

Assessing Needs

Youth Live was launched by the Halifax Regional Municipality as a job and life skills development program for youth at risk, aged 16 to 30, who are motivated to improve their lives. Participants in the program earn money and gain hands-on experience working in various business initiatives that protect the environment and provide valuable services to the community. While each participant's circumstances are unique, they often face similar barriers to finding traditional employment, such as low education, lack of work experience, learning disabilities, mental health issues, difficult family situations or past conflict with the law. The objective of Youth Live is for participants to gain work experience, increase their confidence in their abilities, and learn how to transition into the workforce or further education, without depending on other social assistance programs or engaging in criminal activities to survive. The long term goal is for participants to be able to find and maintain employment.

An initial telephone interview is conducted with youth who apply to the program to make sure they understand that this is not a traditional job but, rather, a skills development program where they will receive daily coaching, guidance, support and feedback from staff, and will work on their essential skills.

Youth Live worked with the Career and Transition Services at the Nova Scotia Community College (NSCC) as part of an Essential Skills in the Workplace Services project. The NSCC approached Youth Live because it recognized that the program was a good model and could benefit from greater integration of essential skills. During the Essential Skills in the Workplace Services project, the NSCC worked with Youth Live staff (the program manager, the program generalists and team leaders) to help them understand the concept and

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importance of essential skills. A number of the Youth Live staff completed a voluntary Test of Workplace Essential Skills (TOWES) self-assessment to identify their own skill levels and areas for growth. Training sessions were arranged for all staff to build their skills in **oral communication** and **document use**. With a better understanding of how essential skills apply to work, learning and life, Youth Live staff are better prepared to help participants work on their own essential skills. Youth Live staff explain to participants that they are not just learning specific business operations (e.g. counting bottles), but they are also learning essential skills that they can carry with them and build on throughout their working lives.

When new participants begin the program, they meet with a program generalist individually to talk about what they hope to get from the program. They complete the Office of Literacy and Essential Skills' online indicator pre-tests for **numeracy**, **reading** and **document use** in order to assess their current skill levels. They also complete the self-assessments on **working with others** and **oral communication**. These informal assessments show participants the skill areas where they are doing well and where they could improve. The program generalist helps participants to set goals for improving their essential skills levels in relation to their long term goals.

Supporting Skills Development

Youth Live has 18 participants in the program at a time, who are brought in on a continuous basis. Participants work in the five business initiatives that the program operates. The initiatives provide community services, such as recycling programs and cleaning programs for properties that are in violation of municipal bylaws. Youth Live charges fees for

these services, off-setting the program's operating costs by approximately 50%. The program's funding comes partly from the Halifax Regional Municipality, and partly from the income generated through the businesses' operations fees for services. This social entrepreneurship is an important component of the program's success. Participants are

paid an hourly stipend, giving them a means to pay for basic necessities like food and shelter. This provides an opportunity for participants to focus on their personal development, rather than worrying about their livelihood.

Participants gain marketable job skills by working at these business initiatives, including: customer service; product processing and quality control; cash management; shipping and receiving; data collection; map reading and navigation; inventory control; building, ground and equipment maintenance; safe work practices; team work and leadership. Participants gain this practical experience in an environment where they also receive coaching. They learn how to conduct themselves appropriately in a work environment and work on improving their essential skills.

Throughout the 28 week program, participants have the opportunity to work in each of the operations. Once participants have settled into their first business operation, such as the Recyclable Material Collection Service operation for example, and are familiar with the various tasks in that operation, they complete a job skill assessment, a tool used by Youth Live and adapted to integrate essential skills. Team leaders observe participants' skills and challenges on the job,

Participants receive feedback on how they are performing in each operation and on how they are using and building their essential skills.

and then provide feedback to participants on how they are performing in each operation and on how they are using and building their essential skills. Participants receive additional coaching and support from the team leader in areas that are challenging and can meet with a program generalist one-on-one to improve their skills using practice and learning exercises and tip sheets.

There are also weekly group activities for participants to help them gain a better understanding and knowledge of essential skills. These learning modules on essential skills are ongoing throughout the program and participants are shown how the various tasks in each operation relate to essential skills. For example, reading hazardous materials signs, maps, charts and diagrams all relate to **document use**. Handling money and recording work hours requires **numeracy**. All of the essential skills are addressed to some degree in participants' daily actions and interactions with each other, supervisors and customers.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

Two of the biggest challenges for Youth Live are attendance and punctuality. Because of the many barriers faced by youth at risk, participants may have difficulty moving beyond their immediate barriers to understand how their choices and actions today can impact them long-term. The program tries to show them that they can make choices that will affect their future in a positive way, but first they have to show up. Demonstrating their commitment and reliability is a positive first step on their path to success.

