

Communiversity

**Aligning HIRED Workshops with Work Readiness
Standards**

Prepared in partnership with
HIRED

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Aligning HIRED Workshops with Work Readiness Standards

“Workforce development will be crucial to Minnesota’s
economic future.”

– *Tom Stinson, Minnesota State Economist*

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Purpose

The purpose of the “Aligning HIRED Workshops with Work Readiness Standards” research study is to help HIRED trainers and managers assess HIRED’s current work readiness skills workshops. The goal is to make these workshops consistent with current work readiness standards and meet the needs of HIRED’s job-seeking customers. Also, to standardize the training throughout HIRED’s many programs and locations.

Research Question

How can HIRED provide and create successful job training classes that increase client’s effectiveness and retention in the workplace? What skills do HIRED’s trainers need to address in workshops to assure that all of HIRED’s job seeking customers meet current work-readiness standards and are able to secure and retain employment that enables them to support themselves and their families? How can HIRED’s trainers most effectively address the skill needs of HIRED’s job seeking customers?

Objectives:

- a. Determine the skills Twin Cities Metro employers most want in employees
- b. Determine what clients need for successful employment
- c. Determine what training modules are effective for clients
- d. Create recommendations for training programs based on findings

Research Design

1. Literature Review

- a. What current job readiness standards exist? Define “work readiness”
 - i. What programs currently exist and what are their levels of success?

- ii. What research has been done into job training effectiveness with at risk populations?
- iii. What are the current employment statistics for the Metropolitan area?
- iv. What entry level jobs are in demand?
- b. Research benefits of work readiness credentialing.
 - i. Explore 4 skill areas of test
 - ii. Explore WRC efforts locally
- c. Find statistics related to job training in the Twin Cities and nationally.

2. Interviews:

- a. Interview HIRED staff about history of program, staffs' perception of effectiveness of job training programs, what client training needs are?
 - i. Interview managers, ESD staff and business development coordinators, placement staff to identify sectors of employment that HIRED places clients
 - b. Interview employers: what are their current needs? What skills do they most want in workers at entry level positions?
 - c. Interview clients:
 - i. What skills do they need to be effective workers?
 - ii. What makes a training program worth attending?
 - iii. What have they found helpful/not helpful in past trainings/classes?
 - iv. What barriers exist that keep clients from being employed?
 - d. Interview other stakeholders/experts as identified in the literature review and research.
- ## 3. Review existing curriculum and training services. Look for possible redundancies and methods for collaboration.
- a. Create a library of existing curriculum

Work Readiness

The leading definition of work readiness comes from the National Work Readiness Council. They have developed a certification exam of work readiness as defined by employers. The test includes four modules: situational judgment, oral language, reading with understanding and using math to solve problems. The test is also based on a business-defined standard of the critical skills needed by entry-level workers to:

- a. Complete work accurately, on time and to a high standard of quality
- b. Work in teams to achieve mutual goals and objectives
- c. Follow work-related rules and regulations
- d. Demonstrate willingness to work and show initiative
- e. Display responsible behaviors at work, including avoiding absenteeism and demonstrating promptness”

“Forty percent of job applicants lack the basic skills necessary to perform entry-level work” (Mizereck, 2006).

The National Work Readiness Council has created a list of nine critical skills that define an employee as “work ready”. “Businesses from across industry sectors identified these skills as critical for entry-level workers to succeed in today's workplace and global economy” (Mizereck, 2006).

1. Speak so others can understand
2. Listen actively
3. Solve problems and make decisions
4. Cooperate with others

5. Resolve conflicts and negotiate
6. Observe critically
7. Take responsibility for learning
8. Read with understanding
9. Use math to solve problems

Client Interviews:

26 clients from five programs were interviewed. The programs were: Customer Service and Clerical Skills, Goals, Adult WIA, Service First, and Fresh Start. These programs are located at Sabathani, Griggs-Midway, Brooklyn Park and the 1200 office. A summary of the results are in the appendix to this report. 26 respondents is a small sample size compared with the total number of clients served annually by HIRED. Although the response rate is not statistically significant due to the small sample size, we believe that the results are an important snapshot of clients' response.

