



An investment that works.

SOFT SKILLS READINESS TRAINING GUIDE

DEVELOPED FOR: REDF

Flying Whale Strategies

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PURPOSE:

To provide employment social enterprises (ESEs) with a self-guided tour of existing frameworks and curriculums for job readiness training and to help jumpstart the implementation process

with key background, resources, and considerations. The curriculum discussed in this toolkit are not supporting your hard or technical skill training, but rather soft skills that lead to job readiness. We are defining soft skills as: personal attributes, social abilities, and emotional intelligence competencies that enable individuals to navigate the workplace. We believe that soft skill training combined with the hard skills acquired by working in your ESE results in job readiness.

GLOSSARY:

Soft Skills: Personal attributes, social abilities, and emotional intelligence competencies that enable individuals to navigate the workplace.

Ex: Regulating emotions during a meeting, arriving at work on time, choosing appropriate footwear.

Framework: Research-based concepts that guide your soft skill training

Ex: Executive functioning skills are damaged by chronic stress. In order to teach soft skills, we need to move the needle on five cognitive functions.

Curriculum: Research-based concepts that inform a fully developed set of instructions for teaching a series of classes on soft skills.

Ex: An outline for activities, learning outcomes, and homework for an 8-week course on soft skills for the workplace.

Job Readiness: Professional and personal readiness to transition out of the ESE to another employer or into a permanent role at the ESE.

INTRODUCTION:

The idea of supporting job seekers with soft skills is not new. Workforce development efforts have prioritized soft skills since the late 20th century, featuring the importance of communication, time management, leadership, and teamwork. In today's labor market, skills-based hiring is a growing trend where companies focus on specific competencies rather than traditional qualifications, like degrees, when choosing candidates. Moreover, changes in today's labor market have caused a shift from compliance-based skills to problem-solving skills. With artificial intelligence able to take on more routine, manual tasks, experts predict that as many as 85 million jobs could be displaced. As new jobs emerge in response to this shift, employers are placing greater emphasis on soft skills like complex problem solving, critical thinking, creativity, adaptability, and emotional intelligence. Thus, it is essential that employment social enterprises (ESEs) help participants hone both technical and soft skills.

This list of curriculum and training frameworks has been curated to support these new developments, using the following criteria:

- **Soft skills that are needed in the new economy:** These resources highlight soft skills that job seekers can take with them, no matter what kind of role they find themselves in.
- **Soft skills that can be learned on shift:** These resources allow for the majority of training to be performed on shift—meaning that participants gain critical skills without facing additional costs or spending significant time outside of regular work hours. We know that employment social enterprise staff have numerous priorities competing for

their attention. These frameworks have been chosen to not only prepare participants to navigate the new economy but also to fit into the work you're already doing. The options that call for classroom support are helpful for those serving populations with specific and unique needs, and opportunities for one-on-one coaching are available to enhance programming.

Selecting a framework or curriculum for your workforce development program, allows you to develop a uniform implementation process. This means you can better measure and highlight what sets you apart as a workforce development organization. In addition, program participants can more easily articulate ways they've honed particular skills, making them more marketable candidates on their career journeys.

Start here:

When you're thinking about choosing a soft skill tool for your ESE, the first step is to consider your organization's belief system about what people need in order to become more employable. You will notice that the designers of each of the following frameworks and curriculum for soft skills operates from a belief system. Here are a few examples:

- Soft skills are about code switching. They are a necessary set of behaviors to fit into a culture that values perfectionism and paternalism.
- Everyone already has soft skills, we just need to apply them differently.
- Soft skills are about how we perform our work. We can always improve our performance.
- Chronic stress and trauma make it difficult to demonstrate soft skills. Using strategies to cope with stress will help us improve.
- Traditional approaches to soft skills training don't place enough emphasis on participants and what their needs are.

By naming your organization's beliefs about soft skills, you will choose a tool that supports the work you're doing and the impact you want to achieve. You will also ensure that employees understand the "why" behind soft skills training which helps increase buy in and effectiveness when implementing new materials.

Make a choice:

After identifying your organization's belief system about what people need in order to become more employable, you can dive into the lists of frameworks and curriculum we've put together. Below you'll find information about the driving theories behind these resources, where they could be implemented, logistical details you should consider, and any tools to help you with implementation. To help you make a choice, we've developed two rating systems to assess each framework. Keep in mind that although we've tried to rate them accordingly, each of them are valuable and what's right for one organization might not work for another.

