

Building Skills: Inspiring a Workforce at Northwood Care Inc.



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Summary

What would the impact of having employees improve their Essential Skills (ES) be on the workplace and services provided to seniors in a long term care facility? Employees in several departments such as Food Services, Environmental Services, Physical Plant, and In- Care Living were invited to participate in ES research and training over an eight week period. Twenty two people were assessed using the Test of Workplace Essential Skills (TOWES) and 16 employees participated in 12 hours of classroom training. Of the ten who wrote the post-TOWES, nine scored higher in at least one of their Essential Skills: Reading, Document Use or Numeracy.

Business Case

Nova Scotia's population is aging. According to a 2011 HRSDC report seniors in this province represent 16.5 % of the population making it one of the highest in Canada (HRSDC, 2011). According to a recent report, this difference may be the result of differentials in fertility and immigration levels, as well as in interprovincial migration patterns (Statistics Canada, 2011). Hence, there is a growing demand in this province for specialized services focused on long term care for people who no longer have the ability or desire to live independently.

Northwood Care (Northwood) is a private, not-for-profit, long term care, homecare, independent living and community outreach organization with over 50 years of service in the Halifax Regional Municipality. The delivery of services takes an approach that reflects their commitment to quality, and building a strong relationship with clients, staff and the community. Part of their mission states their willingness to invest in the future. Since 1962, Northwood has been a strong advocate for people and their right to live lives of dignity and purpose in the fall and winter of their lives (Northwood, 2012).

Northwood agreed to be a partner in conducting this Essential Skills (ES) research and cited the fit with their strategic plan which was "commit to innovative solutions that maximize our resources to provide programs/services across the life span" (Northwood, 2012). The ES project was seen as being consistent with the mission and values of Northwood. Northwood mission states it has a high commitment to quality and a willingness to invest in the future. The managers spoke of employees being encouraged to reach their full potential and wanting each staff person to make a quality impact on the lives of the residents at Northwood. As a vibrant community, it was hoped that by participating in the research, employees would improve service quality and excellence.

Northwood has over 1500 employees spread over 5 locations within Halifax Regional Municipality. The following departments in the Halifax location (650 employees) were identified as potential employee groups who would benefit from the opportunity to improve Essential Skills: Food Services, Environmental Services, Physical Plant, and In-Care Living. Northwood managers acknowledged that improved efficiencies in the work and tasks, lessening accidents and reducing absenteeism would contribute to the overall operations and goals of Northwood. They wanted to use the ES research project and training to assist with developing work skills for Northwood's future.



Managers also hoped this project would encourage workers to explore promotions or realize the opportunities for career advancement within Northwood as they improved their skills. For example, some managers indicated that they would be open to people switching roles from environmental services into food services.

Partnerships

Initial discussions to explain Essential Skills and the research project were held with Ann McInnis, Vice President, Community and Continuing Care. Ms. McInnis designated the responsibility of implementing the research to Josie Ryan, Director In-Care Living and her team, Karla Sonnichsen-- Staff Educator, and Gail Craig -- Staff Education Liaison and the liaison between all ES research project members. An initial 40 minute presentation on Essential Skills and the research project was given to 12 managers of various departments at the Halifax location. The ES team from NSCC consisted of the Director of Career & Counselling Services, ES Coordinator, and the ES Coach. A committee project team was established and tasks included organizing presentations for employees, creating promotional materials, ordering TOWES, booking rooms and audio-visual equipment, and reviewing employee scheduling. Northwood provided physical space and freed up 1.5 hours weekly for 8 weeks for each employee on their work shift to meet with the ES coach.

Awareness and Promotion

The ES Coordinator facilitated 6 sessions to different employee groups on the benefits of participating in the ES research project. The sessions were 45 – 60 minutes in length and used PowerPoint and short video clips. Advertising and promotion occurred through bulletin boards, emails, and contact with the 12 managers who previously attended the 40 minute ES presentation. The anticipated outcomes for their sessions were i) helping employees understand what essential skills are ii) the benefits of raising one's essential skills levels and iii) how to sign up for the research project.

