



CASE STUDY

Immersive Training for Disability Support Workers

IHC New Zealand: Redefining Inclusion and Autonomy
through Immersive Supported Decision-Making Training





About the Client

IHC New Zealand is one of the country's most respected non-profit organisations, advocating for the rights, inclusion, and wellbeing of people with intellectual disabilities since **1949**. Founded by parents seeking better opportunities for their children, IHC has grown into a **nationwide network** of services, community programmes, and advocacy initiatives that promote equality, autonomy, and belonging for people with intellectual disabilities.

Operating across New Zealand, IHC provides **support services, housing, employment advocacy, and inclusive education initiatives**, empowering individuals to lead self-directed, fulfilling lives. The organisation also plays a vital role in shaping public understanding and influencing policy to ensure equal access and participation for all.

Partnering with Skills^{VR} reflects IHC's ongoing commitment to innovative learning approaches that equip support workers with empathy, understanding, and practical tools to uphold human rights and dignity in everyday interactions.

The Challenge

Despite major progress in inclusion and accessibility, many people with intellectual disabilities still face **barriers to exercising personal choice** in daily life – from what to eat, wear, or do, to decisions about education and employment.

Support workers, caregivers, and community staff often find it challenging to **balance autonomy with safety and efficiency**, particularly in high-pressure environments. Traditional training methods – classroom instruction, handbooks, or observation – tend to focus on compliance and process rather than **understanding the emotional and ethical dimensions** of supported decision-making.

This gap leads to a lack of confidence and inconsistency in applying person-centred practices. As a result, even well-intentioned support workers may unintentionally make decisions *for* the people they support, rather than *with* them.

IHC recognised the need for a training solution that would go beyond theory – one that would help learners **truly feel the consequences of their actions and build empathy through experience**.





The Solution

To address this challenge, IHC partnered with **Skills^{VR}** to develop an immersive **Supported Decision-Making (SDM) VR training module** – an experiential learning tool designed to simulate real-life interactions between support workers and people with intellectual disabilities.

The module places learners inside realistic environments, allowing them to **observe, act, and reflect** on scenarios where personal autonomy and respect are at stake. Through these experiences, participants explore how small decisions – such as assuming what someone wants for lunch – can have significant emotional and psychological impacts.

Within the virtual experience, learners engage with a range of characters who represent common dynamics in support relationships, including individuals with different communication styles and needs. Learners navigate conversation pathways and see how their approach – from directive to supportive – directly shapes each outcome.

The module blends **interactive storytelling, guided reflection, and evidence-based learning design** to transform abstract principles into tangible experiences. It reinforces IHC's belief that **supported decision-making is not just a policy – it's a practice built on empathy, listening, and respect.**





Case in Action

The VR experience immerses learners in **two distinct everyday situations** that challenge their ability to recognise and respond to individual preferences.

In one setting, learners experience how overlooking a seemingly minor choice can unintentionally disempower someone. In another, they support a person with limited verbal communication to express their preferences using observation, confirmation, and adaptive communication techniques.

Through these scenarios, learners practice identifying subtle emotional and behavioural cues, adjusting their approach, and validating the person's right to decide. Each interaction is followed by a **guided reflection sequence**, prompting learners to consider how their assumptions, tone, and decisions influence others.

By allowing participants to “see and feel” the outcomes of their actions, the module transforms everyday training into **deep, emotional learning** that creates genuine empathy and behavioural change.

Key Features

- **Immersive, emotionally engaging storytelling** that connects learners to real-world experiences.
- **Branching scenarios** with multiple outcomes to show the consequences of different decisions.
- **Guided reflections and debriefs** that promote deeper learning and emotional intelligence.
- **Accessibility options** for use across standalone headsets, desktop, and mobile delivery.
- **Seamless integration with the Skills^{VR} Platform** for analytics, learner progress tracking, and organisational reporting.
- **Culturally sensitive design**, aligned with New Zealand's values of inclusion, manaakitanga (care), and respect for diversity.



Outcome

Early trials and facilitator feedback have shown remarkable impact across several fronts:

- **Stronger learner empathy and understanding** of client autonomy and supported choice.
- **Improved communication practices** among support staff, with greater awareness of unconscious bias.
- **Higher engagement and completion rates** compared to traditional e-learning or workshops.
- **Enhanced retention of learning**, supported by real-time reflection and emotional immersion.
- **Positive organisational culture shift**, with teams reporting greater confidence and compassion in everyday interactions.

The module is now being rolled out across IHC and its partner networks, providing a nationally scalable, values-driven training solution that brings inclusion to life through immersive technology.



Looking forward

Building on this success, Skills^{VR} and IHC are exploring ways to extend and scale the impact by expanding the Supported Decision-Making series into new contexts such as employment, healthcare choices, and community participation.

With new AI-powered capabilities in Skills^{VR}, there is an opportunity to provide real-time feedback and personalised coaching for learners, deliver training through Mobile and Web platforms to ensure accessible and flexible learning in regional and remote areas, and align future modules with NZQA micro-credentials to formally recognise inclusive practice competencies.

Through this pioneering collaboration, IHC and Skills^{VR} are redefining professional training for the disability support sector – **empowering workers to uphold dignity, respect, and independence, one immersive experience at a time.**



Transform your Training Programs with Skills^{VR}

Explore how your organization can create, manage and scale immersive learning quickly, affordably, and at scale.

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