

# Findings from the Contextualized Essential Skills Demonstration Project

*Contextualized essential skills training is a promising strategy for helping individuals enhance their skills and find success in the labour market. Blueprint was engaged by the Ontario Centre for Workforce Innovation (OCWI) to lead a demonstration project that tested the effectiveness of contextualized essential skills in the hospitality and retail sectors.*

Research has demonstrated a strong link between essential skills and earnings, meaning that workers with lower skills face barriers to career progression and higher earnings. The fact that a significant proportion of Ontarians have gaps in their essential skills directly impacts the province's ability to develop a more productive and resilient labour pool.

The *Contextualized Essential Skills Demonstration Project* tested a potential solution to this challenge: an innovative workplace training model that focuses on increasing the skills and productivity of frontline workers in the hospitality and retail sectors. The training curriculum was based on the *Workplace Training Program*—a British Columbia project led by Douglas College that demonstrated promising results.

The new Ontario-branded program is called *Customer Service Results (CSR)*. It contains a series of modules that integrate technical sector-specific content with essential skills training. In addition to providing training for frontline employees, the project also offered leadership training for supervisors at participating businesses. This was based on research findings which suggested that a supportive supervisor can reinforce the positive effects of workplace essential skills training.

Blueprint engaged OTEC—a training, consulting, and workforce development organization—to lead recruitment and training delivery. OTEC collaborated with Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) providers to co-deliver training, and LBS network organizations to engage employers and coordinate training. Douglas College supported the adaptation of the curriculum and also delivered “train-the-trainer” sessions to both OTEC and LBS trainers.





## Our approach

The goal of the Contextualized Essential Skills Demonstration Project was to:

**1. Evaluate the effectiveness of CSR for participants—including skills gains in numeracy and document use—and the satisfaction and perceived impact of training by employers**

Participants completed surveys and skills assessments to measure gains in essential skills and other outcomes such as attitudes towards learning, job motivation, and self-esteem. Employers completed surveys on training expectations, relevance, and perceived impact. We also conducted in-depth interviews with a sub-sample of employer partners to explore their business needs and satisfaction with the program in more depth.

**2. Explore success factors and challenges in implementation, and opportunities for sustaining and scaling the model moving forward**

The process evaluation explored the potential role of CSR in Ontario's skills training ecosystem and identified opportunities for sustaining the model as well as key learnings that could inform the implementation of similar projects.

## Key Findings

Results demonstrated that the CSR program has the potential to add value for both employees and employers.

### Modest gains in essential skills

There was a small but statistically significant average gain in numeracy skills; and while there was no significant improvement in document use overall, participants who entered the training with low skills levels did experience a statistically significant improvement in this area. Overall, participants who entered the program with lower levels of skills tended to show gains in essential skills, while those who entered with higher levels showed decreases.

### High levels of participant satisfaction

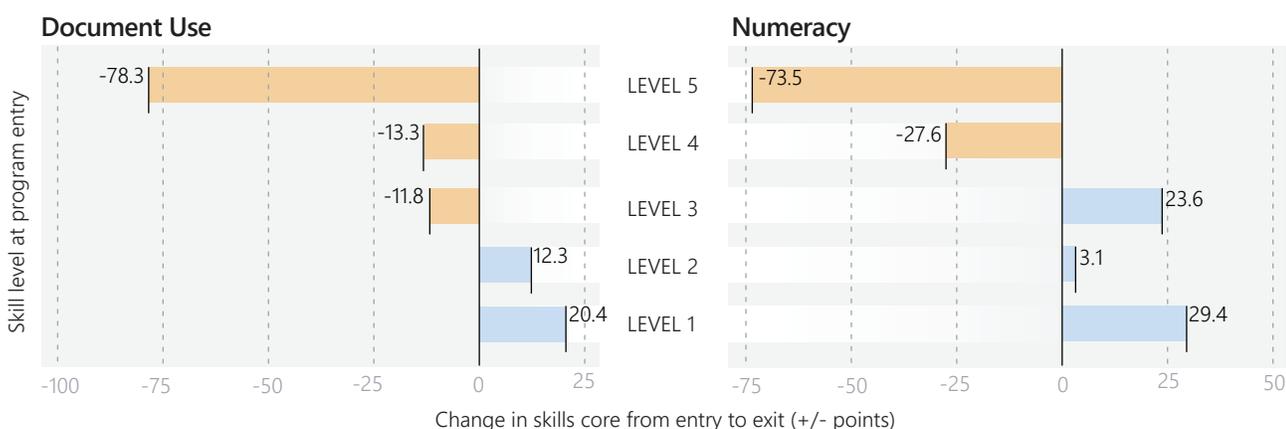
Overall, both participants and employers were very satisfied with the training. 92% of participants in frontline training

