

A Study on the Impact of the Pandemic on Soft Skills
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April 2024

Context

The COVID-19 pandemic, which significantly impacted lives worldwide, had profound effects on many aspects of employment. This study examines the effect of the pandemic on soft skills of people seeking employment through workforce development agencies and non-profit organizations in Canada. Specifically, we assess changes in soft skills before, during, and after the pandemic using the Employment Readiness Scale (ERS), an online self-assessment tool that measures soft skills, employability factors, and challenges. The sample sizes for the three interval periods were selected to be representative of the Canadian population with similar patterns observed in the US and Australian data. The three interval periods examined were:

1. April 1, 2018 through March 31, 2020 representing the period end just after the declaration of the pandemic.
2. April 1 2020 through March 31, 2022 representing the height of the pandemic
3. April 1, 2022 through October 31, 2023 representing a few months after the official declaration of the end of the pandemic¹

By examining soft skills across these intervals, this paper aims to provide insights into the long-term effects of the pandemic on employment-related skills.

Results

Table 1: Employment Readiness

| | Interval | Duration (months) | Employment Not Ready (%) |
|------------------|------------------------------|-------------------|--------------------------|
| Pre-COVID 19: | April 1, 2018 – Mar 31, 2020 | 24 | 72.0% |
| During COVID 19: | April 1, 2020 – Mar 31, 2022 | 24 | 71.8% |
| Post COVID-19: | April 1, 2022 – Sep 31, 2023 | 18 | 74.4% |

The ERS data showed a negligible difference in Employment Not Ready clients between the pre-COVID and during-COVID periods (71.8% and 72.0% respectively). However, this percentage increased to 74.4% after the pandemic's official end, indicating a notable change. While the data does not point to any conclusive evidence for this increase, potential factors may include:

1. Increased presence of multi-barrier clients within workforce development agencies.

¹ The WHO declared the end of the global pandemic on May 5, 2023.

2. the pandemic’s impact on the well-being of clients seeking employment;
3. A substantial influx of new Canadians – many of whom may have been unprepared for job market.

The top 5 challenges reported by clients during these 3 periods also exhibited significant differences. Housing emerged as the primary concern rising from 53% to 59%, while feelings of helplessness as measured by health or emotional problems due to the effects of the pandemic on mental well-being increased from 45% to 48%, and feelings of failure increased from and 40% to 46%. Notably, the lack of financial resources to sustain oneself decreased from 61% to 55%, likely influenced by government financial assistance programs and reduced spending during the pandemic.

Table 2: Challenges

| Top Five Reported Challenges | 2022-23 | 2020-22 | 2018-20 |
|--|---------|---------|---------|
| I can't find affordable housing near where I want to work. | 59% | 53% | 56% |
| I never seem to have enough money to survive without assistance. | 55% | 53% | 61% |
| I don't have enough education. | 50% | 51% | 56% |
| I am having health or emotional problems. | 48% | 45% | 47% |
| I often feel like a failure. | 46% | 40% | 41% |

The analysis of Table 3 shows a comparison in the self-sufficiency of soft skills across the three time periods and before any program interventions were implemented. Notably, there was a 5% point decrease in Work History following the pandemic, which can be attributed to the closure of businesses and reduced hiring opportunities during that time. Similarly, there was a 5% point decline in self-efficacy over the same period. This decline may reflect the challenges individuals faced in maintaining confidence and belief in their abilities amidst the uncertainty brought about by the pandemic. The data suggests a need for targeted interventions to address these declines and support individuals in rebuilding their work history and bolstering their self-efficacy.

Table 3: % Clients who are self-sufficient on Soft Skills

| Clients who are self-sufficient | 2022-23 | 2020-22 | 2018-20 |
|---------------------------------|---------|---------|---------|
| Self-Efficacy | 41% | 46% | 43% |
| Outcome Expectancy | 60% | 61% | 60% |
| Social Supports | 39% | 41% | 40% |
| Work History | 37% | 42% | 38% |
| Job Maintenance | 56% | 58% | 57% |

Analyzing the impact of interventions, we found large variations between the 3 time periods. The ERS

assessments, conducted at client intake and then repeated after a program intervention, allowed us to measure progress in soft skills development. Graph 1 shows the impact of interventions over each of the 3 time periods.

