Weaving Soft Skills Development into Everyday Employment Services in the U.S.

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Context

Data on the employment readiness needs and outcomes of over 34,000 U.S. clients reveal important gaps in the critical soft skills required for work life success. Referral data for key client groups show that interventions being offered to clients are not necessarily the optimal ones for strengthening soft skills. While data from clients who took the Employment Readiness Scale™ (see Appendix A for information) suggest that at least 57 percent of U.S. clients seeking assistance in work life transition could benefit from enhanced services, program design and funding often assume that such assistance is required by a significantly smaller percentage of clients.

Increasing the likelihood that clients will get help with soft skills can improve their job acquisition rate, as well as their job performance and retention once hired. This article provides an initial brief overview of ERS data on soft skills, followed by sections on (a) examples of ways to address soft skills informally, and (b) suggestions regarding how strengthening soft skills could be integrated into formal career exploration and job search interventions.

How Well Are Soft Skills Being Addressed at Present?

The importance of soft skills for work life success has been summarized in a previous article (Ward & Riddle 2012). Sources consistently show that, 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. These skills are vital to employers, yet they often appear to be viewed as marginal to employment service mandates, only for "high need" clients, or "too expensive" to address.

Data generated through use of the Employment Readiness Scale™ (ERS) in diverse employment service settings in the U.S. over a nine-year period offer unique insight into client needs, referral patterns, and outcomes with respect to soft skills development. Built into the ERS is the measurement of the five soft skills most critical for work life success:

- o *Self-Efficacy*, or a sense of being able to perform well.
- o *Outcome Expectancy*, or whether or not a client expects to succeed and is willing to take responsibility for creating that success.

o *Social Supports*, or the client's network and ability to get help.
o *Work History*, or the client's feeling that they have performed well in past work contexts, paid or unpaid.
o *Job Maintenance*, or having the skills to keep work once found.

The four ERS employability factors that are not considered "soft skills" include Career Decision-Making, Skills Enhancement, Job Search, and Ongoing Career Management. From the three years of field research undertaken in developing the ERS, it became clear that self-sufficiency in Job Maintenance was the single best predictor of success in work life (Ward & Riddle 2001).

The clients requiring the most support to effect successful employment transitions are those classified by the ERS as "Not Ready" – i.e., likely to lose employment, if obtained, unless they receive help with at least three of the five soft skills and at least two of the four employability dimensions. U.S. ERS data indicate that of those "Not Ready" clients, a half or more need help with Self-Efficacy, Social Supports, and Work History (see Table 1). Regarding Job Maintenance, 46% need help while over a third (40%) need help with Outcome Expectancy, which appears to be one of the most difficult soft skills to strengthen. Even among clients who score "Minimally Ready" on the ERS (not displayed in Table 1), there is a significant percentage who are likely to need help with Work History (27%) or Social Supports (22%).

Table 1: Percent of "Not Ready" U.S. Clients Needing Assistance on Soft Skills

Factor	Percent of "Not Ready" Clients" Needing Assistance				
	Clients with Disabilities	Hispanic Clients	19-24 Years Old	46-65 Years Old	All Clients
Self-Efficacy	**72**	63	60	62	62
Outcome Expectancy	**52**	39	35	**45**	40
Social Supports	**67**	58	54	**72**	62
Work History	74	77	**81**	63	73
Job Maintenance	**60**	43	41	**51**	46
Total Soft Skills	**65**	56	54	59	57

The data highlighted in this article are drawn from four client groups that illustrate different patterns of need with regard to soft skills development. Percentages in bold in Table 1 are significantly higher than the average for all "Not Ready" clients (namely, the percents shown in the "All Clients" column). Thus, clients with disabilities are significantly more likely to need help with Self-Efficacy, Outcome Expectancy, Social Supports, and Job Maintenance, while 46-65 year old clients are significantly more likely to need help with Outcome Expectancy and Social Supports, and 19-24 year old clients with Work History.

Focusing on the clients most in need of assistance (those scoring "Not Ready"), Table 2 provides data on the percent of clients who shifted from being weak or not self-sufficient on soft skills to becoming strong or self-sufficient. In each instance, a

statistically significant number of clients made that shift from weak to strong, or not self-sufficient to self-sufficient, indicating that no further assistance was needed.

