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Strong Foundations

Supporting transferable skill development for jobseekers with disabilities



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Canada

The opinions and interpretations in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Government of Canada.

Strong Foundations is a guide for employment service providers and career coaches who support jobseekers with disabilities in developing their employment skills.

In 2022, CCRW began developing focused skills training for jobseekers and workers with disabilities. Funded by the Government of Canada's Skills for Success program, CCRW created an eLearning platform with over 70 trainings, including over 30 focusing on the five transferable skills: **adaptability, collaboration, communication, creativity and innovation, and problem solving.**

Through 2024, the *Research in STEAM* (the Skilled Talent Employment Advantage Method) project studied how developing these skills can support people with disabilities in their job search and employment.

Drawing on information gathered from employers, employment services providers, and jobseekers with disabilities, we created this resource to share insights on transferable skills. This includes **what these skills are, why they matter, and how to develop them, as well as best practices for service providers on coaching and creating training programs.**

INTRODUCTION

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What Are Transferable Skills?

Transferable skills, sometimes called soft skills or socioemotional skills, involve thinking, creating, and interacting with others. Transferable skills are core competencies, meaning they are not specific to a particular industry, sector, role, or workplace. They are applicable to any employment setting and to daily life.

In the Skills for Success model, the five transferable skills are **adaptability**, **collaboration**, **communication**, **creativity & innovation**, and **problem solving**.



Adaptability

Adaptability is the ability to adjust to new situations and persist through setbacks.



Communication

Communication is the ability to receive and share information clearly with others.



Problem Solving

Problem Solving is the ability to identify issues and find effective solutions.



Collaboration

Collaboration is the ability to work well with others towards shared goals.



Creativity & Innovation

Creativity & Innovation is the ability to create and implement new ideas.

These five areas are each unique skillsets that cover a range of cognitive, social, and emotional abilities. They interact and build on each other to support success across the employment lifecycle.

Why Are Transferable Skills Important?

In a dynamic, evolving labour market, employers are increasingly looking for workers with strong transferable skills.[1]

Qualities like strong communication, teamwork, and organizational skills are commonly requested in job postings, even in highly technical roles.[1] Employers we spoke to through the Research in STEAM project often evaluate workers for evidence of transferable skills during interviews and performance management.

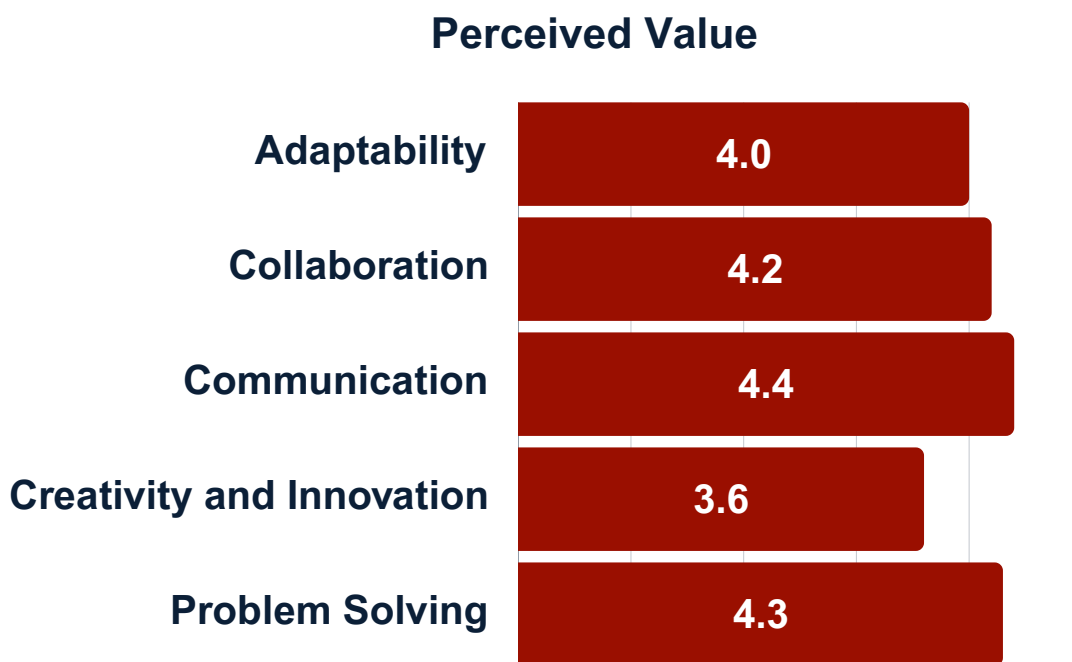
Through a combination of surveys and eLearning assessments from 88 jobseeker clients, and semi-structured focus groups and interviews with 16 employers, 18 employment service providers, and 26 jobseekers, Research in STEAM investigated:

