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Skills and Employment

Office of Literacy and Essential Skills

Problem SOLVED! A Guide for Employees and Learners

This tool is designed to support employees and learners who want to practice and improve their problem solving skills. It includes various problem solving techniques, activities and worksheets that can help individuals develop their skills.

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Problem SOLVING Techniques

Five problem solving techniques are described in this section. Read each one carefully and, when faced with a problem, choose one that you feel comfortable with and that best suits the situation.

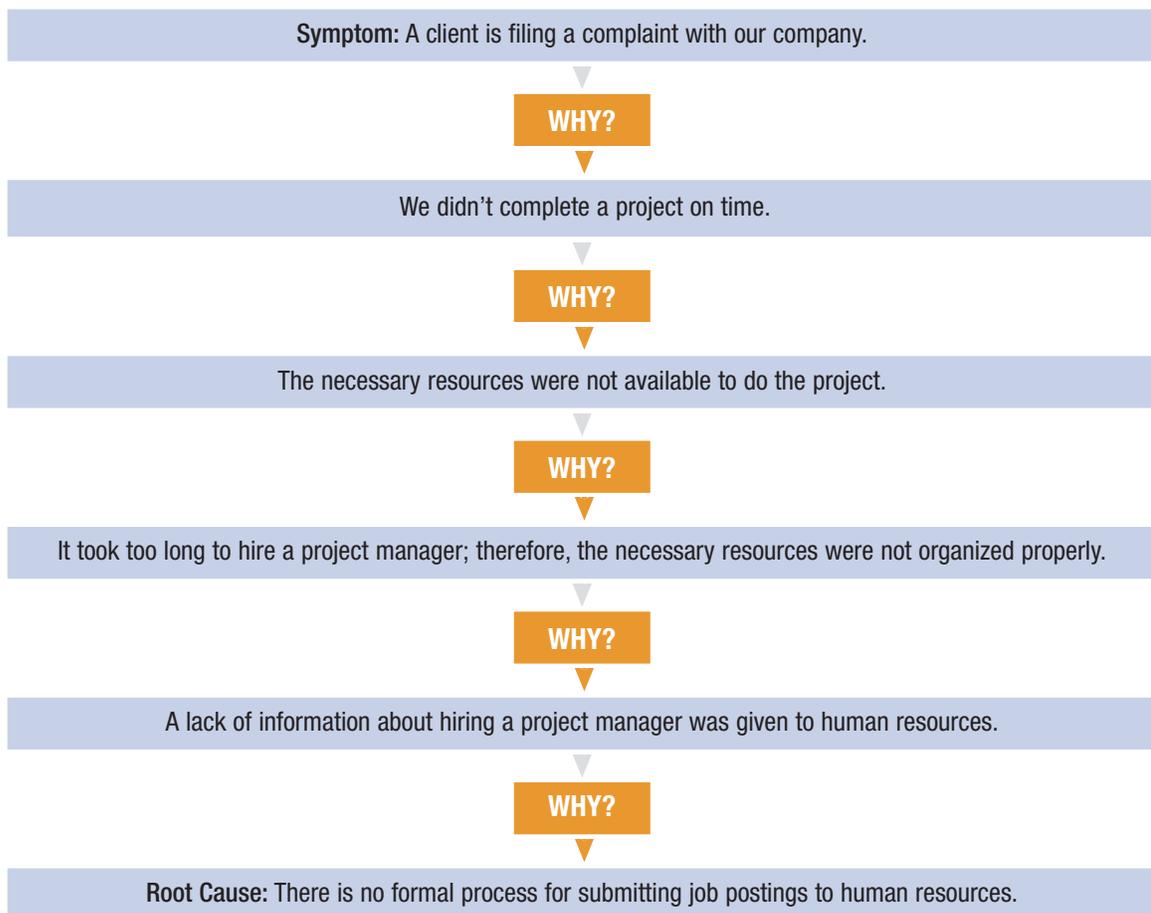
- ✓ The Five Whys Technique
- ✓ The PROACT Technique
- ✓ The Creative Technique
- ✓ The Collaboration Technique
- ✓ The Plan, Do, Check, Act Technique

The following techniques can be used when problem solving in groups or on your own.

1 FIVE WHYS TECHNIQUE

Senge, P. (1999). *The Fifth Discipline, Fieldbook*. New York: Doubleday.

The Five Whys Technique can be used to identify the root cause(s) of a problem. Often, what appears to be a problem is actually a symptom (sign, indication) of a bigger issue that needs to be resolved. You can use this technique to help determine the reason the problem exists by asking “why” certain things have occurred. Generally, you should be able to reach the root cause(s) after asking a series of five whys; however, the number can vary depending on the situation. For example:



Once you have determined the root cause(s) of the problem, take the appropriate steps to resolve the issue.