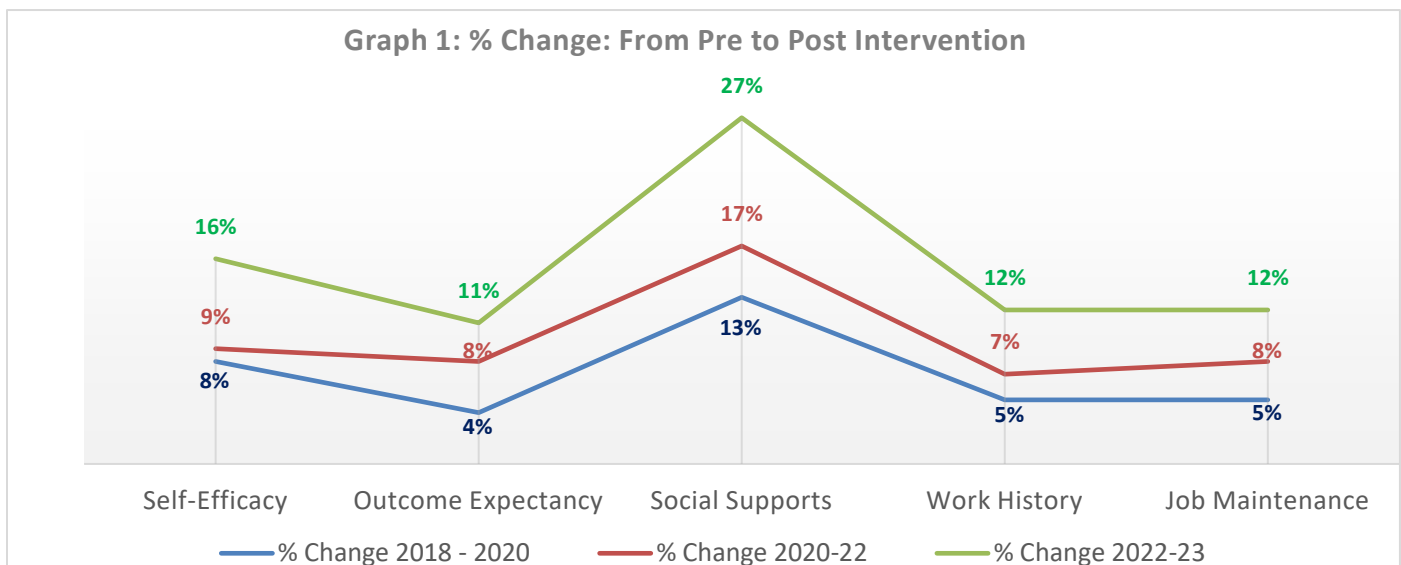
During the pre-COVID period, only social supports exhibited a significant (>10%) improvement of 13% between the initial and subsequent assessments. However, the post-COVID era witnessed substantial progress across all five soft skills, with increases exceeding 10%. Notably, outcomes expectancy demonstrated an improvement of 11%, while social supports saw a remarkable surge of 27%. These findings suggest a comprehensive and positive impact of interventions on clients' employability and readiness for the job market. A couple of factors may contribute to this observed improvement:

1. Client Reflection During the Pandemic:

- The extended duration of the pandemic provided clients with an opportunity for introspection, allowing them to reassess their career objectives and gain a clearer understanding of the necessary steps for achievement. This self-reflection likely played a crucial role in enhancing their soft skills.