- What transferable skills are most valuable in the workforce (and why)
- What strengths and areas of opportunity exist for jobseekers with disabilities in building and using these skills
- How building transferable skills supports job-related milestones and workplace success

Data from employers, service providers, and jobseekers showed that all five transferable skills were valued to some extent for the ways they helped jobseekers navigate the job search process, adjust to a workplace, and do their jobs effectively.

Why Are Transferable Skills Important?

Jobseekers rated how valuable they believed the five skills were to employers from 1 (very unimportant) to 5 (very important).



Survey data showed jobseekers felt **communication, problem solving, and collaboration skills were especially important** to employers.

On the next pages, we share three of the most notable themes that emerged about transferable skills and their value.

Strong communication skills are critical.



85%

85% of jobseekers said they believed communication skills were **important or very important** to employers.

Employers, service providers, and jobseekers with disabilities all agreed that communication skills are essential at all stages of the employment life cycle, from finding a job to developing a career.

Employers are looking for workers with strong communication skills because:

- They help employees work effectively with clients, coworkers, and supervisors
- They're necessary to provide good customer service
- They're crucial for navigating conflict
- They help workers ask questions and tell employers when they need support

Jobseekers with disabilities, and the service providers who worked with them, value strong communication skills because:

- They're essential for creating application materials and interviewing
- They allow people to share their thoughts and ideas effectively
- They promote relationship-building and mutual understanding, and reduce interpersonal conflict
- They're important for navigating difficult situations, like requesting accommodations

INSIGHT 1

Strong communication skills are critical.

Communication skills were closely linked to other skills, especially collaboration. Effective, clear communication leads to better collaboration and stronger relationships, and collaboration skills like mutual respect, empathy, and an inclusive attitude create an environment for open communication. **They were also linked to problem solving,** especially in teams. Effective communication makes it possible to solve challenges together.

Importantly, **good communication is two-directional.** Both workers and employers have a role to play in listening and sharing information. Employers have a responsibility to clearly convey expectations and instructions, respond effectively to questions and concerns, and proactively communicate changes. If workers face disability-related barriers to communication – like speech disability, anxiety, or difficulties with non-verbal communication – awareness and understanding from employers is especially important for promoting belonging and mutual understanding.

