



**Human Resources
Development Canada**

**Développement des
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Joanne Crawford, Project Officer
Human Resources Development Canada
150 N. Christina Street
Sarnia, Ontario N7T 7W5

FINAL REPORT: WORKFORCE TRAINING NEEDS ANALYSIS PROJECT HRDC CONTRACT U780193

SUMMARY

The Industrial Educational Cooperative's (IEC's) original application to Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) in 2001 was for funding to conduct research and development of "soft skills" training programs in our community. Our long-term objective was, and still is, to raise the level of people skills within Sarnia-Lambton. After discussion with HRDC, it was agreed to narrow the scope and start by conducting a community-wide "soft skills" training needs analysis.

We are pleased to report that the workforce training needs analysis project has been highly successful. Key findings are as follows:

- Top training needs identified from the survey include team/work group skills, stress management, conflict management, time management, communication skills, and decision-making & problem-solving skills – several of these topics involve sub-categories of abilities
- A significant need for basic supervisory skills training emerged from the interviews we held with individual organizations – this need traverses sectors and company size
- While the overwhelmingly preference is for leader-led classroom training, there is interest in other delivery methods; i.e., computer-based training (CBT), web-based training (WBT), self-study, video-based learning, blended learning solutions, etc.
- Organizations are very concerned with training efficiency - the bulk of respondents want courses to be a half-day or less in length
- During the follow-up process, several organizations shared information on their competency-based performance management systems, which could be a real asset to other community organizations – these systems provide a valuable framework for identifying on-going training needs

The balance of this report provides detailed information pertaining to activities, targeted clientele, and expected and actual project results. Other information contained in this report includes our interpretation/analysis of the overall project findings, recommendations from the survey results, project staffing changes, and media coverage of the project

In addition, a copy of the live survey report summarizing individual responses was taken off the InfoPoll site on December 17/03; it is appended to this document.

PROJECT ACTIVITIES, MAY 2002 TO APRIL 2003

May-July 2002 – Q1

- Assigned staff to key project roles: 1) Training needs analysis co-ordinator - Bill Sisler and 2) Project administrative assistant - Charlotte Cooper
- Commenced development of comprehensive employer database to survey large number/broad range of employers
- Selected and installed software to assist in analyzing data
- Project staff attended software training
- Set-up and established office for the project
- Co-ordinator began researching effective systems for training needs analysis in consultation with experienced industry stakeholders
- Co-ordinator participated in workshop to expand his knowledge and skills in this area
- Accepted proposals from two organizations specializing in training needs analysis surveys
- Continued to develop employer database
- Completed review process for proposed survey
- Friesen Kaye and Associates (FKA) selected to assist in design/development/distribution of training needs analysis survey
- FKA recommended survey be administered online via an InfoPoll Internet site using e-mail to direct potential respondents to the site via an active URL

August-October 2002 – Q2

- Further modifications made to the employer database
- Survey instrument designed in conjunction with Friesen Kaye and Associates
- InfoPoll Survey Services selected to gather and compile the responses electronically
- Survey launched in September - total of 450 organizations invited to complete it
- Total of 48 surveys completed in September; another 32 submitted in October
- IEC entered data manually for surveys completed via paper-based questionnaires
- Initiated telephone contact to arrange follow-up interviews with survey respondents
- Analysis of first 60 surveys revealed demand for a variety of soft skills (tentative needs comprised team/work group participation, team/work group leadership, stress and time management, communication skills including communicating change, conflict management, and organizational skills)
- Database of clientele finalized with few minor adjustments being made

November 2002-January 2003 – Q3

- Start of follow-up interviews with respondents - 40 interviews conducted in November
- Five more surveys completed - total to date: 85

- Follow-up interviews revealed potential barriers to training, preferences for course length and instructional techniques
- Significant need for basic supervisory skills not evident from the online survey responses emerged through one-on-one discussions with interviewees
- Commenced interviews with labour organizations to obtain views on soft skills training needs of membership
- Began closely analyzing potential numbers to train in the top ten skills to obtain clearer picture of the potential market for training
- By year's end, a total of 86 surveys were completed and submitted to the IEC
- Began initial consultations with industry to confirm common supervisory competencies as a starting point for program development

February-April 2003 – Q4

- Began review and integration of the summary account of the Soft Skills Community Survey, data acquired from interviews, consultations with labour leaders, and other organizations in our community
- Information interpreted and analyzed
- Recommendations formulated to meet the training needs arising from the initial phase of this project including identification of next steps: research and develop training strategies, programs, and delivery systems to meet survey respondents' preferences
- Results of soft skills survey disseminated throughout the community
- Project final report written and submitted

TARGETED CLIENTELE SERVED THROUGH THE PROJECT ACTIVITIES

The focus of this phase of the project was primarily on leaders, managers, and supervisors in the local workforce who could provide information on the prescribed training needs of their respective employees.