Overall clients reported themselves as being very motivated to work. They overwhelmingly reported that it is difficult for them to find employment and this is because of: criminal records, lack of experience, the economy and lack of transportation. The majority of respondents did not believe that it is hard for them to keep a job once they have one. However, about 40% of clients did say it was hard to keep a job. The most common answer was that the work was unsatisfying or not meaningful. Other reasons that prevented them from keeping a job were: absenteeism, lack of transportation, and personal/family issues.

The clients were asked what further skills they needed to help them get a job. Many respondents said "none" or had no response. The next highest responses were: computer skills, a

college degree or CNA license. These responses show a large difference from what the Work Readiness Council, our employer interviews, and HIRED staff said is important skills for employment. This can be a sign that clients do not know or understand what skills are most important for them to be successful workers. There is a difference between what employers say they most want and need in an employee compared to what skills clients think they need to get and keep a job.

When clients were asked what HIRED can do to help them get a job the most common responses were: skills training, job leads, employer contacts, references and resume writing skills. Clients identified interviewing skills and resume writing as the most helpful skills they have learned in classes. Clients responded that they enjoyed the classes and that they found them useful. One respondent said that “these classes motivate and empower me”. Other respondents made positive comments about their instructors and staff. They commented that the staff was very helpful, that the staff motivated them and that they benefited from the time that staff would spend with them.

Many clients responded that they are interested in taking more classes from HIRED. “All HIRED programs are informational and I would attend many more.” The most requested classes are CNA, computers and job specifics. This shows that clients are placing a priority on learning specific job skills to help them get employed. However, this is different from the literature that says what is most important for entry level workers are “soft skills” (Houghton & Proscio, 2001).

There were no significant differences in responses between client groups. It appears that clients face many of the same challenges across groups. They all responded equally motivated. There were similar responses between the groups about what they want from HIRED. The only

major difference was that the Fresh Start group reported a higher amount of felony convictions as a barrier to employment. However, having a criminal record was a barrier for clients in many of the other program areas.

Staff Interviews

20 HIRED staffers were interviewed. Staff included managers, business development coordinators, employment counselors and trainers. The staff represented a variety of programs including: MFIP, EJJ, Fresh Start, WIA, Dislocated Worker, STEP, GOALS, Customer Service, Hospitality and Youth. A summary of responses from staff are included in the appendix of this report.

Staff reported that the most important needs clients have are: to get motivated, to get their life in order (housing, child care, transportation, mental/chemical health), and proficiency in soft skills such as: punctuality, attendance, conflict management, creative problem solving and confidence.

Most staff do not have effective contacts with employers. They reported that they do not have the time or the ability to make these relationships. Yet, a few staff do have good relationships with employers. They report that they have employers that will hire a client that they recommend. But, these staff reported that they are very hesitant to use these contacts. They said that some of their clients do not seem ready to enter the job market. Staff will not refer a client to an employer that they feel will not be successful. Staff are worried that if they refer a client who does not succeed in the job that it will ruin the relationship they have with that employer. Staff reported that there are very few clients they feel comfortable with referring.

Staff reported satisfaction with subsidized employment programs. They reported a higher success rate for clients that are able to go through subsidized work programs. The clients are able to practice skills learned in class and ease into the work environment. Subsidized employment is viewed as a bridge to full time employment. Workforce development literature supports the importance of employer relationships. Clients are more successful in keeping a job that comes as a result of a workforce development program referral (Harper-Anderson, 2008).

There are many factors in the lives of clients that keep them from being work ready that go beyond the scope and ability of HIRED staff. The staff expressed a frustration that they work hard to help their clients succeed but they cannot solve these greater problems (soft skills, poverty, and mental/chemical health). They also expressed the difficulty in changing client “attitudes”. A client cannot be forced to be motivated. They worry that clients are able to use their resume and interviewing skills to find a job but that the client will not be able, or doesn’t plan, to stay at the job for an extended period of time.

Overall, staff reported making strong connections and relationships with clients. They report that these strong relationships help them assist clients in finding meaningful employment. They also report (and clients did as well) that HIRED staff are an important and positive influence in clients’ lives.