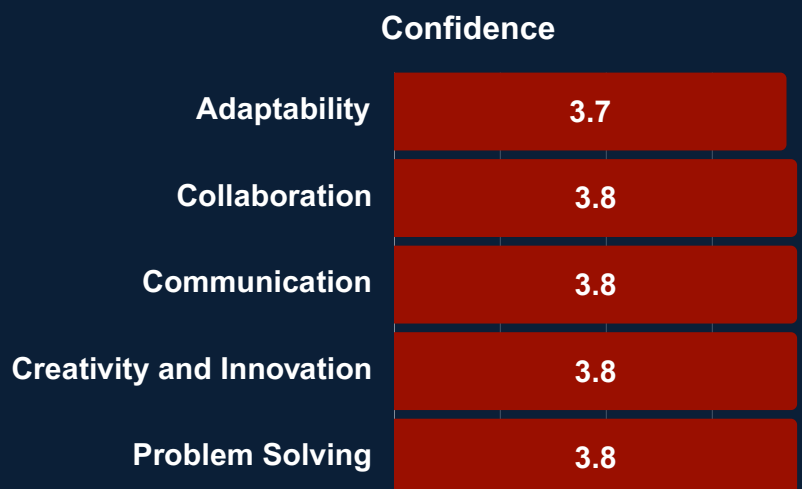
Many jobseekers with disabilities told us communication was one of their strongest skills. At the same time, almost all participants wanted to increase these skills. We learned **there is always room to grow, even for people with strong communication skills.** Writing, speaking, and body language are distinct and important aspects of communication, and developing in each of these areas supports better collaboration and more effective team problem solving. Advanced learners can also build their communication skills in specialized areas, like technical writing, public speaking, negotiation, or conflict mediation.

Workers with disabilities have a variety of strengths that benefit workplaces.

Jobseekers, service providers, and employers told us about a wide variety of strengths that workers with disabilities bring to workplaces.

Echoing findings from other research,[2] we learned that living with a disability can mean using various transferable skills “all day long” to meet challenges, and “seeing things differently” (as our participants put it). Many workers with disabilities have spent years or a lifetime navigating an inaccessible world, and developed important skills and strategies in the process. For Research in STEAM participants, these included resilience, lateral thinking, and many other transferable skills.

At the end of service delivery, jobseekers rated their confidence using their transferable skills in the workplace from 1 (very low) to 5 (very high).



Workers with disabilities have a variety of strengths that benefit workplaces.

Almost all jobseekers felt **problem solving** was one of their strongest areas. Many felt they were skilled problem solvers in work and daily life, and were often approached by others for help. Many participants also said they were creative and innovative in the workplace, and described themselves as inventive and good at brainstorming.

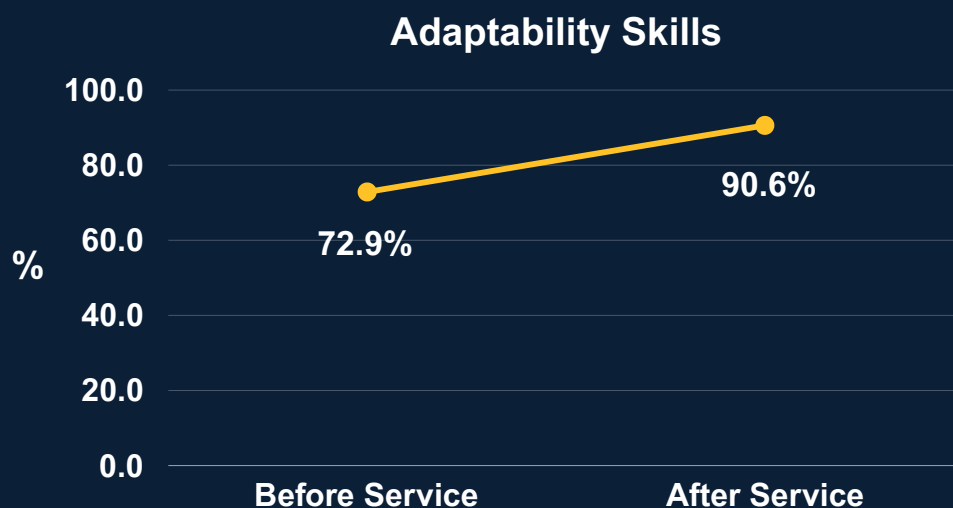
Most participants felt **communication** was one of their strongest skillsets. Jobseekers had diverse communication strengths: some were great writers, while others were skilled at non-verbal communication. Service providers shared stories of how building communication skills helped clients transition to new roles like customer service, or overcome barriers like interview anxiety.



