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COACHING THE SKILLS FOR SUCCESS

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P L A Y B O O K

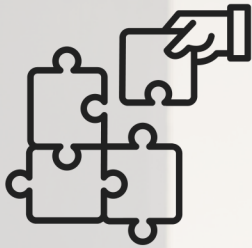
# I N T R O D U C T I O N

The Skills for Success (SFS) are foundational and transferable skills that were identified by Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC) as critical for participating and thriving in the workplace, learning environments, and in life.

The Canadian Council on Rehabilitation and Work (CCRW) is a national not-for-profit organization that exists to promote and support meaningful and equitable employment of persons with disabilities. Through CCRW's ESDC-funded Skilled Talent Employment Advantage Method (STEAM) program, which ran from June 2022 through March 2024, jobseekers with disabilities accessed pre-employment SFS training, including a vast catalogue of CCRW-developed eLearning courses, as well as individualized support from CCRW's Training and Development Coaches. These frontline staff members developed training plans with jobseekers to suit unique goals and support needs.

Through November 2023, CCRW's Research Team interviewed 7 frontline staff to learn about best practices in supporting jobseekers' skill development and career journeys. Findings from these interviews are collected in this Skills for Success Playbook as a resource for others implementing SFS training tailored towards jobseekers and workers with disabilities. As it is the mandate of CCRW to support persons with disabilities in seeking, securing, and navigating meaningful employment opportunities, the findings from these interviews are specific to jobseekers with disabilities, though the insights from this Playbook can also benefit organizations serving other communities.

# 9 SKILLS FOR SUCCESS



PROBLEM SOLVING



COLLABORATION



COMMUNICATION



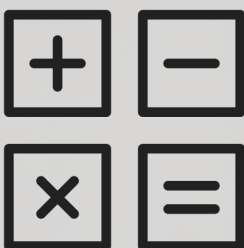
ADAPTABILITY



READING



WRITING



NUMERACY



DIGITAL



CREATIVITY & INNOVATION

# BUILDING BLOCKS FOR SKILLS FOR SUCCESS TRAINING

The interviews conducted with frontline staff at CCRW revealed key foundational elements when implementing successful SFS training program for jobseekers with disabilities. The following section outlines important considerations for the design and execution of SFS training.

## **Build Rapport With Learners**

In service delivery, rapport refers to the relationship of trust, understanding, and clear communication that is fostered between the staff member (coach) and client. Building rapport is an important first step, as it enables coaches to gain a holistic understanding of the jobseeker's goals, barriers, support needs, learning styles, and, in the SFS context, which skill domains should be built into the training plan.

Individuals differ greatly in their learning preferences (e.g., in-person versus online; solo versus group work); their capacity and schedules

(e.g., if they are in school, or have caretaking responsibilities); and their preferred communication styles. Having this context enables the coach to create a plan that fits the jobseeker's needs. When working with persons with disabilities (PWD), rapport is particularly important for gaining a full understanding of the jobseeker's disability and their unique barriers and needs, which may inform how training is delivered. Maintaining a dialog also allows coaches to assess and modify learning plans as needed, ensuring alignment as the jobseeker's career goals evolve or skills develop, and to check that training plans suit the jobseeker's capabilities (e.g., technological literacy). Having a strong rapport provides insights into any barriers to progression.

Building rapport begins at intake, a process which may span multiple meeting sessions. During intake, coaches conduct assessments to gather information including demographics, employment goals, and support needs.

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This phase is also an opportunity to collect information about jobseekers' previous employment and educational experiences, including any challenges they've faced, to look for patterns of barriers that the training plan can help to overcome.

**Consider Asking:**

- Is there anything you struggled with in school?
- If you had to start work tomorrow, what would be the scariest thing about that?

Creating a friendly, approachable atmosphere can be helpful for building rapport. Coaches can do this by going beyond formal assessment questions and learning about the jobseeker's pastimes or hobbies. 'Icebreaker' questions help to start discussions positively, while serving the dual purpose of providing deeper insight into the jobseeker's areas of interest. Striving to make jobseekers comfortable will also help conversations about sensitive topics go more smoothly.

