



**Future Skills Centre**

Centre des **Compétences futures**

Project Insights Report

# Future-Proofing the Food and Beverage Processing Workforce



## PARTNERS

Food Processing Skills Canada



## LOCATIONS

New Brunswick  
Newfoundland and Labrador  
Nova Scotia  
Prince Edward Island



## INVESTMENT

\$2,134,491



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## ☰ Executive Summary

The food and beverage processing sector faces challenges in finding and retaining skilled workers.

Using its industry-validated [Learning and Recognition Framework](#), Food Processing Skills Canada developed the STAC program to address the skill gaps and training needs of the industry. The program offered online courses that covered technical and social-emotional skills for different groups of workers. It also provided support and resources to employers and participants.

The STAC pilot program was most successful in recruiting and training supervisors in the food and beverage processing industry. Program graduates said their skills improved in providing positive and corrective feedback, listening, being able to ask people to do things or for things that they need, and supporting their teams to make quick adjustments. More than 90% of graduates would recommend the STAC program to other supervisors.

The STAC pilot program has many lessons for other sectors facing similar challenges in recruitment, retention, and turnover, with limited HR capacity. The results are also relevant to discussions on how to support SMEs to engage in training for their employees. The positive outcomes of this pilot project led to its expansion nationwide with ESDC's support.

### KEY INSIGHTS

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330 participants participated in the STAC pilot program, with 266 enrolling in the supervisor learning stream.

- 2 89% of participants who responded to the post-program survey said their supervisory skills had improved because of the STAC program.
- 3 65% of employers that participated in the STAC pilot were small-medium enterprises with fewer than 50 full-time staff.

## The Issue

Almost half of employers surveyed in the food and beverage processing sector in 2020 had significant challenges finding people with the right skills and training to fill their vacant positions. Gaps in “soft skills,” or social-emotional learning areas, were most pressing. This experience is well documented in the industry-validated [Learning Recognition Framework \(LRF\) for the food and beverage industry](#) based on National Occupational Standards. Key to the LRF and consistently highlighted in the sector’s ongoing labour market information research has been the importance and priority of social emotional learning in addition to technical skills and knowledge at all levels within companies.

There are several considerations when designing a training solution for the food and beverage processing sector. Firstly, many entry-level positions require very little or no post-secondary training, so the workforce has limited experience with formal training and education. Secondly, most training is currently done in-house with on-the-job training techniques, resulting in the sector having less experience of collaborating on training initiatives. Thirdly, any training and skill development has to be interwoven and accommodated within very busy processing environments with multiple shifts within a 24-hour period, which are often short-staffed with employees working long hours. Despite these challenges, employers in this sector feel that many of the occupations in demand require specific skills and see training as a strategy to encourage career development and retention of workers in the industry.



## What We Investigated

This project developed and implemented a three-year Skills Training Atlantic Canada (STAC) pilot program to advance workforce development for food and beverage processors in Atlantic Canada. The purpose of the STAC pilot was to develop skill sets among current employees that would help both employees and employers successfully adapt to the anticipated and ongoing challenges of increased industry growth, disruption due to technological industry advancements, and an aging workforce.

Intended for new hires, seasonal workers, frontline workers, and supervisors in the food and beverage processing sector, STAC's course curriculum was aligned with [Canada's Learning and Recognition Framework for the food and beverage industry](#) to ensure the most progressive learning environment and raise the bar for industry workforce development. Courses included foundational training in food safety and quality assurance, workplace essentials, courses at the supervisory level, and a comprehensive program focused on social emotional learning skills like communication, leadership, problem-solving, and teamwork.

Initially planned as a blended training model with in-person sessions, the program transitioned to an exclusively online model due to the COVID-19 pandemic. These online courses were self-paced, accessible 24-7, and tailored to the needs and backgrounds of four main groups of workers: supervisors, new hires/seasonal workers, established frontline workers with a high school diploma, and established frontline workers without a high school diploma. Participants were required to have a sufficient grasp of English, sufficient literacy levels, and adequate computer skills to complete the online courses.

This program was made available at no cost to food and beverage processing businesses in Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick, and Newfoundland & Labrador. Employers received considerable support implementing the STAC program, including: live onboarding sessions with employers and participants, assigned STAC support personnel, STAC kits and learning aids such as workbooks, online employee and employer portals linked to the learning management system, and Chromebooks.

Anticipated outcomes for individual participants included increased skills and knowledge, opportunities to practice and develop skills in the workplace, more job satisfaction, and improved job performance.

