TORONTO
REGION
BOARD OF TRADE

LEADING PRACTICE GUIDE

Supporting Employee Soft Skill Development

Introduction

Talent attraction and retention have never been more critical. We live in both an innovation age and a highly competitive market for talent. Businesses of all sizes are under more pressure than ever to set themselves apart as a great place for talented people to work.

Managing and developing talent remains critical to a company's growth prospects. Our region's businesses must rise to the occasion, leveraging best practices and established expertise to build their talent pipeline over time. That's why the Board is pleased to introduce our six Leading Practice Guides, born from our workforce development strategy, "Unlocking Talent".

Unlocking Talent highlighted how we can turn system gaps and barriers into opportunities in three areas: (i) collaborating to narrow the skills gap; (ii) promoting collective workforce development in the skilled trades; and (iii) growing the region's youth talent pipeline and immigrant talent pipeline.

To build on these areas, the Board convened senior business leaders for a series of roundtables, to share lessons learned and best practices on pressing workforce development challenges and opportunities. As a result, we have focused on 6 urgent priorities for the Leading Practice Guides:

Supporting Employee Soft Skill Development

Reducing Integration Barrier for Immigrant Workers

Finding the Right Entry-Level Workers

Increasing Work-Integrated Learning ("WIL") Opportunities

Tapping into the Immigrant Talent Pool

Expanding Mental Health Supports for Younger Workers

We hope they will be used as blueprints for success, helping businesses of every size contribute to a workforce that thrives in tomorrow's economy.

Giles Gherson
President & CEO,
Toronto Region Board of Trade

Blaine Woodcock
National Strategy, Analytics & M&A Portfolio Leader, Deloitte
Vice Chair of the Talent Committee, Toronto Region Board of Trade

Overview

Soft skills are vital to employment success, and include skills such as communication and negotiation, interpersonal skills and empathy, leadership and management skills, entrepreneurship and initiative-taking, adaptability and continuous learning skills, and teaching and training skills.

It is crucial for employers to understand and ultimately realize the benefits of soft skills development for their employees. Hiring and retraining employees with the appropriate soft skills for their job will help employers reduce their turnover rate, contribute positively to workplace culture, and help drive innovation.

A 2022 Business Council of Canada Skills Survey highlights high demand from employers for soft skills, and the view that worker and job-seekers' soft skills are currently not meeting expectations. Less than a third of surveyed employers believe that recent graduates are better prepared today than five years ago in 'human skills'. This gap has a significant economic impact; the Conference Board of Canada reported that job vacancies related to skill requiring active listening, critical thinking, reading comprehension, speaking, monitoring and coordination are costing the Canadian economy $1 billion a year or more in unrealized value for each of these skills.

While these skills certainly need to be developed as early as childhood, more must be done across the post-secondary system and in workplaces to advance the critical skills required for success in today's workplaces. A recent analysis of workplace and employer surveys found that employers spent, on average, only $169 per employee in training in 2005, which adjusted for inflation is only $240 per employee. While employers must invest more into the skills' development of employees, more guidance is needed on how to best allocate these dollars.

Less than a third of surveyed employers believe that recent graduates are better prepared today than five years ago in 'human skills'.

This Leading Practice Guide will help employers:

- Understand required competencies

- Measure soft skills against employers' needs

- Select the right medium for soft skill training and development opportunities

Leading Practices

STEP 1

Understand and Identify Required Competencies

A key first step in the development of any employer-driven programming is an assessment. Sizing the soft-skills gap is challenging, and HR leads / employers need to be better equipped with a framework that codifies skills and defines evaluation criteria. "Competency models" – that is, a framework to assess and measure employee knowledge, skills, abilities, and behaviours – are a helpful starting point to articulate the skills needed in your organization, against which an employee may be assessed.