2. Enhanced Targeted Interventions:

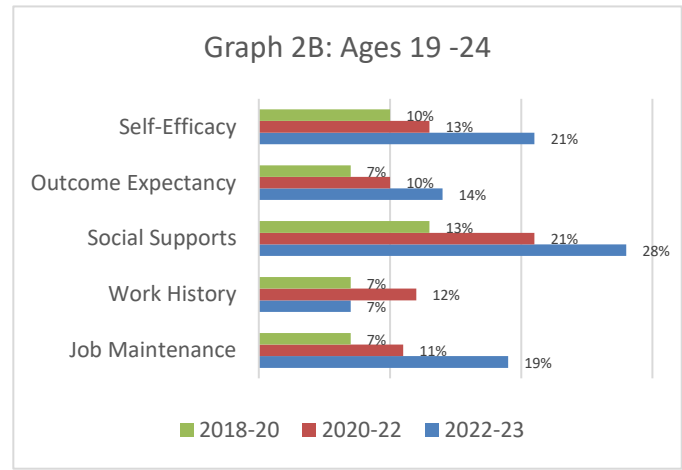
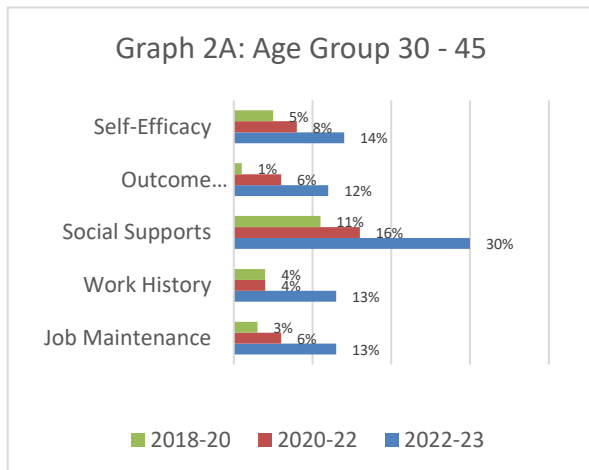
- The success observed may be attributed to the refinement and targeting of interventions. A more precise and tailored approach seems to have been employed, addressing specific soft skill areas and contributing to the across-the-board improvements.



Demographic variances

We conducted a comparative analysis between two distinct age groups, 19-24 and 30-45 years, to explore potential differences in how individuals perceived the pandemic and responded to interventions aimed at improving soft skills. Graphs 2A and 2B depict the improvements in soft skills pre and post-intervention for each age group, highlighting notable trends and disparities.

In examining Graph 2A, representing the age group 30-45 years, we observed improvements in all five measured soft skills over the three time periods. Notably, the performance during the



pandemic was better than prior to the pandemic, with significant post-pandemic improvements observed across all skills. For instance, self-efficacy showed a noteworthy improvement of 5% pre-pandemic compared to 14% post-pandemic. However, when compared to the younger cohort, this age group of 30 – 45 years exhibited lower levels of improvement in all soft skills categories over all three periods. Turning to Graph 2B which illustrates improvements for the younger cohort aged 19 to 24 years, we observed a significantly greater improvement post pandemic than pre pandemic. For example, self-efficacy saw an increase of 10% pre-pandemic compared to 21% post pandemic. This suggests that the younger cohort was more responsive to interventions and displayed greater resilience in enhancing their soft skills compared to the older cohort.

Overall, our analysis indicates that age may indeed play a role in how individuals perceive and respond to interventions aimed at improving soft skills. While both age groups showed improvements, the younger cohort demonstrated greater responsiveness and resilience, underscoring the importance of tailored intervention strategies to address the unique needs of different age demographics.



Conclusion

The interventions implemented during the three time periods analyzed in this study have demonstrated a significant impact on improving soft skills among individuals seeking employment. Specifically, certain soft skills categories showed notable improvements, particularly during and post-pandemic. Clients have recognized the importance of being proficient in soft skills for achieving success in the workplace, underscoring the need for continued investment in skill development programs.

Our findings also highlight the adaptability and responsiveness of younger cohorts to interventions aimed at enhancing soft skills. This suggests the importance of tailoring intervention strategies to different age demographics to maximize effectiveness.

Moving forward, workforce development agencies play a crucial role in supporting clients' soft skills development. It is essential for agencies to identify and implement multiple strategies to strengthen and reinforce the five key soft skills identified in this study. By mindfully integrating the building of these skills into everyday employment services, agencies can significantly contribute to their clients' immediate and long-term work life success.