

## IMPROVING GENERIC SKILLS THROUGH COMMUNITY WORK

Few social scientists would argue against the importance and positive influence of academic abilities and generic skills on economic success in life. For many years, however, research focused primarily on the effects of academic ability alone. This has resulted in volumes of scientific work that comprehensively documents various measures of academic ability and the merits of higher learning. The scope of research on this topic began to broaden in the late 1980s and early 1990s to include research on the effects of generic skills. Generic skills are sometimes referred to as soft or non-cognitive skills, differentiating them from more concrete cognitive or academic abilities, which are often measured using aptitude or achievement tests such as IQ score or level of education. Generic skills refer to all-purpose, transferable skills that are fundamental to performing a wide range of tasks in a wide range of occupations. This includes communication skills, motivation, being able to work in teams, problem solving, and positive work attitudes. Deficiencies in these areas can limit one's employability and success in the labour market. The development of generic skill deficits is particularly a concern for those who have recurring spells of unemployment or little attachment to work.

Aware of the growing body of research that links generic skills to success in the workplace, Community Employment Innovation Project (CEIP) evaluators included the assessment of such skills in its analytical workplan. The determination of which soft skills to assess was influenced by the Conference Board of Canada research report on generic skills. According to their research, in addition to the academic and technical qualifications required for the job, employers in Canada are looking for people possessing skills in communication, lifelong learning, positive attitudes and behaviours, teamwork, problem solving, responsibility and adaptability.<sup>1</sup> The CEIP assessment draws on a subset of questions from the instrument *Working: Assessing Skills, Habits, and Style Inventory*<sup>2</sup> and questions on attitudes to work, which assesses proficiency in nine workplace competencies — responsibility, teamwork, persistence, sense of quality, lifelong learning, adapting to change, problem solving, information processing, and systems thinking. The nine critical dimensions are described in more detail in Text Box 1.

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<sup>1</sup> McLaughlin, M. (1992). *Employability Skills Profile: What Are Employers Looking for?* (Report 81-92-E). Ottawa: Conference Board of Canada.

<sup>2</sup> Miles, C., & Grummon, P. (1996). *Working: Assessing Skills, Habits, and Style Inventory*. Lansing, MI: H & H Publishing Co., Inc.

### **Text Box 1: Definitions**

Each competency is measured using a statement that would describe someone with the associated trait and scored on a scale of 1 (almost always like me) to 5 (almost never like me).

**Persistence** is measured with the statement “I follow through on things no matter what it takes.” This statement not only measures the respondent’s desire to finish a task they start satisfactorily, but also being able to recognize when an adequate amount has been done.

**Lifelong learning** encompasses the desire and motivation to continue learning in order to keep up the ever-changing demands of the work place. It is measured in the survey with the statement “I prefer to know what’s in it for me before I spend a lot of effort learning something.” The reverse of this statement would be true for persons open to continuous learning.

**Adaptability to change** is measured in the survey with the statement “I usually do something I’ve enjoyed rather than try something different.” This statement would not be true to someone amenable to change. Adaptability requires being open to new things, being flexible, and the ability to adjust easily to varied experiences.

**Systems thinking** is a measure that looks at inter-relationships and culture within an organization. It is measured in the survey with the statement “I know how to get things done in a system or an organization.”

**Responsibility** is measured using the statement “It really bugs me to see a problem that no one is trying to solve.” Persons with a sense of responsibility are able to take ownership of the tasks, identify its components, and set priorities and targets to get it done satisfactorily.

**Sense of quality** relates to going beyond the mere minimum required to get the job done. It is putting the additional effort and time to produce work that can be looked upon with pride. It is measured in the survey with the statement “I can’t quit thinking about something until I’m sure I’ve done it well.”

**Problem solving** entails being able to first recognise a problem, the ability to decompose it, and develop solutions for its resolution. This measure is captured with the statement “I make a detailed plan before I tackle a complex problem.”

**Teamwork** is measured using the statement “I prefer to earn with other people.” This statement measures the respondent’s comfort level at working with other people.