rated the training as “good”, “very good”, or “excellent”. The majority also agreed or strongly agreed that the topics covered were highly relevant to their job tasks (82%) and that they would have opportunities in their job to apply what they had learned (87%).

### Positive perception by employers

All employers rated the training as good (28%), very good (52%), or excellent (20%). Most employers were willing to recommend the program, with 88% of employers agreeing (44%) or strongly agreeing (44%) that they would recommend the program to other businesses. In addition, 80% of employers agreed (64%) or strongly agreed (16%) that the CSR curriculum has enhanced the job performance of their frontline staff.

## CHANGES IN ESSENTIAL SKILLS FOR CSR PARTICIPANTS



## Successes and challenges

### What worked well?

- CSR trainers reported that the **curriculum** was relevant, useful, and aligned with the needs and interests of employees in the hospitality and retail sectors.
- Many employers perceived CSR’s blend of essential skills and sector-specific corporate training to be well-aligned with their **business objectives**. They also felt that the leadership training offered to supervisors was extremely valuable.
- Trainers reported that the **co-delivery** approach involving LBS providers and OTEC trainers was a very positive experience for trainers. It facilitated capacity building and added value for participants.
- Adopting a **coaching-based** approach—with skills assessment scores discussed with participants to motivate growth and learning—was found to be effective in increasing focus and confidence.

## What challenges were encountered?

- **Coordinating training** proved difficult. Scheduling training for cohorts with employees from multiple small and medium-sized businesses was particularly challenging, as training had to be aligned with multiple schedules and held at mutually convenient locations.
- **Diverse cohorts** presented an additional challenge. Trainers reported it was difficult to ensure the relevance of training content to participants from different types of business and with different skill levels.
- **Integrating the essential skills assessments** into the training proved demanding given time constraints and the logistics of administering the assessment. These challenges may have affected the motivation and effort of participants.
- **Contextual factors** such as seasonal business cycles, policy changes related to the minimum wage and guaranteed time off for employees, and local labour market pressures also presented challenges.



## Lessons learned

A number of lessons emerged that could directly inform the future efforts of workforce development organizations interested in implementing workplace essential skills training in Ontario:

- The employer recruitment strategy should be tailored to both the sector and to the way in which small to medium-sized businesses operate in the sector. OTEC noted that face-to-face engagement is often most effective in working with employers in the hospitality sector. Leveraging existing relationships with employers or networks of employers also was shown to be effective.
- Training should be designed and delivered with a clear target audience in mind in order to ensure that training is closely aligned with participant needs and skill levels.
- Sector-based essential skills projects must consider the impact that policy, seasonal, and regional factors can have on the overall success of the project and the coordination of recruitment and training.

## Where do we go from here?

Factors that could support the success and enable the scaling of workplace contextualized essential skills training programs in Ontario include:

- **Strategic partnerships** – Strong relationships between industry and essential skills trainers are important to ensure the alignment of skills training and industry needs, position the training to meet business objectives, and add value for both participants and employers.
- **More resources for coordination** – Coordinating training for small to medium-sized employers is particularly challenging and more support for training

coordination is required if training is to be accessible to these employers. OTEC and partner organizations are actively working to build new regional training consortiums in the hospitality and tourism sectors to help address this challenge.

- **Funding envelopes** – The Canada-Ontario Job Grant is a promising avenue for funding workplace contextualized essential skills training projects. The alignment of training offerings with Job Grant requirements and guidelines—and employer interest and motivation to pursue training—are necessary for leveraging the Job Grant to support training programs like CSR.