

# SOFT SKILLS ASSESSMENT TOOL FEASIBILITY STUDY

A Case for Digital Gaming



Workforce Planning Board of Grand Erie  
Commission de planification de la main-d'œuvre de Grand Erie

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## Our Vision

A skilled, resilient workforce contributing to dynamic communities and their economies

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Key Facts and Findings

Soft Skills Assessment Tool Feasibility Study

Work Plan

Budget

Appendix 1 – Literature Review

Appendix 2 – Partners and Participants

Appendix 3 – Skill Assessment Tools/Practices from Service Providers

Appendix 4 – Skills Assessment Tools/Practices from Employers

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## Key Facts and Findings

- 1 Good soft skills result in better job outcomes
- 2 A clear, common definition of soft skills is needed to increase understanding between employers and job seekers
- 3 Common assessment tools and practices are needed to ensure service consistency and continuity
- 4 Self-assessment tools rely on individual's self-awareness and often result in skill competencies being under-or-over rated
- 5 Learning-based tools enhance soft skills through practice, problem solving, and evaluation
- 6 Serious gaming provides *active learning* and motivates and engages people by rewarding progress
- 7 Tools must include online and paper-based applications for individuals and groups

## Soft Skills Assessment Tool Feasibility Study

### Why this Feasibility Study Was Conducted

Soft skills, also known as transferable, inter-personal, and personal skills are critical to an individual's attachment to the labour force and to an employer's productivity and success. Employers participating in EmployerOne during 2014 and 2015 identified soft skills as their top requirement across all sectors. In addition, 47% of participating employers reported hard-to-fill jobs noting a declining availability of qualified workers.

Consultation with local stakeholders and a preliminary review of academic research, best practices, and tools suggested the potential to partner with Laurier Brantford to explore and develop tools using serious gaming techniques.

This feasibility study examines critical components associated with successful project development including:

- Consideration of all options before determining the best value option
- Evaluation of the investment and resources required to meet our solutions
- Detailed aspects of project development and success outcomes
- Risk Assessment prior to project implementation
- Testing the level of commitment of partners, sponsors, and stakeholders

### Project Description

Our submission to the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities for 2015-2016 spoke to the development of a Skills Assessment Tool - an on-line, interactive tool, using "serious gaming" techniques, incorporating assessment and learning components designed to help employers, employment services, and job seekers understand and develop the soft skills required in today's workplace.

This feasibility study represents Phase 1 of this multi-year project and speaks to the research findings, stakeholder recommendations, content development, marketing strategy, and costing. These findings will inform the Phase 2 implementation plan.

### Consultation and Research

#### Laurier Brantford

Academic leaders and students from Laurier Brantford played a pivotal role in the research and recommendations for this project.

Laurier Leadership and Faculty – four meetings were conducted with Laurier's leadership team and faculty during the course of the project. With the endorsement of Associate Dean, Dr. Kathryn Carter, four programs were engaged in research and development support to the project:

- Faculty of Liberal Arts – Digital Media, Human Resources: Dean, Heidi Northwood
- User Design & Experience: Professor Abby Goodrum
- Research Methodology: Professor Judy Eaton
- Digital Culture & Gaming: Dr. Scott Nicholson

Through the partnership contributions of Laurier Brantford, faculty and staff have conducted an environmental scan of existing research, tools, and best practices; researched critical soft skills and developed a framework for a “real-time” online assessment tool, and advised Workforce Planning Board of Grand Erie staff on the principles of serious gaming, the limitations and potential, and about the required specifications.

This work has identified the need to:

- Expand the terminology for tool development to include games, simulation, serious gaming, experiential learning
- Identify the differences between “gaming to assess” and “gaming to learn”
- Clearly outline specifications required by the users, e.g. individual players, group application, etc.
- Build the test models (manual, pen & pencil) before moving into online design and implementation
- Test, assess, and refine

#### **Environmental Scan and Competitive Landscape**

A more detailed understanding of soft skills and their impact on employment set the framework for several research components conducted as part of our environmental scan. These components included a literature review into existing tools, best practices, and recommendations, simulated intake assessments with local employment and literacy providers, analysis of existing assessment tools in use within the community, employer interviews, and academic research into the characteristics of specific soft skills.

#### **The Literature Review**

Cole Norman, Laurier Brantford, conducted an environmental scan designed to provide a clear definition of the soft skills and competencies most valued by employers, the effectiveness of current skill assessment tools and potential development methods and technologies using serious gaming.

The research shows that soft skills are a critical component or characteristic of successful employees, but defining and describing what each soft skill means is challenging for both employers and job seekers. Part of the difficulty is the use of multiple terms to describe soft skills including transferrable, personal and 21<sup>st</sup> Century skills.

The research also shows that despite the lack of clarify and definition, there is agreement on the core set of skills that employers and workers require:

- Communication (speaking, writing, listening, reading)

- Teamwork (collaborating, helping others, appreciating diversity)
- Critical Thinking & Problem Solving (identifying problems and solutions, finding information)
- Task/Time Management and Organization (planning, organization, multitasking)
- Leadership (delegating, role modeling, decision making)
- Community/Global Awareness (social responsibility, engaging with or contributing to the community)
- Self-Management (initiative, assertiveness, professionalism, work ethic, responsibility)

Although these skills are described as individual competencies, soft skills are not developed independently but together - for example, good problem solving skills cannot be developed in the absence of good communications skills. This is an important characteristic to incorporate into assessment tools and practices.

The research conclusions suggest that “serious gaming” would be a valuable training tool for soft skill assessment and development. Gaming involves active learning, which research has shown to enhance learning engagement, improve recall and “more easily and reliably teach essential skills such as teamwork, communication and problem solving.”

Gaming also provides users with additional motivation to complete activities, as there are often rewards, achievements, points or certificates awarded. Games can also provide prompt feedback on how well a user has done and such feedback is critical to skill development.

### Skills Assessment and Development

Investigation into soft skill assessment practices and tools shows well-established processes based largely on self-assessment models. These tools range from asking people to evaluate and rate their own skills to question-based tests that require individuals to provide the right answer. People’s inability to accurately judge their own skills and the requirement for honesty and accuracy often result in over-estimation, or under-estimation, of skills and abilities. In addition, self-assessment tools can be intimidating to individuals who may feel they are being tested or who do not enjoy the assessment process.

