

Resilience and Work Life Success

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Based on Employment Readiness Scale™ research in Snohomish County, Washington, USA.
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Introduction

Resilience, or the ability to bounce back from adversity, has been investigated in conjunction with the management of stress (Diehl & Hay 2010; Friborg et al. 2006; Smith et al. 2010) and a range of psychiatric issues (Campbell-Sills, Cohan & Stein 2006). Windle (2010) has provided a more detailed definition of resilience as being “the process of effectively negotiating, adapting to, or managing significant sources of stress or trauma. Assets and resources within the individual, their life and environment facilitate this capacity for adaptation and ‘bouncing back’ in the face of adversity.”

In parallel with the work on resilience, researchers on work life success began focusing on the importance of “soft skills” as critical supplements to the technical skills typically receiving focus (e.g., Awe 2012, Klaus 2008, Reh 2012, Ward & Riddle 2012). As industrial restructuring shifts jobs from traditional production to positions requiring customer interaction, there has been a dramatic increase in the need for employees to have strong interpersonal skills, good problem-solving and time management skills, the ability to participate effectively in teams and networks, and a strong sense of personal efficacy. In addition, rapid technological changes are underscoring the importance of employees being able to think critically and build networks across traditional silos. Such skills are also directly relevant to managing life stabilization issues. The research that resulted in the development of the Employment Readiness Scale™ also verified that individuals strong on Soft Skills were significantly better able to deal successfully with the stress from a range of life challenges.

In 2012, Workforce Snohomish, the local workforce development board, and a group of partners began using the Employment Readiness Scale™ (ERS) as a tool to assist in addressing family homelessness in Snohomish County, Washington, by increasing economic self-sufficiency. Data from the ERS confirmed that homelessness was intertwined with a range of life issues in addition to economic self-sufficiency, and that strengthening resilience could be a critical factor in ensuring housing stability as well as obtaining and retaining employment.

Historically the approach to increasing economic self-sufficiency for those who were homeless or in unstable housing had been to encourage them in job search, frequently with limited success. Too often, the individuals assisted who were able to obtain employment were unable to retain it. Therefore the partners decided to broaden their focus to ensure services were in place to strengthen key Soft Skills measured by the Employment Readiness Scale™, predicting that strength in Soft Skills would be correlated with an increase in resilience, which could in turn result in better job search success and job retention.

Methodology

After a review of the available scales to measure resilience, Workforce Snohomish selected the 25-item version of the Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale (CD-RISC-25) developed by Kathryn M. Connor, M.D., and Jonathan R.T. Davidson, M.D. (2003). The authors kindly provided a license for the CD-RISC-25 to be used in the research project. Based on correspondence with the authors, the scoring used to categorize participants by level of resilience was as follows:

Low Resilience	73 or less
Medium Resilience	74-89
High Resilience	90-100

The Employment Readiness Scale™ is an online tool that measures an individual's strength on a nine-factor internationally-validated Employment Readiness Model™ (Ward & Riddle 2001). Further information on the ERS and the three years of field research involved in its development can be found at www.EmploymentReadiness.info. The research to develop the ERS included measurement of the amount of current stress participants were experiencing from the 30 most common challenges or life stabilization issues – the kinds of issues are likely to precipitate problems for those with low resilience. That research found that, even if an individual were experiencing high stress, if they scored as “strong” on the five key soft skills, they were successful in work life.

From the initial research and subsequent data collected on over 200,000 individuals, functioning in a resilient manner would appear to be strongly related to strength on three of those Soft Skills, with the hypothesis that those low in resilience would be more likely to need help on these factors than those high on resilience:

- a. Self-Efficacy, or one's confidence in one's ability to perform effectively (a component of self-esteem).
- b. Outcome Expectancy, or one's belief in one's ability to succeed and willingness to take responsibility to create that success.
- c. Job Maintenance, or the interpersonal and self-management skills necessary to work effectively and keep a job once obtained.

Using the Employment Readiness Scale™ (ERS) to measure Soft Skills provided two specific benefits. First, the ERS is a scale that has been validated for repeat administration; therefore, both the initial relationship of Soft Skills with resilience and their strengthening over time could be measured. Second, the Soft Skills measured by the ERS have been outcome validated as being critical to work life success.

In order to examine the relationship between housing stability and resilience, various statistical methodologies were examined in order to determine how best to define degrees of homelessness. The methodology developed by the Australian Government seemed most applicable as it distinguished 'home'lessness from rooflessness and focused on whether or not the person has a sense of security, stability, privacy, safety, and the ability to control their living space (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2012). Use of this methodology resulted in research participants being categorized as sleeping rough (i.e., outside a safe structure), emergency shelter (where individuals were safe at night but could not remain during the day), unstable housing (temporary safe solutions such as couch surfing or other time-limited housing), and stable housing.

The research was conducted between July 2013 and June 2017 and focused on a randomly-selected group of 551 participants who were part of a larger population of 2,073 individuals participating in one or more programs designed to address the needs of individuals with limited income in Snohomish County, Washington. The vast majority of the population were also challenged in terms of housing stability, and 94.7 percent were receiving housing assistance. All participants took the ERS at least twice and were coded in the data analysis by level of resilience.