Anticipated outcomes for organizations included improvements in working relationships, team performance/productivity, workplace culture and communication, and in various sector-specific areas such as food safety, quality assurance/control, and sanitation.

## **What We're Learning**

330 people participated in the STAC pilot program, with 266 of them taking the supervisor stream. There were 57 participants in the established frontline workers with a high school diploma stream; three in the established frontline workers without a high school diploma stream; and four in the new hires/seasonal learning stream. Approximately 1 in 10 of the participants reported having had no training for their current role, either as supervisors or frontline workers.

45 employers participated in the STAC pilot program, 46% of which had been in operation for more than 25 years. All participating employers said they offered on-the-job training prior to their beginning with the program.

### **Starting with supervisors**

The supervisor stream was the most popular among the four streams, accounting for 81% of the enrolled participants and most of the graduates. This was consistent across nearly all employers, despite the numbers of supervisors being significantly fewer than frontline workers. This was some of the first structured training for these companies, and supervisors wanted to be trained first before involving other team members. Of participants who responded to the post-program survey, 89% said their supervisory skills had improved because of the STAC program, including providing positive and corrective feedback, listening skills, being able to ask people to do things or for things that they need, and supporting their teams to make quick adjustments. Of supervisor graduates, 93% reported using what they learned in STAC in their current job with 50% using the knowledge and skills often. Overall, 94% of participants in the supervisor stream would recommend the STAC program to other supervisors. Interestingly, there were significant differences between the younger and older supervisors in terms of their satisfaction and outcomes from the STAC training with the younger supervisors reporting less positive effects than the older supervisors.

## Balancing virtual, asynchronous learning with in-person support

The transition to exclusively online learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic proved useful in managing the self-paced nature of learning for some participants, and for accommodating training within busy schedules and workplace requirements. However, there may be some components of the STAC program, and some participants who may have benefitted from in-person training as well. This included the learning platform itself. Considerable effort was made developing the learner-user interface to ensure individual participants could find their way through the system, have access to their own learning pathway, and get updates on their progress. In addition, a learner support system was created for participants to contact STAC resource people for technical or content questions.

## Extra support required for SMEs

Small-medium enterprises with fewer than 50 full-time staff made up 65% of employers that participated in the STAC pilot. This meant they had limited in-house human resources and needed considerable support in implementing and delivering training to their staff. As a result, STAC was designed to be relatively easy to participate in from the perspective of the employer, with a dedicated team of resource people assigned to various regions and employers to assist with registration, follow-ups, and communications. This support also included devices to facilitate the training: 71% of participating employers asked for Chromebooks to support their STAC participants' training.

## ★ Why It Matters

This project and its well-documented evaluation has relevant learnings for decision-makers across the skills ecosystem, including training/education institutions, employers, employer councils and policy makers. Learnings are not specific to the food and beverage processing sector and are likely adaptable to other sectors facing similar challenges in recruitment, retention and turnover, with a limited HR capacity.

To build effective training solutions, the results of the STAC pilot encourage workforce training initiatives to:

- Use standards-based, industry-validated frameworks as the basis for the development of training programs.
- Design easy, flexible, and supported training programs that acknowledge limited HR capacity, busy schedules and diverse preferences.
- Implement a blended training model that combines in-person and on-line sessions with a user-friendly learning platform with clear navigation, personalized pathways, progress updates, and learner support.
- Include content on social emotional learning as well as technical and industry-specific skills.



### State of Skills: Unleashing AI into the skills development ecosystem

To reap the benefits that AI has to offer, its adoption and deployment should be a collaborative and inclusive process that recognizes and addresses genuine concerns individuals have about AI and technology more broadly.

[Read Thematic Report](#)

The STAC pilot also holds lessons for how to support SMEs in implementing training with their existing workforces. Decision-makers looking to support SMEs should build in appropriate resources to provide intensive support to companies they expect to participate in the training.

## ► What's Next

Food Processing Skills Canada partnered with industry associations, large employers, and post-secondary institutions to expand STAC nationally through ESDC's Sectoral Workforce Solutions Program. This increased investment has resulted in an updated, and improved version of STAC available to all Canadian food and beverage manufacturers since Spring 2023; increased partnerships with additional industry associations to get them involved with promoting STAC nationally; and greater awareness of the Learning and Recognition Framework aligned training among relevant industry trainers and colleges. The national STAC program will further test the findings of the pilot on larger samples with more diverse companies and a multitude of workplace settings and regions.

Have questions about our work? Do you need access to a report in English or French? Please contact [communications@fsc-ccf.ca](mailto:communications@fsc-ccf.ca).

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