The initial challenge was attracting employees to the sessions. Out of 600 potential workers from various departments, approximately 30 employees attended the sessions. This may have been caused by the interpretation of the term, Essential Skills, and being unclear about the relevancy of the training to their work at Northwood. During this time, the ES Coach was hired and she visited the Northwood site to gather work place documents used by the occupational groups identified for the research.

Essential Skills Intervention

Adult Education Principles

The ES Coach was an experienced adult educator. She utilized basic adult education principles in the Essential Skills Training. These principles included:

- i) adults learn best by doing and solving real life problems they can relate to,
- ii) adults have experiences and interests to tap into when facilitating learning,
- iii) the desire for adults to learn is based on internal incentives and curiosity,
- iv) all learners have something to teach others and something to learn from others.

The use of small learning groups was deemed successful. There were five sessions a week for eight weeks. Fifteen sessions had more than one employee with the average being four per session. The highest number of employees in a session was six.

The supportive group atmosphere was enhanced through creating a friendly, secure, and safe learning atmosphere. Workplace documents that employees were familiar with were used to practice Essential Skills. For example, employees were given copies of the Northwood Employee Referral Program and asked specific questions related to Reading and Document Use (Figure 1).

Northwood Employee Referral Program Policy:

Employees who refer candidates to Northwood as a place of employment receive a cash incentive. Look at the policy statement with the attached Employee Referral Program form and determine the following.

1. Where does the Human Resource Staff send a successful referral form?

Answer: Application Manager

2. What is the current date of the Employee Referral Program form?

Answer: September 2007

Figure 1

Another example of using material from Northwood was asking employee's questions based on the floor plan related to Document Use (Figure 2).

Northwood Floor Plan

Northwood floor plan helps people locate rooms, buildings, floors and facilities at the large Northwood complex. From the map, determine the following:

1. List the number of washrooms indicated on the Northwood Main Floor – Tower Map

Answer: Two

2. How many stairways are shown on the all maps?

Answer: Eight

3. How many Entrances are listed on all maps?

Answer: Four

4. Show where the ATMs are located.

Answer: At the Centre Entrance across from the elevators.

Figure 2

The ES Coach continually demonstrated how the ES reading and document process worked. She focused on learning on how to learn by helping employees practice scanning the documents, locating key aspects of the problem and deciding what information would assist with solving the problem. The practice exercises increased in level of complexity as the eight weeks progressed and were determined by the needs of the participants.

One of the challenges for the ES Coach was scheduling times around participants work and vacation schedules. Each participant was asked to choose from a number of options which 1.5 hours for ES training would work best for them. Sessions were scheduled based on this information.

The initial needs of the workers were tied to their internal desire to feel more confident. When they acquired additional knowledge and mastery of the three essential skill areas, other goals were then created that related specifically to their work specific tasks. For example, if an employee improved their confidence in basic reading, they would then challenge themselves with a reading task related to the work they were doing.

Professional Practitioner Skills

Juanita Hiscock, the ES Coach, runs her own business, JH Training Services in Nova Scotia. She has extensive teaching experience of ES skills in various workplaces, educational institutions, and community organizations in Nova Scotia. She is a Certified Nova Scotia Workplace Education Instructor and has additional certificates in: Communication Skills for the Modern Workplace, Mastering Facilitation Skills, Organizational/Educational Needs Assessment, Managing the Adult Classroom and Student Discipline and, Business Skills Development.

The ES Coordinator Clarence DeSchiffart has extensive background in career development including testing, assessment, skill analysis, and program planning. These skills were used throughout the development of the Essential Skills pilot project. The ES Coordinator acquired skills necessary for the facilitation of the research through previous ES projects. Prior to these years, the ES Coordinator had worked with Michael Herzog in the TOWES department at Bow Valley College, and BC Skill Plan on using the TOWES and creating ES Profiles.

Types of Interventions

All of the workers in this research project expressed a desire to increase their ES. Some indicated a desire to feel more confident in completing their work tasks and making fewer mistakes such as reading safety bulletins or dietary charts. The unique aspect in working with the employees on this research project was the invitation for all participants to take the ES training, no matter where they scored on the TOWES in Document Use. Employees expressed a belief that the training could ultimately lead to better employment opportunities within Northwood or elsewhere. This belief was influenced by the orientation to Essential Skills when participants were presented with information on what could happen if people in Canada increased their Essential Skills levels. Increased Essential Skills meant better paying jobs, more money flowing in the economy, better health care and school, and other such advantages. With this knowledge, Northwood employees appeared motivated to increase their own skill levels through hands-on and practical experiences with reading, document use and numeracy workplace examples.