Employer Interviews

Eleven employers were interviewed from a range of business sectors including health care, retail, food service, clerical, child care, technical, IT, warehouse, construction and libraries. The summary of employer responses is attached in the appendix of this report. The employers

were very direct and open about the skills they most need and look for in employees. It is encouraged to read their full surveys as well.

Employers overwhelmingly reported that the most important skills they need in employees are soft skills. These include: communication, conflict management, the ability to listen, dependable and reliable and the desire to learn and evaluate their performance. Multiple employers reported that specific job skills are less important than soft skills. They reported that they can teach job specific skills but they do not have the time to teach the more intangible soft skills. “The most important skill they need to succeed in this job is their commitment to the position. Like I said, we have pretty extensive training; we can teach them what they need to know on how to do the job. We can’t teach someone work ethic.”

Employers face many of the same problems with their employees. One employer said “reliability of candidates, and having them show up to work every day, on-time” is one of their greatest problems. Another employer said “gossiping and reliability.” A similar response from an employer was, “Lack of motivation, follow-thru, inflexibility, inability to adapt to changes. Missing deadlines, inability to work well with others- including customers, and inability to manage conflicts or communicate effectively.”

When asked what kind of training they wished employees had before starting work, one employer said, “interpersonal communication and problem solving.” Another said, “Business etiquette.” Other responses reflected the need for soft skills training such as, “Skills to address conflict- employee and customer” as well as “skills on being an effective listener.”

The skills most important to the employers we interviewed match very closely with the nine skills that are defined by the Work Readiness Council. These skills are: speak so others can

understand; listen actively; solve problems and make decisions; cooperate with others; resolve conflicts and negotiate; observe critically; take responsibility for learning; read with understanding; and use math to solve problems. “The primary concern of more than 80% of employers was finding workers with a good work ethic and appropriate social behavior: reliable, a good attitude, a pleasant appearance, and a good personality” (Cotton, 1993). Employers expressed a willingness to hire HIRED clients if they knew the clients possessed these skills. If HIRED can produce clients with these in demand skills it may be possible to build strong relationships with employers.

Curriculum Review

Curriculum material was collected from eight HIRED programs. These are: STEP, MFIP – Brooklyn Park, MFIP Sabathani, MFIP 1200, Fresh Start, RC MFIP, Health Careers MFIP Broadway, and Customer Service Professional. All classes in each program were classified into four categories. These categories are: Job Search, Life skills, WP Intelligence, and Job Basics.

It was found that Job Search classes make up about 50% of most programs. Job Search classes include: resume writing, applications, cover letters, etc. Life Skills comprise about 23% of each program. Work Place Intelligence consists of 15% of each program. Job Basics consists of 11%. This suggests that clients are spending the majority of their time learning skills that will help them get a job such as resume writing, but much less time on learning the soft skills that employers are asking for.

Job Search	50%
Life Skills	23%

Work Place Intelligence	15%
Job Basics	11%

One program had a much different distribution of classes. The Customer Service class spends much more time on soft skill and work skill development than the others. Customer Service spends only 6% of their time on job search skills. They spend 28% of their time learning Job Basics such as phone, computer and basic math skills. They spend 19% on Life Skills such as communication and conflict mediation. 9% is spent on Work Place Intelligence: office etiquette, office politics. They also spend 37.5% on industry specific training. The Customer Service program appears to be more aligned with training clients to be proficient in skills they need to be successful in the workplace.

Each program uses separate training schedules and material. There are many similar training modules that are covered in each program like resume writing, interviewing and soft skills but they are all slightly different. There is no standardized measurement of a client's progress that can be used to compare proficiency across all programs. There are no graduation tests or measurements of achievement. It cannot be proven that every client leaves HIRED programs with a certain set of skills and abilities.

Research states that soft skills cannot be taught in an hour or week long class. "The most successful training programs generally resist the temptation to treat soft skills as simply another discipline to be taught – and thus to relegate it to an hour of the day, a special exercise or a one-week module" (Houghton & Proscio, 2001). These programs organize their curriculum for practice and repetition of interactions that come up on the job like conflict management,

responding to criticism and working with a team. A principle is first taught in class and then is repeated in practice many times throughout the course.

