



Project Insights Report

Assessing and Developing Workplace Employability Skills with ESAT



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LOCATIONS

Alberta
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☰ Executive Summary

Canada's labour market increasingly demands strong social and emotional skills (SES), such as adaptability, communication, and teamwork, as workers navigate technological change, shifting employer expectations, and ongoing labour shortages. Yet adult learners often lack structured opportunities to build these skills, and service providers have limited tools to assess SES development in meaningful, consistent ways. To address this gap, Futureworx created the Employability Skills Assessment Tool (ESAT), a digital platform designed to strengthen self-awareness, support behavioural growth, and provide instructors with a shared language for discussing SES.

Across three phases of research, this project examined how ESAT is used, what outcomes it generates, and what evidence is needed to test its impact rigorously. Phase 1 explored how organizations implemented ESAT and identified early signs of increased self-awareness and skills growth among participants. Phase 2 expanded this work through a multi-year mixed-methods evaluation involving 15 organizations and 85 program cohorts. Findings showed that participants experienced measurable SES improvements, staff viewed ESAT as a valuable complement to training, and higher implementation fidelity was linked to stronger participant satisfaction. Phase 3 then established a theory of change and outlined how a future randomized controlled trial could determine ESAT's causal impact on employment outcomes.

Together, the findings offer important insights for workforce development policy and practice. They show that SES development is both teachable and measurable, and that structured assessment tools can enhance job-readiness supports across community agencies and post-secondary institutions. They also demonstrate that delivering SES programming effectively requires adequate time, staffing, and resources, highlighting an opportunity for funders to invest more intentionally in this foundational aspect of employability.

As the work moves forward, demand for ESAT continues to grow, with 52 organizations now holding licenses and several national partners exploring tailored versions of the tool. The findings position ESAT as a promising component of Canada's skills-development infrastructure and chart a clear path for future evidence-building and system-level adoption.

KEY INSIGHTS

- 1 Staff-assessed ESAT scores increased by an average of 8%, with 66% of participants improving across all nine social and emotional skills.
- 2 Embedding social and emotional skill development into training programs is effective only when organizations have the time, staffing capacity, and funding to deliver high-fidelity implementation.
- 3 Demand for ESAT has grown rapidly, with 52 organizations purchasing licenses, indicating strong sector-wide interest in structured tools for assessing and developing social and emotional skills.

The Issue

Across Canada, employers increasingly identify social and emotional skills (SES), such as adaptability, communication, teamwork, problem solving, and self-management, as essential for labour market success. These skills form the foundation for learning, enable individuals to navigate workplace change, and support both short- and long-term employment outcomes. Canadian employer surveys consistently show that SES are prioritized during recruitment and selection, and the federal Skills for Success framework highlights their role in employability, resilience, and the capacity to adapt to economic and technological disruptions.

Despite their importance, the ecosystem supporting SES development has long been characterized by two critical gaps. First, most SES programs were historically directed toward children and youth, leaving adults, especially career-transitioners, job seekers, and individuals participating in publicly funded workforce development programs, without structured tools to practice and strengthen these foundational skills. Second, there was no widely accepted or validated approach for assessing SES development among adults. Existing tools tended to rely on subjective observation, lacked behavioural specificity, or produced static scores that did not support skill growth over time. This created challenges for service delivery organizations and employment programs seeking reliable ways to assess clients' needs and strengths, track their progress, and tailor supports accordingly.

In response to these gaps, Futureworx began work in 2020 (Phase 1) to develop the Employability Skills Assessment Tool (ESAT) — a digital, developmental assessment designed to measure SES using clear behavioural indicators and structured self- and staff-assessments. ESAT sought to address longstanding implementation challenges by offering a more consistent, transparent, and growth-oriented approach to skill assessment within employment services, community-based training programs, and college settings across Canada.

As ESAT was adopted more widely between 2021 and 2024 (Phase 2), the need for stronger evidence about its reliability, validity, and effectiveness became increasingly important. Workforce development practitioners required confidence that the tool produced accurate assessments, supported meaningful skill development conversations, and could be adapted to diverse program models, durations, and learner needs. This phase of research highlighted persistent challenges within the sector: the difficulty of embedding rigorous SES assessment into day-to-day programming, the lack of multi-perspective tools that combine self-reflection with structured observation, and the absence of progress-tracking systems that reveal growth over time.

