001). The authors were interested in examining ERS data to see if this vital “soft skill” was showing change when clients taking the ERS participated in the interventions available.

Analyses of ERS client change data over time has shown certain consistent patterns with respect to the four “employability” factors as distinct from the five “soft skill” factors. Clients classified by the ERS as “Not Ready” appear particularly vulnerable to work life failure if “soft skills” are not addressed effectively. The levels of readiness designated by the ERS, based on the original field research, include:

- “Not Ready” clients, having only a 40 percent chance of finding a job within 12 weeks without additional assistance to become “ready” and over a 75 percent chance of losing it once they find one.
- “Minimally Ready” clients, having about a 60 per cent chance of finding work within 12 weeks if they have no help in improving readiness and over a 65 percent chance of losing the position if they do find one.
- “Fully Ready” clients, having an 80 percent chance of finding a job within 12 weeks and a high likelihood of retaining that job.

## **Assessing the Need for Assistance with “Soft Skills”**

Data in Table 1 show the percentage of total clients who were not self-sufficient on each factor when they first took the ERS, as well as the percentage of “Not Ready” clients requiring assistance in strengthening the factor. Of 118,055 clients included in the following analyses, 63 percent scored as “Not Ready.” The data show that two employability factors – Ongoing Career Management and Job Search – are the factors with which the most “Not Ready” clients need help, with Career Decision-Making ranking fourth. So it is not surprising that Career Exploration and Job Search interventions are the most usual ones made available to clients.

**Table 1. Percent of Canadian Clients Needing Assistance**

<b>Factor</b>	<b>Total Clients</b>	<b>“Not Ready” Clients</b>
<b>Employability factors:</b>		
Ongoing career management	62%	88%
Job Search	60%	87%
Career Decision-Making	46%	70%
Skills Enhancement	47%	69%
<b>“Soft skills”:</b>		
Work History	52%	72%
Social Supports	49%	67%
Self-Efficacy	45%	66%
Job Maintenance	32%	50%
Outcome Expectancy	27%	40%

Source: Employment Readiness Scale™

If we examine the “soft skills” specifically, though, we find that a substantial proportion of “Not Ready” clients need help with at least four of these factors. Two-thirds require assistance in building Work History, Social Supports, and Self-Efficacy, while half of “Not Ready” clients need help with Job Maintenance.

Further examination of “soft skills” data reveals some significant differences in need among client groups (see Table 2). Two sub-groups of “Not Ready” clients, in particular, showed some notable differences from the “Not Ready” group as a whole and are highlighted here – persons with disabilities, and clients between 46 and 65 years of age.

Persons with disabilities are significantly more likely to be “Not Ready” overall – 73.7 percent as compared with 63.2 percent of all clients. These “Not Ready” clients are particularly likely to need help with improving Self-Efficacy (74%), Job Maintenance (61%), and Outcome Expectancy (50%).

**Table 2. Percent of Canadian “Not Ready” Clients Needing Assistance**

<b>Factor</b>	<b>All Clients</b>	<b>Persons with Disabilities</b>	<b>46-65 years</b>
<b>Total Percent Not Ready</b>	63%	74%	62%
<b>Employability factors:</b>			
Ongoing career management	88%	88%	86%
Job Search	87%	87%	86%
Career Decision-Making	70%	74%	70%
Skills Enhancement	69%	76%	75%
<b>“Soft skills”:</b>			
Work History	72%	72%	65%
Social Supports	67%	69%	<b>74%</b>
Self-Efficacy	66%	<b>74%</b>	63%
Job Maintenance	50%	<b>61%</b>	51%
Outcome Expectancy	40%	<b>50%</b>	42%

Source: Employment Readiness Scale™

Turning our attention to clients between 46 and 65 years of age, while the overall percent of “Not Ready” clients for this group is similar to the national average, they are significantly more likely to need help with Social Supports (74%). This trend has appeared in the last five years and appears to represent a group of older workers who were made redundant, lost their primary network at work, and have been isolated at home, perhaps out of embarrassment at being unemployed.

This pattern underscores the wisdom of offering job search groups for older workers. The ERS finding is consistent with results of a Simon Fraser University study of the impact of unemployment on older adults’ health and a review of programs targeting this group. Describing job search programs for older workers, they say: “These interventions teach older adults the requisite skills for a successful job hunt, such as resume-writing, networking, and interviewing within a leader-led, group environment where participants are motivated by and benefit from the support and feedback of others (Rife & Belcher 1994). Within these groups, older workers are able to share their fears and frustrations with peers, many of whom have had similar experiences” (Rogers & O’Rourke 2012, 173).