Work skills are learned in a work environment and not in a classroom. Houghton and Proscio (2001) emphasize putting clients in as real as work like settings as possible. They highlighted four workforce development programs that immerse clients in either real work settings or mocks settings where clients practice work place skills while receiving feedback from instructors. This also gives clients the opportunity to practice team work in real life situations. “Learning the dynamics of mutual reliance and learning to adjust your habits to the needs and abilities of other people are indispensable to eventual success” (Houghton & Proscio, 2001).

They also stress the importance of establishing discipline of the workplace into all aspects of the training program. Rules for things like attendance, punctuality and clothing are strongly enforced during the training program. The authors noted that in role plays, it is very helpful to put clients in the employer’s role so that they learn to see why managers and supervisors require certain behavior and performance (Houghton & Proscio, 2001). We recommend that HIRED use interactive “real world” work situations to train clients in workplace skills.

It can be very helpful for clients to meet and hear from other successful people. It can be very empowering to have a former HIRED client come talk to a class about their struggles and success. “Trainees tend to draw lasting encouragement and positive examples from people who are doing well in the business world and will spend enough time to help them overcome barriers of intimidation or alienation” (Houghton & Proscio, 2001).

Many clients and staff reported that there are financial, family and mental/physical barriers that keep them from being employed. A client will not be able to hold down a job unless they have a basic level of stability in life. It is necessary to “maintain some network of supportive services, counseling, child care, health and other resources that people will need if they are to get a job and keep it” (Houghton & Proscio, 2001). HIRED staff reported that they have a stronger relationship with their clients than county financial workers or other case workers in the client’s life. Staff can use these relationships to help connect clients with needed services.

Recommendations

In our interviews, employers consistently rated soft skills such as communication, conflict management, hard working, and dependable as the most valuable skills for their employees to have. The most common problems they have with employees stem from the lack of these skills. HIRED staff reported that their clients leave HIRED with a good resume and interviewing skills but still lack the necessary soft skills to be successful employees. The clients themselves do not understand the need for or the importance of these skills. Clients understand the need for more training and proficiency in practical skills like computers but they do not realize that soft skills are more important to many employers. Throughout our interviews HIRED staff demonstrated a remarkable dedication to helping clients achieve. Clients are motivated to work and learn. They also value highly the encouragement and empowerment they receive from staff. The following are recommendations that build off the strengths of HIRED’s existing programs, the clients’ motivation, and the dedication of staff, to increase the amount of work ready clients.

1. Increase the availability of subsidized employment and internships.
2. Create more connections with employers that will accept HIRED clients.
3. This is a list of core skills and abilities that all HIRED clients should have upon graduation of a program, compiled from Cotton (1993).

BASIC SKILLS	HIGHER ORDER THINKING SKILLS	AFFECTIVE SKILLS
Oral communications (speaking, listening)	Problem Solving	Dependability/Responsibility
Reading, understanding and following instructions	Learning skills, strategies	Positive attitude toward work
Basic Math	Decision Making	Conscientiousness, punctuality, efficiency
Writing		Interpersonal skills, cooperation, working as a team member
		Self-confidence, positive self- image
		Adaptability, flexibility
		Enthusiasm, motivation
		Self-discipline, self- management
		Appropriate dress, grooming
		Honesty, integrity

		Ability to work without supervision
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4. Create a way to measure clients’ proficiency in these core work readiness skills. HIRED can use this assessment as a way to measure clients’ level of work readiness and also gauge how successful training programs are in teaching these skills.
5. Emphasize proficiency in work readiness skills with all clients. The following are seven principles to promote work readiness in job training programs (Houghton & Proscio, 2001).
 - a. Integrate soft skills training into every element of the curriculum.
 - b. Create work or work-like tasks and establish teams to complete them.
 - c. Put trainees in the employer’s role from time to time, so that by managing they can learn to be managed.
 - d. Establish the discipline of the workplace in all aspects of the program.
 - e. Recreate the physical environment of work to the fullest extent possible.
 - f. Give participants lots of opportunities to get to know successful people.
 - g. Support services and soft skills are not the same, but they go hand in hand. It is necessary to help clients with their economic, social and health problems if they are to succeed in learning job skills.
6. HIRED curriculum should devote a greater percentage of training on the recommended employability and soft skills that employers need most, instead of job search skills.

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