By 2024 (Phase 3), as ESAT usage expanded, the field required clearer evidence about how the tool contributes to learner outcomes and under what conditions SES development translates into improved education or employment results. To inform future impact evaluation, Phase 3 work focused on articulating ESAT's theory of change and identifying the necessary steps for conducting a rigorous randomized controlled trial. This reflected a broader challenge in the Canadian skills-development ecosystem: although SES are widely acknowledged as critical, there remains limited causal evidence on the effectiveness of SES assessment tools and interventions for adult learners.

Together, these phases address a persistent, system-level problem: the lack of scalable, evidence-based, and adult-focused approaches to assessing and strengthening the social and emotional skills that underpin Canadians' success in a rapidly changing labour market. The ESAT project responds to this need by developing a measurement tool, testing its reliability and usability, and laying the groundwork for rigorous evaluation of its long-term impact.



What We Investigated

This multi-phase research project examined how the Employability Skills Assessment Tool (ESAT), digital tool developed by Futureworx to assess and strengthen adults' social and emotional skills (SES), is implemented, how it supports participant and staff outcomes, and what evidence is required to evaluate its causal impact. Across all phases, the target population included adult learners and jobseekers participating in publicly funded employment, essential skills, and technical training programs across Canada.

Phase 1: Preliminary Evaluation of ESAT (2020)

The first phase focused on establishing an initial evidence base for ESAT's use in workforce development settings. This phase sought to understand how ESAT was being implemented, what early outcomes were emerging, and what research foundation was needed for future evaluation. The research questions were:

1. Which organizations and programs use ESAT? How is ESAT currently being implemented?
2. What early evidence is there for ESAT's outcomes?
3. What implementation factors are associated with positive outcomes?
4. What do staff perceive to be the greatest strengths and challenges of using ESAT, and opportunities for strengthening ESAT?

To investigate these questions, Blueprint conducted logic-model development; a survey of all ESAT-using organizations; analysis of de-identified ESAT assessment data; and semi-structured interviews with staff from 10 diverse organizations.

Phase 2: Evaluation of ESAT’s Effectiveness, Adaptability, Reliability, and Validity (September 2021 – May 2024)

The second phase built on the foundation of Phase 1 by examining ESAT’s effectiveness, adaptability, reliability, and validity across community-based organizations and colleges delivering 60 programs and 85 cohorts. The research questions were:

1. What participants were reached? How valuable was ESAT to participants and staff? Did it support SES development and employment readiness?
2. How did implementation vary across different settings, and did program fidelity impact outcomes?
3. What would it take to make ESAT a validated tool?

This mixed-methods study combined ESAT platform data, participant and staff surveys, longitudinal skill-change analysis, implementation fidelity analysis, statistical reliability and validity testing, and interviews and focus groups with staff and learners.

Phase 3: ESAT Theory of Change and Randomized Control Trial (RCT) (2024)

The third and final phase examined what is required to rigorously test ESAT’s causal impact. This phase addressed two overarching research components:

Theory of Change: How do people who use the tool (ESAT), both staff and participants, move through a series of actions and experiences that lead to meaningful growth?

RCT Design: Five research questions were explored regarding ESAT’s tool-development strategy, implementation strategy, randomization strategy, measurement strategy, and sample size. Methods included collaborative theory-of-change development, review of findings from Phases 1–2, analysis of implementation conditions, and assessment of feasible RCT models, drawing on the design options detailed in Sections 3 and 4 of the Phase 3 Final Report.

What We’re Learning

Phase 1: Preliminary Evaluation of ESAT (2020)

ESAT was being used widely and variably across diverse program contexts

A survey capturing approximately 45% of ESAT-using organizations showed substantial variation in how programs integrated ESAT—differences in assessment frequency, timepoints, staffing models, and coaching approaches. Staff described both alignment and misalignment with Futureworx’s recommended model, highlighting that organizational capacity shaped implementation quality. This variation helped identify which conditions best support meaningful SES development. These insights laid the foundation for refining the tool and establishing clearer implementation expectations moving into Phase 2.

Staff perceived positive participant outcomes, reinforced by early improvements in ESAT assessment data

Across interviews and surveys, staff consistently reported increases in participants’ employability skills, self-awareness, and wellbeing. Analysis of staff-assessed ESAT scores supported these perceptions: scores tended to increase over time, and participant self-ratings became more aligned with staff ratings, suggesting increased insight into strengths and development needs. These findings offered early evidence that ESAT could influence self-reflection and behavioural growth. Staff also highlighted several core implementation factors—such as multi-observer scoring and dedicated debrief sessions—that became critical anchors for later implementation guidelines.