Workers with disabilities have a variety of strengths that benefit workplaces.

Many jobseekers felt they had strong **collaboration** skills, which they demonstrated in diverse ways. Some described themselves as social and outgoing – crucial skills for networking and building workplace rapport. Some thrived in teams. Others felt that having a disability had increased their empathy and compassion.

Some participants felt they had strong adaptability skillsets. Adaptability covers a wide range of skills including flexibility, perseverance, resilience, regulating emotions, and open-mindedness. Jobseekers, again, had diverse adaptability skills: some were flexible to change, and others were very resilient. Service providers also noted that many clients improved their adaptability skills significantly during training.



Jobseekers reported how capable they were with course topics before and after completing eLearnings. Skill scores are averages of all courses clients took in a particular skill.

Workers with disabilities have a variety of strengths that benefit workplaces.



We also learned that employers don't always recognize workers' transferable skills.

Sometimes they hold misconceptions and biases, like believing workers with disabilities are all the same. For example, service providers shared that some employers believe workers with disabilities are not good at problem solving or coming up with new ideas.

Undoing these misconceptions and recognizing all individual employees' unique strengths is crucial for unlocking potential.

Creativity & innovation are underrecognized strengths.

Many jobseekers felt they were creative, **but only half thought creativity skills were important to employers.**

Creativity and innovation skills help individuals come up with new ideas and plans. Highly creative people can connect different concepts, combine information from different sources, and find new or improved ways to do things. Despite this, only about 56% of our jobseeker participants thought employers valued creativity, **and some believed employers actively discouraged it.**

Employers we spoke to had conflicting opinions. Some felt that establishing workplace processes made creativity irrelevant or even undesirable. Of course, different industries and roles require different skills. Employers in process-driven industries like manufacturing, or who managed workers in entry-level roles with routine tasks, placed less importance on creativity. On the other hand, employers who valued creativity recognized how creative workers could create process improvements or provide better customer service.

INSIGHT 3

Creativity & innovation are underrecognized strengths.

Why are creativity skills undervalued? One employer believed that employers' resistance to change could make them unwilling to entertain new ideas. Another possibility is that, for some people, 'creativity' conjures images of jobs in art, design, and marketing. But being able to come up with new ideas and think outside the box is a competitive advantage and a productivity booster in nearly all workplaces. Additionally, for many participants we spoke to, **problem solving and creativity were deeply connected.**



Many jobseekers with disabilities described themselves as highly creative people. Promoting these skills in the workplace has the potential to lead to new products, services, and business strategies. Creativity also improves efficiency – process improvements can help employees ‘work smart, not hard’. Creativity is also part of problem solving. Change and challenges are inevitable, whether in day-to-day tasks or strategic planning. Workers who can generate new and effective solutions are indispensable.

How Can Service Providers Support Skill Development?

All five transferable skills are valuable for workplace productivity and thriving, and they also enhance jobseekers' employability. By helping jobseekers with disabilities develop their transferable skills, service providers can support them to achieve and retain work.

Through *Research in STEAM*, we learned that having strong transferable skills can support jobseekers in their job search in a few ways:

- Strong communication skills help jobseekers **write application materials, succeed at interviews, and self-advocate** at all stages of employment.
- Adaptability, problem solving, and creativity and innovation help jobseekers **identify new learning opportunities or shift to different career paths**.
- Collaboration and adaptability help jobseekers **regulate emotions and work effectively with others**.
- Strong adaptability skills help jobseekers **persevere through setbacks** like rejection and maintain motivation.