## **How CEIP Develops Generic Skills**

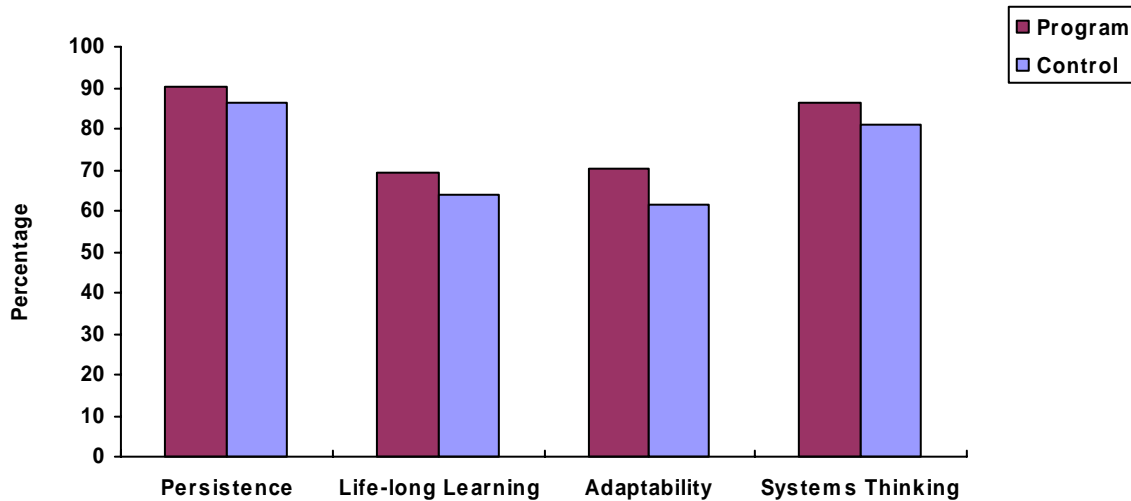
CEIP provided a range of jobs with a wide array of organizations through which participants could conceivably acquire or continue to develop soft, generic skills, with most participants having the opportunity to work in multiple positions. The vast majority of jobs were in the service industry with voluntary or third-sector organizations, which required participants to be flexible and work at various positions on the job. In some jobs, participants would have had to adapt quickly to working in a new environment, with new rules and new organizational culture. While some positions required working independently, others involved work as a team member of the organization.

The interim results, measured at 40 months after their enrolment in the study — including the full three-year eligibility period — suggest that CEIP did have a positive effect on the enhancement of soft skills, over and above what would have occurred without the project.

### CEIP’s Impact on Generic Skills

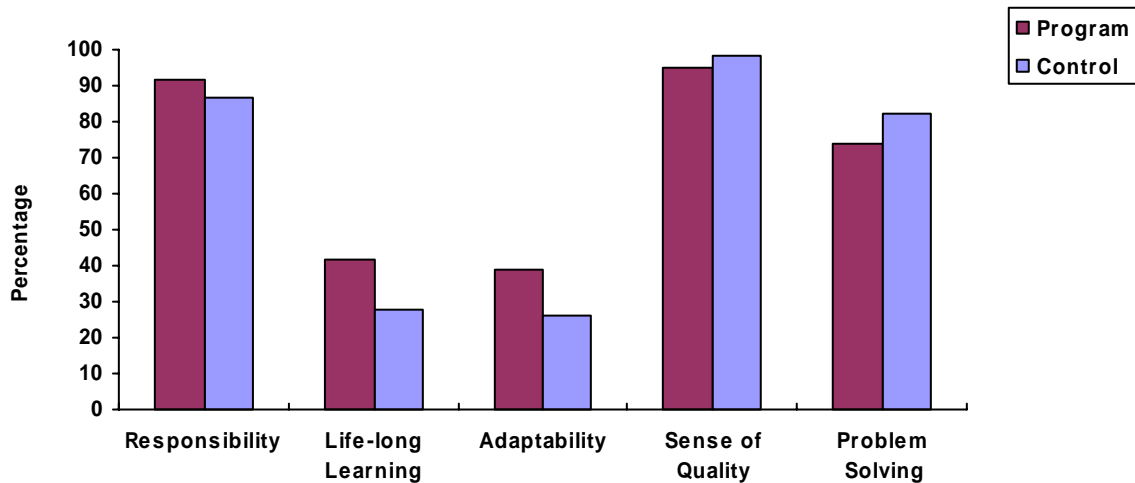
Among Employment Insurance (EI) sample members, CEIP had a positive effect on persistence, lifelong learning, adaptability, and system thinking. As shown in Figure 1, more EI program group members than those in control groups reported that the statement assessing persistence and system thinking, more aptly described them. Program group members are also more likely to have described themselves as being amenable to continuous learning and having a willingness to try new things. Fewer program group members than those in control groups identify themselves as almost always wanting to know what is in it for them before spending a lot of effort learning something new, or wanting to do something they have enjoyed rather than try something different.