Assessing skills with serious gaming applications provides opportunities to motivate and engage individuals in an enjoyable process that achieves, or exceeds, the quality of assessment and provides participants the opportunity to actively use the required skill. These tools require the *learner* to perform the actions or tasks being measured.

### Existing Tools

There is a large range of self-assessment tools on the market. They are relatively easy and inexpensive to design, however, most have limitations in how accurate the results are and in their ability to impact learning and skill development.

There are also serious gaming assessment tools designed to develop self-motivation, work ethic, and customer service skills. Examples of these include simulation games used by companies such as Lowes and McDonalds that establish a basic level of competency for employees. There are also examples of more detailed games designed to “develop multiple skills while providing a high level of immersion that motivate participants to succeed.”

### **Local Assessment Practices in Employment, Literacy and Basic Skills**

In order to understand what current practices and tools are being used to assist job seekers, WPBGE participated in “mock client assessments” and “interviews” with seven agencies delivering employment services, literacy, and basic skills.

Participating organizations were asked to respond to nine questions:

1. How does your organization define soft skills?
2. How are client’s soft skills assessed during the period of intake to termination of services?
3. Is there a standard questionnaire or form used during client intakes and interviews?
4. Are there tools used to assess or measure clients’ soft skills?
5. Are employers’ soft skill needs a part of the discussion with clients?
6. What are the soft skills employers look for when hiring, or value most in, current employees?
7. If you identify that someone has challenges with work-related soft skills, how do you communicate this to the client? What are the soft skills that most often require improvement?
8. What is done to assist someone who needs to improve their work-related soft skills?
9. If you assist someone to enhance their soft skills, what kind of follow-up do you do to measure the effectiveness of that assistance? How do you measure that there has been an improvement?

The findings from this research reflect the complexity of understanding and assessing soft skills and indicate that few common practices are in place. The brief descriptions below capture the findings by question:

**Soft Skills Defined** – there was no consistency across 7 Employment Ontario services on the definition of soft skills. Definitions included a range of skill descriptions including workplace retention, character, interpersonal, essential, transferable, punctuality and attendance, and technical skills.

**Skill Assessment Methods and Tools** – assessment methods range from informal to formal practices including interviews, drop-ins, self-reporting, interview skills, assessment tools such as WorkStart, Personality Dimensions, Career Cruising, and other self-assessment programs. There is no common framework or consistency between organizations or even within organizations

Agencies are using a variety of assessment tools but there is a significant difference in what is being used. All are based on the self-assessment tools that offer a level of self-measurement and self-awareness, but none offer a learning component.

Standard Questionnaires & Tools – beyond the EO/LBS participant registration form used by more than one organization, no common tools are in use.

Incorporating Employers' Soft Skill Requirements — employment, literacy, and basic skill organizations identified a detailed list of skills valued by employers. While these skills aligned well with the skills identified through the research phase, it appears this knowledge is not well communicated to clients to inform them of employer needs.

The level to which agencies include employers' soft skills needs in discussions with clients ranged from “not strongly” to “employer expectations workshops”. Agency feedback received suggests a stronger emphasis on the technical skills advertised in job postings. Those identifying soft skills rely largely on job developers for information or on the clients themselves.

Communicating with Clients – agencies use a variety of methods to discuss soft skill issues with clients. These ranging from blunt discussions on specific skill challenges to gentle suggestions. Agencies reported that they restrict their discussion about soft skill challenges to occupational or job specific requirements.

Client Assistance – the majority of assistance is provided through inter-agency referrals to upgrading, employment services, in-house workshops, computer training, and job shadowing. Overall, the emphasis focuses on further assessment of the client rather than on skill development.

Follow-up and Measurement – all organizations reported compliance with mandatory client follow-ups. The information primarily tracks employment status at the 3, 6, and 12 month and measures status of employment and whether the agency's services were helpful.

### **Recommendations from Employment, Literacy and Basic Skills**

Participants were asked three questions pertaining to their ideas about assessing and enhancing soft skills, the type of tools they would find most effective and the critical skill sets required.

Ideas for Assessing/Enhancing Soft Skills – three themes emerged in response to enhancing soft skills: the need for a standardized, common assessment tool that is short and effective at identifying skills; the need for tools that connect soft skills to job scenarios; and the need for tools that build in tasks that teach the desired skill outcome.

Type of Tool - organizations were asked their preference in the type of tool to be developed. All agreed that an on-line tool would be their priority, but most noted that a customizable paper-based toolkit with some form of in-person or group application would be required as well.

Critical Skills – while expressed in many different terms, participants identified critical skills that aligned with those identified in our research – communications, team work, critical thinking, and leadership. One notable exception gap arising was the area of community/global awareness, which has been

identified through academic research and employer feedback to be an important characteristic associated with success.

### **Current Employer Assessment Practices and Recommendations**

Three sources informed the findings about employers' current assessment practices for new hires and existing employees – EmployerOne, employer interviews, and research conducted by Laurier Brantford with Kelly Services, the area's largest staffing agency.

**Critical Soft Skills** – employers reported soft skills as the most critical skill requirements when hiring in the 2015 EmployerOne Survey. These findings were further validated through in-person interviews conducted as part of this research. Employers consistently identified customer service, communications, teamwork, critical thinking, and work ethic as factors for success.

**Assessment Practices** – employers assess and measure soft skills for both new hires and existing employees. A variety of methods are used to assess soft skills during the hiring process including phone interviews, behavioural based interview questions, reference checks, and testing. Ongoing soft skill assessments continue for existing employees through a variety of methods including employee/management rating systems, supervision, and performance reviews. More formal fee-based assessment tools and services are normally reserved for senior positions such as managers.

**Soft Skill Tool** – feedback from employers was mixed given their diverse environments and hiring needs. While about half thought a tool would assist in the hiring process, most employers indicated that it would likely be used only to finalize candidates. Others reported that their unionized environments would likely prevent the use of such a screening tool. All of the employers interviewed, however, felt such a tool would be beneficial to job seekers if the tool accurately assessed and developed soft skills, and if the tool provided some form of verification or certification.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The research conducted for this feasibility study confirms the strong connections between good soft skills and successful attachment to employment. Defining and understanding those soft skills, however, is challenging and the lack of good assessment and learning tools leaves it to the jobseeker to largely self-assess their own capabilities, and with little opportunity to develop skills.