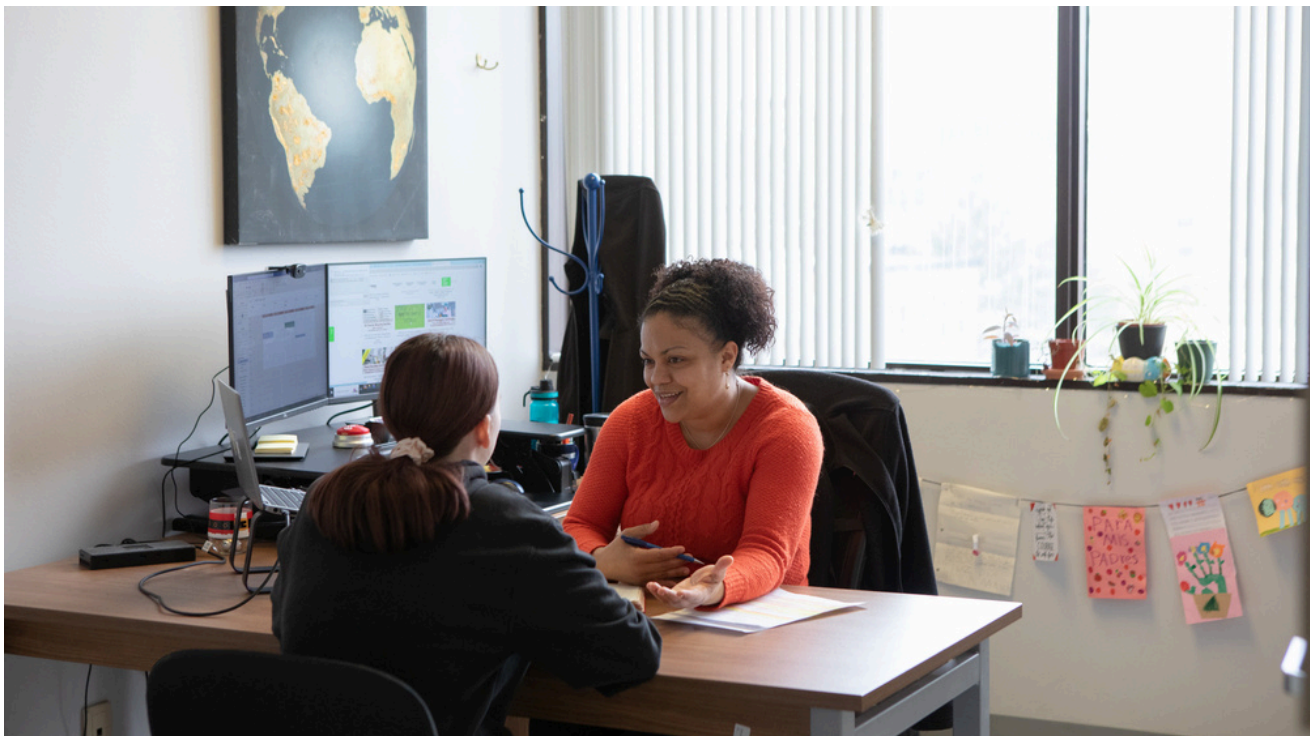


How Can Service Providers Support Skill Development?

Service providers of skills training for jobseekers with disabilities have several important roles. Providers can:

- Offer **effective, accessible transferable skills training**.
- Help jobseekers **recognize, apply, and demonstrate their strengths** in the workplace.
- **Advocate and educate employers** about disability-inclusive work and the strengths of workers with disabilities.