This article is intended to address the following questions, based on that research: What is the relationship between housing stability and resilience? Is there indeed a relationship between the quality of resilience and the construct of employment readiness (i.e., the ability to find and keep meaningful work)? Are those low in resilience more likely to also be weak on the three Soft Skills listed above? Can employment services interventions significantly strengthen those three soft skills for those low on

resilience? Is the strengthening of resilience also related to strengthening social capital, or one’s social network?

The data reported below represent the percentage of participants scoring in designated categories on the ERS. The scoring matrix of the ERS is structured such that a difference of five percentage points or more between the scores for the total sample and the scores for each level of resilience is statistically significant at $p \leq .05$. Regarding the “change” data, the original validation research demonstrated that a shift of more than 10 percent in those who went from being “weak” to becoming “strong” on Soft Skills was statistically significant at the 95 percent confidence level. Where a percentage is statistically different from the total, it has been presented in bold.

Results

The baseline scores on the CD-RISC-25 showed that, of the 551 participants, 10 percent scored as High Resilience, 33 percent as Medium Resilience, and 57 percent as Low Resilience. Thus, while the majority of these vulnerable participants scored as Low Resilience, it is worth noting that this was not the case for all.

Relationship between housing stability and resilience. The data collected confirm that there is indeed a statistically significant relationship between housing stability and resilience. Four levels of housing stability were measured, and the percentages of participants who scored as “Low Resilience” were as follows:

- 98% Sleeping rough or in emergency shelter
- 67% Unstable housing
- 49% Stable housing

Thus, the hypothesis that addressing homelessness must involve strengthening resilience is confirmed.

Relationship between resilience and employment readiness. Based on the initial three years of field research, the ERS provides a designation of level of readiness defined as follows:

- a. Fully Ready, or at least an 80% likelihood of getting a job within 12 weeks without additional assistance plus a high likelihood of keeping that job.
- b. Minimally Ready, or at least a 60% (but less than 80%) likelihood of getting a job within 12 weeks without additional assistance plus a moderate likelihood of losing that job.
- c. Not Ready, or a 40% or lower likelihood of getting a job within 12 weeks without additional assistance plus a high likelihood of losing that job.

Data in Table 1 demonstrate that those scoring Low Resilience on the CD RISC-25 were also significantly likely to score as Not Ready on the ERS (86% compared with 64% for the total sample), confirming a probable relationship between resilience and employment readiness.

Table 1: Percent of All Participants by Employment Readiness and Resilience Levels

Readiness Level	Total Sample	Resilience Level of the Sample		
		High	Medium	Low
Fully Ready	16%	41%	15%	5%
Minimally Ready	20%	33%	25%	9%
Not Ready	64%	26%	60%	86%
Total participants	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source: Employment Readiness Scale™ data, *Starting From* report.

Note: Percentages in bold are significantly higher than the percentage for the sample total.

These data support there being a meaningful relationship between resilience and preparedness for obtaining and retaining employment as those High on resilience were more likely to score Fully Ready in terms of employment readiness in contrast to the Not Ready scores of those Low on resilience.

Relationship between resilience and Soft Skills. Based on initial ERS scores, there is a clear relationship between level of resilience and strength on key Soft Skills (see Table 2). The percentages of participants needing help to strengthen the three key Soft Skills were much lower for those scoring as High or Medium in resilience when compared with the sample averages. However, the percentages of participants needing help who scored as Low Resilience were significantly higher than the sample averages (e.g., 76% versus 58% for Self-Efficacy; 47% versus 33% for Outcome Expectancy; 57% versus 39% for Job Maintenance). The relationship between Low Resilience and strength on Soft Skills is particularly notable for Self-Efficacy, on which over three-quarters of the sample who scored as Low Resilience needed help.

Table 2: Percent of Participants Needing Help with Key Soft Skills, by Resilience Level

Soft Skill	Total Sample	Resilience Level of the Sample		
		High	Medium	Low
Self-Efficacy	58%	16%	42%	76%
Outcome Expectancy	33%	8%	18%	47%
Job Maintenance	39%	6%	16%	57%

Source: Employment Readiness Scale™ data, *Starting From* report.

Note: Percentages in bold are significantly higher than the percentage for the sample total.

These data reconfirm that strengthening Soft Skills can lead to increasing resilience, or the ability to deal effectively with life stabilization issues.

Changes from employment services interventions. In order to determine whether or not interventions provided in the context of employment services were effective in strengthening the key Soft Skills, data from participants retaking the ERS after interventions were analyzed to see whether or not a statistically significant percentage shifted from “weak” (or ineffective) to “strong” (or effective). Data were available from three types of interventions:

- Life skills workshops, which included basic employment orientation
- Interventions intended to address particular challenges (e.g., addiction, domestic violence)
- Skills training

Data in Table 3 detail the percentage of participants, at each level of resilience, who shifted from “weak” (i.e., not very effective) to “strong” (i.e., very effective) on each Soft Skill as a result of a particular type of intervention.

