Skills Builder Universal Framework for Essential Skills

Toolkit for Employers
Introduction and context

The importance of developing a set of essential skills for individuals to thrive in education, employment and entrepreneurship has been long documented, from the CBI’s landmark 1989 report through to the Taylor Review in 2017.

These are the skills which ‘almost everyone needs to do almost any job. They are the skills that make specific knowledge and technical skills fully productive.3

Too often this is an area where terminology is confused and confusing. The work of the Essential Skills Taskforce over the last year has been to try to cut through this, to refine a consistent, universal approach to these essential skills.

We define the essential skills as: Listening, Speaking, Problem Solving, Creativity, Staying Positive, Aiming High, Leadership and Teamwork.

The Skills Builder Universal Framework

This Universal Framework builds off the original Skills Builder Framework which has already proved its worth in education, used in more than 750 organisations in the last year. Through a 9-month process of refinement and testing, it has been extended and improved to be truly universal – usable with individuals at any stage of their education or career and in different contexts.

Within organisations, the Framework can be used to support:

- **Employability outreach** – using the consistent language that is already used in a lot of educational settings to join up initiatives like employability workshops, work experience or other volunteering

- **Recruitment** – by helping to structure the design of job roles, thinking about which essential skills are required at what steps and developing interview questions

- **Training** – using the Framework as a set of learning objectives to help structure training in essential skills alongside technical skills

- **Personal Development** – allowing individuals to reflect on their own essential skills, and to work individually or with a mentor or manager to build them

Putting into practice

The Universal Framework is freely available to all organisations. If you want extra support in putting it into practice, you can get in touch with us. We hope you will find it a useful tool.

Tom Ravenscroft
CEO, The Skills Builder Partnership
skillsbuilder.org

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4 Essential Skills Taskforce: CIPD, CBI, Gatsby Foundation, EY Foundation, Careers & Enterprise Company, Business in the Community and the Skills Builder Partnership

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Who's using the Skills Builder approach?

We're building a global coalition of educators, employers and skills-building organisations, all using a shared approach. As these skills are widely transferable, our partner organisations cover a whole range of different industries and outcomes.

**Educators**
- 514 schools and colleges in 2018-19

**Employers**
- 119 employer partners in 2018-19

**Organisations**
- 59 organisation partners in 2018-19

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We have learned a lot over the years about how best to build essential skills. We know that to have a real impact, the skills must be developed with consistency and focus. These principles hold true whatever the setting.

1. Keep it simple
A consistent focus on the same skills helps ensure everyone’s shared understanding and makes building these skills as tangible as possible. Using the same language all the time makes a big difference.

Things to consider:
- Does everyone know which essential skills you value in your organisation?
- Is there consistent language when referring to the skills?
- Do all staff receive training and support on these skills?

2. Start early, keep going
Mastering these essential skills isn’t simple and takes time, and sustained effort. These underpinning skills are relevant and worth revisiting and refining throughout a career.

Things to consider:
- Do you think about these skills for all the individuals you work with?
- Could you introduce these skills earlier on?
- Are there opportunities for staff to build the skills further as they grow?

3. Measure it
Take time to reflect on the skills of individuals – by observing or by self-assessment. This gives a balanced understanding of strengths and weaknesses, highlights progress and shows next steps.

Things to consider:
- Are you using a consistent skills framework and assessment tool like Skills Builder?
- Does your framework reflect quantifiable progress over time?
- Do you check in on progress regularly?
4. **Focus tightly**

Building essential skills should be timely and focused appropriately. It should allow dedicated time just to explicitly build the skill.

**Things to consider:**
- Is it clear exactly what individuals need to develop next?
- Do you make time just to focus on explicitly developing skills?

5. **Keep practising**

To accelerate progress in the essential skills, they should be used and reinforced as often as possible – including opportunities for reflection.

**Things to consider:**
- Are there regular opportunities for individuals to use their essential skills?
- When they do, are these opportunities highlighted clearly to them?
- Is there regular opportunity to actively reflect on the skills and how they have been developed?

6. **Bring it to life**

Ensure individuals see how their essential skills can transfer between different settings and be applied to different problems.

**Things to consider:**
- Are the skills framed in terms of their usefulness for education, employment or entrepreneurship?
- Are there opportunities for individuals to use their skills in different settings?
- Do you use links across the organisation to support building these skills?
Our starting point is eight essential skills. Known by many different names, these eight skills map across to the four domains that come up time and again as the core, transferable skills for employment.