### **The Effectiveness of Interventions in Strengthening “Soft Skills”**

Of the interventions offered across Canada, three types are particularly relevant to this analysis - Life Skills (which are designed specifically to address “soft skills”), Career Exploration, and Job Search/Job Clubs. For Canadians who retook the ERS after such interventions, an interesting pattern has emerged (see Table 3). “Soft skills” consistently show less average improvement than employability factors, even in Life

Skills interventions. There was no significant difference from the overall average improvement for persons with disabilities or 45-65 year old clients. It should be noted that as part of the research demonstrating the validity and reliability of the ERS scale (Ward & Riddle 2001), it was determined that statistically significant change was an increase of 10 per cent or more clients shifting from not self-sufficient to self-sufficient following an intervention.

The most successful interventions in addressing either employability factors or “soft skills” were Career Exploration interventions. For persons with disabilities, in particular, both Career Exploration and Job Search interventions produced significantly greater improvement in “soft skills” than did Life Skills interventions.

**Table 3. Percent of Canadian Clients Shifting from Not Self-Sufficient to Self-Sufficient by Type of Intervention**

<b>Factor</b>	<b>Life Skills</b>	<b>Career Exploration</b>	<b>Job Search/Job Club</b>
<b>All clients:</b>			
Employability factors	18.8%	33.8%	27.3%
“Soft skills”	14.4%	18.2%	14.4%
<b>Persons with disabilities:</b>			
Employability factors	16.3%	35.3%	33.0%
“Soft skills”	14.4%	20.4%	20.0%
<b>Clients 46-65 years old:</b>			
Employability factors	14.8%	32.5%	31.5%
“Soft skills”	12.2%	13.6%	16.2%

Source: Employment Readiness Scale™

For all client groups, the greatest improvement in Life Skills interventions was in Social Supports, followed by Self-Efficacy. This pattern raises some questions as Work History is the factor on which the most Not Ready clients need help and Job Maintenance is key to maintaining employment; yet both factors were marginal in the extent of improvement.

**Table 4. Percent of Canadian Clients Shifting from Not Self-Sufficient to Self-Sufficient on “Soft Skills” in Life Skills Interventions**

<b>Factor</b>	<b>All Clients</b>	<b>Persons with Disabilities</b>	<b>46-65 years</b>
<b>“Soft skills”:</b>			
Social Supports	20%	17%	19%
Self-Efficacy	17%	17%	11%
Job Maintenance	12%	13%	12%
Work History	12%	13%	9%
Outcome Expectancy	11%	12%	10%
<b>Average percent improving</b>	<b>14.4%</b>	<b>14.4%</b>	<b>12.2%</b>

Source: Employment Readiness Scale™

While the percent of clients improving is important, what is most telling is the percent of clients “left behind” who still need help on key “soft skills” at the end of a given intervention. Table 5 provides data of the percent of clients still needing help. We can see that the percent requiring assistance with Work History remains at almost half of all clients after Life Skills interventions, with the percent being lowest after completing a Job Search intervention. The need for help with Self-Efficacy remains high across the board as well, with at least a quarter of clients still not feeling confident of their ability to succeed.

**Table 5. Percent of Canadian Clients Still Needing Help on “Soft Skills” After Interventions**

<b>Factor</b>	<b>Life Skills</b>	<b>Career Exploration</b>	<b>Job Search</b>	<b>Average</b>
<b>“Soft skills”:</b>				
Work History	49%	37%	32%	39.3%
Self-Efficacy	40%	29%	25%	31.3%
Social Supports	36%	24%	23%	27.7%
Job Maintenance	28%	20%	17%	21.7%
Outcome Expectancy	25%	13%	13%	17.0%
<b>Average</b>	<b>35.6%</b>	<b>24.6%</b>	<b>22.0%</b>	<b>27.4%</b>

Source: Employment Readiness Scale™

Generally speaking, if clients receive a single intervention, it is related to job search skills. While overall improvement on “soft skills” is not as great in Job Search interventions as in Career Exploration interventions, at least “soft skills” do show some improvement. However, approximately a quarter of clients are still low on “soft skills” after participating in an intervention. And participation in a Life Skills intervention leaves more than a third of clients still needing help with “soft skills.”

### **Implications for Employment Services**

Being strong on “soft skills” is critical to becoming employment ready and transitioning successfully to long-term employment. Data from the Employment Readiness Scale™ suggest that methodologies for addressing “soft skills” may not be valued and well developed. The existing Life Skills interventions, for example, are consistently more effective in improving employability factors like job search skills than they are in improving the “soft skills” that they generally intend to be targeting.

There are a number of potential explanations for this pattern and it offers an intriguing subject for further investigation. One consideration is the role of outcome evaluation itself. Historically, attention in employment services has focused on helping clients make a suitable occupational choice, acquire any needed skills training, and interview successfully for a job. Traditional measures of success have been whether (a) the client finds employment, or (b) the client enrolls in, or completes, an occupational training program. So perhaps being driven by and rewarded for these outcomes,

service providers focus on them more than on the less visible and more difficult to address “soft skills”.