By including all sectors in the needs analysis, ultimately all workers in the community will benefit from the identification of training needs arising from the community soft skills survey.

EXPECTED AND ACTUAL PROJECT RESULTS

Expected

- Fill project staff positions
- Set up project office
- Set up database
- Identify appropriate training needs analysis system
- Launch soft skills survey
- Analyze preliminary survey results
- Initiate follow-up process
- Identify trends, barriers, preferences
- Monitor and analyze data results
- Develop report with recommendations

Actual

- Assigned staff to key project roles
- Established project office
- Created database of 450 employers
- Survey methodology developed including online data recovery
- Total of 86 surveys completed Q4 2002
- Prioritized demand for top 10 skills
- Conducted 50 follow-up interviews
- Examined trends, barriers, preferences
- Interpreted/analyzed results
- Report completed with recommendations

Comments - Actual vs. Expected Results

The sample survey group of 450 organizations comprised approximately 10% of the 4,000-5000 firms operating in Sarnia-Lambton¹. Of this sample group, 86 surveys were completed or 19%. Our goal for survey completion was 100 companies.

Of the 86 organizations that completed the survey, at least 1/3 were unable to submit it online. Their responses had to be given manually to IEC staff, who then input the data. We discovered that some respondents could not complete the survey online because they did not have Internet access; others had Internet access but couldn't open the survey; and finally, some respondents were able to open the survey but the site would not allow them to submit their replies.

Given the challenges that approximately 30% of respondents had using the technology-based process, we speculate that other companies of the 450 invited to complete the survey may have faced similar difficulties; however, they simply chose not to complete it, manually or otherwise.

Approximately 60% of survey respondents agreed to follow-up meetings. Interviews were not held with all 86 organizations, as certain companies' training needs were limited rather than significant or critical. In those cases, organizations felt it was unnecessary to pursue the data any further. Additionally, due to more pressing business concerns, some company representatives were unable to meet with the project interviewers.

The top ten related soft skill requirements identified through the survey are as follows:

1. Team/work group participation
2. Stress management
3. Conflict management
4. Time management
5. Difficult communications
6. Listening skills
7. Decision-making/problem-solving skills
8. Team/work group leadership
9. Communicating change
10. Team/work group management

This list of "top ten training needs" remained fairly constant throughout the intake process; that is the order of priority changed very little during the survey submission stage. When follow-up interviews were initiated, however, a significant need emerged that had not previously been identified as one of the top training requirements—basic supervisory skills training.

The follow-up interview allowed organizations to prioritize and clarify their training needs; therefore, requirements for supervisory training surfaced through this process. Basic supervisory skills training is a requirement that crosses industries and organizational size.

The demand for a range of soft or people skills revealed through the survey and follow-up interview process coupled with 1) the emerging need for supervisory training, 2) challenging barriers, and 3) a myriad of preferences for program delivery points to the necessity of developing a comprehensive overall strategy to meet these needs in a follow-up phase to this stage of the workforce training needs analysis project.

¹ Information on the number of organizations in Sarnia-Lambton provided by the Sarnia-Lambton Economic Partnership

INTERPRETATION/ANALYSIS OF PROJECT FINDINGS

The survey and subsequent interviews uncovered several themes in relation to the results:

- (a) Various interpretations of the definition of the soft skill (in other words, a skill meant different things to different people)
- (b) Relationship among the top ten skills
- (c) Emergence of basic supervisory skills as a common training need
- (d) Common trends, barriers, and preferences
- (e) Survey gaps

(a) *Interpretation of the described soft skill*

The first theme deals with respondent perceptions around some of the soft skills. While many skill requirements were commonly understood (e.g. for time management, people wanted to learn how to identify/eliminate time wasters, prioritize tasks, differentiate between important and urgent work, etc.), for other topics, i.e. “team/work group participation,” there was not a common understanding of what constituted this skill and/or the competencies comprising satisfactory team/work group participation.

Depending on who was asked, team/work group participation was varyingly interpreted as group meetings/targets, communicating with team members, managing up, motivating workers, etc. Therefore, it would be exceedingly difficult to design a program to address team/work group participation without a common understanding of what is involved with or meant by this soft skill.

(b) *Relationship among the top ten training needs*

The relationship among the top ten training needs correlates to the trio of critical skills that assist individuals to “enter, stay in, and progress in the world of work.”² These employability skills are grouped as 1) fundamental skills, 2) personal management skills, and 3) teamwork skills. Fundamental skills encompass communication, managing information, using numbers, and thinking and solving problems. In the soft skills needs analysis survey, difficult communications, listening skills, communicating change, and decision-making/problem-solving comprised the training needs in fundamental skills.