Of the 30 people who attended the Skills for Success presentation, 22 employees wrote the pre-TOWES. Sixteen employees decided to attend the training sessions with the ES Coach after the pre-TOWES testing. The results of the pre-TOWES in Reading, Document Use, and Numeracy are shown in Figure 3. As can be seen in Figure 3, 14 employees scored at Level 3/4, and 8 scored at Level 1/2 in Reading. In Document Use 2 employees scored at Level 3/4, while 20 scored at level 1/2. Finally, 11 workers scored at Level 3/4 and 11 scored at Level 1/2 in Numeracy.

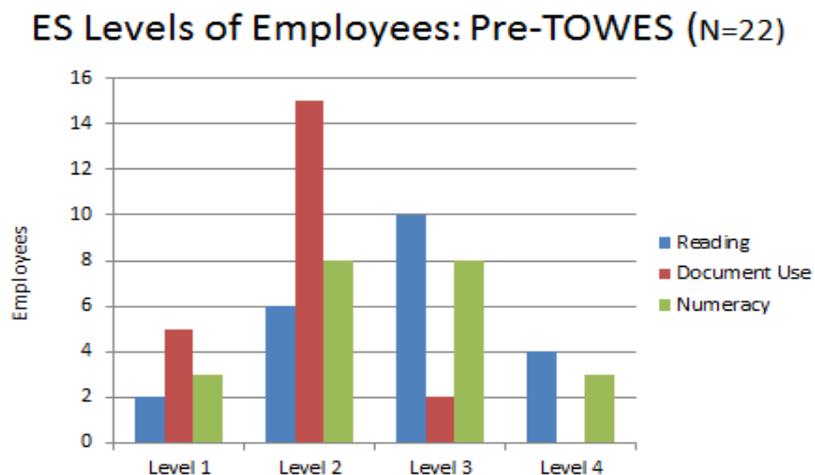
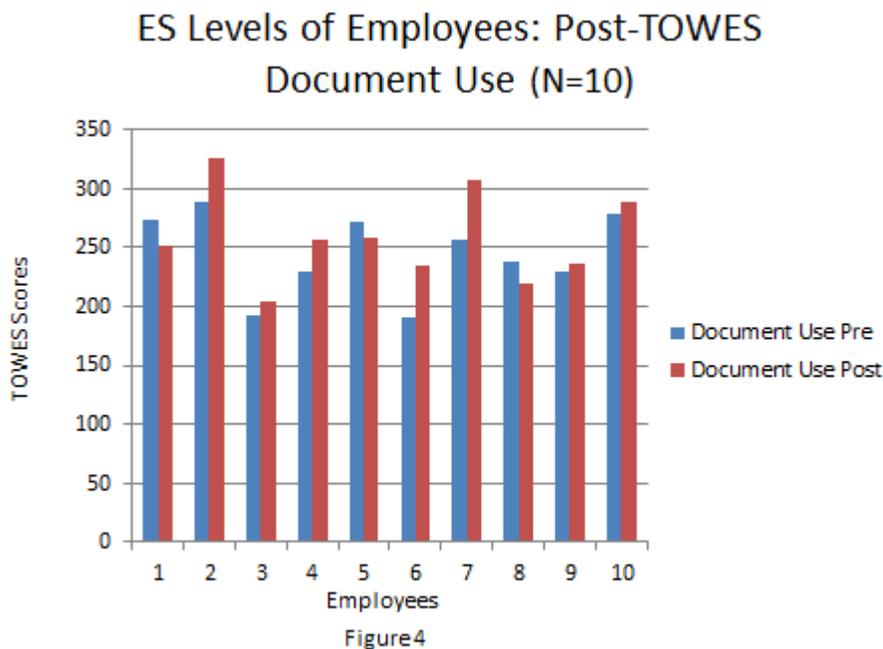


Figure 3

The main goal of the ES training was to move the participants from Level 2 to Level 3 in Document Use as well as improve their reading and numeracy skills. Most of the training occurred in small groups. This encouraged teamwork and cooperation among the employees. One staff was on night shifts and she had one-to-one sessions. The learning for the workers focused on sample workplace documents using questions and answers. Feedback to the group as to how the solutions were obtained was given by their peers as well as the ES Coach.