In summarizing research conducted by the CRWG (see <http://crwg-gdrc.ca>; Magnusson & Lalande 2005), Hiebert (2011) talks about outcomes that front line workers and service agency managers identified as important but that are often not (or not allowed to be) reported. “These included client intrapersonal factors such as: Belief that change is possible, internal locus of control, self-confidence, motivation, self-esteem, client self-reliance and initiative, and opportunity awareness.” He goes on to add: “The contextual, intrapersonal and skill-focussed variables listed ...will need to be addressed, for they have an important impact on career development outcomes ... The skill-focussed outcomes are **precursors to achieving the ultimate impact of career services**” (CRWG, 1-2) [emphasis added].

We note that these precursors correspond to “soft skills.” For example, belief that change is possible, self-esteem, internal locus of control and motivation all correspond to Self-Efficacy and Outcome Expectancy. The ability to leverage one’s Work History and demonstrate Job Maintenance skills are certainly precursors to successful employment.

It may be fruitful to consider whether the life skills programs that do exist actually engage clients in the kinds of learning processes that would truly effect the desired skill development. In his article, “The Myth of ‘Soft Skills’ Training,” James C. Georges (2012) challenges us to consider what kinds of approaches we use in teaching “soft skills.” He makes the distinction between training and education and suggests that the usual approach to “soft skills” programs is education rather than training, typically consisting of presenting information, showing video, and brief role play practice. Truly building a skill, he asserts, normally requires practice with expert coaching until competence is reached.

If clients are to benefit from employment services and become successful in their work lives, then specific attention needs to be paid to designing interventions that are successful in strengthening “soft skills” beyond Social Supports. Approximately half of all clients seeking help need such assistance.

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## **Appendix A**

### **What Are We Measuring? The ERS Model**

The Employment Readiness Model underlies the Employment Readiness Scale™ (ERS) and was developed by the authors at the request of Human Resources Development Canada. This model and the ERS which measures it were validated as part of a three-year research and development process, overseen by a government steering committee, to ensure validity and reliability (Ward & Riddle 2002).

“Employment readiness” is defined within the ERS as “being able with little or no outside help, to find, acquire and keep an appropriate job as well as to be able to manage transition to new jobs, as needed.” In the ERS model, “employment ready” means an individual has successfully achieved three interrelated goals:

**1. Being self-sufficient in five employability dimensions:**

- Career decision-making, or knowing what type of work suits them
- Skills enhancement, or having the skills for the work they want
- Job search, or having the skills to find work
- Job maintenance, or having the skills to keep work once found
- Ongoing career management, or being able to manage career changes

**2. Understanding the particular stresses or challenges one faces:**

- Personal challenges, which clients can address themselves
- Environmental challenges, which clients can manage with help
- Systemic challenges, which have to be addressed on a community basis

**3. Coping effectively with the stresses or challenges one faces, drawing on four sources of support:**

- Self-efficacy, or a sense of being able to perform well
- Outcome expectancy, or whether or not a client expects to succeed
- Social supports, or the client's network and ability to get help
- Work history, or the client's previous work success

The field research showed that just being self-sufficient in the five employability dimensions is not enough. Most clients face a number of barriers or challenges that act as stressors and can be incapacitating if not managed well. Clients facing significant challenges without assistance in handling them are likely to fail at work even if they are

successful in getting a job. So all three parts of the employment readiness model are equally important.

One of the unique features of the ERS is that it allows service providers to document client changes through administering the ERS at the beginning of service and again after interventions (up to six times). “Before and after” data can be rolled up across clients. This data on client change can be used for program evaluation and accountability reporting, while also informing program planning and design. These “before and after” comparisons form the basis for the data in this article that looks at the effectiveness of interventions.

Agencies wishing to use the ERS for before-and-after measurement are asked to create a menu of local interventions which are set up, customized for that agency, within the ERS. Clients are coded by staff as to which interventions they participate in, and then data is rolled up across participating clients to yield the program evaluation data. The ERS asks staff to group their local programs under one of nine categories of intervention:

- Academic upgrading (including literacy/second language training)
- Basic employment orientation and life skills
- Career exploration
- Career/employment counselling
- Interventions to address specific challenges
- Job clubs/job search skills (including resume writing)
- Job placement
- Personal support group
- Skills training (including computer training and vocational training)
- Workplace-based training/apprenticeship (including job coaching)

These categories – groupings of local programs – form the basis for the data reported “by type of intervention.”

Just before a client begins taking the ERS, they are asked to select from a menu of age categories and to indicate if they are a member of one or more of Canada’s employment equity groups: Aboriginal persons, persons with disabilities, visible minorities, and/or women. The roll-up data provide the basis for the analyses which are reported by age and/or equity group.