**Consider Asking**

- What is your morning routine like?
- What are your interests and hobbies?
- What do you like to do in your spare time?

Some jobseekers may be accompanied by support persons or coaches. In some cases, support persons might be able to provide additional information; for example, in cases where the jobseeker is quiet or uncomfortable sharing. However, coaches should always consult the jobseeker first for information because they are the experts on themselves.

Meeting in person, if suitable, can also promote rapport, and allows coaches to observe mannerisms, body language, or behaviours that are difficult to glean virtually.

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## Set Expectations

An early conversation between the learner and the coach is crucial for establishing realistic expectations of both parties. This conversation should clarify the roles, responsibilities, capacity, and desired outcomes of each party. Having a conversation about expectations early on allows the coach and the learner to understand how to work together, ensuring that both are on the same page. It is also important that this conversation set up boundaries with the learner. For instance, the coach's effort should not exceed the work that the learner is willing and able to put in. The learner must be prepared to bring something to the table to get the most out of their learning journey.

## Using Client-Led and Collaborative Approaches

A combination of **client-led** and **collaborative** approaches can be used to develop and carry out training plans.

In client-led approaches, jobseekers are empowered to make decisions about their training.

In practice, this means providing ample time for jobseekers to review offerings, (e.g., eLearnings), allowing independent exploration and autonomy. Collaborative approaches build on this by incorporating direction from coaches to ensure the jobseeker is successful; for example, by guiding the jobseeker on learning materials with suitable structure, pacing, and fit for their goals. Coaches can also help ensure learners are not taking on too many courses at once.

Consider using a collaborative approach with jobseekers who thrive in structured, goal-oriented learning. Learners enrolled in too many courses at once, or courses that don't suit their learning styles, can become overwhelmed, disengaged, and unsatisfied with their progress.

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## **Building Successful Training Plans - Create Individualized Training Plans**

Individualized training plans are those that meet the unique needs of a jobseeker, rather than applying a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach to service delivery. Customizing a training plan means focusing on outcomes and goals that are meaningful to the jobseeker, strategies and trainings that suit their learning preferences and abilities and supports tailored to meet their circumstances and needs. Individualized training plans are those that meet the unique needs of a jobseeker, rather than applying a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach to service delivery. Customizing a training plan means focusing on outcomes and goals that are meaningful to the jobseeker, strategies and trainings that suit their learning preferences and abilities and supports tailored to meet their circumstances and needs.

Training timelines will vary between clients. Coaches should understand that it may take as much as three months to establish strong rapport with jobseekers, and that support needs can also impact timelines. Learners may need to familiarize themselves with new technologies, they may have difficulty with English, or they may struggle with self-directed learning due to the nature of their disability – such as those living with learning, cognitive, or Intellectual and Developmental disabilities. Securing accommodations can also extend service timelines, as coaches may need to coordinate schedules with ASL interpreters or support persons. Finally, timelines can be delayed if jobseekers become demotivated – a problem that can arise if training plans are poorly developed or misaligned, if there are financial barriers to access, or if life circumstances interrupt the training period.

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## Use S.M.A.R.T. goals

**S.M.A.R.T.** (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-Bound) **goals** are a framework for setting effective goals. They help learners and coaches outline clear and well-defined (**Specific**) objectives with criteria to track progress (**Measurable**), and ensure the objectives are attainable for the jobseeker within an appropriate timeframe, such as within the service timeline (**Achievable, Realistic, and Time-Bound**). Using a S.M.A.R.T. goal-setting template when developing a training plan helps learners stay on track and, as part of creating an individualized plan, assists with tailoring trainings to their strengths and support needs.

Start learners off with a **small selection of courses**.

Coaches should be cautious of overwhelming clients with a large catalogue of training options. Selecting a few courses to start with boosts engagement, creates a sense of accomplishment, and scaffolds learning by allowing jobseekers to absorb new material before moving on.