2 PROACT TECHNIQUE

Hammond, J., Keeney, R., & Raiffa, H. (1999). *Smart Choices*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

The PROACT Technique encourages a thorough problem solving approach. The problem is examined in detail and potential solutions are carefully reviewed before any decisions are made. Answer the questions in each of the steps to work towards a solution.

PR	Problem	Define and examine the problem: What are the symptoms of the problem? What is the root cause - the real problem? How big is the problem? Is it severe or minor? Who is involved in the problem? What are the effects of the problem? How much is it costing you (financially, emotionally, etc.) to have the problem? Why is solving the problem important? What information do you need to gather in order to solve the problem?
O	Objectives	Determine your objectives: What do you want to accomplish? How will you know if the problem is solved?
A	Alternatives	Identify the alternatives (options): What can you do to address the problem? Identify at least three options.
C	Consequences	Consider the consequences of each option: How well does each option satisfy your objectives? What are the advantages and disadvantages of each option?
T	Tradeoffs	Think about the tradeoffs associated with the options: What criteria are most important in this situation? What are your priorities? What will be given up or gained by choosing one option versus another?

When you have completed the steps, choose a solution and take action.

Problem SOLVING Worksheet

This worksheet will help guide you through the problem solving process. Complete each step to help you work towards a solution. Insert steps from the different problem solving techniques as required. Keep the worksheet handy and use it when you need to solve a problem. Visit our website, hrsdc.gc.ca/essentialskills, to download additional copies of this worksheet.

STEP 1: WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

- What are the symptoms of the problem?
- What is the root cause of the problem — the real problem?

STEP 2: WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS?

- Are there any factors that you need to consider when choosing a solution (e.g. policies, procedures, etc.)?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of each possible solution?
- What are the consequences of each possible solution?

STEP 3: WHAT IS THE BEST SOLUTION?

- Which solution is the best overall? Why?
- Choose a solution and act on it!

STEP 4: IS THE PROBLEM SOLVED?

- Did the chosen solution solve the problem? If not, return to Step 1 to review the problem again. Try using a different approach.

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ACTIVITY 3

SCENARIO

A front desk clerk is working at a large hotel. At 10pm, she receives a complaint from a hotel guest that some of the guests staying on the same floor are having a party and are very loud. He asks that the issue be resolved as soon as possible. Hotel policy states that excessive noise will not be tolerated after 9:30pm.

ACTIVITY

Pretend that you are the front desk clerk. Solve the problem using the techniques and worksheet provided.

THINGS TO CONSIDER

- Are there existing policies or procedures to consider?
- Do you approach the guests that are causing noise? If so, how?
- How do you ensure that everyone involved is satisfied?

TIPS

- This activity can be used to practice problem solving in any customer service setting. It can also be used to develop your conflict resolution skills.
- This activity can be done by role playing with co-workers or friends (e.g. one person is the clerk and one is the guest).

ACTIVITY 4

SCENARIO

A production clerk is working at a small car manufacturing plant. He is responsible for inspecting parts and deciding if they meet the quality standards. The clerk receives a large batch of parts and sees that the production quality is questionable. Ordering new parts could cost the plant time and money, but using poor quality parts could cause problems in the future.

Due to the fast-paced production schedule, the clerk must quickly decide what to do with the questionable parts. The company has an excellent reputation for meeting high quality standards.

ACTIVITY

Pretend that you are the production clerk. Solve the problem using the techniques and worksheet provided.

THINGS TO CONSIDER

- Are there existing policies or procedures to consider?
- Who should you approach about the issue?
- Are the parts made in-house, or are they from a supplier?

TIPS

- This activity can be used to practice problem solving in any fast-paced setting.
 - This activity can be done by role playing with co-workers or friends (e.g. one person is the production clerk and one is the supplier or supervisor).
- Continuous Learning • Thinking • Computer Use • Reading • Document Use • Numeracy • Writing • Oral Communication • Working with Others

ACTIVITY 5

SCENARIO

A server is working at a busy restaurant. She is serving eight tables and is rushing to keep up. One of the customers calls her over to say he is not happy with the quality of the service and, therefore, refuses to pay the bill. The server is trying to deal with the customer, while continuing to serve the other patrons. The restaurant is committed to ensuring that, generally, customers leave satisfied with their experience.

ACTIVITY

Pretend that you are the server. Solve the problem using the techniques and worksheet provided.

THINGS TO CONSIDER

- Are there existing policies or procedures to consider?
- Who should you approach about the issue?
- What if the customer becomes angry? What if other customers become frustrated?

TIPS

- This activity can be used to practice problem solving in any customer service setting. It can also be used to develop your conflict resolution skills.
- This activity can be done by role playing with co-workers or friends (e.g. one person is the server and one is the customer).

Date:

Problem:

Challenges:

Chosen Solution(s):

Result(s):

Lessons Learned:
