

Strategy #1: Targeted Employment Support for Job Seekers with Low Literacy Skills

Literacy Link South Central (LLSC)

As part of a large Labour Market Partnership (LMP) Project, Literacy networks throughout the Western Region of Ontario researched support opportunities for individuals who have less than a grade 12 level of functional ability and who struggle to find jobs with their skill level.

The ~~overall~~LMP project involved 10 distinct strategies. The goal of the ~~overall~~ project was to address barriers preventing individuals from successfully connecting to the labour market. Our long-term objective is to enhance the support for unemployed workers in the Western Region of Ontario and increase their chance of connecting with gainful employment.

The focus of this particular strategy was to provide enhanced support for a specific target client group that faces serious barriers to employment. Our target – was job seekers with a solid history of work, but who have lost their jobs and are being passed over for new employment. These job seekers have experience but not the minimum Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD) or General Educational Development (GED) that are so often required in today's labour market.

We refer to these clients as both

- “job seekers with low literacy skills”
- “experienced workers with low literacy skills”

A good example of a client we were considering would be someone who

- left school with a grade 10 education
- worked for 20+ years in a factory before losing their job to downsizing

These clients were an excellent choice for this strategy's focus as we knew they

- had many of the skills necessary for them to contribute to the workforce
- would need additional support with their Literacy skills
- are often not considered for the jobs they need because of their lack of education

Within the first months of the project, Literacy Link South Central (LLSC) built a foundation of support that included

- forming an Advisory Committee made up of both Job Developers and Literacy and Basic Skills practitioners
- hiring a Project Coordinator, Project Clerical Support, and an External Evaluator
- having the External Evaluator work with the Advisory Committee to establish success indicators

Partners

Advisory Committee Members

Literacy Link South Central extends thanks to the members of Literacy and Employment Service (ES) communities who volunteered to sit on the Advisory Committee for this project. Their roles and responsibilities included

- participating in bi-monthly meetings and online discussions
- providing local knowledge, relevant background and expertise related to the focus client group
- providing concrete recommendations for consideration by project staff

The Committee

Alison Sims, Nokee Kwe Native Education Centre

Andrew McMurray, Goodwill Industries

Carol Stewart, Employment Sector Council of London Middlesex

Diana Timmermans, Employment Sector Council of London Middlesex

Emily Davies, ATN Access for Persons with Disabilities

Gord Fansher, Hutton House

Ray LeBlanc, London Employment Help Centre

Summary of Revisions in Project Strategy

This strategy began with the hypothesis that we could work with Job Developers to move experienced workers with low literacy skills to employment more quickly through the use of targeted wage subsidies. As feedback was gathered from Employment Services (ES) it became clear that this hypothesis was not reasonable. While wage subsidies were available to support some clients in our target group, it wasn't a viable enough option to be considered a solution. The focus of our project changed, and, with approval from the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU), refocused on what Literacy and Employment Services could do together to support these clients without using subsidies.

Original Project Strategy Summary

Work with Employment Services Job Developers and Literacy practitioners to explore ways to connect lower-skilled literacy learners with Individualized Training Incentives offered through Employment Services. The purpose is to get meaningful, long-term employment for these lower-skilled individuals. We envision that ES and Literacy Services will jointly support the clients.

Revised Project Strategy Summary

Work with ES Job Developers and Literacy practitioners to explore ways to bring unemployed low-literacy learners with a work history, but who require significant upgrading, to employment more quickly. In many cases these learners don't meet minimum job requirements and need to pass the General Educational

Development (GED) to receive their High School equivalency or complete credits and get their High School Diploma. This takes time and many of these learners need to work now.

Pre-revision Activities

a. Meetings with Community Partners

We began with the hypothesis that we could use targeted wage subsidy programs (through Employment Services) to provide access or open doors to employment for lower-skilled Literacy clients. Following this hypothesis, project staff met with the Job Developers Network of London /Middlesex to outline the strategy and gather their feedback. **Please see Appendix 4.**

Participants indicated that the way we envisioned Job Developers using the Training Incentives was not correct. Job Developers focus Training Incentives on clients who are “job ready”, and whom they believe should have no further need for support from Literacy.

Project staff were told that the Job Developers work with employers who ~~Job Developers work with~~ are interested in employees that are ready to do the job with minimal training. Therefore, Job Developers don't make incentive offers for Literacy clients who still need upgrading prior to being what they (and the Employer) consider “job ready.” Members of the Job Developers Network further suggested that the idea of partnership with Employment Services (ES) at the Job Developer level would be less effective than partnering with ES at the Intake and Counseling level where educational needs are identified and goals are set.

To ensure a balanced reaction from our available networks of Job Developers, we met via teleconference with Lisa Savoy, the Chair of the Job Developer Network of Norfolk, Brant, Haldimand and Oxford Counties. We discussed this strategy and requested her feedback. Much of the information shared by Lisa reflected what

had been communicated by the London / Middlesex Network. This indicated a lack of buy-in from the partners we had originally intended to work with to complete this strategy.

To gain a different perspective, project staff met with Ontario Works (OW) to

- learn how they use incentives during their support of clients who wish to get employment
- outline the vision for the strategy

While OW staff also discouraged relying solely on the use of Training Incentives to bring our target client group to employment, they were supportive of Literacy partnering with Employment Services (ES) and OW to offer additional support.