Introducing courses in this way also gives learners the opportunity to decide if they want to continue training in the selected skill domains. When selecting these first courses, consider the jobseeker's baseline skill level, and encourage courses that are aligned with the training plan and provide a strong foundation to build upon. For coaches engaged in a more client-led approach with jobseekers, pay attention to how many courses they've selected to start with. If it seems like it could be too much, talk to the jobseeker about the advantages of beginning with fewer courses.

Provide **in-person learning opportunities** when needed

Some learners may benefit from incorporating in-person learning in addition to eLearning trainings. In-person learning can include direct instruction from coaches, or it can simply mean providing space for learners to complete courses independently, but with a coach present to offer support or encouragement.



# S . M . A . R . T



SPECIFIC



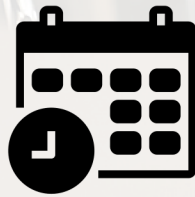
MEASURABLE



ACHIEVABLE



REALISTIC



TIME-BOUND



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In-person learning can be particularly useful when learners have high support needs and require detailed verbal instructions, or instructions given in plain language. It can also provide opportunities for activities such as role-playing, where course content is applied to real-world examples – a particularly beneficial tool for jobseekers who find social situations stressful or challenging. And, as discussed in the section on Building Rapport, in-person support helps coaches to observe non-verbal signals and reactions that may be missed in virtual settings.

Beyond direct instruction or activities, some learners may prefer to have their coach nearby for support and reminders. Others may benefit from being in an environment with greater accountability and fewer distractions (for example, cell phones, TV, busy home environments), helping them to better engage in and retain course content.

## **Review and Iterate Training Content**

Audit training content, such as eLearning materials, regularly for usability, quality, effectiveness, and accessibility. You can use a team approach where coaches each review a portion of the Skills for Success training content (e.g., eLearning modules). During this review, flag potential issues such as jargon, time constraints, or barriers to accessibility. Share this feedback with course developers to improve course design and delivery. Course modules should be inclusive to all learning styles, with opportunities for hands-on and interactive learning. As a coach, understanding the training content is crucial for effectively assisting jobseekers through their SFS training journey. Reviewing content as a team gives coaches the opportunity to get familiar with the concepts and learning outcomes of the training, while also providing space for coaches ask questions and tap into the skills and knowledge of the team.

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## Train the Trainer

“Train the trainer” is an approach to training subject-matter experts – in this case, coaches – in an organization that enables them to mentor others. Train the trainer models not only benefit organizations by leveraging internal talent and providing professional development, but ultimately benefit clients as well, by instilling in coaches a deep understanding and knowledge of training materials.

The more familiar coaches are with training content (e.g., eLearning modules) themselves, the better they can guide jobseekers. Coaches need comprehensive eLearning training and quality resources to effectively support learners in their SFS training. When training coaches, invest sufficient time to engage deeply with the training curriculum. In practice, this can look like providing detailed walkthroughs, facilitating meaningful discussions, being responsive to questions, and giving instruction on how to teach specific skills, such as using a computer.

Consider providing coaches with supplementary resources, like a standardized coaching guide, to serve as a reference. This guide should include coaching tips like maintaining an open-door policy with jobseekers, leveraging team expertise, managing time efficiently for content review and administrative tasks. It can also include brief module summaries that highlight key ideas and coaching prompts to use.

## Have Consistent Check-ins with Jobseekers

Regular, proactive check-ins keep the lines of communication open between coaches and clients. In these check-ins, coaches can review training content, discuss learning progress, address challenges, and plan next steps. Jobseekers may also share feedback with their coaches about trainings they did, or did not, enjoy, enabling coaches to adapt the training plan. **Rapport and ongoing communication are the foundation for providing tailored support.**

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The check-in process can also be tailored to the jobseeker's needs. For example, consider semi-structured meetings with a clear agenda and incorporate open times at the beginning and end to answer the jobseeker's questions, review reflection prompts, and check in on their well-being.

Through check-ins, establish accountability by collaboratively setting goals and expectations with jobseekers. This may involve determining action items and assigning homework to keep the learner on track. For example, outline expectations for the upcoming check-in and have them recap the plan and your responsibilities, prompting transparency.