Table 2: Percent of "Not Ready" U.S. Clients Becoming Self-sufficient on Soft Skills

. Factor	Percent of "Not Ready" Clients" Becoming Self-Sufficient				
	Clients with Disabilities	Hispanic Clients	19-24 Years Old	46-65 Years Old	All Clients
Self-Efficacy	24	**32**	20	24	26
Outcome Expectancy	20	18	14	**25**	17
Social Supports	25	22	22	27	25
Work History	18	**35**	19	19	24
Job Maintenance	18	23	15	20	20
Total Soft Skills	21	26	18	23	22

Table 3 provides data on the percent of all U.S. clients "left behind" on soft skills – i.e., not yet self-sufficient – after various types of interventions had been completed. Inspection of the data in Table 3 indicate that, after Career Exploration interventions had been completed, at least 21% of all clients still needed help with soft skills, and after Job Search interventions at least 22% of clients were still weak on soft skills. Each of these patterns, if not addressed, could inhibit clients' work life success.

Turning to interventions that theoretically would strengthen soft skills, after completing Life Skills interventions, at least 19% of all clients still needed help strengthening soft skills and after receiving Employment Counseling at least 29% of clients were still weak on soft skills.

Table 3: Percent of All U.S. Clients "Left Behind" on Total Soft Skills

Intervention Type	Percent of All Clients "Left Behind"				
	Clients with Disabilities	Hispanic Clients	19-24 Years Old	46-65 Years Old	All Clients
Career Exploration	**35**	**28**	**26**	24	21
Job Search	**39**	21	**34**	27	22
Life Skills	**32**	**28**	**28**	23	19
Employment Counseling	-	**-**	33	-	29

Table 4 provides data on the percent of U.S. clients being referred to various types of interventions by agencies using the ERS who have coded their clients to specific interventions. The data in this article focus on those clients referred to only one intervention (see Appendix A for details).

Comparing the data in Tables 3 and 4, we find that Career Exploration interventions were the intervention of choice for clients with disabilities and clients 46-65 years old. Next most frequent as a referral target were Life Skills interventions, particularly for Hispanic clients; however, Life Skills interventions were not necessarily the most effective for these clients in terms of demonstrated changes in employment readiness.

More effective for Hispanics clients were referrals to Job Search interventions. Finally, a disproportionately high percentage of clients 19-24 years old were referred Employment Counseling although it was not particularly effective in assisting clients to become more employment ready.

Table 4: Percent of All U.S. Clients Referred to a Single Intervention

Intervention Type	Percent of All Clients Referred				
	Clients with Disabilities	Hispanic Clients	19-24 Years Old	46-65 Years Old	All Clients
Career Exploration	**92.4**	29.6	60.6	**84.8**	74.1
Job Search	2.6	**15.3**	8.0	9.4	8.4
Life Skills	4.0	**40.8**	12.1	5.8	11.3
Employment Counseling	1.0	**14.3**	**19.3**	0.0	6.2

From the data on clients "left behind," we can see that the percentage of clients needing help with soft skills often remains high after standard interventions. As well, choices of referral interventions have not necessarily correlated well with the interventions most likely to strengthen soft skills.

Strengthening Soft Skills Informally

Often service providers have very limited time in which to assist clients. By being aware of what kinds of focus or strategies can influence the development of soft skills, service providers have an opportunity to combine soft skills strengthening with addressing issues of immediate concern to clients. In this section, each of the soft skills is discussed in turn, with sample strategies for how to weave them into interactions with clients outside of formal programs.

Self-Efficacy

The key to strengthening self-efficacy is to switch clients' focus from feeling discouraged or like a failure to recognizing previous successes and gaining confidence in their ability to manage their personal and work life effectively. If clients are low on self-efficacy, they are likely to consider only a narrow range of career or work options, interview poorly, fail to follow up on possible job leads, and demonstrate limited problem-solving ability. There are three general approaches that can be helpful in building self-efficacy:

Shifting the focus from deficit to success. Being unemployed is often discouraging and it is important to remind clients that they have been and can be successful through strategies like the following:

- o Ask clients to describe past successes and identify the skills they used.

- o Ask clients about hobbies and volunteer activities to draw out skills and past successes that they may not have considered.

- Help clients identify transferable skills and then generate examples of where those skills could transfer.

- Where relevant, draw out the skills required of "stay-at-home" parents.

- Conduct mock employer interviews with clients asking "What are your skills?" "What are you good at?"