Personal management skills incorporate positive attitudes and behaviours, responsibility, adaptability, continuous learning, and working safely. The survey identified stress management and time management training needs as high priorities under personal management skills.

Teamwork skills involve working with others, and participating in projects and tasks. From the soft skills survey, the identified teamwork training needs are team/work group participation, conflict management, team/work group management, and team/work group leadership.

Competing demands on resources—human, financial, and time—challenge organizational ability to provide cost-effective and efficient soft skills training for employees. As a consequence, soft skills training has been eliminated and/or reduced compared to levels of training that have been conducted in the past. In many organizations, there is no in-house capability to conduct soft skills

² Employability Skills 2000+, Conference Board of Canada.

training. Compounding these challenges is the difficulty of quantifying the return on investment for soft skills training.

(c) The need for basic supervisory skills training

As previously stated, although basic supervisory skills was not identified through the survey process as one of the top training needs, it did emerge as a significant training need when follow-up interviews were conducted. Basic supervisory skills training is a critical need now for existing supervisory staff and for prospective supervisors/front-line leaders due to changing workforce demographics (i.e. massive retirements within local labour force over the next several years).

As with other kinds of soft skills training, the ability of organizations to provide supervisory training has been impacted by competing demands. With supervisory training in particular, there are a number of difficulties to surmount:

- Large organizations may be able to address the initial wave of supervisors needing training; what happens, however, when the first wave has been trained and new supervisors are hired one or two at a time? How is supervisory training to be provided when there are insufficient numbers to fill a classroom?
- Some organizations require supervisors to attend training at a regional, national, or head office location – not a cost-effective approach from a local perspective
- To maximize front-line supervisory training, second line supervisors should provide coaching and reinforcement to their subordinates – this may necessitate training the 2nd line in order to effectively support the first line

To determine the required curriculum for a supervisory or front-line leadership program, a necessary first step is the identification of supervisory competencies. This initial step has been undertaken with local industry, which has expressed interest in a cost-effective, generic way to collectively train their front-line leaders.

(d) Common trends, barriers, and preferences

An overall trend evident from the survey is the recognition of the importance of soft skills, and the need to provide training in the following areas: communication skills, personal management skills (stress & time management), teamwork skills (including conflict management), and decision-making/problem-solving skills.

Many organizations have not provided much in the way of soft skills training in recent years for a host of reasons:

- Dominance of technical training and training geared to competencies seen as more critical than soft skills (e.g. safety training)
- Outsourcing of training functions
- Difficulty freeing up staff to attend training
- Local availability of soft skills training that meets both organizational needs and preferences
- Difficulty quantifying soft skills training with bottom-line results

Recognition of the importance of soft skills and the need to train staff in various aspects of soft skills is challenged again by competing demands to adequately develop these skills (time and financial resources).

This trend is obvious in the preferences for both training delivery and course length. While the majority of survey respondents indicated a preference for leader-led, classroom training (70.6%), respondents also expressed significant interest in other approaches to learning, such as:

- E-learning: computer-based training or CBT(36.5%)
- E-learning: web-based training or WBT (25.9%)
- Video-based training (34.1%)
- Paper-based training defined as self-study (25.9%)
- Combination of leader-led and CBT (24.7%)
- Combination of leader-led and WBT (24.7%)
- Combination of leader-led and video (29.4%)
- Combination of leader-led and self-study (35.3%)
- Small group discussion (41.2%)

Some qualitative comments supplied by survey respondents re: their preferences for training delivery methods included: “Ensure lots of interaction/involvement;” “Some of the material would lend itself well to the ability to ask questions and interact directly with others members of the group. This is particularly helpful in supervisory type training;” “Larger group participating discussions.”

These types of comments were also prevalent during the follow-up interviews. Respondents stressed lots of interactivity, mixed medium, training “focussed on practical issues and real-life training,” practice, etc.

Multimedia training could incorporate a number of the respondents’ preferences: leader-led, videos, small group discussion, paper-based case studies, role-plays, etc. Blended learning solutions, on the other hand, incorporating computer-based or web-based training pose significant challenges, e.g. accessibility issues, (1/3 of respondents who could not complete the survey online points to this concern), lack of basic computer skills and/or interest in learning via the computer, lack of bandwidth, cost, high drop out rate of e-learners, etc.

The other issue with CBT or WBT is the appropriateness of these methodologies for soft skills training. Is the development of interactive skills for use in face to face situations best accomplished by using these processes?

However, blended learning solutions warrant a closer examination given the interest expressed by respondents, the promise of delivering “just in time” training to learners at their desktops or workstations, analysis of the kinds of support learners need to be successful in e-learning, and the suitability (or otherwise) of this delivery mechanism against the type of skills this training is focussed on—interactive or people skills. From a broader business performance perspective, Kevin Oakes, CEO of Click2learn, as quoted in the April 2003 issue of T&D magazine predicts that “most organizations will come to view the process of learning and managing their intellectual capital electronically as mission critical.”