Clear strengths of ESAT surfaced, along with challenges around clarity, time demands, and platform usability

Staff praised ESAT’s common language, ease of use, and ability to support objective, constructive skill-development conversations. They also noted challenges: some participants struggled with question wording, and delivering multiple assessment cycles required more staff time than some programs could accommodate. These learnings directly informed Phase 2’s refinement of guidelines and the need for evidence on the relationship between fidelity and outcomes.

Phase 2: Evaluation of ESAT’s Effectiveness, Adaptability, Reliability, and Validity (September 2021 – May 2024)

ESAT reached diverse adult learners and generated consistently positive participant and staff experiences

Across 15 organizations delivering 60 programs and 85 cohorts, 650 participants completed the baseline survey and 496 contributed ESAT platform data. Most participants (79%) reported being satisfied with ESAT, and 84% said they would recommend it to others. A large majority (83%) reported increased awareness of their SES strengths and gaps, and 79% felt more comfortable discussing these skills with staff. Staff echoed these positive experiences, describing ESAT as an accessible, structured tool that supported clearer, more objective coaching conversations.

Measurable improvements in SES skills, particularly in staff-assessed ratings

Staff assessments showed improvements across all nine SES domains, with an average 8% increase and 66% of participants improving in every skill area. Teamwork, Attitude, and Stress Management showed the largest gains, with Teamwork improving by 11%. Participant self-assessments increased more modestly (+2% overall), reflecting both deepened self-awareness and recalibration of personal expectations. Together, these results suggest ESAT can support both behavioural growth and insight into SES competencies.

Early evidence of employment-related gains among participants

Among participants in employment-focused programs (representing 81% of the employment sample), employment rates increased from 29% at baseline to 46% nine months later — a 17-percentage-point increase (+59%). Weekly earnings also rose from \$365 to \$587, a 61% increase over the same period. These correlational findings point to ESAT’s potential contribution to employment readiness, warranting future causal evaluation.

Strong overall fidelity, with meaningful relationships between fidelity, program setting, and participant satisfaction

Programs met an average of 4.6 of six recommended guidelines, and 92% met at least four. Higher fidelity was associated with a 15-percentage-point increase in participant satisfaction (80% vs. 65%), and each one-point increase in fidelity above 3/6 corresponded to an 11% increase in satisfaction likelihood. Participants in college settings were 17% more satisfied than those in community settings, even after controlling for fidelity. These findings confirm that implementation quality meaningfully shapes participant experience and that fidelity is achievable across varied delivery models.

ESAT has a strong foundation for validation but requires refinements to improve reliability and construct clarity

ESAT showed promising face validity and short-term predictive validity, and it effectively differentiated SES from “hard skills.” However, internal consistency varied depending on how many items participants received, and some SES domains—such as Accountability and Adaptability—showed high overlap. These findings underscore opportunities to strengthen question design, scale structure, and the distinctiveness of SES domains before pursuing full psychometric validation.

Phase 3: ESAT Theory of Change and Randomized Control Trial (RCT) (2024)

A rigorous RCT of ESAT is feasible and required to evaluate ESAT’s causal impact

A refined Theory of Change mapped how staff and participants move through the ESAT process — assessment, reflection, feedback, and practice — to generate SES growth and employment-readiness outcomes. The feasibility study concluded that an RCT is possible with key refinements, such as updating ESAT based on Phase 2 validity findings and adopting a seven-part implementation guideline. Recommendations include instructor-level randomization, four-part measurement (surveys + linked administrative data), and a minimum sample of 4,882 participants to detect effects reliably. These insights chart a clear evidence pathway for assessing ESAT’s long-term impact on labour-market outcomes.

Why It Matters

ESAT demonstrates that strengthening social and emotional skills (SES) is a foundational ingredient in successful job transitions—and that Canada needs scalable, evidence-based ways to support this work. Across all three phases, the project confirmed that SES such as adaptability, confidence, teamwork, and stress management are central to navigating a rapidly changing labour market. These skills are increasingly critical as workers respond to automation, climate-driven economic shifts, immigration pressures, and persistent labour shortages in care, construction, digital, and green-economy sectors. Findings from Phases 1 and 2 show that ESAT effectively builds self-awareness and supports SES growth across diverse learners, including newcomers, youth, people with disabilities, and mid-career workers.

