

CURRICULUM RESOURCE

Workplace Skills, Strategies, and Know-How: Problem Solving in the Workplace

OALCF ALIGNMENT

Competency	Task Group	Level
Competency A - Find and Use Information	A1. Read continuous text	2
Competency A - Find and Use Information	A2. Interpret documents	2
Competency B - Communicate Ideas and Information	B1. Interact with others	2
Competency B - Communicate Ideas and Information	B3. Complete and create documents	2
Competency D - Use Digital Technology	N/A	N/A

Goal Paths (check all that apply)

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Employment | <input type="checkbox"/> Postsecondary |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Apprenticeship | <input type="checkbox"/> Independence |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Secondary School Credit | |

Embedded Skills for Success (check all that apply)

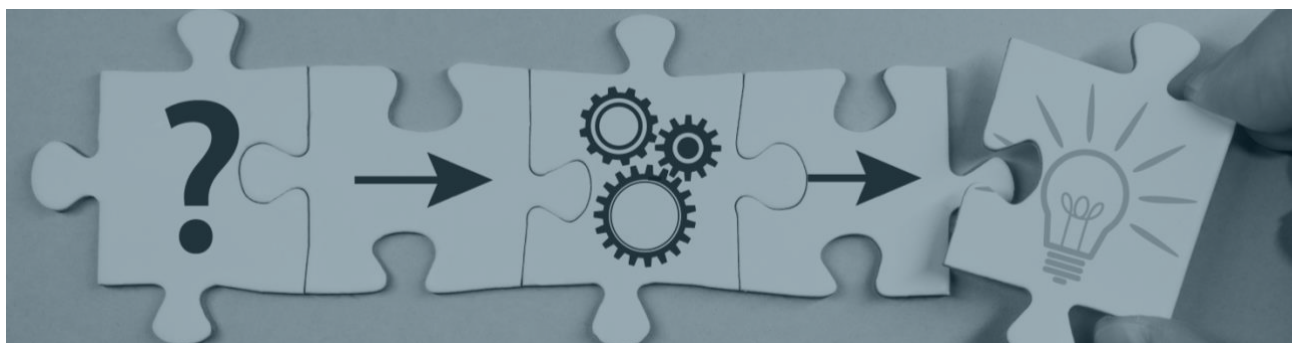
- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Adaptability | <input type="checkbox"/> Numeracy |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Collaboration | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Problem Solving |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Communication | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Reading |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Creativity and innovation | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Writing |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Digital | |

NOTES: Part six of an eleven-part series on workplace norms for employed learners.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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This Employment Ontario service is funded in part by the Government of Canada and the Government of Ontario through the Canada-Ontario Job Fund Agreement.



The opinions expressed in this report are the opinions of Community Literacy of Ontario and do not necessarily reflect those of our funders.

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WORKPLACE SKILLS, STRATEGIES, AND KNOW-HOW

Note for practitioners:

This series of **Skills for Success Curriculum Resources** is a beginner's guide to the modern workplace for LBS learners. The goal is to provide essential tools to employed learners, or learners seeking employment, so that they can thrive as employees. This series considers personal development topics ranging from conflict resolution to time management; topics focused on changes in the workplace; and mental health issues like stress management.

The overall focus of the series is on helping employees (or aspiring employees) understand their rights and responsibilities.

These resources are learner-based and activity-focused, with each topic area serving as a mini-lesson, followed by personalized activities. The activities invite learners to respond to lesson material or explore their own ideas on the subject.

The series is divided into eleven sections that can be used separately or in tandem:

- Your Rights in the Workplace
- Adaptability in the Workplace
- Collaboration in the Workplace
- Communication in the Workplace
- Creativity and Innovation in the Workplace
- Problem Solving in the Workplace
- Work-Related Stress
- Time-management
- Conflict Resolution
- Self-Advocacy
- Changes in the Workplace

WORKPLACE SKILLS, STRATEGIES, AND KNOW-HOW: Problem Solving in the Workplace

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Overview	4
Introduction	5
Benefits	9
Skills	11
Strategies to Try	12
Identify the Best Solution	17
Resources	18

*This is Section Six, Workplace Skills, Strategies, and Know-How:
Problem Solving in the Workplace*

Overview

Are you currently employed? Are you about to start a new job? There are many things about the modern workplace that you may not know.

This resource series is designed to help you get the most out of your employment.

When you have a job, there are several important questions you should ask:

- What are my rights?
- How can I advocate for myself?
- How should I expect to be treated on the job?
- What are the expectations at a modern workplace?
- What has changed at workplaces over the last few years?
- How can I be my best at:
 - conflict resolution
 - time-management
 - communication

You may also face other challenges on the job. Do you have concerns about:

- stress on the job
- mental health at your workplace

This resource series will consider these topics and more. Participate in the lessons and activities, and you will learn to get the most out of the modern workplace.