Current practices used by local agencies and employers also reflect these issues. Organizations working with job seekers lack a clear definition of soft skills, a common approach to assessment, and learning tools that assist individuals increase their soft skill competencies. Employers lack a clear definition of soft skills, common assessment practices, and ways to validate soft skill competencies in job candidates.

These findings have been used to make the following recommendations for Phase 2. There is a need for:

- Common assessment tool and practices to ensure consistency and continuity
- Learning tools and strategies that build clients' soft skill competencies
- Learner outcome-based evidence (certification) that demonstrate that job candidates have the required skills

- Both an on-line assessment and physical/paper-based learning tools that can be used for individual clients and groups
- An incremental approach to the tool development that starts from a physical, hands-on tool that can be tested and refined (short term) to an on-line tool (long term)
- Commitment from Employment Ontario, Ontario Works, and local educational organizations to work on developing the specifications and resources required to create the tools
- Resources

### **Risk Management**

Moving forward with Phase 2 of the skills assessment project has moderate risks associated with successful outcomes. These include:

- Partnership commitment – this project will be successful only if the partners commit the time and work required to define the key skills, project specifications, monitoring and evaluation
- Financial resources – this project requires student funding to cover the cost of summer employment for two Laurier gaming students
- User Commitment – the commitment of community partners, educators, etc. to adapt and use the common, soft skill assessment tool in their daily work
- Measurement and Evaluation - ensuring pre- and post-soft skill measurements for individuals using the tool
- Ownership – developing criteria over intellectual property rights

## Work Plan 2016-2017

Project	Category	Assigned To	Est. Start	Est. Finish
Partner/Advisory Meeting	Research	WPBGE	4/1/2016	4/30/2016
2 Planning meetings	Planning	WPBGE/LAUREIR	4/1/2016	6/30/2016
Resource Development	FUNDING	WPBGE/LAURIER	04/01/2016	05/01/2016
Hiring of Students	GAMING STUDENTS	WPBGE/LAURIER	05/01/2016	05/30/2016
Prototype developed (Phase 1)	PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION	WPBGE/LAURIER	05/01/2016	08/30/2016
TESTING	EVALUATION	ALL	8/1/2016	9/30/2016
Online simulation tool	PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION	WPBGE/LAURIER	9/30/2016	3/1/2017
PROJECT MEASUREMENT	EVALUATION	WPBGE	3/1/2017	3/31/2017

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Category	Description	Total Cost
Meetings	\$100.00 X4	\$400.00
Materials and Supplies	\$1,000.00	\$1,000.00
Staffing (Students – Gaming Program)	2 students working 30 hours per week for 12 weeks @15.00 per hour, plus MERCS	\$11,500.00
<b>TOTAL</b>		\$12,900.00

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## Appendix 1

### Skills Assessment Serious Gaming Tool Feasibility Study – Literature Review

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#### Introduction

The purpose of this document is to provide clear definitions of the most-valued soft-skills and competencies by employers, as well as information regarding the effectiveness of current skill assessment and development methods and technologies. This document will serve as a foundation for the exploration of *serious gaming* (SG) techniques for assessing and developing soft skills in employees and job seekers.

*Serious games* are games that have been developed for purposes other than entertainment – often to be used as a learning tool. Though serious games are most commonly known for their focus on specific skills (such as America’s Army [<http://www.americasarmy.com/>], used as a recruiting tool by the U.S. Army, which focuses on the basics of combat operations), a new wave of marketing and development has seen these games applied to the training and assessment of soft skills.

The use of *serious gaming* technologies to develop and assess soft skills is a relatively new and understudied phenomenon. The dramatic rise in popularity of causal gaming (i.e. recreational game play) in the last decade has led many to wonder about the potential training applications of games (Vasileva-Stojanovska, Vasileva, Malinovski, & Trajkovik, 2014). Gaming is an innately attractive learning tool because it is a form of *active learning*; where the learner participates in and makes decisions about their experience. This is as opposed to traditional e-

learning styles, which have been described as *passive learning* (Sancho, Fuentes-Fernández, Gómez-Martín, & Fernández-Manjón, 2009). Such programs mostly involve reading and passive listening without any actual interactivity. When programs consist of listening to lectures, watching videos, or other passive learning activities, this often translates into a low level of learner engagement and interest (Kitchen, 2005).

Conversely, active learning has been demonstrated to enhance learner engagement, improve recall, and more easily and reliably teach essential skills such as teamwork, communication, and problem solving. This is because the learner engages in activities which allow them to use the skills in question (Kitchen, 2005). Serious gaming enhances the existing benefits of active learning by providing learners with additional motivation to complete activities, such as rewards, achievements/trophies, or points (Shah & Foster, 2014). Serious games can also provide individualized feedback on users' performance, which is a critical component of skill development. Users must be able to practice and receive feedback to better develop soft skills (Shah & Foster, 2014). The low-cost of serious games compared to classroom-style learning is a benefit in this regard, as training sessions with serious games can be completed online, without the cost of a classroom or instructor (Bellotti, Bottino, Fernández-Manjón, & Nadolski, 2014).

Serious games are valuable teaching tools, particularly for developing and assessing the soft skills that are so necessary for success in the work world. What follows is an overview of the soft skills that employers and job agencies are most concerned about.

### **Defining Soft Skills**

There are many definitions of soft skills, with different focuses depending on the context in which they are being studied. Soft skills are often highlighted as critical elements of a successful employee, but job seekers often have a difficult time expressing what each skill actually represents. In fact, undergraduate university students often lack the language to properly articulate the soft skills that they have acquired (Martini, Rail, & Norton, in press). Further complicating matters, employers and job agencies do not always agree on what qualifies as soft skills, and many different terms are used to describe soft skills, including *transferrable skills*, *21<sup>st</sup> century skills*, and *personal skills*. The most commonly sought-after soft skills that are often emphasized by employers are communication skills, problem solving skills, and teamwork skills (Vasileva-Stojanovska, Malinovski, Vasileva, Jovevski, & Trajkovik, 2015).