In pairs they cover communication, creative problem-solving, self-management, and collaboration skills. These eight skills are laid out in the Skills Builder Universal Framework.

The Framework breaks down each of the eight essential skills into tangible steps which can be developed in turn. We can use it to clarify what success looks like in each skill and to map out the trajectory for growth. The full Framework can be found from page 7.

The Framework is the culmination of four years of learning and builds on the expertise of over 120 leading organisations and individuals across the sector. It has been used with over 750 skills-building organisations. It has also been independently reviewed twice. The background to the development of this version of the Framework can be found at skillsbuilder.org/universal.
### Listening

**The receiving, retaining and processing of information or ideas**

This skill is all about being able to effectively receive information - whether it comes from customers, colleagues or stakeholders.

Initially, the skill steps concentrate on being able to listen effectively to others - including remembering short instructions, understanding why others are communicating and recording important information.

Individuals then focus on how they demonstrate that they are listening effectively; thinking about body language, open questioning and summarising and rephrasing.

Beyond that, the focus is on being aware of how they might be being influenced by a speaker, through tone and language.

The final steps are about critical listening - comparing perspectives, identifying biases, evaluating ideas and being objective.

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#### Skill definition

1. **Skill definition**

2. **The thematic progression in skill development**

3. **Individuals will start at different places, so identifying the step first is essential**

4. **This statement helps individuals understand their own skills**

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**Learn how to build, assess and recruit for every skill step at**

[skillsbuilder.org/framework](skillsbuilder.org/framework)
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Beyond that, the focus is on being aware of how they might be being influenced by a speaker, through tone and language.

The final steps are about critical listening - comparing perspectives, identifying biases, evaluating ideas and being objective.
This skill is all about how to communicate effectively with others, being mindful of whether they are talking to customers, colleagues or other stakeholders in different settings. Initially, this skill focuses on being able to speak clearly - first with well-known individuals and small groups and then with those who are not already known.

The next stage is about being an effective speaker by making points logically, by thinking about what listeners already know and using appropriate language, tone and gesture. Beyond that, individuals focus on speaking engagingly through use of facts and examples, visual aids, and their expression and gesture.

Beyond that stage, speakers will be adaptive to the response of their listeners and ready for different scenarios. The final steps focus on speaking influentially - using structure, examples, facts and vision to persuade listeners.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Statement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Step 0</td>
<td>I speak clearly to someone I know</td>
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<tr>
<td>Step 1</td>
<td>I speak clearly to small groups of people I know</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 2</td>
<td>I speak clearly to individuals and small groups I do not know</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 3</td>
<td>I speak effectively by making points in a logical order</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 4</td>
<td>I speak effectively by thinking about what my listeners already know</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 5</td>
<td>I speak effectively by using appropriate language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 6</td>
<td>I speak effectively by using appropriate tone, expression and gesture</td>
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<tr>
<td>Step 7</td>
<td>I speak engagingly by using facts and examples to support my points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 8</td>
<td>I speak engagingly by using visual aids to support my points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 9</td>
<td>I speak engagingly by using tone, expression and gesture to engage listeners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 10</td>
<td>I speak adaptively by changing my language, tone and expression depending on the response of listeners</td>
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<tr>
<td>Step 11</td>
<td>I speak adaptively by planning for different possible responses of listeners</td>
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<tr>
<td>Step 12</td>
<td>I speak adaptively by changing my content depending on the response of listeners</td>
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<tr>
<td>Step 13</td>
<td>I speak influentially by changing the structure of my points to best persuade the listeners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 14</td>
<td>I speak influentially by changing the examples and facts I use to best persuade the listeners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 15</td>
<td>I speak influentially by articulating a compelling vision that persuades the listeners</td>
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Problem Solving

The ability to find a solution to a situation or challenge

This skill focuses on how to solve problems, recognising that while part of Problem Solving is technical know-how and experience, there are also transferable tools that individuals can develop and use.

The first steps focus on being able to follow instructions to complete tasks, seeking help and extra information if needed. The next stage focuses on being able to explore problems by creating and assessing different potential solutions. This includes more complex problems, without a simple technical solution.

Beyond this, the focus is on exploring complex solutions - thinking about causes and effects, generating options, and evaluating those options. This extends into analysis using logical reasoning and hypotheses.

Finally, individuals implement strategic plans to solve complex problems, assess their success, and draw out learning for the future.

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Creativity

The use of imagination and the generation of new ideas

Creativity is the complement to Problem Solving, and is about generating innovations or ideas which can then be honed through the problem-solving process.