Key for "Level of lift to implement"

- ☐ **Easy:** Out-of-the box curriculum
- ☐ **Medium:** Framework would need adaptation and contextualization
- ☐ **Advanced:** Includes concepts, not curriculum and would need significant adaptation and contextualization

Key for overall rating system: Our rating consideration takes into account factors such as: whether the theoretical framework clearly identifies soft skills, how well the soft skills align with those needed for “jobs that don’t yet exist,” how easy it is to implement on shift, whether it offers ready-to-go resources for implementation, and whether it adds insights and nuance for engaging particular populations. The maximum score is five.

FRAMEWORKS

What’s a framework?

A soft skills framework is a research-based set of ideas. It’s a list of concepts that researchers recommend considering when coaching or training individuals toward economic mobility. Frameworks are used to build curriculum, but they are not yet in the format of curriculum. We have selected the following frameworks to help social enterprise staff eliminate the guesswork of curating relevant soft skills training. The benefit of using a framework instead of a curriculum is that it allows you to use the concepts to build your own. It’s more flexible than a curriculum. Think of it as the architectural plans. Another benefit is that frameworks often provide methodology for coaches and trainers. For example, a framework might tell us, “If you want someone to overcome poverty, first you must understand how their brains work.” As social service practitioners, staff might find they already agree with many of the principles listed below. We recommend choosing a framework that best aligns with your organization’s theory of change or belief system. In some cases, you may choose to combine frameworks. For example, the Learn, Innovate, Improve framework can be layered with the Positive Youth Development framework to create a learning environment that values both learning and supporting the agency of youth.

In short:

Framework: Research-based concepts that guide your soft skill training

Ex: Executive functioning skills are damaged by chronic stress. In order to teach soft skills, we need to move the needle on five cognitive functions.

Curriculum: Research-based concepts that inform a fully developed set of instructions for teaching a series of classes on soft skills.

Ex: An outline for activities, learning outcomes, and homework for an 8-week course on soft skills for the workplace.

The Frameworks

- EMPath’s Mobility Mentoring
- Positive Youth Development
- Harvard’s Building Adult Capacities
- Executive Skills Approach
- Essential Skills & Dispositions

EMPath's Mobility Mentoring

Theory: Living in poverty causes chronic stress which challenges a person's executive functioning skills. Executive functioning skills like resilience, persistence, decision making, and goal setting are critical for retaining employment.

Summary/focus: Coaches support participants to enhance their decision making, persistence, and resilience over time. Coaches use the holistic Bridge to Self-Sufficiency tool that helps participants visualize their path to self-sufficiency, chart a path to economic independence, and make decisions in the context of their lives. Participants and coaches use the Bridge to Self-Sufficiency to identify short, medium, and long term goals and measure progress along the way. Goals are always participant-led, and over time, the coach needs to provide less support. Finally, participants should be recognized and celebrated for their achievements.

Medium:

- ☐ Online
- ☒ Classroom
- ☒ One-on-one
- ☒ On the job

Types of jobs it prepares for: Jobs that offer living wage/economic independence

Best applicable to these populations: Adults

Cost: Varies, based on type and size of organization and what the organization wants to do. Most ESEs would likely be Level 2, which includes access to training, technical assistance, communities of practice, and more. The annual cost for Level 2 is \$2,000.

Level of lift to implement: Advanced

Implementation resources:

- Bridge to Self-sufficiency resource which can be adapted or used as is
- Portal which includes access to learning materials for member organizations

Rating: 4/5

Is this for us?: This framework might be for your ESE if your staff are motivated by the belief that people can learn and change. Choose this framework if you'd like a personalized approach to serving participants and have time and staffing to meet one-on-one and make referrals. This framework might also be a good fit if you find that the individuals you serve face external barriers that make succeeding at work difficult, such as access to resources.

Positive Youth Development

Theory: Traditional workforce development initiatives for youth--that focus on removing barriers and general career readiness activities (resumes, interviewing)--are insufficient. They operate in isolation and don't consider the holistic needs of young people.

Summary/focus: Positive Youth Development (PYD) takes a whole-person approach, recognizes the challenges young people face, and aims to create a supportive environment that emphasizes skill development and links to school, family, work, and community, and the supportive relationships in those settings. PYD programs should work with youth to improve their:

- 1) Assets: Youth can access resources and tools to achieve their desired goals.
- 2) Agency: Youth are capable of identifying their own goals and charting a way toward those ends.

- 3) Contribution: Youth are engaged with their communities.
- 4) Enabling environment: The environments youth operate in (in this case, work) support their assets, agency, access to services, and opportunities.

Soft skills development should support both Assets and Agency.

Medium:

- ☐ Online
- ☒ Classroom
- ☒ One-on-one
- ☒ On the job

Types of jobs it prepares for: Participant-driven: Jobs that align with youth's goals

Cost: Free

Best applicable to these populations: Youth

Level of lift to implement: Advanced

Implementation resources:

- [PILOT tool](#) for organizations to assess readiness for implementation
- [PYD toolkit](#) from USAID, which includes cross-cultural considerations
- [Curriculum](#) intended to help staff become familiar with PYD
- [Case studies](#) of workforce development organizations implementing PYD

Rating: 2/5

Is this for us?: PYD might be a great fit for you if your organization serves youth. While the curriculum requires adaptation to a workforce development organization, it includes a plethora of best practices for engaging young people. An ESE could fully implement this framework if they had the capacity to offer classroom time and one-on-one sessions, or scale down and focus on the “Assets” and “Agency” portions of the framework on shift.

[Harvard's Building Adult Capacities](#)

Theory: Chronic stress makes it difficult for adults to act in ways that help them succeed at work. Adult brains can relearn the executive functioning and self-regulation skills they need to thrive. Workforce development organizations must be sure they aren't creating more stress for participants.

Summary/focus: Identifies [5 core life/soft skills](#) to train participants in: flexibility, planning, focus, self-control, and awareness. Urges organizations to consider the following components—focusing on creating less stressful environments and situations for participants:

- How folks access services
- How staff approach participants
- What supports can be implemented to increase access to services

Medium:

- ☐ Online
- ☐ Classroom
- ☐ One-on-one
- ☒ On the job

Types of jobs it prepares for: Jobs in fast-paced environments; jobs that don't exist yet

Cost: Free

Best applicable to these populations: Adults with adverse experiences of some kind

Level of lift to implement: Advanced

Implementation resources:

- [Building the Core Skills Adults Need for Life toolkit](#)
- [Building the Core Skills Youth Need for Life toolkit](#)

Rating: 3/5

Is this for us?: This framework could be a great fit for your ESE if you work with participants who have faced trauma or adverse experiences and would benefit from a focus on self-regulation strategies. Implementation does not require classroom time so could work well for organizations who need to prioritize on-shift soft skills training.

Executive Skills Approach

Theory: Workforce development programs often do not adequately account for the trauma/stress of those they serve and therefore do not equip participants to succeed in the workforce. By helping individuals inventory how adept they are at particular soft skills, this framework reveals where their strengths are and where additional growth is needed. Executive skills are widely considered to be equalizers: everyone - no matter their employment status - has executive skills they're either strong or weak in.

Summary/focus: Has five core tenets:

- Executive Skills knowledge
- Environmental modifications
- SMART goal tracking
- Coaching
- Incentives

Each component has the goals of reducing barriers to success and supporting participants to achieve personal and professional success.

Medium:

- ☐ Online
- ☐ Classroom
- ☒ One-on-one
- ☒ On the job

Types of jobs it prepares for: Jobs that require the executive skills in which a participant is strongest

Best applicable to these populations: Highly client-centric so can be customized as needed.

Cost: Free

Level of lift to implement: Medium

Implementation resources:

- [Toolkit](#) to assess organizational readiness to implement
- Worksheets and thought exercises to support organizations in implementing each phase (e.g. modifying their environment, tracking goals, etc.).
- [Executive Skills Profile](#) and Executive Skills [definitions](#)
- [Executive Function library](#): Contains case studies, resources, and tools for implementation

Rating: 4/5

Is this for us?: If you found yourself nodding along with the theories behind Harvard’s Developing Adult Capacities or Mobility Mentoring, but are concerned about the level of adaptation required for implementation, the Executive Skills Approach might be a great fit! This framework takes a similar angle but includes more tools specific to a social enterprise setting. It is a great fit for organizations who rely primarily on the training that occurs on shift but can spare occasional one-on-one time. The executive skills highlighted in the profiles participants complete are highly marketable and transferable to other job opportunities.

Essential Skills & Dispositions

Theory: “Readiness” cannot be measured solely by the needs of the job market or knowledge acquisition but must include certain skills that equip participants to navigate their world. Collaboration, communication, self-direction, and creativity are skills that must be included in learning opportunities and intentionally taught for participants to be successful.

Summary/focus: This resource unpacks each of the four skills—defining that contributing components and showing the progression one can make as they portray that particular skill more and more effectively.