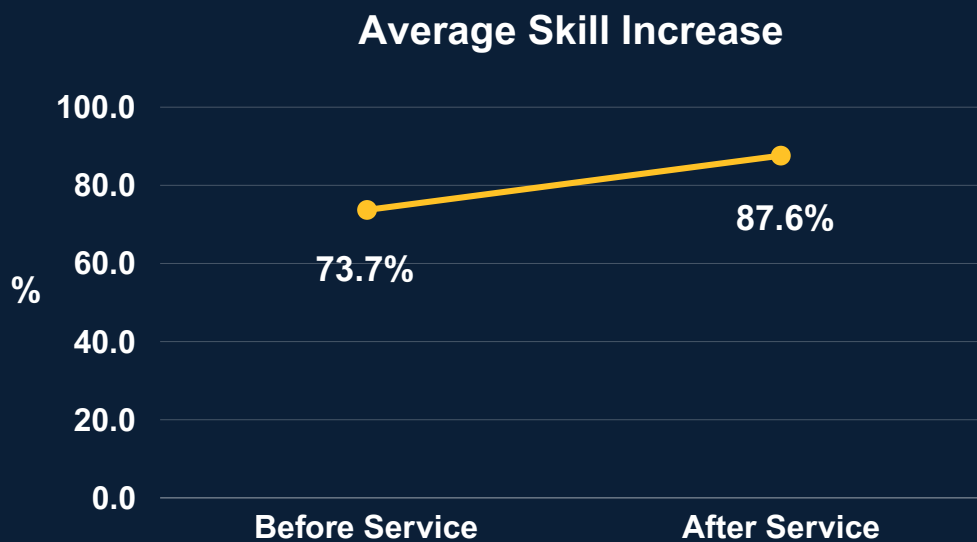
Next, we share three recommendations for service providers to effectively support jobseekers with disabilities to build and use transferable skills for employment success.



Implement effective, accessible skills training curricula.

‘Soft skills’ are sometimes viewed as personal qualities or personality traits that can’t be changed.

It’s important to recognize that adaptability, communication, collaboration, creativity, and problem solving are all transferable skills that can be **developed with education, training, coaching, and practice.**



Jobseekers reported how capable they were with course topics before and after completing eLearnings. Skill scores are averages of all courses clients took in a particular skill.

Note: Average above excludes collaboration due to insufficient data.

RECOMMENDATION 1

Implement effective, accessible skills training curricula.

Because the Skills for Success are foundational competencies, the five transferable skills cover many areas. CCRW's Adaptability curriculum, for example, includes training on prioritization, time management, stress management, accountability, developing a growth mindset, and coping with change (among others). Encourage clients to develop the skills that would most benefit them by facilitating **flexible, modular, and client-led learning plans**.

Regardless of your curriculum topics, remember that everyone will arrive with a different level of experience. Consider offering **tiered courses for learners at different levels** (e.g., beginner, intermediate, and advanced). For communication skills, for example, this could include courses on the foundations of body language and non-verbal communication, and advanced training on specialized topics like negotiating business deals.



Implement effective, accessible skills training curricula.

For service providers working with disability communities, provide **curriculum content tailored to community needs**. For example, communication courses aimed at building self-advocacy skills can support workers navigating disability disclosure and accommodations requests. Organizations are encouraged to consult with community members to develop and implement training to determine needs and collect feedback. For organizations supporting specific populations (e.g., neurodiverse jobseekers), feedback could inform training on unique topics of high value to the community or reveal accessibility considerations to improve delivery.

Providing content in a **variety of formats** (e.g., text, audio, visual) is a best practice that supports clients with different learning preferences. At the same time, training should be **designed with accessibility in mind**, allowing users to access alternative formats of learning materials (e.g., plain text versions of documents; transcripts of videos) and to toggle off features that could interfere with assistive technologies like screen readers.

Curriculum content is just one part of skill building. For more guidance on coaching the Skills for Success, including tips on building client-coach rapport and creating individualized training plans, service providers are encouraged to access CCRW's [*Coaching the Skills for Success Playbook*](#).^[3]

Support jobseekers to recognize and show their strengths.

Jobseekers often have many skills they've developed through education, previous work experiences, and daily life. However, sometimes individuals are not aware of all of their strengths, or don't know how their skills can be used in workplace settings. Service providers can help clients recognize, apply, and demonstrate the skills they already possess.