Introduction

What is Problem Solving?

Problem solving means:

finding effective solutions to the problems you face.

Problems arise in life and at work. As an employee, it's important to be able to solve the problems you face on the job. Developing problem solving skills will help you minimize mistakes and make you a key part of the team.

Problem solving might mean:

- figuring out what to do if you are locked out of your apartment
- coming up with a repayment plan for a loan
- finding childcare when your babysitter cancels

Problem solving at work might mean:

- addressing a customer question or concern
- learning a new task your manager has assigned
- offering your ideas for improving something on the job

This resource will discuss problem solving in the workplace. It will teach you how to improve your problem-solving skills.



1. What was a big problem you had to overcome in your life?

Check the boxes that apply to you:

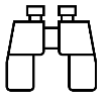
- ☐ I feel overwhelmed when faced with big problems.
- ☐ I struggle when under pressure.
- ☐ I am full of good ideas.
- ☐ I like the challenge of solving tough problems.



What's the Problem?

Facing problems can be hard. Trying to fix them can be even harder. Why is it so difficult to try to make things better? There are three main reasons:

- Problems usually give us a **negative** feeling. That's why they're problems!
- Solving problems can take a lot of **effort**.
- We don't always **understand** the problem or what to do about them.



Let's look at an example.

J has been working at a Tim Hortons for one month. J's responsibilities include helping customers and cleaning the restaurant. One day J sees that someone has knocked over a box of coffee beans. The main problem is clear: there are coffee beans everywhere!

But J has other questions:

- Who did this and why didn't they clean it up? Who **should** clean it up?
- Should the coffee beans be thrown out or saved?
- Should the loss of beans be recorded? Should a manager be told?

J takes a moment to decide which problem is most important. Then J decides to start cleaning up the spilt beans.



Reflect!

Write your answers below or discuss with your teacher or group.

1. Do you think J made the right choice to clean up the beans first? Why?

2. Can you list the problems in order of importance?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____

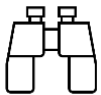
3. How do you think J should handle the rest of the problems?

Benefits

Even at the best run businesses, problems do arise. Even if you love your job, you will face some challenges. Employees with strong problem-solving skills help to address these problems when they happen. They help reduce problems or avoid them.

Some of the benefits of problem solving are:

- learning new tasks and roles
- learning to adjust to changes in your schedule
- being an even more valuable member of the team
- strengthening your creativity and decision-making skills
- helping resolve at-work issues such as:
 - customer questions or concerns
 - conflicts with managers or co-workers
 - workplace safety issues



Let's look at an example.

P works in the kitchen of a big restaurant. One day P is waiting on a shipment of fish to arrive. Fish is on the menu tonight and P must prep it. But the shipment is late. P is anxious and impatient. If the fish doesn't arrive soon, it won't be ready for dinner.

P tries to stay calm and find a solution. P could call the fish company to see what's up. But P doesn't know the name or number of the fish company. P thinks carefully and looks at some old boxes. On one is the name and number of the fish company.

P calls and explains things. The fish company manager calls the delivery driver, who was lost. The driver is given new directions to the restaurant and arrives there soon.



Reflect!

Benefits of problem solving. Fill out the chart below.

List some of the emotions P was feeling.	List the steps P took to solve the problem?	What might be some benefits to P solving the problem?

What skills do you think helped P solve the problem? Check the boxes that apply below:

- ☐ paying attention
- ☐ thinking carefully
- ☐ staying calm under pressure
- ☐ finding and sharing information
- ☐ willingness to learn and adjust
- ☐ confidence to make decisions
- ☐ creativity

Skills

All the skills on the list above help with problem solving. The best problems solvers are able to notice things, stay calm, and respond creatively. That's why the key problem-solving skills are:

- staying focused and calm
- making sure you have the information you need
- thinking about things in new and creative ways



New Task!

How many problem-solving skills do you have?

Put a check in the box that applies to you.

Problem-Solving Skills	Always	Sometimes	Rarely
I am good at paying attention and noticing things			
I am able to stay calm under pressure			
I am good at seeking out new information			
I am confident sharing information with others			
I can learn to adjust			
I am confident making decisions			



Which of these are you best at? Which would you like to work on?

There are some strategies below that will help you!

Strategies to Try

1. Find More Information

The best problem-solving tool you have is information. If you're unsure how to solve a problem, you may need more information. When faced with a tough problem, you may need to:

- seek information about products or policies on the computer
- ask a customer to clarify their concerns
- ask questions to a co-worker
- ask for guidance from a manager



Let's look at an example.

