

ICD's Beliefs about Basic Skills

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The Institute for Career Development (ICD) was created to help workers brush up basic skills. But what are basic skills? For starters, basic skills are not abilities we are born with (like breathing) but abilities we learn from others (like how to communicate). They are, in fact, essential skills, and our livelihoods often depend upon how well we can combine and use these skills for employment and life situations.

When our basic skills such as reading or speaking are working best, we barely need to think about the processes. They become automatic. For complex situations, we invent strategies that work so that we can use our skills in combinations to handle tough mental work. Of course, these automatic skills and strategies can get rusty when we don't use them for a long time. But, like riding a bike, the skills are retrievable and can be "brushed up" to work efficiently again.

At ICD, we believe basic skills can be broken into at least two types of know how that are both practical and essential for success in today's information age.

Foundational Basic Skills

The first type we call "Foundational Basic Skills." This category includes ten skill areas that all schools (including universities and graduate schools) teach at various levels:

1. Reading,
2. Writing,
3. Computation,
4. Oral communication,
5. Listening,
6. Learning to learn,
7. Motivation,
8. Creative thinking,
9. Problem solving, and
10. Information technology

These ten skills are the foundation for all other learning. They are so basic, in fact, that no matter how accomplished you are, you can still improve. After all, workers today need basic skills that exceed high school level competencies.

In order to upgrade these foundational skills, we need to consider the numerous sub-components of each skill area. For example, reading strategies include predicting outcomes, word identification, comprehension, and skimming. These components are multi-faceted and vary with context and task.

Context and task are key components of what the National Institute for Literacy (NIFL) calls "usable" knowledge. In other words, foundational skills include not only what you know but how well you use it. For instance, people who are good at reading mysteries may need to improve when it comes to reading contracts. People who are good at reading contracts may not excel when reading medical reports, and so on. The best readers can flexibly use a wide variety of strategies to build understanding in multiple contexts. In short, this ability to transfer knowledge from task to task is the hallmark of a successful learner in all ten foundational skills.

Portable Employability Skills

The second type of basic skills is called “Portable Employability Skills.” *Portable* means that the skills go with the workers when they are displaced from their specialties. *Employability* means that employers everywhere value and are seeking these abilities in their new hires. These skills build upon the first type. Workers combine and apply their foundational basic skills to create flexible strategies which make them employable in many industries and multiple jobs. For instance, oral communication and listening skills are merged with other skills to build portable leadership skills.

Portable Employability Skills have four key areas:

1. Teamwork,
2. Leadership,
3. Negotiating skills, and
4. Interpersonal skills.

While these four sub-components of the Portable Employability Skills definitely help workers on their current job, what makes them especially valuable to individuals is that they transcend the steel industry. These skills are basic in that no one can afford to be without them. Like the foundational basic skills, this type of skill requires frequent activation and exercising to remain vibrant and accessible.

Conclusion

The chart below sums up much of what ICD believes about basic skills.

<u>Basic Skills Are</u>	<u>Basic Skills Are NOT</u>
Important to our careers and lives	Things you should have finished learning in grade school
Routine when dealing with a known but complex when new situations arise	Fixed, new technology requires new basic skills
Retrievable, like bike riding, but sometimes rusty, like the bike	Inflexible, as if there is only one correct way to do a task
Portable, not job specific, so that we use them wherever we go	Ever mastered to the point that anyone can stop improving and learning.

Basic skills can be thought of as two varieties: Foundational or Portable Employability. No matter their type, the many skills we call “basic” are so important that we spend our lives keeping these abilities fine tuned. For instance, people who give up trying to improve their listening skills soon deteriorate as communicators. In other words, our basic skills are either improving or declining: they do not remain constant for long. Use it or lose it, they say. Fortunately, applying our skills to contemporary problems will keep them fresh and improving!