For example, Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC) has defined a 'Skills for Success' framework which includes both soft and technical skills needed to participate and thrive in learning and work environments. **Using this framework an employer can identify 5 to 6 top soft skills most relevant to the organization more generally, as well as those that are critically important to specific roles.** For example, a company may identify the following:

Adaptability
How well can you handle expected or unexpected changes?

Communication
Can you effectively receive, understand, consider, and share information and ideas?

Collaboration
Can you work with others to achieve a common goal?

Creativity & innovation
Can you identify new solutions and opportunities?

Problem solving
Can you solve a problem by identifying, analyzing, and proposing effective solutions?

The organization should then proceed to define this skill in the work context, its importance to the organization, and examples of how this would be applied at work. Below is an example of this breakdown provided by ESDC for two specific skills:

ESDC 'SKILLS FOR SUCCESS' FRAMEWORK WITH A FOCUS ON SOFT SKILLS

Collaboration
Ability to contribute and support others to achieve a common goal.

IMPORTANCE

Today people are more connected within communities, across the country, and around the world. Modern workplaces are more diverse, and many jobs require individuals to work with others from different backgrounds and cultures to complete tasks and solve problems. It is important to be able to work respectfully with people who have different professions, experiences, cultures, and backgrounds.

Collaboration skills help employees perform better in a team by understanding how to support and value others, manage difficult interactions, and contribute to the team's work.

Strong collaboration skills help employees build and maintain positive relationships with others at work, in school, and in other parts of life.
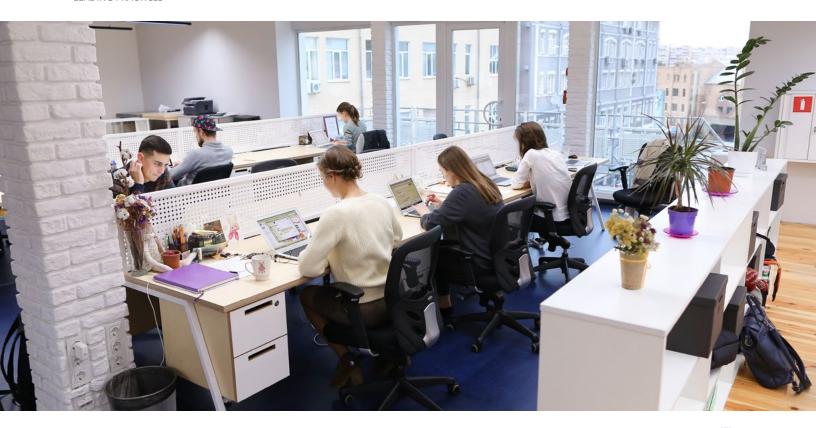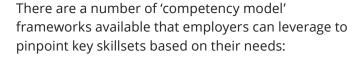
Communication
Ability to receive, understand, consider, and share information and ideas through speaking, listening, and interacting with others.

IMPORTANCE

Strong communication skills help employees share information in a way that others can clearly understand. Employees also need strong communication skills to listen to, pay attention to, and understand others. In all jobs, communication skills are important for developing good working relationships with co-workers and clients. These skills are also needed to work effectively in a team, understand a variety of viewpoints, and gather and share information while problem solving – whether at work or in daily life.

There are a number of 'competency model' frameworks available that employers can leverage to pinpoint key skillsets based on their needs:

- The Government of Canada's Skills and Competencies Taxonomy streamlines the terminology of hundreds of occupational descriptors, with an aim to standardize the language we collectively use around skills, abilities, and knowledge.

- IRCC's Behavioural and Technical Competency Dictionary outlines major competencies created by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada. While designed to support job applicants to that ministry, it provides clear definitions of many competencies that could be helpful to employers looking to describe their own needs.

- World Education Services' discussion paper Beyond Academic Credentials: Toward Competency-Informed Hiring is a great resource which outlines the competency approach to support a long term labor market growth.

Action Summary

1. Explore existing 'competency model' frameworks to identify 5-6 top soft skills most relevant to the organization more generally, and those that are critically important to specific roles.