The first few steps focus on the individual's confidence in imagining different situations and sharing their ideas.

The focus is then on generating ideas - using a clear brief, making improvements to something that already exists and combining concepts. Individuals then apply creativity in the context of their work and their wider life. They can build off this to develop ideas using tools like mind mapping, questioning, and considering different perspectives.

The most advanced steps focus on building effective innovation in group settings and by seeking out varied experiences and stimuli. Finally, individuals support others to innovate, by sharing tools, identifying the right tools for the situation and through coaching.
This skill is all about individuals being equipped to manage their emotions effectively and being able to remain motivated, and ultimately to motivate others, even when facing setbacks.

The early steps focus on identifying emotions - particularly feeling positive or negative. Building off that is the ability to keep trying - and then staying calm, thinking about what went wrong, and trying to cheer up and encourage others.

The focus then turns to identifying new opportunities in difficult situations, sharing those, and adapting or creating plans accordingly. At more advanced steps, individuals identify and manage risks and gains in opportunities.

Finally, individuals support others to stay positive by managing their own response, helping others to see opportunities and creating plans to achieve them.

## Staying Positive

*The ability to use tactics and strategies to overcome setbacks and achieve goals*

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This skill is about being able to plan effectively - both to achieve organisational goals, and also to set their own personal development targets. Initially, this is about knowing when something is too difficult, and having a sense of what doing well looks like for an individual.

The focus is then about working with care and attention, taking pride in success and having a positive approach to new challenges. Building on this, individuals set goals for themselves, informed by an understanding of what is needed, and then order and prioritise tasks, secure resources and involve others effectively.

At the higher steps, the focus is on creating plans informed by an individual’s skill set, with clear targets, and building on external views. At the most advanced level, individuals develop long-term strategies. These are informed by an assessment of internal and external factors, structured through regular milestones and feedback loops.
Leadership

Supporting, encouraging and developing others to achieve a shared goal

This skill is relevant not only for individuals in positions of management with formal power, but also for individuals working with peers in teams. At the earliest stages, the focus is on basic empathy - understanding their own feelings, being able to share them, and recognising the feelings of others. The focus is on managing - dividing up tasks, managing time and sharing resources, managing group discussions and dealing with disagreements.

Beyond that, individuals build their awareness of their own strengths and weaknesses, and those of their teams. This allows them to allocate tasks effectively. They then build techniques to mentor, coach and motivate others. At the highest steps, individuals will be able to reflect on their own leadership style and understand its effect on others.

Ultimately, they should be able to build on their strengths and mitigate their weaknesses, and adapt their leadership style to the situation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Statement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Step 0</td>
<td>I know how I am feeling about something</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 1</td>
<td>I know how to explain my feelings about something to my team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 2</td>
<td>I know how to recognise others’ feelings about something</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 3</td>
<td>I manage dividing up tasks between others in a fair way</td>
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<tr>
<td>Step 4</td>
<td>I manage time and share resources to support completing tasks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 5</td>
<td>I manage group discussions to reach shared decisions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 6</td>
<td>I manage disagreements to reach shared solutions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 7</td>
<td>I recognise my own strengths and weaknesses as a leader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 8</td>
<td>I recognise the strengths and weaknesses of others in my team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 9</td>
<td>I recognise the strengths and weaknesses of others in my team, and use this to allocate roles accordingly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 10</td>
<td>I support others through mentorship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 11</td>
<td>I support others through coaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 12</td>
<td>I support others through motivating them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 13</td>
<td>I reflect on my own leadership style and its effect on others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 14</td>
<td>I reflect on my own leadership style, and build on my strengths and mitigate my weaknesses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 15</td>
<td>I reflect on my own leadership style, and adapt my approach according to the situation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Teamwork

Working cooperatively with others towards achieving a shared goal

This skill applies to working within both formal and informal teams, and also with customers, clients or other stakeholders. Initially, this is about individuals fulfilling expectations around being positive, behaving appropriately, being timely and reliable and taking responsibility. This extends to understanding and respecting diversity of others’ cultures, beliefs and backgrounds.

The next steps focus on making a contribution to a team through group decision making, recognising the value of others’ ideas and encouraging others to contribute too. Beyond that, individuals improve their teams through managing conflict and building relationships beyond the immediate team. At the top steps, individuals focus on how they influence their team through suggesting improvements and learning lessons from setbacks.

Ultimately, individuals support the team by evaluating others’ strengths and weaknesses and bringing in external expertise and relationships.

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