**Figure 1: Impact on Soft Skills (EI Sample)**



Among income assistance (IA) sample members, CEIP had mixed effects on soft skills. While CEIP had a positive effect on responsibility, receptiveness to lifelong learning, and adapting to change, it had a negative effect on sense of quality as well as problem solving. Figure 2 shows that among the IA sample, fewer program group members than those in control groups responded with occasionally or almost never when read the statement “It really bugs me to see a problem no one is trying to fix.” On the other hand, more program group members than those in control groups responded as such when read the statements corresponding to measures of lifelong learning and adaptability. For instance, about 42 per cent of program group members, compared to 28 per cent of control group members, said they occasionally and almost never need to know what is in it for them before spending a lot of effort learning something new. Similarly, 39 per cent of program group members and 28 per cent of control group members report that they almost never stick to doing only the things they enjoy rather than try something new.

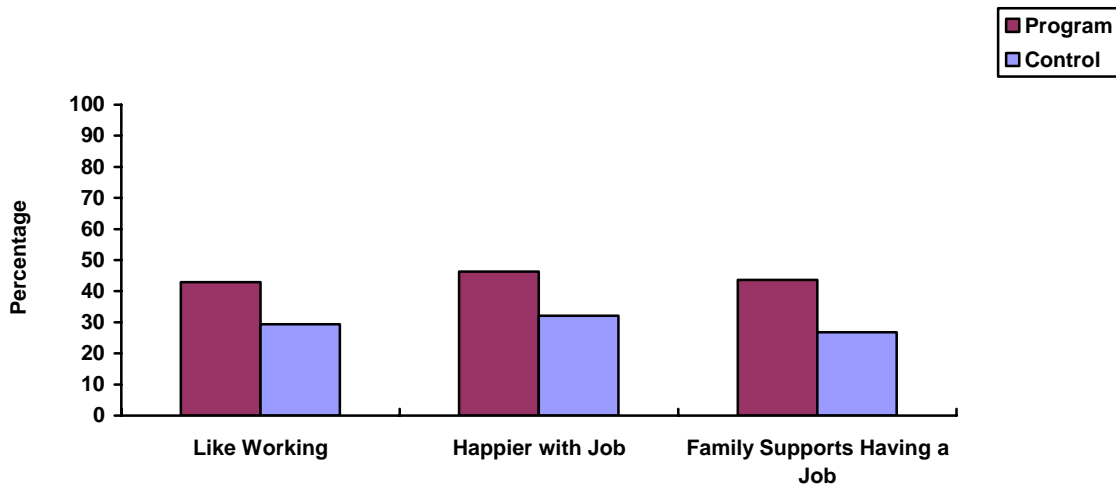
**Figure 2: Impact on Soft Skills (IA Sample)**



CEIP has led to the strengthening of some existing positive attitudes towards work. Among the EI sample, program group members expressed stronger attachment to work, compared to their control group counterpart. When asked whether they liked going to work, about one third of program group members said they agreed strongly with the statement, whereas only approximately one quarter of control group members indicated this was also the case for them. At the same time, 5.3 per cent of the control group and 2.1 per cent of program group members disagreed with that statement, implying they did not like going to work.

Among the IA sample, Figure 3 illustrates that program group members were much more likely to say they agreed strongly to the statements “I like going to work,” “When I have a job, I am a happier person,” and “My family supports me taking a job.” This increase in the percentage agreeing strongly to these statements was accompanied by a decrease in those who said they only agreed with the statement. This indicates a strengthening of positive attitudes, which were already held.

**Figure 3: Impact on Attitude towards Work (IA Sample)**



These results demonstrate, through a rigorous random-assignment evaluation, that a community-based employment program, like CEIP, can produce positive effects on skills that are relevant to employability, even in the context of lower-skilled community jobs.

The results, however, also lead to a number of caveats. The negative effects observed on sense of quality and problem solving among the IA sample could be indicative of the quality of their jobs, which were often low-skilled, or rather the suitability of the assigned positions. It is possible that their assigned jobs would not have provided many opportunities to engage in finding solutions to complex problems.

These results reflect interim findings after three years of eligibility. Questions remain about the longer-term nature of the impacts on generic skills and whether they will translate into improved employment outcomes. Will these skill gains be maintained or deteriorate after the program has ended? Will they even help participants obtain non-CEIP employment in an area of chronically high unemployment? These and other questions can only be addressed in later stages of the study.