If formalized testing is a part of your organization's training process – or if jobseekers are preparing for an external exam – check-ins can also be a time to gauge test-readiness and codevelop a study plan, as unsuccessful attempts can be demotivating and, in some cases, create financial hardship.

## **Review Course Content Together**

Check-in meetings are valuable touchpoints to review the jobseeker's progress through Skill for Success training, particularly when training is based on eLearning content. Regular check-ins can help assess a learner's progress and comprehension, providing opportunities to modify training plans as needed. When reviewing Skills for Success training progress, engage learners with practical exercises and reflective questions exploring what they learned, what resonates with them, and any barriers they faced. For example, coaches can prompt learners to explain how they would teach course materials to gauge their understanding. Personalizing SFS materials for learners (e.g., selecting courses or customizing activities based on learner interests), can enhance their eLearning comprehension and foster genuine conversations. Using this approach, learners can be heard, supported, and understood.

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Effectively assist learners and provide them with the tools for success by carefully observing their accommodation needs, learning styles, and challenges they face during content reviews. For both in-person and virtual settings, this can look like responding to questions promptly, providing technical support tailored to learner needs, and walking learners through any challenges they've experience (e.g., understanding checkboxes or multiple-choice questions). For learners whose training plans do not reflect their skill levels accurately— when it is too easy or challenging— provide other options like suggesting alternative skills, recommending external courses, or encouraging independent eLearning.

### **Incorporate Evaluation**

Evaluation is a key part of any initiative, enabling your organization to measure the impact and success of your training program. To assess the effectiveness of SFS training, organizations can consider using formal skills assessments,

developing in-house skill assessments, asking clients to self-report on aspects of service delivery like quality and satisfaction, or tracking client outcomes after completing training.

Consider leveraging a variety of data sources to inform your evaluation. For example, to assess learners' confidence in securing a job interview following program completion, coaches can ask learners directly, collect learner testimonials, collect stakeholder testimonials (e.g., organizational partners if applicable), or provide their own testimonials based on their observations of learner outcomes (e.g., greater self-reflection, willingness to take on more challenging courses, greater self-advocacy, stronger communication skills). Coaches can take notes during meetings with learners to record learner comments (e.g., feeling more confident with interviews or that their resume has improved).

# TEACHING THE SKILLS FOR SUCCESS

## Teaching Strategies

There are 10 useful strategies coaches can use when teaching and supporting learners.

### 1. Use **positive reinforcement**.

Using positive reinforcement in conversations can include encouragement, empowerment, focusing on strengths, and understanding what helps the client flourish. As a teaching strategy to foster early wins, coaches can encourage learners to start with skills they already feel confident about. This confidence can motivate them to work on improving in growth areas. Coaches can also incentivize goals and short-term milestones, such as by providing certificates of completion. Certificates of completion serve as proof of success, allow coaches to track learner progress, and improve learner engagement and motivation.

### 2. Use **plain language**.

Avoid complex terminology in course titles, content, and teaching

Inaccessible language creates barriers for learners and negatively impacts understanding and engagement. Remember that ESL learners and coaches also benefit from plain language.

### 3. The **feedback sandwich**

is a simple but effective technique coaches can use when providing feedback to learners. Coaches can start with positive feedback, then provide constructive criticism, and end with more positive feedback. The feedback sandwich aligns well with positive reinforcement and makes criticism easier to digest.

### 4. **Provide meaningful examples**

to make abstract concepts understandable. Meaningful examples are relatable examples. Coaches can relate course concepts to the daily life, not just workplace situations. Connecting course content with real-life scenarios can improve learner understanding and engagement

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## 5. Roleplaying

invites learners to observe and practice skills in safe environments. For example, coaches can conduct mock interviews with learners to prepare them for real interview experiences. Coaches may provide mock interview questions in advance, encouraging learners to reflect on why employers might ask these questions and what kinds of answers employers seek. Repeated mock interviews help learners build interview confidence through practice. They further provide opportunities for coaches to give tailored feedback. An emerging practice that is currently being rolled out in a pilot project at CCRW is the use of Virtual Reality (VR) trainings to facilitate roleplaying activities in both in-person and virtual training settings.