Providing positive feedback. All too often we focus on what needs to change rather than pausing to congratulate clients on what they are already doing well. Hearing from others that they are impressed with one's progress can be very empowering. Here are some ideas:

- Get feedback on strengths from others (family, friends, coaches, etc.).

- Help clients clarify their expectations of themselves to ensure that those expectations are realistic.

- Ask clients for ideas on next steps and praise their contributions.

- Highlight for clients what you learn from them.

- To build their confidence and sense of self-worth, encourage clients to test out and increase their work skills by volunteering.

Helping clients connect with outside support. It is important that clients establish ongoing sources of support and encouragement outside of employment service agencies. Practitioners can help clients bridge these gaps through strategies such as the following:

- Help clients find a mentor or job coach (one-on-one or group).

- Refer clients to self-esteem workshops if appropriate.

- Encourage clients to build public speaking skills and networks through Toastmasters.

Outcome Expectancy

The key to strengthening Outcome Expectancy is helping clients recognize their own role in creating success. If they are weak on Outcome Expectancy, they are likely to be passive or display low motivation in regard to choosing a career path or searching for work, to blame others for their failures, and to view the world from a "glass half empty" perspective. There are two main types of strategies that can be helpful in working with such clients:

Helping shift the client's perspective to a more positive view of the future. When clients feel pessimistic, they are unlikely to make the effort necessary to succeed in their work life.

- Explore how clients have benefited from "bad" experiences.

- Remind clients that they are responsible for (i.e., a causing agent in) their past, present and future.

     o   Reduce fear by visualizing the future in a positive manner ("what would that look like?")

Emphasizing the client's own role in creating their success. If clients feel that they have little potency or that it is up to others to determine their success, they are likely to feel entitled. Shifting this attitude is particularly challenging, but the following can help.

     o   Ask clients about their role in creating past successes.

     o   Avoid helping them directly; instead, coach them in how to help themselves.

     o   Focus on their responsibility in the job search process.

Social Supports

The key to strengthening Social Supports is helping the client recognize the importance of social networks and build strategies to develop them. When clients are strong on Social Supports, they have people they can turn to when they feel discouraged or need practical help and they have a network through which they can learn about job leads and other opportunities (e.g., to learn or volunteer). When Social Supports are weak, clients often remain isolated from needed help and resources and are more likely to run into difficulty. Strategies for strengthening Social Supports include the following:

Helping clients learn why networks are important and to create them. Some job-seekers become isolated due to personal circumstances or embarrassment about their situation and don't know how to reach out to others. Some clients reach out to gain assistance but forget to offer assistance in return.

     o   Help clients understand the benefits of networks and why it is important to reach out to meet other people.

     o   Coach clients in how to network effectively, beginning with identifying others' needs that they can meet rather than waiting for their own needs to be met.

     o   Work with clients to map out their social network and identify how they may want to further expand it.

     o   Help clients become aware of the community resources available to them.

     o   Encourage clients to participate in networking organizations as a way of meeting people and gaining mutual support.

     o   Help clients make choices about participating in online communities such as LinkedIn.

     o   Create a reference sheet or handout that identifies community support resources.

Practicing how to strengthen and utilize their network. Having a network is not enough. Clients can often benefit from coaching in how and when to call on that network.

- Encourage clients to identify situations that could interfere with work and create an effective back-up plan (i.e., alternate transportation, child care).
- Provide practice in how to initiate a conversation with an unknown person (e.g., at a social or networking event).
- Include pair or group activities within workshops and remind clients to get to know their partner(s).
- Host a career fair or open house and coach clients on taking the opportunity to make contacts.
- Discuss with clients the usefulness of online networks or support groups.

Work History

The key to strengthening Work History is helping clients both to recognize the positives in their past work experience and to select work contexts where they are likely to succeed. When clients are weak on Work History, they view themselves as having failed, perhaps repeatedly, and they may feel pessimistic about their ability to succeed. Possible strategies for strengthening Work History include:

Reframing past experiences. Sometimes clients have had recent negative experiences (such as being laid off) that they allow to overshadow the positive successes they have had. Sometimes there are lessons to be learned from past experiences that can empower clients.

- Start with "what is your experience?" (drop the word "work").
- Analyze past experiences (paid and volunteer) and identify transferable skills.
- Encourage clients to interview former supervisors to gain insight about the their actual performance and suggestions for how they could improve their work life success.
- When working with groups, pair clients low on Work History but high on another soft skill with a partner with the reverse patterns for support.