Through reflective exercises and storytelling, trainers and coaches can help **clients identify skills they use in daily life and connect them to the workplace**. For example, for a jobseeker who manages a busy schedule of personal health appointments and providing care to family members, coaches can encourage clients to reframe these activities as evidence of time management and prioritization skills. A jobseeker who often mediates conflict between peers could frame this as evidence of active listening and de-escalation skills.

CCRW staff found that **many jobseekers have developed strong transferable skills** - especially **adaptability** - over the course of their lives.

RECOMMENDATION 2

Support jobseekers to recognize and show their strengths.

The STAR method is one technique to turn personal strengths into narratives that apply to the workplace.[4] In the STAR method, jobseekers break down a scenario by explaining the context of the **situation**, the **task** they took responsibility for, the **actions** they took to meet the goal, and the positive **result** they achieved. Providers can also help clients learn to interpret job descriptions to identify relevant transferable skills and coach them on how to provide supporting examples from their experiences.



In addition to building on strengths, trainers and coaches can help clients recognize growth areas so that clients can select skills training that will be most valuable for their career goals.

RECOMMENDATION 2

RECOMMENDATION 3

Educate and advocate to undo misconceptions and promote disability-inclusive work.

Community organizations and service providers have an important role to play as allies and advocates for jobseekers with disabilities. By educating employers on the diversity of skills and talents workers with disabilities can offer and helping undo common myths, providers can help advance workplace inclusion.

Unfortunately, biases and misconceptions persist. Employers can be reluctant to provide accommodations, uncomfortable navigating conversations about disability, fearful of risks, or misinformed about how diverse the experience of disability is. When it comes to transferable skills, we learned through *Research in STEAM* that some employers still paint all workers with disabilities with the same brush – for example, believing they are not capable of adapting to change, or that they are unable to solve problems on their own.



Educate and advocate to undo misconceptions and promote disability-inclusive work.

One of the key messages for employers is that **every worker is unique** (whether they have a disability or not). One worker with a disability may find adapting to new processes challenging, but is highly efficient and skilled at managing their time; another may have difficulty remembering deadlines, while also being flexible and a quick learner. And, most importantly, both workers would thrive in a role that fit their strengths and provided support to remove barriers. The first worker may need nothing more than a supervisor who communicates changes proactively and clearly; the second may only need additional reminders or a task management tool.

Relatedly, **employers have a responsibility to demonstrate transferable skills** with their employees and to **evaluate applicants and workers in an objective and inclusive way**. As advocates, service providers who liaise between workers and employers can help both parties navigate each other's communication styles and reach mutual understanding. Providers can also educate employers on how to evaluate skills objectively, and why it is important not to rely on 'instinct' or 'gut feelings' to inform decisions.

Finally, providers can be advocates for recognizing non-traditional **evidence of transferable skills** – the ways that life experiences outside of the workplace can cultivate strengths like resilience, critical thinking, and cooperation.

RECOMMENDATION 3

Educate and advocate to undo misconceptions and promote disability-inclusive work.

By combining these recommendations for curriculum design, confidence building, and employer advocacy and pairing them with effective coaching techniques, service providers can empower jobseekers with disabilities to recognize their potential and confidently apply their skills in the workplace.



Other Resources

Interested in discovering more about employer disability confidence or how to coach and train the Skills for Success? Check out some of our other resources below.

[Learn more about CCRW's Research here.](#)



[Coaching the Skills for Success Playbook](#)

The SFS Playbook shares best practices for coaching and teaching the SFS with jobseekers with disabilities, including building rapport, effective instruction techniques, and using client-led approaches.

<https://ccrw.org/coaching-the-skills-for-success-playbook/>

[Disability Confidence Toolkit](#)

The Disability Confidence Toolkit is a resource to empower and educate employers on their journey towards fostering disability confidence within their organizations.

<https://toolkit.ccrw.org/>

[Untapped Talent](#)

Untapped Talent is an online job board that connects job seekers with disabilities to meaningful employment opportunities from disability-confident employers across Canada.

<https://www.untappedtalent.ca/>



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