Employers are also concerned with more general characteristics such as work ethic and self-motivation. These are actually elements of what are called *self-management* or *personal skills* – i.e. skills that are just as much an element of one’s personality as they are skills in themselves. Adjectives that can be used to describe oneself such as ‘hard working’, ‘confident’, ‘self-motivated’, etc. are examples of *self-management skills* (Martini et al., in press). Further, there are some skills that are job-related but are a universal component of job experience, such as customer service skills, which includes a constellation of other related soft skills, and would not generally be considered a soft skill.

There are many lists and charts of soft skills that claim to be comprehensive, and there tends to be agreement across employers, job agencies, and researchers that there is a core set of soft skills. The most commonly cited soft skills across all disciplines are:

- Communication (speaking, writing, listening, reading)

- Teamwork (collaborating, helping others, appreciating diversity)
- Critical Thinking & Problem Solving (identifying problems and solutions, finding information)
- Task/Time Management and Organization (planning, organization, multitasking)
- Leadership (delegating, role modeling, decision making)
- Community/Global Awareness (social responsibility, engaging with or contributing to the community)
- Self-Management (initiative, assertiveness, professionalism, work ethic, responsibility, and any other 'trait')

Of these core soft skills, some are easier developed than others. Communication, teamwork, and leadership skills have well-established teaching systems and general rules for success. Self-management skills on the other hand tend to be more strongly linked to one's personality traits and are consequently more difficult to change. Short-term interventions such as game-based skill training could provide 'hard and fast' rules and expectations for how to perform, but long-held attitudes and beliefs about work ethic, assertiveness, or professionalism are more resistant to change. As such, current serious gaming solutions tend to be focused on developing communication, teamwork, critical thinking, and task/time management skills.

It is noteworthy that there is considerable overlap between soft skills; leadership requires teamwork and task/time management skills, and virtually all skills require communication skills. Soft skills do not exist in a vacuum – they are developed together. This is important to remember when assessing skill levels. It is unlikely that someone would have

strong teamwork skills but poor communication. All soft skills are essential together for good employee performance.

There is much evidence that soft skills can be actively developed, but the most effective teaching solutions are those that give learners the opportunity to practice (Martinovic et al., 2014). Passive learning experiences (such as traditional e-learning solutions) rarely provide genuine opportunities to practice skills such as communication, teamwork, or critical thinking in the same way that active learning experiences such as serious games can practice (Martinovic et al., 2014). Answering multiple choice questions or watching videos about how to work effectively in a team (forms of passive learning) are less effective for teaching soft skills than an engaging game where one is forced to make decisions with a team that could lead to rewards. Games enable an active learning approach that encourages group communication, critical thinking, debate, and decision making practice (Martinovic et al., 2014).

### **Feasibility of Skill Assessment & Development**

Assessment of soft skills is a relatively well-established set of procedures that can be implemented in a variety of ways. The most common method by far is to have individuals rate their own level of competency, which is typically achieved using a 1-5 or 1-7 point scale (i.e. ranging from *very strong* to *very weak*). The individual may then be asked to provide examples of how those skills have been demonstrated in the workplace. The *General Innovation Skills Aptitude Test 2.0* (Centre for Business Innovation, <http://www.conferenceboard.ca/cbi/gisat2.aspx>) and the *Workskills Survey* (Workstart, <http://www.workstart.org/>) are examples of commonly structured self-assessments. There are

countless examples of self-assessment tools available for soft skills – a web search for transferrable skills assessment yields thousands of questionnaires, all based on the same template as described. Many universities provide their own soft skills self-assessment tools on their Career Services page. Self-assessments are common, likely because they are easy to develop and to use.

Despite the wide usage of self-assessment, there are some inherent problems with this method of skill assessment, first and foremost that it relies on the honesty - and accuracy – of peoples’ beliefs about themselves and their strengths. There is much psychological literature on the issues with this type of reliance on self-reporting, which ultimately suggest that self-report is not an ideal solution. Some individuals tend to consistently overestimate their skills, while others consistently underestimate their skills. Further, we are not always the best judge of our abilities relative to other people. This is an important critique of self-report, as it is a reflexive exercise that allows one to consider their own strengths and weaknesses.

Given the issues with self-report, it is preferable to use exercises and quizzes to better assess one’s soft skills. The benefit of using quizzes is that it allows one to judge the quiz-taker’s ability to demonstrate the skills in question. For example, to assess problem solving skills, one could be tasked with selecting the correct answer(s) to a question requiring problem solving abilities from a list. Despite the value of this method of skills assessment, it is relatively uncommon due to ease of developing and implementing self-assessment tools. In fact, many skills assessment tools are marketed or presented as exercises to test one’s soft skills, but are actually poorly disguised self-assessment questionnaires. A good example of an exercise-based tool for skills assessment is the “Transferrable Skills Quiz”

(<http://www.centerstagegroup.com/public/128.cfm>). This assessment tasks users with identifying which soft skills would be required for specific jobs, matching skills to job requirements. Although these methods of skill-assessment are more ideal than self-assessment, there are some concerns. Motivation to participate in and complete quizzes and assessments is typically low, as it can be intimidating and/or unenjoyable, as one can feel as if they are being tested. Serious games provide a workaround for this issue.

Serious gaming assessments are an elegant solution to the issue of motivation to complete assessments, as they can potentially provide additional meaning and enjoyment, while still achieving the same - or often better - level of assessment quality (Romero, Usart, & Ott, 2015). In fact, serious games can go one step further in assessment, giving one the opportunity to actively participate in activities that require the use of soft skills, rather than simply choosing a correct response to a question (Parry et al., 2014; Kitchen, 2005). In this regard, serious games have been quite successful. When learners are required to perform actions or tasks that require the demonstration of the skills to be assessed, we can get a far more accurate judge of their abilities than is possible with quizzes and self-report (Martinovic et al., 2014). For example, *Pacific* (<https://game-learn.com/>) requires users to perform in-game tasks such as managing the roles of fellow survivors, delegating tasks, and making active leadership decisions through dialogue choices (i.e. users are presented with several dialogue choices representing what your character will say). These in-game tasks require the demonstration of soft skills such as teamwork, leadership, and communication. Upon the completion of the game session (or task, depending on the game), users may be presented with

detailed feedback on the quality of their decisions, along with recommendations on how to improve.