Selecting optimum work settings. When a client is low on Work History, it is particularly important that they have a positive experience the next time. By selecting an employer who provides support to new employees, they can increase the chances of a positive experience.

- Coach clients on questions to ask of potential employers regarding the orientation and supervision they provide to new employees.
- Role play interviews where clients ask about employment conditions.
- Create a list of local employers who offer orientation and supervision.

- Work with local business groups to expand the number of employers who offer initial orientation and supervision, coaching or mentoring, or on-the-job training.
- Help clients access wage subsidy / work experience programs.

Job Maintenance

The key to strengthening Job Maintenance is understanding past difficulties and reinforcing or building appropriate work behaviors. These behaviors include learning what one's supervisor expects, working and communicating well with others, being able to handle several tasks at a time, continuing to learn and improve one's skills, and being able to put aside personal problems when at work. When clients are not self-sufficient on Job Maintenance, they have a high likelihood of losing work once they obtain it and being unsuccessful in skills training due to ineffective habits and beliefs. There are three general strategies for helping clients strengthen Job Maintenance:

Helping clients understand and build effective work habits. Some clients come from families where effective interpersonal skills are not well modelled and/or where older family members have been unsuccessful in their work life.

- Help clients see through the eyes of the employer and explain how they could contribute to the company.
- Help clients examine the impact of their behavior on their co-workers.
- Encourage excellence in any and all jobs they may perform, noting the benefits for self-esteem and for future references.

Addressing previous problems at work. Most clients who score low on Job Maintenance are aware of the types of behaviors that have gotten them into difficulty, though they may not be aware of alternatives.

- Review challenges clients have had previously at work and help clients problem solve how difficulties could be avoided.
- Strategize with clients about sources of support to avoid similar problems in the future.
- Help clients reframe their job loss story and articulate what they would do differently the next time.

*Preparing to succeed at work.*In order to avoid a scenario where clients lose their next position once they obtain one, it can be useful to help clients plan ahead and anticipate and develop strategies regarding potential difficulties.

- Provide clients with a handout on appropriate workplace behavior, including timeliness, personal hygiene, treatment of co-workers, treatment of supervisors, etc.

o Provide clients with a handout on critical interpersonal skills such as active listening, problem solving, negotiation, assertiveness, and anger management.

o Walk clients through critical tasks when beginning a new job, such as making sure they have a job description and understand it, clarifying priorities, etc.

o Encourage clients to speak to other employees or have a mentor on workplace culture.

o Encourage clients to have regular meetings with their supervisor to get feedback and help with prioritizing tasks.

o Identify sources of coaching and support they can turn to after they are employed to help with problem solving and job retention.

o Encourage clients to respect seasoned employees and observe work culture before trying to make changes.

Strengthening Soft Skills in Formal Interventions

Usually funding is focused on three types of employment-related interventions: career exploration, skills training, and job search. Any of these interventions can be restructured to also provide a context for strengthening soft skills, even if building soft skills is not a primary focus. Here are some general suggestions for any type of group intervention:

o Articulate ground rules or guidelines for behavior at the start and explain how they translate to a work setting.

o Emphasize in all group settings the importance of getting to know and respect other group members as a way to strengthen one's network.

o Teach the importance of helping others rather than waiting for others to help you, and provide opportunities for group members to provide mutual support.

Career Exploration Interventions

Career exploration interventions may be designed for individuals or for groups, but they have a common theme of gathering information about an individual's interests and abilities and investigating and weighing a range of work options that align with these characteristics. Below are four usual components of a career exploration intervention and ways in which the strengthening of soft skills could be embedded.

Gathering information about oneself. It is usual to ask clients to explore their interests, aptitudes, and values and there are numerous tools available to help with this. What can be added to help build soft skills is a conscious emphasis on shifting client focus from feelings of discouragement or anxiety to recalling that they have succeeded before through activities like the following:

- Have clients create storyboards of their lives, highlighting successes and how those could relate to a career choice.

- Have clients interview each other regarding past interests, hobbies, and volunteer activities and how those could relate to a career choice or transferable skills.

- Have clients interview each other regarding what they have gained from "bad" experiences in order to challenge "glass half empty" thinking.

- Provide self-assessment opportunities to help clients understand their own motivations.

- Identify positive sources of social support and practice asking for feedback.