## 6. Locate & utilize **supplementary learning opportunities**

such as offerings from local community organizations. Identify, share, and arrange a repository of external learning resources like free trainings, courses, or workshops. These opportunities allow learners to further develop their skills.

7. Set up **accommodations** at the beginning of a learner's journey to ensure their success. Make learners aware that accommodation plans can be changed as needed throughout their journey.

## 8. Proactive Support

is key for learner success. Coaches can provide regular office hours and have an "open-door policy" with jobseekers as they complete course content. Additionally, providing timely responses to jobseekers helps to maintain engagement. For effective support, consider providing supports in the learner's first language.

8. Work with clients to overcome technological barriers. Coaches should assess technological literacy at the start of a learner's journey. For instance, if using an eLearning platform, coaches can review course content together with learners at the outset to gauge their ability and confidence in navigating the course website independently.

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Coaches should be aware of what clients are using to complete coursework (e.g., personal computers, public computers, mobile phones), and work with clients to find solutions to challenges using these tools. Coaches should be ready to address login issues, know how to navigate eLearning platforms, and support other technical issues that arise. For learners with low technological literacy, coaches can offer printed course material.

### 9. Offer in-person, group learning opportunities.

For learners working on the same skills (e.g., the same eLearning courses or modules), group learning opportunities allow them to practice their skills (e.g., building rapport, interviewing, thinking on the spot) in a low-stakes, peer-to-peer setting. When working with learners with disabilities, having different modes of learning is important for creating accessible learning opportunities. Online learning may not work for every learner, and in-person group learning may not work for every learner either.

Tips for coaches: Coaches should leverage their rapport with learners to identify when they would benefit from learning content that goes beyond the Skills for Success training material that is offered (e.g., workshops on disability advocacy).

### Teaching Abstract Concepts

While some SFS are concrete, like Numeracy, Reading, and Writing, others are more abstract and conceptual, like Creativity & Innovation. When training soft skills like Creativity & Innovation, Adaptability, Problem-Solving, and Collaboration, it is even more important to be intentional about the following practices:

- Using **plain language**, especially when teaching content to diverse learners.
- Using **real, meaningful examples** that are relevant to everyday life and explore opportunities for activities that allow the learner to apply these skills in comfortable and encouraging learning environments.



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- Taking a **collaborative approach** by reviewing content together, and encouraging learners note any areas of confusion.
  - Providing learners with **additional supports** where needed, and leveraging strong rapport to help identify learners that are struggling with abstract concepts.
  - **Leveraging supplementary or external resources.**

### **Empowering Learners to Self-Direct their Skills for Success Journeys**

There are numerous ways that coaches can empower learners to take charge of their own learning.

Coaches can work in **collaboration** with the learner. The learner is the expert of their own experience, and they bring their insights to their skills training. It is important to find the right balance between empowering the learner to self-direct their learning journey, without overwhelming them with responsibilities.

Incorporate teaching strategies such as reviewing course content, working in-person, scheduling check-ins (including follow-up emails that summarize the tasks the learner and coach are each responsible for completing), and integrating role-playing (e.g., mock interviews) for jobseekers who require additional supports.

As each jobseeker is different, coaches can use a **client-led approach** to their support to the needs of the jobseeker. Some jobseekers are proactive and will take the initiative by signing up for relevant courses. Coaches can support these jobseekers by providing resources and guidance as needed, but otherwise allowing them to lead their own learning journey. For jobseekers that need more support, coaches can help them develop the self-reflection skills that will enable them to become more independent learners by asking reflective questions about past experiences and areas they feel they could improve.

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It is important for learners to see value in the skills training. To this end, fostering learner buy-in is an important empowerment strategy that coaches can use to encourage learners to engage in Skills for Success training. Instead of telling learners that they must do the skills training, coaches can encourage learners to decide for themselves that the skills training is worth the work. Starting with skills that the learners already feel confident with can further empower learners to explore more challenging skills

For learners who find it challenging to learn on their own, involving support persons, such as parents, guardians, and support workers, can be helpful. Support persons can provide a fuller picture of the learner's history and needs, and the support person may be capable of explaining course content in a way that the learner understands better.