In terms of developing skills, active learning solutions such as serious games are the clear choice for training when compared to traditional e-learning solutions. However, little research exists to clearly suggest the superiority of serious games over workshops and classroom-style learning solutions in terms of skills development. Serious games are typically cheaper to implement, require less oversight, and are scalable and more accessible than workshops (Martinovic et al., 2014), but the difference in skill development overall is yet to be established, although active learning within a game environment is theoretically more engaging and flexible. Both solutions can provide active learning experiences with high levels of immersion, giving learners many opportunities to complete tasks and activities which require the use of soft skills.

Of note, serious games do not have to be computer-based. Games designed for workshops and classroom-style learning could potentially be beneficial for skill development and assessment in similar ways to computer-based serious games. The issue of motivation and engagement would be a primary concern with this method however, as many individuals find workshops and classroom participation to be intimidating and/or 'lame', which is something that computer-based serious games have been designed to address (Kitchen, 2005). Board games are an elegant solution to the engagement problem, which have been employed by a variety of Scandinavian companies, who are using this approach to gain an advantage on their competitors. Inspired by the old Prussian tradition of Kriegsspiel (war games) the companies use the simulations as a training ground, where leadership skills, business understanding and

key strategies can be tested and fine-tuned before implementation in real life

(<http://www.wired.com/insights/2014/12/board-game-to-board-room/>). Games such as Monopoly, Risk, and other wargames such as Axis and Allies have been used for their requirements of strategic thinking, teamwork, and resource management.

### **Existing Serious Gaming Tools**

Some serious game tools available today are ready to play and pre-built to teach specific skills such as communication or leadership. Some provide training and development for a variety of skills, while others are provided as an open software tool that require employers to contribute to the development of program offerings within the game. Regardless of how they are structured, serious games can both assess and provide opportunities for development of skills. In fact, most serious games include features for skill assessment and skill development, as there must be a way to assess the skill development throughout the experience.

All or virtually all serious games on the market are designed to build communication and teamwork skills, whether it be through multiplayer decision-making (The Leadership Game, MetaVals, Linehan, Pacific, etc.) or interacting with virtual characters (VECTOR, deLearyous, Triskelion). Also universal is the development of computer skills/literacy (also known as ICT skills), simply by using the software tools. Serious games need not be designed deliberately to teach ICT skills, they only need to be user-friendly so that individuals can develop these skills actively through use of the program. Critical thinking and problem solving skills are another common target for skill development with serious games (Romero, Usart, & Ott, 2015). Puzzle games (or puzzle components in a game) are fun and easy ways to develop these skills. The

majority of currently available serious games appear to be focused on these core set of soft skills: communication, teamwork, leadership, critical thinking, and problem-solving (Romero, Usart, & Ott, 2015).

There are few serious games that are marketed to explicitly develop self-motivation, work ethic, or customer service skills. Employers such as Lowes, McDonalds, and others use forms of interactive software for their orientation training, primarily to establish a base level of soft skills competence required for the job (Ravenscroft, & McAlister, 2006). These tools – though not serious games in their own right – tend to include components of customer service skill training, although this training is explicit. For example, McDonald’s has used a customer service simulation to assess and develop customer service skills (Ravenscroft, & McAlister, 2006). Users are shown a virtual work environment and are tasked with resolving customer complaints by selecting appropriate dialogue choices. It is doubtful that these software tools provide the same level of immersion and motivation as a serious game such as *Gamelearn’s* Pacific or Triskelion, though no data exists to confirm this.

*Gamelearn’s* catalogue of serious games is a particularly good example of learning tools that are designed to develop multiple soft skills while providing a high level of immersion and motivation to succeed (<https://game-learn.com/>). Their games *Pacific*, *Triskelion*, and *Merchants* are alleged to develop soft skills and critical business skills such as persuasive communication, negotiation, personal productivity and time management, as well as communication, teamwork, and problem solving skills (<https://game-learn.com/>).

### **Best Practices**

Some highlights for best practices among serious games include:

- *Task users with completing objectives or activities that require the active use of soft skills (active learning).* This allows users to demonstrate their skills in real applications AND develop skills in a meaningful way. (Examples: resolve a conflict between digital characters by selecting appropriate dialogue choices [communication]; fairly delegate tasks to digital group members based on their expertise [leadership and teamwork; complete a puzzle requiring lateral thinking [critical thinking]).
- *Provide a high level of immersion for users.* This increases motivation to participate and improves learning quality. (Examples: attractive graphics and interface, fun gameplay, ease-of-use).
- *Provide valuable individualized feedback to users throughout the session(s).* Users must be able to experiment and receive feedback on their choices in order to improve their skills. (Examples: receiving 'points', 'tokens', 'achievements', etc. for good performance).

### **Other Considerations**

Technology literacy will be a deciding factor in the success of serious gaming assessment and development techniques. However simple the interface and however attractive the design may be, users must be confident enough in their ability to use technology to engage with these tools (Barnett, Ridgers, Hanna, & Salmon, 2014). Job-seekers who are most resistant to skill training through technologies may be resistant because of their lack of confidence with computers and other devices. Access to computers and mobile devices is another major barrier for job seekers, as there are still many Canadians who lack reliable access to an internet-connected device. Serious games that require a regular (i.e. weekly) or lengthy (i.e. multiple hour sessions) time investment may be less likely to appeal to drop-in job seekers at

employment agencies, particularly for those who do not have reliable access to an internet-connected device at home. Millennial job seekers are far more likely to be open to serious game skill assessment and development methods due to their exposure to video games, although the aging Canadian workforce may be more resistant to such tools.

Recent research has highlighted the importance of explicitly discussing skill development as it happens. Students in undergraduate university courses often lack the language to properly articulate the soft skills that they spent years developing (Martini et al., in press). Further, students are often unaware of soft skill development and training in their classrooms. Explicit mention of the skills being developed is generally required to ensure that individuals are able to 'sell' their skillset (Martini et al., in press). In this regard, successful serious gaming tools would benefit from clear language regarding the skills users can hope to improve, as well as reminders about the type of soft skills being assessed.