Medium:

- ☐ Online
- ☐ Classroom
- ☒ One-on-one
- ☒ On the job

Types of jobs it prepares for: Customer-facing; Jobs that don’t exist yet

Cost: Free

Best applicable to these populations: Youth, adults

Level of lift to implement: Medium

Implementation resources:

- To create a tool for implementation, ESE staff should identify criteria for each of the essential skills—in alignment with what they would want staff to exemplify on shift. For example, a few attributes for “communication” might be: “responding to messages from colleagues, following through, or keeping an open mind to feedback.”
- After staff have identified criteria for each skill, they should identify opportunities for teachable moments of each on shift.
- Finally, staff should choose an assessment tool that they will use to measure progress in each skill, such as a leveling matrix that describes what a staff member should exemplify at levels 1, 2, and 3 or a feedback sheet with areas of growth and success for each skill.

Rating: 4/5

Is this for us?: This framework is for you if you need help deciding which soft skills to prioritize. While this framework has fewer resources like toolkits and worksheets available and therefore requires an initial time investment to create those, once ESEs decide what skills to prioritize and train for, this framework is the one that fits most seamlessly into existing operations. If you can’t afford any classroom or one-on-one time, this framework is for you.

Learn, Innovate, Improve (LI2)

Theory: Our organization’s staff or the participants themselves are best equipped to identify the soft skills learning that would be helpful to promote job readiness.

Summary/focus: Learn, Innovate, Improve (LI2) is a framework designed to help human services organizations enhance their programs through a structured process of learning, innovation, and continuous improvement. The LI2 approach emphasizes data-driven decision-making, collaboration, and an iterative process to ensure programs are both effective and responsive to participant needs. Using the LI2 Toolkit to design a soft skills training program in an ESE would involve:

- Assessing participants' needs and gathering input from employees and program staff on soft skill gaps.
- Developing and piloting training solutions tailored to the work context and participant needs, such as workshops or mentoring.
- Evaluating the training for effectiveness, refining it based on feedback, and allowing for ongoing adjustments to improve outcomes.

Medium:

- ☐ Online
- ☒ Classroom
- ☒ One-on-one
- ☒ On the job

Types of jobs it prepares for: N/A - this toolkit guides practitioners to design a soft skills training approach but does offer an approach in and of itself.

Cost: Free

Best applicable to these populations: Populations that will share openly and honestly about employment needs.

Level of lift to implement: Advanced

Implementation resources:

- The LI2 report describes the framework and provides case studies to help practitioners understand the approach and generate buy in from colleagues.
- Includes worksheets for each step of the process that leaders can use to collect feedback, make decisions, and plan next steps.
- The toolkit authors are part of consulting firms which offer services to support organizations in walking through this process.

Rating: 2/5

Is this for us? This framework is for you if feedback from participants and staff is the most important indicator for choosing an approach to soft skills training. It's important to note that this toolkit guides practitioners through the process of collecting feedback and making data-driven decisions but does not provide specific insight on how to teach soft skills. Findings from this approach would help leaders understand what kind of training would be most relevant but would still need to design or select an actual training approach.

In Short

Name	Summary	Rating	Level of Lift	Types of Jobs
Mobility Mentoring	Executive functioning skills like resilience, persistence, decision making, and goal	4	Advanced	Jobs that offer a living wage and contribute to

	setting are critical for retaining employment.			economic independence
Positive Youth Development	Soft skills development focuses on increasing a youth's assets and agency	2	Advanced	Jobs aligned with participants' goals
Building Adult Capacities	Identifies 5 core life/soft skills to train participants in: flexibility, planning, focus, self-control, and awareness.	4	Medium	Fast-paced environments; jobs that don't exist yet
Essential Skills and Dispositions	Collaboration, communication, self-direction, and creativity are skills that must be included in learning opportunities and intentionally taught for successful employment	4	Medium	Customer-facing; Jobs that don't exist yet
Learn, Innovate Improve	Helps human services organizations enhance their programs through a structured process of learning, innovation, and continuous improvement.	2	Advanced	N/A

CURRICULUM

What's a curriculum?

Soft skills curriculum are lesson plans, learning outcomes, and assessments packaged for use in a training environment. In most cases, the selected curricula equip social enterprise staff to teach soft skills by providing ready-to-implement materials. They may be especially helpful for those who can allot classroom time for participants.

The Curricula

Accenture's Skills to Succeed Academy

Chicago Jobs Council Career Readiness Curriculum

Higher/Switchboard: Job Readiness Training

[Accenture's Skills to Succeed Academy](#)

Theory: People who are unemployed are not conditioned for the job search and placement process. They need to learn the hidden norms of looking for a job and performing in the workplace so they can behave differently and succeed.

Summary: Offers 36 modules and content is curated based on the initial prompt the user selects and where they are in their career journey: "Choose a Career," "Getting a Job," and "Success in Work." ESEs would likely focus on "Success in Work" for teaching soft skills to their employees. By completing workforce development training online, participants also hone digital

literacy skills. The asynchronous modules allow participants to learn wherever and whenever it is convenient for them.

Medium:

- ☒ Online
- ☐ Classroom
- ☐ One-on-one
- ☐ On the job

Types of jobs it prepares for: Highlights digital/tech jobs as well as jobs that involve remote/virtual work

Best applicable to these populations: Folks with sufficient digital literacy skills

Cost: Free

Level of lift to implement: Easy

Implementation resources:

- Online modules that are ready to use
- Option for learners to export progress to program staff

Rating: 1/5

Is this for us?: This curriculum is for you if the individuals you serve only need help with the job search. In addition, they must have digital literacy skills, laptop or mobile phone access, and reliable WiFi. It might be a great fit if your learners value flexibility and learning on their own time. Be sure to consider whether a focus on job search soft skills are sufficient for your participants or if you need to integrate elements from another curriculum.

[Chicago Jobs Council Career Readiness Curriculum](#)

Theory: The current labor market perpetuates structural racism, white supremacy, and individual bias, cloaked as “employability” and “professionalism.” Naming the role that white supremacy culture plays in job seeking allows us to abandon narratives of “failure” and individualism and shift to a client-centered approach that honors the experiences of jobseekers.

Summary/focus: This curriculum is built on brain science and trauma-informed care and provides strategies for facilitating through a racial equity lens. The Chicago Jobs Council identifies the following as key to a successful job readiness program:

- 1) executive function skills
- 2) client-led goal attainment
- 3) coaching approach

Participants begin with an overview of the job search process and the driving assumptions that have become normative, identify skills, create resumes, apply for jobs, and review interview strategies.

Medium:

- ☐ Online
- ☒ Classroom
- ☒ One-on-one
- ☐ On the job

Types of jobs it prepares for: All. It also prepares people to identify a preferred job

Best applicable to these populations: Adults. Includes nuances for immigrants, returning citizens, and individuals with felonies.

Cost: Free

Level of lift to implement: Easy

Implementation resources:

- Out of the box [curriculum](#) includes lesson plans, slide deck, and handouts.

Rating: 4/5

Is this for us?: This curriculum is for you if the bulk of your training can take place in a classroom and you have a staff member whose primary responsibility is planning and teaching classes. If you appreciate the theory but don't have classroom time, you can integrate the core executive function skills on-shift by applying them practically and in real time if you are willing to identify stations and tasks that might be appropriate for teaching key workplace readiness and executive function skills.

Higher/Switchboard: Job Readiness Training

Theory: The most important soft skills for refugees are those that support integration with U.S. workplace norms. By building awareness of U.S. workplace norms, refugees will become more employable.

Summary/focus: This curriculum serves as an orientation to the job search process and covers key components such as creating a resume, identifying skills, applying and interviewing for jobs, and networking. Examples of soft skill training included:

- Body language
- Flexibility
- Problem-solving
- Becoming a team-player
- Envisioning your long-term pathway

Medium:

- ☐ Online
- ☒ Classroom
- ☐ One-on-one
- ☐ On the job

Types of jobs it prepares for: First-time, entry level jobs in the US

Best applicable to these populations: Refugees & immigrants

Cost: Free

Level of lift to implement: Easy

Implementation resources:

- Out-of-the box curriculum
- Complementary resources available on Switchboard's [website](#), like this research [brief](#) for workforce development organizations focused on career development

Rating: 3/5

Is this for us?: This curriculum could be a helpful fit for you if your social enterprise serves refugees and immigrants who need an orientation to the process of searching for and beginning a job in the United States. Staff should consider whether they have sufficient classroom time and a teacher to cover the material. Like some of the other out-of-the-box curriculums, staff

should consider whether this material includes all soft skills they'd like learners to leave their program with, or if supplementation is needed.

In Short

Name	Summary	Rating	Level of Lift	Types of Jobs
Accenture's Skills to Succeed Academy	Offers 36 online modules based on the initial prompt the user selects and where they are in their career journey.	1	Easy	Digital/tech jobs as well as jobs that involve remote/virtual work
Chicago Jobs Council Career Readiness Curriculum	Built on brain science and trauma-informed care and provides strategies for facilitating through a racial equity lens.	4	Easy	All
Higher/Switchboard: Job Readiness Training	Serves as an orientation to the job search process and covers key components such as creating a resume, identifying skills, applying and interviewing for jobs, and networking.	3	Easy	First-time, entry level jobs in the US

SUMMARY

By offering soft skills training, ESEs generate job readiness. Frameworks and curriculum serve as road maps for ESEs by helping them to clarify their beliefs about what makes someone employable, identify a process for implementing soft skills training and measure and track impact more clearly.