Utilization of learning technology could augment one other preference identified through the survey - course length. Competing business demands are imposing a need to achieve learning in the least amount of time possible. Survey respondents overwhelmingly prefer courses a half-day or less in length (72.9%). Slightly more than 50 per cent (56.5%) of respondents preferred day-long courses, and only 23.5% indicated a preferred course length of 2-3 days. In the end,

preferences for shorter course length must be balanced with the reality of what course participants can learn in small blocks of time.

With respect to barriers, timing/scheduling seems to be the most often repeated obstacle. Both the length of the course (as stated previously) as well as time of year, and the day of the week are cited as potential barriers to participation in training courses. After timing constraints, cost-effectiveness is the next litmus test that training courses must surpass. Not only must owners and managers be convinced of the cost-effectiveness of training, but employees must also be sold on the value of training to improve their work performance.

A potential barrier requiring further exploration by all stakeholders in the manufacturing and construction sectors (i.e. client/owners, contractors, and labour) concerns who will provide and pay for soft skills training of unionized workers. In addition to clarifying who provides the courses, there is a related issue of who will pay workers to attend soft skills training.

(e) Survey gaps

The online survey employed in this project incorporated eight categories of soft skills, which were further divided into sub-categories of skills, and one other category defined as “Other Training Needs,” which invited respondents to list any soft skill training needs not previously identified. Survey respondents were asked to identify soft skills training needs in their organizations by selecting the following choices: not applicable, no need, limited need, significant need, or critical need.

As the previous section of this report identified, the actual definitions of the soft skills were somewhat open to interpretation. Further clarification with survey respondents is needed to ensure a shared understanding of the soft skill and the desired performance or competency that is expected back on the job (e.g. what would satisfactory team/work group participation “look like” in the workplace?).

While companies identified their soft skills training needs via response to the survey, identifying the difference between current or actual job performance of employees and the desired job performance is equally important so that a proposed training solution targets the appropriate knowledge, skills, and attitudes to effectively close the performance gap.

For the most part, individuals responding to the survey have been managers, supervisors, team leaders, owners, and individuals other than the prospective learners themselves. To confirm that proposed training is clearly linked to learner needs, learner input is required.

One final gap in the survey is the lack of information pertaining to barriers to transfer of training. If at all possible, barriers to transfer should be identified upfront to minimize, eliminate, or compensate for them, thus ensuring maximum transfer of learning back on the job.

RECOMMENDATIONS

From the findings, it is clear that research of skill development strategies, training programs, and delivery systems is a critically important next step. This should follow on the heels of the training needs analysis step to ensure expectations of community organizations can be met. Hence the IEC is requesting HRDC to consider funding of the “second phase” of this project.

Outstanding issues from phase one of the project need to be addressed at the onset and/or over the duration of Phase II. Specific recommendations include:

- clarification of the definition or meaning of the soft skill(s) to ensure a common understanding of what it is and what it “looks like” when it is performed well in the workplace
- exploration of various delivery methods to meet organizational and learner preferences, as well as provide cost-effective and efficient “soft or people skills development strategies”
- some means of capturing sample employee input/data re: their perceived training needs should be conducted to ensure that both prescriptive (manager/supervisor) and felt (employee) needs are considered
- ideally, organizations should conduct some type of performance analysis by assessing current performance against desired performance – the resulting gap is what soft skills or people skills strategies are designed to close
- Barriers to transfer of training back on the job should be evaluated to minimize their impact
- Potential barriers to unionized labour involvement in soft skills training need to be recognized including who pays for training provided to workers and who pays workers to attend the training

PROJECT STAFFING CHANGES

Bill Sisler, the initial training needs analysis co-ordinator for this project, received and accepted a job offer with Trans Alta in November 2002. Shelley Brown, a local independent contractor with extensive experience in co-ordinating similar needs analysis projects, replaced him ensuring a smooth continuation of the project.

PROJECT MEDIA COVERAGE

Attached to this report are the following:

- Article on the soft skills training needs analysis project featured in First Monday, October 2002 edition
- Press release prepared by the co-ordinator at project completion April 2003

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This project was funded in part by the Government of Canada’s Labour Market Partnerships Program. The Sarnia-Lambton Industrial Educational Co-operative appreciates the support and financial contribution provided by the Government of Canada for this important initiative in our business community.

We look forward to our continued partnership with HRDC in Phase II of the project and to the overall outcome of skill development strategies to meet identified priority needs in Sarnia-Lambton.

The opinions and interpretations in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Government of Canada.

APPENDICES