2. For each of these skills, document the following:

   - Its definition

   - Its importance to the company or specific roles

   - Examples of how it is applied in the workplace

Assess or Measure Soft Skills

The next step in addressing skills gaps is to properly assess the current state of the skills. The assessment can be part of the hiring process or a collaborative process between employers and existing employees.

2.1 Potential Hires: How to Assess a Candidate's Soft Skills

Use online pre-employment assessment tests
Online platforms help hiring managers develop a better understanding of the work style, communication style, and social style of potential candidates. These platforms offer innovative tests for business communications, cross cultural communication, presentation, negotiation, persuasion, and among other skills.

- Capterra provides a list of assessment software that are used by education providers and HR professionals to test the knowledge and skill retention of job applicants.

- TestGorilla is a pre-employment test platform that helps employers streamline the recruitment process, help reduce bias, and capture the right candidates for the job.

Ask soft skills related questions at interviews
Soft skills related questions can be integrated into the interview process, particularly as a component of behavioural interviews. For example:

- A work/project example to illustrate a soft skill

- Present the candidate with a scenario at work and ask the candidate to assess what soft skills are needed and why

- Ask the candidate to rank the soft skills they think would be important at work

- Factor soft skills as part of the reference check

2.2 Current Employees: Measuring Employees' Soft Skills

Self-assessment tools
Skills related self-assessment tools (including online tools) often take the form of a series of questions that help assess competencies across a variety of skills. Similar to other self-assessment tools, it requires an honest personal reflection for robust results. The selection of an appropriate tool should be reflective of an organization's needs and existing resources. Tracom is one example of an assessment tool, which also provides training programs.

360-degree feedback
The 360-feedback approach is intended to collect honest feedback for any employee from various perspectives and levels, including input from direct supervisors, direct reports, other colleagues, and/or customers. It is a well-developed process that is widely used by many organizations and can be used to assess soft skills competencies within an organization.

Action Summary

1. Recognize a need for assessing/measuring soft skills for both potential employees and current employees.

2. Adopt tools based on individual needs and capabilities:

- Online or in-person

- Self-driven or led by professionals

Pursue Training and Development Initiatives to Help Employees Improve Their Soft Skills

3.1 Understand Different Mediums Available to Develop Soft Skills Training

Once you've identified the competencies needed in your organization, and assessed your employees' skills gaps, you can design an approach to fill these gaps. It is important to note that there is no silver bullet for the training and development of soft skills. Multiple steps and approaches may be required due to the dynamic nature of each organization. Effective reskilling may require a blended journey of traditional learning such as training, digital courses, and job aides, alongside non-traditional methods such as peer coaching and mentorship.

Skills Development Resources

Digital Courses / Learning Management Systems (LMS)
Learning management systems can facilitate, deliver and track employee learning initiatives, and in some cases can help employees set their own goals, monitor progress, and track achievements. Tapping into an existing LMS may be well-suited for smaller firms that don't have the capacity to build and independently run training programs.

- Some examples of courses through a LMS include GoSkills, SkillsSoft, and Alphalearn.

- The Retention Skills Enhancement Tool (ReSET), developed by the Hospitality Workers Training Centre (HWTC) in partnership with Futureworx, is a tool that helps employers and employees map the core soft skills that are essential for retaining and developing top talent.

Online / in-person training workshops
Subject to employer resources, online and/or in-person workshops are an intensive opportunity for employees to upgrade their soft-skills.

- Companies like SkillsCamp and The Soft Skills Group offer online and in-person standard or customized workshops. Universities and colleges may also offer soft skills development courses through their continuing education programming, such as business writing, negotiation, and other workplace communication skills.

- Local universities and training providers also provide workshops and career development opportunities. University of Toronto's school of continuing studies offers programs such as career development and communication skills.

Mentorship
One-on-one mentoring, a group setting, and even a cultural shift towards a "mentorship mindset" can advance soft skills development in the workplace and may be especially important in early-career development. Building mentoring programs can be challenging in smaller organizations but tapping into industry associations or partnering with other firms within your sector may be a helpful approach.