Approximately 12 hours of in-class sessions over 8 weeks were offered to the 16 workers who wrote the pre-TOWES and volunteered for the training. Employees could choose to take home web-based assignments to work on as well. One staff person left Northwood and 5 others decided not to continue with their participation in the research during the ES training.

Figure 4 indicates that 7 of the 10 employees who wrote the post-TOWES after training saw increases in Document Use TOWES scores.



Only two employees saw an increase in their Reading TOWES scores as shown in Figure 5.

ES Levels of Employees: Post-TOWES Reading (N=10)

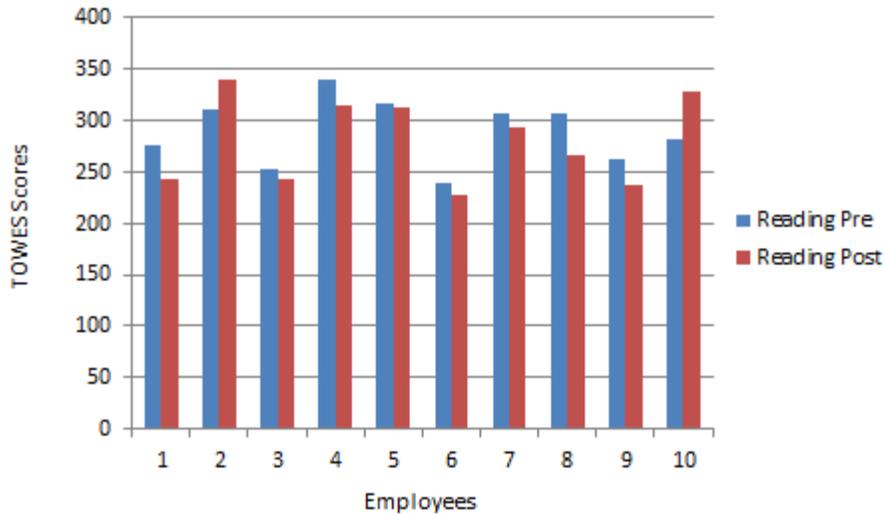


Figure5

Finally, Figure 6 shows that six employees improved their Numeracy TOWES scores.

ES Levels of Employees: Post-TOWES Numeracy (N=10)

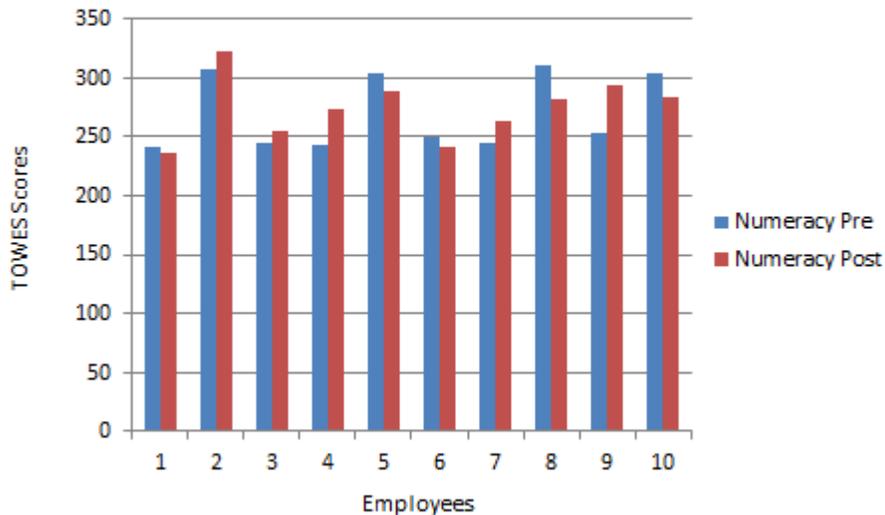


Figure6

Two employees indicated in the TOWES interpretation session with the Essential Skills Coordinator that they thought their scores were lower because their concentration was

focused on personal matters. One other employee stated that he was just finishing taking an anti-depressant and his concentration was not there.