The data below in Table 3 suggest that all three types of interventions can strengthen the Soft Skills under examination if they are designed appropriately. Life skills or basic employment orientation interventions are particularly effective in strengthening Self-Efficacy, or a person’s confidence in their ability to perform well. Skills training, by contrast, can be particularly effective in strengthening Outcome Expectancy, perhaps because mastering a skill reinforces a sense of personal potency. Neither those scoring Medium Resilience nor those scoring High Resilience showed similar improvement on Soft Skills from the interventions measured.

Table 3: Percent of Participants Becoming “Strong” on Key Soft Skills, by Resilience Level

Intervention Types	Soft Skill	Sample Total	Resilience Level of the Sample		
			High	Medium	Low
Life skills/basic orientation	Self-Efficacy	25%	4%	1%	30%
	Outcome Expectancy	17%	10%	8%	23%
	Job Maintenance	16%	1%	3%	25%
Interventions addressing challenges	Self-Efficacy	11%	6%	8%	24%
	Outcome Expectancy	10%	7%	10%	17%
	Job Maintenance	8%	4%	3%	17%
Skills training	Self-Efficacy	19%	11%	14%	25%
	Outcome Expectancy	15%	7%	7%	28%
	Job Maintenance	13%	7%	4%	29%

Source: Employment Readiness Scale™ data, *Interventions* report.

Note: Percentages in bold are significantly higher than the percentage for the sample total.

Resilience and Social Supports. An unexpected finding in this research was that the ERS factor, Social Supports, also showed a significant relationship to resilience (see Table 4). Social Supports measures the ability of an individual to reach out for support – e.g., to those having information on available community resources and job leads, as well as to gain emotional support and encouragement.

Table 4: Results for Social Supports, by Resilience Level

Soft Skill: Social Supports	Sample Total	Resilience Level of the Sample		
		High	Medium	Low
Percent needing help	56%	20%	43%	70%
Percent strengthening	29%	10%	29%	34%
Percent strengthening through:				
Life skills/basic orientation	28%	12%	28%	33%
Interventions re: challenges	18%	12%	30%	32%
Skills training	28%	12%	27%	32%

Source: Employment Readiness Scale™ data, *Starting From* and *Interventions* reports.

Note: Percentages in bold are significantly higher than the percentage for the sample total.

The data in Table 4 show that a significantly higher percent of those scoring Low Resilience needed help strengthening Social Supports, while the opposite was true for those scoring High or Medium on resilience. Both Life Skills workshops and interventions focused on specific challenges resulted in a significant strengthening of Social Supports for participants scoring as Low Resilience, but skills training workshops were not as effective in addressing that Soft Skill. While those scoring Medium or High Resilience also showed some strengthening from Life Skills or interventions addressing challenges, the shift was not significantly stronger than the sample average.

Discussion

This research confirms that there is a direct relationship between the concept of resilience and key Soft Skills (Self-Efficacy, Outcome Expectancy, and Job Maintenance), and that the nature of those Soft Skills can provide clues as to how individuals can enhance their own resilience. Interventions intended to

address the life challenges that are particularly difficult for those low in resilience (e.g., addictions, bereavement, domestic violence, housing instability, etc.) are not necessarily designed to strength the relevant Soft Skills. As a result, individuals may emerge from such interventions still vulnerable to high stress situations. A fruitful area of future study could be identifying the necessary and sufficient design characteristics of interventions to ensure that they indeed strengthen the key Soft Skills, and in turn resilience.

The findings on resilience and Social Supports also underscore the importance of strengthening social networks as a method of optimizing resilience. In a world increasingly reliant on social media and online impersonal networks, coaching clients in how to develop and maintain meaningful personal support networks is critical. Ultimately, coping with life challenges requires resilience as reflected in a strong social network to support good choices (Social Supports), strength on Self-Efficacy and Outcome Expectancy, and the interpersonal and self-management skills necessary for economic self-sufficiency.

For the past ten years, there has been an increasing focus on the importance of Soft Skills in achieving economic self-sufficiency (Klaus 2008; Ward & Riddle 2014). Other research with the Employment Readiness Scale™ has shown that strength on Soft Skills is necessary for managing a range of life challenges as well as for success in work life (Ward & Riddle 2012). Focusing simply on employability factors such as job search strategies is not sufficient for addressing the employment related needs of individuals experiencing or at risk of homelessness, especially in an environment of rapid change in work situations and career tracks (Ward and Riddle 2014, 2017, 2018).

The good news is that it is possible to design a range of interventions in such a way as to strengthen targeted Soft Skills, including Social Supports, and thus resilience. This ability to enhance resilience though strengthening the Soft Skills critical for work life (and indeed personal life) success provides a positive and constructive methodology for positioning vulnerable individuals to rebound from adverse situations and become potent in managing their own lives. This methodology can help ensure that individuals also have improved job search success and are more likely to obtain and retain employment. While some work has already been done on identifying the key design and delivery components that strengthen Soft Skills in employment related interventions (see Ward & Riddle 2014), further research would be beneficial for finding best practices that can be shared.

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