DIGITAL COURSES/LEARNING MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

- ✓ Wide range of selection
- ✓ Can be customized to individual employer needs
- ✓ Employees can take courses at their own pace

- ✗ Costs vary considerably across options
- ✗ Lack the benefits of in-person interactions

ONLINE/IN-PERSON TRAINING WORKSHOP

- ✓ Guided discussion and training process
- ✓ Can fit different group sizes
- ✓ Can utilize local universities and training providers

- ✗ Fixed schedule
- ✗ Hard to measure outcomes

MENTORSHIP

- ✓ Helps expand professional networks and build closer relationships
- ✓ Provide access to a senior role model

- ✗ Finding the right match can be a challenge
- ✗ Scope of the facilitation could be large for an organization

3.2 Considerations When Designing Training and Development Programs
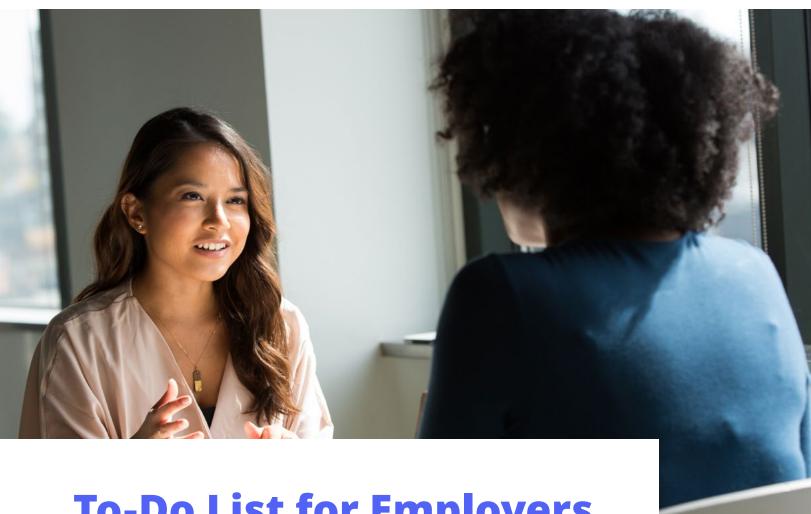
Prioritize training investments
For most organizations, limited resources require a prioritization of efforts. A pre-pandemic poll indicated that one in two employees who left their job did so because of negative interactions with managers, therefore efforts should start with advancing the softs skills of managers. According to the Global Leaders Forecast Report, many leaders prefer to advance their skills through interactive experiences with their peers guided by instructor-led training, as compared to self-driven learning.
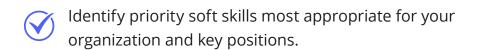
Blended journey
Effective reskilling may require a blended journey of traditional learning such as training, digital courses, and job aides, with non-traditional methods such as peer coaching and mentorship. As the blended learning journey is being designed, it is essential that skills development is integrated and applied into employees' jobs (and built into work expectations); otherwise, the learning risks being perceived as "ticking boxes".
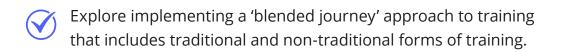
Action Summary

1. Explore different training and development mediums available.

2. When determining the appropriate mix of programming for your organization, take the following into consideration:

- Prioritize training investments in critical areas, for example soft skills development for managers

- Explore a blended journey of training, where different forms of training are combined

To-Do List for Employers

✓ Identify priority soft skills most appropriate for your organization and key positions.

✓ Build in soft skills assessments and/or measurement tools for both new and current employees.

✓ Explore implementing a 'blended journey' approach to training that includes traditional and non-traditional forms of training.

✓ Prioritize training investments based on identified needs by both employees and employers.

Case Study

Equipping Managers to Lead Changes in Manufacturing Processes[1]

CLIENT
Food manufacturer

TRAINING PROVIDER
Skillogy

GOAL
To improve manufacturing process efficiency and output by radically reorganizing frontline supervisors and ensuring that they are trained to lead and supervise well-motivated shift teams.