## **Conclusions**

Academic literature on the effectiveness of serious games as training tools is fairly limited. Much of the information we do have is marketing information from the companies who developed the tools in question. According to developers, serious games are indeed superior to traditional e-learning solutions, and it appears to be due to lower cost, ease of implementation, increased immersion, and the benefits of active learning (Romero, Usart, & Ott, 2015). Serious games do indeed appear to be valuable training tools for soft skill development and assessment.

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## Appendix 2

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### Partner and Participant List

Heidi Northwood – Dean, Faculty of Liberal Arts, Laurier Brantford

Abby Goodrum – Professor, User Design & Experience, Laurier Brantford

Judy Eaton, Research Methodology, Laurier Brantford

Scott Nicholson, Professor; Director, Game Design and Development Program;

Director, Brantford Games Network and the BGNlab, Laurier Brantford

Colleen Vandaele, Employer Consultant, Kelly Services

Fanshawe College, Community Employment Services

Brant Skills Centre

Community Resource Services

Fanshawe College, Literacy and Basic Skills

St. Leonard's Community Services

Haldimand-Norfolk Social Services

Bridges to Success

J.P. Bowman Ltd.

Roulston's Pharmacy

The Marco Corporation

## Appendix 3

### Skills Assessment Tools/Practices Data from Service Providers Summarized

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1. Soft Skills Defined	2. How Soft Skills Assessed
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Workplace ready and “retention” skills</li> <li>• Character traits</li> <li>• Interpersonal skills, EQ</li> <li>• People skills- leader/follower</li> <li>• 9 essential skills- soft skills are the foundation to be successful, hard to teach</li> <li>• Transferable skills- matter of your opinion and taken from experience</li> <li>• Transferable skills- attendance, attitude, interpersonal</li> <li>• Focus on tasks</li> <li>• Soft skills- to follow instructions, ability to work with others in classroom, managing time and priorities, communication, skills you utilize on daily basis</li> <li>• Punctuality, attendance, initiative</li> <li>• Maturity level</li> <li>• We refer for the technical skills – retention assessment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Orientation session &amp; workbook (self-identify)</li> <li>• Employment readiness assessment- self reporting</li> <li>• 30-60 minute conversation on goal path, objective and their self-identified skills they need to improve</li> <li>• Takes an hour- intro, drop-ins (self-report)</li> <li>• Assess skills level – what clients want to work on</li> <li>• Interview/appointments and work it in as need arises- don’t know they need it</li> <li>• Mock interviews and interview prep</li> <li>• Constant follow-up-learning happens through entire process</li> <li>• Foundation Skill program- context for soft skills</li> <li>• Use tools available (eg. WorkStart- Personality Work Characteristics, ON Skills Passport, Personality Dimensions, Career Cruising</li> <li>• Once start program- assess daily exercises, assess daily interest, lots of informal assessment tools</li> <li>• Soft skills may not apply in program</li> <li>• For person who doesn’t know what they want, can take few weeks to 2 months</li> <li>• Length of service varies</li> </ul>

3. Questionnaire/Form used	4. Tools used to assess/measure soft skills
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• EO/LBS Participant registration form used by a couple</li> <li>• ETNA (St Leonard’s form helps meet expectations of Ministry and provide more info)</li> <li>• Employment Readiness Assessment- Norfolk OW</li> <li>• Writing and math assessment in-house</li> <li>• Forms used during info sessions and intake interview</li> <li>• Menu of options- someone can opt out, if don’t want to do formally, can do one-on-one chats of walk-throughs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Laubach Way to Reading, Breakthrough to Math, ESKARGO Reading Writing &amp; Numeracy, GED Pre-tests</li> <li>• Assessment mainly on literacy skills</li> <li>• Essential Skills Needs Assessments, TOWES, Common Assessment of Basic Skills (CABS), Build Your Career with Essential Skills, Essential Skills Indicator, Measure Up, Essential Skills for Employment &amp; education</li> <li>• Ontario Skills Passport, Skills Zone- OSP</li> <li>• Personality Dimensions</li> <li>• Career Cruising</li> <li>• WorkStart – Personality Work Characteristics</li> <li>• Employment Needs Assessment</li> <li>• Work readiness assessment</li> <li>• Screening lists</li> <li>• Milestones – EO developed, dependent upon learner’s goal &amp; culminating tasks (culminating involves computer word processing)</li> <li>• End of class project- developed by EO- if ready, employment, school – secondary or postsecondary, or independent learning</li> <li>• Self-assessment on skills</li> <li>• Some self-assessment</li> <li>• Action plan (some self-reporting)</li> <li>• People need to learn themselves- what are my skills</li> <li>• Assessment plans</li> <li>• Via interaction with staff, ability to apply feedback, people watching during workshops</li> <li>• Referral to LBS</li> <li>• In person works best</li> <li>• Meet every 3 months</li> <li>• Instructor – paper based- if digital tech section- do on computer</li> <li>• EO tools pretty effective- no one has failed. Sometimes do Milestones more than once- may not be successful first time</li> </ul>