Gathering information about particular career options. Again there are many tools for gathering career and labor market information. What can be added is practice with creating and achieving small milestones, as well as broadening one's network and understanding why that is important, through activities like the following:

- Teach and encourage informational interviewing with other clients, friends, and referrals.

- Have clients create a To Do list with regard to information gathering activities and report back on its completion.

- Have an alumni panel, sharing success stories to inspire clients.

- Link clients to job shadowing opportunities, with informational interviewing and feedback built in.

- Explore careers that clients think are "cool" but not possible for them and challenge limiting beliefs.

Evaluating whether or not a particular career option is appropriate. Information is only useful if it is then evaluated. The key issue here related to soft skills is being able to accurately evaluate oneself.

- Have clients list their main strengths and the ways in which particular career paths would draw on those strengths.

- Have clients identify areas of challenge and learn how to either strengthen their skills in handling the situations or how to avoid them.

- Help clients develop job shadowing opportunities and then debrief the experience.

Trying out the relevant skills. In order for a particular career direction to work, the client must feel at home in exercising the skills involved. Skills practice offers a rich opportunity for building confidence, willingness to take responsibility, and reinforcing appropriate behavior in a work context through activities such as the following:

- o Encourage volunteering to learn about work culture if the client has not yet had a positive work experience.
- o Provide team building exercises with feedback.

Job Search Interventions

The strengthening of soft skills can also be embedded into a range of job search interventions by linking them to the three main components of such interventions.

Resume development. Creating or refining a resume provides an excellent context for remembering past successes and focusing on transferable skills.

- o Have clients list all work-related experience, paid or unpaid, and analyze the list for relevant expertise.
- o Have clients describe which experiences on their resume were most rewarding to them and why.

Interview skills development. The process of helping clients become good interviewees offers opportunities to strengthen clients' ability to give and receive feedback, and to empower clients by helping them remember that they too are interviewing the prospective employer.

- o Coach clients on questions they can ask to determine what orientation and supervisory support they can expect to receive.
- o Have clients give each other feedback about first impressions and discuss the importance of that first impression.
- o Have clients develop a 25-word statement about what they are looking for in their work life and what they have to offer an employer, and then practice these in the group while receiving feedback.

Lead generation. There are many online tools as well as strategies for developing job leads. Because of the importance of support networks for success in work life, teaching lead generation offers opportunities to also teach networking skills through activities like the following:

- o Brainstorm ways and venues in which to meet potential employers.
- o Practice ways to adapt the 25-word statement to different contexts.
- o Link clients to mentors who can help access networks and provide feedback.

Conclusion

Being strong on soft skills is too important to work life success to overlook. Agencies can be most helpful to their clients if they identify and implement multiple ways to strengthen and reinforce the five key soft skills and mindfully integrate the building of these skills into everyday employment services. The rewards and ripple effects of doing

so could make a significant difference to clients' immediate and long-term work life success.

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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 that 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 2001).

"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 original ERS model, "employment ready" meant that an individual had successfully achieved three interrelated goals:

1. **Being self-sufficient in five employability dimensions:**
   o Career decision-making, or knowing what type of work suits them
   o Skills enhancement, or having the skills for the work they want
   o Job search, or having the skills to find work
   o Job maintenance, or having the skills to keep work once found
   o Ongoing career management, or being able to manage career changes

2. **Understanding the particular stresses or challenges one faces:**
   o Personal challenges, which clients can address themselves
   o Environmental challenges, which clients can manage with help
   o 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:**
   o Self-efficacy, or a sense of being able to perform well
   o Outcome expectancy, or whether or not a client expects to succeed and is willing to take responsibility for creating that success
   o Social supports, or the client's network and ability to get help
   o Work history, or the client's feeling that they have performed well in past work contexts, paid or unpaid

The field research showed that just being self-sufficient in the five employability dimensions was 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.

When researchers began demonstrating the importance of what became known as "soft skills" (see, for example, Klaus 2008), ERS data were reviewed with thisIdentify sources of coaching and support they can turn to after they are employed to help with problem solving and job retention. categorization in mind. It became clear that the four "Supports" were in fact soft skills, along with Job Maintenance.

Regarding the origin of the data cited in this article, 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 from these questions provide the basis for the analyses that are reported by age and/or equity group.

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. These real-time data 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 look at the effectiveness of interventions.

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

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

These categories, or groupings of local programs and services, form the basis for the data reported "by type of intervention."