STEP 1

Understanding Required Competencies

The client's aim was to equip managers and leaders with the right set of skills to manage the change in manufacturing processes. The business faced two specific challenges: process management and shift management.
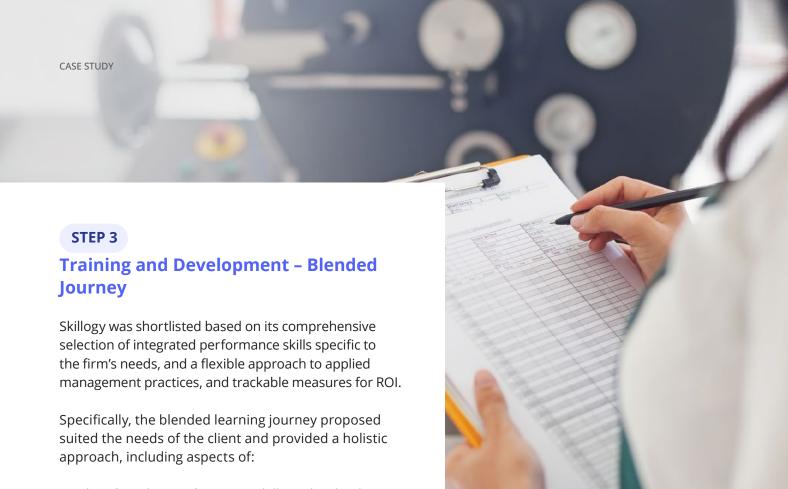
The required skills/competencies were selected based on the areas of development for the supervision role:

- Structure and process
- Productivity and output
- Leadership and motivation

STEP 2

Assessing Skills

The business itself initiated a senior management task force. The task force looked at the requirements of the role of the supervisor in terms of what was required to address current issues, and increase productivity within shift teams to achieve output and quality targets. One of the key areas of focus for the task force was to identify the competencies required, including soft-skill related competencies, and brought in Skillogy to implement the PERFORM programme which involved a skills assessment as well as learning and development programming.

STEP 3

Training and Development – Blended Journey

Skillogy was shortlisted based on its comprehensive selection of integrated performance skills specific to the firm's needs, and a flexible approach to applied management practices, and trackable measures for ROI.

Specifically, the blended learning journey proposed suited the needs of the client and provided a holistic approach, including aspects of:

- Identifying key performance skills to develop line leader competencies.
- Preparing and scheduling workshops, case studies, and projects.

Results

Performance metrics were taken 24 months after delivery and demonstrated:

- ⊘ **More efficient output production:** averaged 97% of targeted production levels due to a reduction in machinery downtime and improvements in shift rotas.

- ⊘ **Reduced manufacturing waste:** reduced by 50%.

- ⊘ **Manufacturing process improvements.**

- ⊘ **Productivity improvements.**

- ⊘ **Increased knowledge retention and application:** knowledge gained across all 24 line leaders from average baseline scores of 25% to 75%.

- ⊘ **Reduced sickness, absenteeism and attrition:** significant reductions were made from an average of 40% to 8%.

- ⊘ **Improved motivation and retention:** 80% improvement in key response areas.

- ⊘ **Improved the flow of information and communication.**

1   Skillogy Perform. Case Studies, Manufacturing Change Project. https://skillogy.com/case-studies/manufacturing-change/.

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The Toronto Region Board of Trade is one of the largest and most influential chambers of commerce in North America and is a catalyst for the region's economic growth agenda. Backed by more than 11,500 members, we pursue policy change to drive the growth and competitiveness of the Toronto region, and facilitate market opportunities with programs, partnerships and connections to help our members succeed – domestically and internationally.

For more on making Toronto one of the most competitive and sought-after business regions in the world, visit **bot.com** and follow us at **@TorontoRBOT**.