Transition Pathways to Employability

The transition pathway most closely related to the workers was employment-based training. Northwood management expressed concern for employees with lower ES levels (Levels 1 and 2) in reading, document use and numeracy. They stated that improving ES Levels would affect productivity, safety issues, and may increase satisfaction by employees in the work they are doing. One supervisor commented on how the employee she had most contact with, was more excited about learning activities and more engaged with her work tasks after participating in the ES Training.

Reflections from the ES Coach and ES Coordinator

Success in achieving a positive adult learning environment was influenced by having people with the same ES levels working together from various departments. Employees stated they appreciated the opportunity to connect with staff from other departments and they stated this was beneficial as it gave them a better sense of teamwork at Northwood. Another aspect of the success for many employees was the use of small groups. Many of the adult learning principles were evident as workers wanted to engage with fellow participants and help each other. Positive reinforcement came from their peers as well as from the ES Coach.

However, one staff employee cited her discouragement at the pace of the group work and would have preferred a more directive (one-to-one) approach. She found herself in a small group where there was an obvious gap between her ES Reading Level 4 and working with people with ES Reading Level 1 or 2. She decided not to continue with the training after four sessions but still wrote the post-TOWES.

A number of workers stated they enjoyed the Essential Skills sessions so much that they talked about the training with other employees. This caused other employees to ask the ES Coach about the program. These employees wanted to know more about the program and asked when the next program would start. Due to the nature of this research project, there was no continuous intake. This excitement and positive energy appeared to reinforce the testimony that the ES training was adding value to employee's

lives. Hosting an Essential Skills celebration after the training was completed, also added a higher profile to the research project at Northwood. Two managers came to participate and support their staff during this recognition.



A significant challenge for the research project was the low support from the initial 12 managers who participated in an ES awareness session. After presenting an introduction on Essential Skills to the managers and receiving positive responses from them, approximately 30 people out of a potential of 650 employees at the Halifax site attended one of the six staff orientations. Twenty two participants made a commitment to writing the TOWES.

Once the Essential Skills training began for the 16 employees who volunteered, it was reported by several workers that their supervisors did not know about the training sessions. These workers stated that they were questioned about their absence because the supervisor indicated that they were not informed that the employee would be away for 60 – 90 minutes for ES training. Others arrived at a learning session and reported they were not able to focus because their supervisor didn't make arrangements to cover their duties during the training. The employees acknowledged they needed to know that they were being supported by their managers, supervisors and peers.

After the project was completed, Gail Craig responded to this concern by stating the managers were aware and supportive, but the employees had to speak with their supervisors once they had established meeting times with the ES Coach. If the supervisor wasn't aware of the learning session, it may in fact have been due to the staff member not having this conversation. For an effective Essential Skills workplace program to be successful, communication between the employees and managers and supervisors must be clarified and practiced throughout the program.

Additional feedback was also received from Gail Craig who stated it may have been advantageous to keep the focus on the specific type of worker that the project was looking to reach when doing the initial presentations. This might include employees with little formal education, those having challenges in productivity, safety or in delivering services, and those interested in exploring promotion work options within Northwood. Gail stated that some of those employees who understood what the project was about

and participated in it, were not those who would have met the original criteria of having Level 2 in Document Use. Employees who Northwood hoped would ultimately engage in continuous learning did not fully recognize the potential for themselves through this ES training.

A number of employees commented on the TOWES. They expressed concern about the length of the time it took to complete it, especially when writing the post test. Some also commented on not being able to see their actual TOWES booklets and the corrected results. Employees expressed disappointment in this as they stated more learning would come from seeing where they made their actual mistakes.

And finally, the marketing of the value and relevancy of Essential Skills to employees at Northwood appeared to be limited. Larger numbers of potential employees did not eagerly sign up for orientation sessions to Essential Skills and the research project. It seemed that many of those who participated found value in the training, but the participation rate was much lower than anticipated. Since employees were working already, the urgency or willingness to be part of a research group looking at Essential Skills did not carry a great deal of influence. It may be helpful to have specific incentives such as monetary incentives for each employee, to increase employees' willingness to be involved in the research project.

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