5. Do you talk about what skills employers looking for with clients	6. What are soft skills employers tell you they value when hiring
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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not strong connection with employers- incorporate soft skills into occupation specific programming</li> <li>• Employer expectation workshop</li> <li>• Yes, as provided by job developer from employer</li> <li>• Learn about needs via job ads, job developers, etc. - employers generally want hard skills</li> <li>• Look at job posting &amp; see if they have matching skills</li> <li>• We make the connection to the job</li> <li>• Make real life connection or tie direct to their path</li> <li>• Try to get info from clients who have gone on interviews</li> <li>• Conversation between client and staff</li> <li>• Ask what do you think went wrong- have them self-identify</li> <li>• Not typical for all clients- would be true for clients with employment goal path.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 9 essential skills</li> <li>• Ability to work with others</li> <li>• Customer service training</li> <li>• People skills- can you get along with others, conflict resolution</li> <li>• Thinking skills- good decision making</li> <li>• Punctuality</li> <li>• Punctuality/attendance/reliability</li> <li>• Attendance/reliability</li> <li>• Reliability</li> <li>• Communication (writing ability)- grammar, spelling</li> <li>• Communication</li> <li>• Communication</li> <li>• Attitude</li> <li>• Accountability/responsibility</li> <li>• Continued commitment to job</li> <li>• Meeting expectations- establishing good will, going above and beyond</li> <li>• Workplace etiquette</li> <li>• Office appropriate wear</li> <li>• Use of text during work – time use</li> <li>• People who can work independently</li> <li>• Organizational skills- organizing life to get to work</li> </ul>
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7. Communicating with clients about areas to work on and areas requiring most improvement	8. Services provided to assist someone with improving soft skills
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Connect skill to the goal path to emphasize its importance</li> <li>• Compare to occupational profile or course package</li> <li>• Use scenarios- options could include...</li> <li>• Focus on the solutions- training, employer needs, different role</li> <li>• If miss 1 class, raises conversation that if I was employer, you need to tell me. Treat class like a workplace</li> <li>• Personality assessment good way- mirroring technique</li> <li>• Training, modules, coaching</li> <li>• Verbal discussion and assigning tasks</li> <li>• Participant agreement sessions- ability to attend, willingness to go to workshops</li> <li>• Group settings (classes) &amp; one-on-one meetings- work with multiple individuals so if a trend is seen</li> <li>• Help them come to conclusion themselves (exposure, provide choices)</li> <li>• Behaviour in workshops</li> <li>• Most people know what they're struggling</li> <li>• Gently- suggesting they attend workshops</li> <li>• Strengthen through relationship building</li> <li>• Avoid conflict</li> <li>• Head on- don't sugar coat it</li> <li>• Confront the behaviour</li> <li>• Provide choices</li> <li>• Hygiene hard to deal with</li> <li>• Area for Improvement- Punctuality/attendance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Our programming</li> <li>• Refer to programming we have under upgrading</li> <li>• Other assessments</li> <li>• Norcat- customer service model</li> <li>• Workshops – “Job survival, because it's a jungle out there!”, tackling the tough skills, time management, workplace communication, enhance your self esteem</li> <li>• Have online resources and take home books</li> <li>• Computer skills huge for every job. Even applying for jobs. Sign up for Essential Skills. Writing, more time for older workers or if don't have computer at home, 40+</li> <li>• Job trial- good for assessment</li> <li>• Refer to other LBS</li> <li>• Work with employment services</li> <li>• Reference to workshops – LBS, one-to-one services (in service plan as coaching)</li> <li>• Talk about tips/tricks</li> <li>• Help them brainstorm ideas on how will work for them</li> <li>• Client supports- bus passes/taxis</li> <li>• Can't push too much- won't come back</li> <li>• No option to practice</li> </ul>

9. Follow-up done to measure if soft skills have been developed. How do you measure improvement	10. Ideas on assessing and enhancing soft skills
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mandated questions from Employment Ontario at 3, 6 &amp; 12 months</li> <li>• Closed service plan- 3, 6, 12 follow-up (6 and 12 if not employed/in training)</li> <li>• 3 months if positive steps, if not move to 6 then 12</li> <li>• 3, 6, 12 month follow-ups standard</li> <li>• Follow-up calls once employed/in training (3 mths, 6 and 12 sometimes)</li> <li>• Follow-up at 3, 6, 12 months- clients informed of schedule at entry and exit of programs</li> <li>• Follow-up at 3, 6, 12 months- if goal- if employed or in school- find out how well they are doing in school</li> <li>• Survey follow-up end of program- how effective it has been</li> <li>• Active service plan- regular follow-up, encourage weekly- email, phone, facebook, text</li> <li>• Monthly or bi-weekly follow-up- multiple forms of communication</li> <li>• May use contact methods to test skills- emails vs phone to review written communication skills/identify other areas for improvement</li> <li>• Face to face meetings</li> <li>• Interviews with someone they have not worked with</li> <li>• Research new ideas based upon client</li> <li>• Test and re-test</li> <li>• Milestones-to assess if growing skills at hand</li> <li>• Recommendations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Same assessment tool for all - make it good for referral purposes</li> <li>• Nothing standardized (requirements) – can they be?</li> <li>• Do short- 20 minutes – people don't want to do them especially the ones who need it- just find me a job- overwhelmed/too much to do/changed my plan</li> <li>• Speed-some processes take a long time</li> <li>• Workplace ready skills can never be emphasized enough (job retention skills)</li> <li>• Identify most important soft skills- what Qs can be asked?</li> <li>• Work ethic, customer service, self-motivation and problem solving skills (just listed the skills of interest)</li> <li>• Tests to identify strengths and weaknesses (Toyota)</li> <li>• Behavioural Qs- eg. Home Depot application- what are they looking for?</li> <li>• Job based scenarios</li> <li>• Look at Skills Canada app as example</li> <li>• Session # 3 of HNSS (In book, looks like "Job Survival, because it's a jungle out there!" which is about job retention and employer expectations)</li> <li>• Building in tasks- example ready</li> <li>• Reinforcement and repetition needs</li> <li>• Using a computer may not be good if no/limited computer skills</li> <li>• Part of assessment to be computer based - still need a paper based assessment</li> <li>• Some soft skills not really included in assessment</li> <li>• Each counsellor approaches soft skills in their own way</li> <li>• Self-assessments not always helpful</li> </ul>

11. Critical skills to be included in a tool	12. Preference around tool being a) online b) tool-kit to be customized c) don't require additional support in this area
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understanding of those with accessibility issues (limit discrimination/stigma)</li> <li>• Team work</li> <li>• Conflict resolution</li> <li>• How well you work with others on rate of 1-10 - now doing by observation</li> <li>• Collaboration</li> <li>• Customer service-relate to others, build relationships, work with others</li> <li>• Can you assess working with others?</li> <li>• Thinking skills</li> <li>• Analytical</li> <li>• Reliability, timeliness</li> <li>• On-time/punctuality/attendance</li> <li>• Time management</li> <li>• Communication</li> <li>• Attitude towards work (just want my pay cheque, why do I work, do I need to like my job)</li> <li>• The impact your role has</li> <li>• Professionalism at work/privacy</li> <li>• Follow-through</li> <li>• Initiative</li> <li>• Computer literacy- software comprehension</li> <li>• Written communication</li> <li>• Numeracy</li> <li>• Reading comprehension- to locate info</li> <li>• Following directions (including H&amp;S)</li> <li>• Interviewing</li> <li>• Job ready</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• on-line but a customizable toolkit would be good too</li> <li>• online and offline</li> <li>• Customizable – option to be online/paper/group</li> <li>• Online with instant results and repeatable for tracking changes</li> <li>• Online tool or customizable tool kit – note only 2 computers on-site</li> <li>• Option of both online &amp; paper based dependent on client</li> <li>• Online tool- work on digital tech, have good success with folks doing activities at home</li> </ul>