Integrating essential skills into the program was also challenging. It required a lot of work to interpret the essential skills model and apply it to the day-to-day tasks and activities of the program. Fortunately, the essential skills coordinator

at the Nova Scotia Community College assisted throughout the process. The Youth Live program manager says that they may not have been able to maintain their commitment to integrating essential skills into the program without someone there to mentor and coach them through it.

"I got away from the bad people and bad things in my life. [The program] made me realize that my life isn't over – it's just started."

Youth Live participant

Outcomes and Impacts

Participants who complete the program demonstrate increased reliability, flexibility, motivation and initiative to achieve their future goals. In the program exit interviews, participants indicated increased self-confidence, improved social skills, and increased awareness and understanding of how to behave in the workplace.

Many participants go on to further employment or education/training after participating in the Youth Live program. Youth Live uses a program evaluation model to collect data on post-program outcomes. In the three-month post-program follow-up with participants who entered the Youth Live program in 2011, of the 33 participants available

*“I was lacking teamwork skills and **working with others**. That’s dramatically improved. I got to do some self-reflection while here and realized what I needed to improve on. I can now talk to others about things – my communication [skills] greatly improved.”*

Youth Live participant

Benefits for Participants
Increased confidence
Increased initiative
Improved teamwork
Better prepared for the workplace

for contact, 24 of them or 73% reported successful outcomes; of these, 16 participants were employed and 8 were in school or training.

Youth Live plans to create its own pre- and post- tests for **numeracy, document use** and **reading** using the actual work documents specific to the Youth Live program. The program manager sees the opportunity to further integrate essential skills into the program to help boost participants’ confidence in their skills and abilities and to help participants find meaningful employment, further their education, and choose a path to a better future. Youth Live plans to continue to make essential skills an integral part of the program in a real and tangible way, so that participants understand how essential skills will help them move forward in life and work.

Use as a Model

The program manager believes that the Youth Live model could be widely replicated. Since many youth at risk do not do well in a traditional classroom setting, the program manager feels that it is important to engage participants by providing practical, hands-on experience and learning. “Allowing the participants an opportunity to be actively involved in the operations while building their skills, and showing them the connections between the task they perform and how it builds their knowledge and essential skills keeps them interested and engaged.”

The program manager believes that the Youth Live program model could work with any number of different small business operations, such as a coffee shop or a courier service, not just recycling initiatives, so long as participants are given

the opportunity to develop skills in a tangible, hands-on work environment. The program manager indicated that there would be start-up costs for the business operations, and non-profit service providers who run programs for youth often rely on government funding. According to the program manager, the best chance for long term success is for the program to generate some income through the business operations, so as to be at least partly financially self-sustaining and not

This program succeeds in helping youth who do not do well in a traditional classroom setting because it provides practical, hands-on experience and learning at the same time.

completely dependent on outside funding sources, which may be reduced or withdrawn over time.

The program manager emphasized that while the business operation is the vehicle by which the program operates, the emphasis has to be placed on skills development rather than on profit. To do this the organization running the program must be committed to making essential skills a part of the organization's culture. This can be achieved through constantly and explicitly using the language, taking every opportunity to remind participants that what they are doing relates to essential skills, and showing them how these essential skills relate to their work experience, personal growth, skills development and future success. The more positive reinforcement participants receive, the stronger they will feel about their own potential for success.

Youth Live places importance on having staff who are not only business-minded, with the skills to run and supervise

KEY INGREDIENTS TO SUCCESS:

1. Hands-on learning
2. Program has means to be partly financially self-sustainable
3. Essential skills are embedded in the organization's culture
4. Staff provides well-rounded instruction and guidance

the business operations, but who are also good at teaching these skills to participants and providing them with guidance and mentoring. The program manager said, "At Youth Live, we have been fortunate to have a dedicated group of staff, many of whom have been with us for over 10 years, who are committed to the youth and the continuing evolution of the program."

Practical Tips to Help You Get Started

1. **Establish a network of partners that can help you to succeed.** Check out **Developing Partnerships to support Literacy and Essential Skills** for more information.
2. **Learn about resources available to assess essential skills needs and support skills development.** You can find free profiles, quizzes, checklists, workbooks and more on the **HRSDC website**.
3. **Create an action plan.** **Taking Action: A Guide** introduces a seven step process for developing and integrating essential skills training in the workplace. From performing a needs assessment, to selecting training techniques, and carrying out an evaluation, this guide can help prepare you to embed essential skills in your organization.

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