Q works as a cashier at a pet food store. One day a customer comes in and shares some complaints. The customer bought a bag of dog food that they are not happy with. The food cost too much and made their dog sick. The customer says the dog food was recommended by one of Q's colleagues. The customer asks Q what can be done about this problem.



Reflect!

Discuss these questions with your teacher or group.

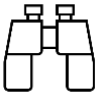
1. What information would help Q understand things better?
2. How would knowing more information help Q solve the problem?

2. Look at the Problem in New Ways

Another strategy: try to look at the problem in new ways. There are many reasons we might not be thinking clearly about the problem. We might be under pressure. We might be worried about getting in trouble.

But sometimes we need to get creative and change the way we think. Here are some tricks to help you:

- Try to stay calm and clear your mind.
- Use your past experience to guide you: have you been in a similar situation before?
- Imagine what someone you respect or admire would do.



Let's look at an example.

M works as a driver for Lays Potato Chips. M drives several different routes. These routes go from the Lays warehouse to stores across the province. After each delivery, M fills out paperwork. The paperwork confirms the product was delivered to the customer.

M rarely receives a complaint from customers. But last time there was a complaint M got angry and yelled at the customer. M's manager was not pleased but did not yell. The manager calmly told M they were suspended for a week.

A few months later, a co-worker criticizes M's work. The co-worker says that M does not complete the route fast enough and that M does sloppy paperwork. M feels angry again and wants to yell at the co-worker.

**Reflect!**

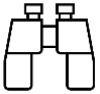
Discuss these questions with your teacher or group.

1. What is M's initial reaction to being criticized? Should M act on these feelings?
2. How could M use past experience as a guide?
3. How could M follow the example of others?

3. Break the Problem into Pieces

Sometimes a problem is too big or complex to tackle all at once. It may become easier if it's broken into smaller pieces. This could mean:

- dealing with the worst part of the problem first
- getting the easy parts done fast
- getting the hard parts out of the way
- working backward from the most important to the least important part of the problem.



Let's look at an example.

H is a dishwasher at a seafood restaurant. One day a pipe bursts. The kitchen begins to flood and causes many problems. The pipe needs to be fixed by a plumber. Meanwhile, the kitchen is flooding and some soup buns on low shelves are getting wet. The water's getting on H's boots and pants. The water is spraying near expensive salmon on the counter. The water is leaking into the dining area where there are customers.

How should H address this problem? What should he deal with first? Write the numbers 1-4 below to show the order H should deal with each problem.

- ☐ call plumber
- ☐ move salmon
- ☐ move soup buns
- ☐ mop dining area

Deciding what should be dealt with first is a skill. It's called **prioritizing**. It's important when you are trying to solve problems.



New Task!

Prioritize. How would you survive the desert island?

Imagine you are stranded on a desert island. To survive, you must take some important steps. But what order will you do them in? With your group decide what order to do the survival steps below.

- ☐ Pick a leader
- ☐ Build a shelter
- ☐ Look for help
- ☐ Find food
- ☐ Find water
- ☐ Build a fire
- ☐ Build a raft to escape

In this task, there is no one right answer. But how did it feel trying to prioritize? Did some steps seem more important than others?

Identify the Best Solution

To review: problem solving requires you to gather information. It requires you to look at problems in new ways. It may mean breaking problems into pieces. Once you've done this, you must try to decide on the best solution. This is easier if you stay calm. It is easier if you have experience.

By practicing your problem-solving strategies and skills, you'll gain experience. You'll make some mistakes. But you'll also be better able to solve problems in the future.



But remember: sometimes problems are too big to handle on your own. Part of problem solving is knowing when you need help. Seek help from co-workers or managers if the problem involves:

- serious physical danger
- serious financial risk
- harassment or bullying
- expertise you don't have

Can't find support for problems you are facing at work? See the resources on the next page for more help.

Resources

Are you feeling stressed at work? Is it getting worse? Don't hesitate to seek help.

There are many resources available to help you. Some are listed below:

- The Canadian Mental Health Association. Tips and resources for dealing with stress: <https://ontario.cmha.ca/documents/understanding-and-finding-help-for-stress/>
- Support for when you are in crisis at Talk Suicide:
 - Call anytime: **1-833-456-4566**
 - Text between 4pm and midnight ET: **45645**
- eMentalHealth.ca offers a listing of local mental health resources: <https://www.ementalhealth.ca/Ontario/Stress/index.php?m=heading&ID=118>
- ConnexOntario offers free mental health support 24/7 by phone or chat: <https://www.connexontario.ca/en-ca/>
- 211 Ontario offers free mental health services:
 - Call **211** or toll free at **1-877-330-3213**
- Distress and Crisis Ontario offers crisis centres in many communities: <https://www.dcontario.org/>
 - Also see the other resources in this series: **Workplace Skills, Strategies, and Know-How**