## Appendix 4

### Skills Assessment Tools/Practices Data from Employers Summarized

13. Top Soft Skills Sought when Hiring	14. How you assess or measure if applicant had required soft skill- any tools/tests/software used
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 4 core modules under which 22 soft skills fall: initiative, innovation, organization, work ethic</li> <li>• Customer service – part of every job within company. Communication skills – more verbal with need to listen, writing is not needed in environment.</li> <li>• Work ethic – bonus as many applicants come without.</li> <li>• Punctuality not an issue when they come in.</li> <li>• Sick calls concern as people don't think twice about calling in sick.</li> <li>• Customer service- everyone's a customer.</li> <li>• Motivation-will do more than just show up, will look for better ways to do job, learn their job and want to do it better.</li> <li>• Problem solving- think outside the box.</li> <li>• Punctuality not a concern</li> <li>• Communication – interpersonal skills. All positions focus on communications skills.</li> <li>• Customer Service- customers are team members, not just patients.</li> <li>• Other soft skill importance depends on position- higher the position, more important soft skills are.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• First step, phone interview (listen for soft skills and attitude) then person comes in for interview and does testing around math, WHMIS, health &amp; safety, problem solving. President will also engage applicant in conversation to gauge the person.</li> <li>• Give math questions for some positions (eg. pharmacy tech, money questions)</li> <li>• Craft interview questions around soft skills to bring out info about how good soft skills are</li> <li>• Rely on behaviour type questions during interview process to highlight soft skills.</li> <li>• Use reference checks to determine soft skills.</li> <li>• Paid tools for leadership positions -Myers Briggs test, McQuaig Institute test</li> </ul>

15. Assess the soft skills of current staff? Program to develop soft skills in current staff?	16. Company interested in tool that can assess or develop soft skills? Pay a fee for tool?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Managers do performance evaluation on each employee – rating soft skills in 22 areas on score of 0 to 4. Tied to compensation- believe it is incentive for employees to pay more attention to how to act in workplace.</li> <li>• No program to train for soft skills- management will offer advice for improvement</li> <li>• Undergoing restructuring and will have Customer Service Manager which will allow company to provide more customer service training to staff (including one-on-one)</li> <li>• Don't assess soft skills of current staff</li> <li>• Internal candidates- look at current performance, work ethic</li> <li>• Yearly performance appraisal helps highlight issues with soft skills</li> <li>• Fee-based services for upper management positions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If there was a tool, would entertain it</li> <li>• Don't see a tool as necessary. Main concern is identifying issues with employees around soft skills</li> <li>• Interested in pre-screening tool. At right price would pay fee</li> <li>• Unionized environment means that is unlikely a tool would be acceptable- there would be resistance from unions.</li> <li>• Re: fee- can't afford additional fees and 62% of our jobs go internally</li> <li>• Specialty skills outweigh soft skills- unless there is red flag related to soft skills</li> </ul>

<p><b>17. What should tool include/cover to meet your needs</b></p>	<p><b>18. Would you incorporate such a tool in hiring process (what stage, how much weight in decision making, computer tool?)</b></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A tool that give insightful information. What can we learn about this person. If hired, how well will they embrace job.</li> <li>• Continuous improvement</li> <li>• Interest in how someone performs under pressure- do they become domineering or will they handle pressure more effectively. What is person’s default position around handling stress</li> <li>• Higher level positions will see applicant given an assignment to prepare as part of interview process- present how they would handle a situation. Interviewers then throw new questions at applicant to see if they can think on their feet, not be thrown off course, will figure out how to handle new challenge</li> <li>• More common for employer to assess on hard skills.</li> <li>• Interest in seeing how someone manages in political arena.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There is program out of Michigan (Expertech or Xpertech) that uses an online test to vet applicants for technical jobs- potential model?</li> <li>• Not applicable according to employer</li> <li>• More likely to use tool around soft skills for short list of job applicants.</li> <li>• Computer tool most helpful if easy to administer and easy to interpret results.</li> <li>• Don’t make too objective that lose human touch (still want to get sense of candidate from talking to them, interviewing them)</li> <li>• Could only be used for external candidates as union would not want it used for current employees.</li> <li>• Would do a trial run, a pilot project and then evaluate and measure effectiveness- did we have better candidates</li> </ul>

<p><b>19. Familiar with serious gaming (online or computer games used as learning tool) Would you consider tool like this?</b></p>	<p><b>20. Benefit to you as employer if applicant has used such a tool and can demonstrate skill? Would they be better candidate or have better chance of hire?</b></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not applicable according to her</li> <li>• Idea makes sense</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Would have to know more about it, more about what tool covered</li> <li>• Too new to comment</li> <li>• Understands the idea of certificates/badges and knows that’s part of lure for gamers.</li> <li>• Would depend on validity of certificate – many of employer’s jobs require certificates with some better to have than others</li> </ul>

**21. Any further ideas, suggestions or comments**

- More soft skills (22) than hard skills (8-15) in their performance review system so employee who scores highly in soft skills gets a better “mark”- there is a stronger weighting for soft skills in their system
- See value in idea in general as generations more tech-driven so could see tool being benefit to job seekers now and in future. Thinks they will relate to tool that uses gaming. Promising idea. Staff who haven’t passed probation is often because of weak soft skills (attendance, too slow and showing no signs of improvement). Sometimes employee just not a good fit.
- Interested to know how things play out.
- Renewed interest within setting for a simulation centre where applicants given case study- given “stress test” of how would they handle a crisis situation and act out in simulation
- Have an Organizational Development department which helps employees with soft skills – if review indicates issues around soft skills, then employee must work with coach from department to improve those skills
- Currently have online learning modules covering 15 topics- some PowerPoint based, some required every year- have problems enforcing completion (too much time, resources)- do some workshops around these modules as well- would be an interest in delivering some of the mandatory learning modules in more interesting way and there may be potential application for that to make it more engaging and interesting for employees