Moreover, the project highlights the need for funders and policymakers to invest in SES development, not just technical training, if Canada wants a resilient workforce. Across all phases, staff repeatedly identified that integrating SES requires time, staffing capacity, and organizational buy-in. Yet, as Phase 1 and Phase 2 showed, most training programs are not resourced for multi-round assessments, coaching conversations, or iterative feedback cycles, even though these practices are essential for SES growth. Phase 2 further illustrates that higher implementation fidelity improves participant satisfaction by up to 19 percentage points, demonstrating that SES tools are most effective when adequately supported. This has direct implications for FSC and government funders: SES development is not a “nice-to-have” — it is a labour-market necessity that requires intentional funding, policy alignment, and sector-wide capacity building. The recommendation for a national SES support centre, drawn from evaluation insight, further underscores the need for consistent training, shared standards, and sector-wide professional development.

For practitioners, the findings show that SES tools are flexible and valuable supplements to both essential-skills and technical training programs. Phase 2 results demonstrate that ESAT worked effectively in community-based employment programs, college settings, essential-skills programs, and technical training programs. This flexibility matters in a labour-market system that increasingly blends digital learning, microcredentials, work-integrated learning, and rapid upskilling models. The findings speak directly to questions about interventions that smooth job transitions: ESAT adds value across program types by offering a common language for SES, improving instructor feedback quality, and helping participants articulate their strengths when seeking employment. These insights are especially relevant for sectors relying on newcomers and underrepresented groups, where SES-related communication challenges or limited self-awareness may act as hidden barriers to entry.

State of Skills: Better labour market transitions for mid-career workers

Many mid-career workers suffer from a lack of self-confidence, discouragement, mistrust in the education system and doubts about the value of their work experience. This can be overcome through an awareness of these socio-emotional factors, individualized attention and a commitment to addressing equity.

[Read Thematic Report](#)

At a systems level, the project makes a significant contribution by establishing a pathway to rigorous evidence through Phase 3's RCT feasibility study. ESAT's early outcomes are promising, and Phase 2 found correlational increases in employment and earnings post-program. However, Phase 3 shows how the sector can now move toward answering the broader policy question: Does structured SES development causally improve employment outcomes? The Phase 3 recommendations, including refining ESAT's reliability, adopting a seven-part implementation guideline, using instructor-level randomization, and leveraging linked administrative data, offer the field a roadmap for generating causal evidence.

Finally, this project underscores the need to rethink how Canada funds and structures career development services. Across all phases, frontline staff indicated that SES work is often undervalued and underfunded despite being critical to employment success. The findings suggest that SES work should be treated as core program infrastructure, not an add-on. This has implications for program guidelines, procurement models, workforce-development funding, and performance measurement frameworks. As Canada faces demographic shifts, immigration changes, and economic transitions, scalable SES assessment tools such as ESAT can help ensure workers are prepared not just with technical skills, but with the adaptive capacities employers increasingly demand.

► **What's Next**

The work initiated through this multi-phase project continues to expand in scope and impact. ESAT and its hosting platform, Complete360, remain core assets actively used and further developed by Futureworx and partner organizations. Since the start of the FSC project, ESAT site licenses have been purchased by 52 organizations across Canada, including PICS Society, Saskatoon Trades and Skills Centre, Intercultural Association of Greater Victoria, and Elevate Aviation, demonstrating strong national demand for structured SES assessment tools.

Futureworx has secured several new investments to support expansion. Funding from The Collaborative and NorQuest College is enabling the development of additional customization options and improvements to ESAT. International interest is also growing: the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) in the United States has expressed interest in adopting ESAT and co-developing a high-school variant. In Canada, a consortium of universities has integrated ESAT into a multi-year initiative focused on strengthening SES among graduate and Ph.D. students.

The Complete360 platform is also becoming a broader hub for SES-focused tools. Futureworx has partnered with the Hospitality Workers Training Centre to develop ReSET, an HR tool supporting SES development in employees, and with Independent Living Nova Scotia to create a tailored SES assessment tool for persons with disabilities, funded by the CASE Innovation Lab. ESAT's growing ecosystem has also led to invitations to support Skills Canada, including participation in its SES Forum at the national competition.

Looking ahead, Futureworx plans to deepen national and sectoral partnerships and is exploring the creation of a Canadian Social and Emotional Skills Centre to provide centralized support, resources, and training for employers, educators, and service providers.

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

How to Cite This Report

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