Suggestions for support included

- offering the literacy specialist perspective on the creation of Training Plans
- being available as a resource for Job Coaches and Case Workers to help identify programs that would be most effective for clients

Following discussions with the Job Developer Networks and OW, we met with a Goodwill Job Developer to review their process for

- supporting clients
- building relationships with employers

We were looking for new ways to support this client group either with or without the use of Training Incentives. One key learning from this discussion was that there is a gap in the understanding of processes and available resources through ES to support Literacy learners. Gaining a deeper understanding of the path through ES that an experienced job seeker with low-literacy skills travels would provide opportunities to identify

- new areas for partnership

- ways to support this client

b. Early Literature Review

In the early stages of this project, material was gathered for a literature review. Referencing a combination of national and international articles and reports, we reviewed the use of subsidies to employers to further focus on the needs of downsized workers in manufacturing fields. Several early themes were identified, including that:

- a. Many evaluations show subsidies to private-sector employment have both large dead-weight and substitution effects. In other words, the subsidies themselves really didn't have any impact on a position being filled.
- b. The use of wage subsidies can often lead to "creaming," or the connecting of only the most skilled job seekers with employers to ensure that employers are content with the match.

Revising the Focus

It was becoming clear that a change in focus was needed for this strategy, as our original hypothesis upon which we based this project had been disproven. Based on the research completed and feedback received in the project thus far, Literacy Link South Central (LLSC) decided to formally revise the focus of this strategy to

- decrease the focus on the use of training incentives
- increase the focus on other support that could be provided by Literacy practitioners

The project plan originally included identifying specific workers and having them partner with employers via a pilot project. As the project was restructured to centre on research rather than piloting actual low-literacy worker and employer matching, the Work Plan and Evaluation Framework needed to be completely rewritten. **Please see Appendix 1 & 2.**

Each was revised to indicate that we were pulling back from our original intention to pilot an initiative and focusing instead on research and relationshipbuilding. As part of that relationship-building, project staff decided to speak to those at different levels within Employment Services (ES) across several organizations, and to programs outside the Literacy/ES community.

To that end, we met with representatives from the Centre for Lifelong Learning to discuss how the employment-specific language training offered in their ESL program could form a basis for a Literacy-to-employment training model. We also met with Cherie Gibson of the March of Dimes to discuss their Working Fundamentals program. We discussed how their approach supports clients to employment, noting that their focus client group is those with disabilities.

Success Indicators of Revised Focus

The project team determined that the success of the newly revised project would be indicated by:

- a. An increase in understanding of the opportunities, supports, challenges and changes required to best support this client group.
- b. A strengthening of relationships and understanding between Employment Services and Literacy Service providers, focused specifically on how clients in this target group are supported by Employment Services.

Post-revision Activity

a. Literacy Client Profile Survey

To ensure that we had a clear vision of the barriers facing current Literacy learners who fit the client profile, a survey was sent to the Literacy programs across Literacy Link South Central's (LLSC) 6-county support area. **Please see Appendix**

3. After collecting baseline demographic information about learners who might

fall within the focus client group for the project, survey participants were asked to consider those client's connections to Employment Services. The survey results are summarized below.

Literacy agencies responding to the survey - 9

Estimated percentage of Literacy learners within those 9 agencies that could be considered experienced workers with low literacy skills - 42.8%

Estimated percentage of those above learners who are currently connected to Employment Services as well as to their Literacy program - 29.22%

The most prominent fields in which those learners in the target demographic have a work history

- factory (100%)
- construction (77.8%)
- food service (77.8%)
- manufacturing (55.6%)
- the farm / agriculture, mechanical / automotive, and customer service fields (44.4%)

Participants identified the top barriers preventing those clients who aren't accessing support from ES from doing so as the client

- has other more immediate needs to resolve before accessing ES (e.g. shelter, mental health, etc.) - 77.8%
- doesn't want to go through the various requirements and stages of ES - they "just want a job" - 77.8%
- doesn't think they can handle Literacy and ES at the same time - 66.7%
- is waiting to complete their upgrading before accessing ES - 55.6%

When asked what participants thought Employment Services (ES) and Literacy Services could do to better to support this particular client's journey to employment, the responses included

- offer flexible programming hours and classes/workshops for clients
- acknowledge that not “one size fits all”
- recognize client literacy issues early in the process
- benefit from better management of client needs through increased partnership between ES and Literacy
- build workshops into Literacy programming to introduce learners to the supports ES can provide

b. Consultation and Outreach

To better understand the journey of an experienced job seeker with low-literacy skills traveling through Employment Services, project Staff began an outreach campaign with two focuses:

1. Facilitate connections between Literacy and ES agencies.
2. Identify key moments along the ES path that would impact clients within the target demographics.

Key Discussion Points

Through a series of visits to ES agencies and meetings with Employment Counsellors and Job Developers that spanned several months, discussions were held around the

- intake process
- supports clients have access to
- timelines to access service
- expectations clients face when moving through the system

At each meeting, project staff asked Employment Services (ES) representatives to walk them through the client experience. They shared with us from the moment of a first phone call or walk-in to a successful transition away from ES support.

When recreating that client journey, project staff observed

- the environment of the agency
- when and where clients are asked to fill out paperwork
- how quickly clients are able to access in-house support from Employment Counsellors, Workshop Facilitators and Job Developers
- when referrals for Literacy support might be made

In addition to gathering information about the journey of a client, project staff also discussed how supports offered by Literacy Link South Central (LLSC) could be used by ES staff to assist their clients. Information was shared about diverse Literacy programs throughout the community, and LLSC's Information and Referral chart was given to any agencies that didn't have a copy. ES staff were also encouraged to call LLSC directly to seek advice on programming for clients identified as needing support with Literacy.

c. Employment Services Agency Visits

When project staff contacted ES to outline the purpose of the project and ask if they could arrange site visits, the reaction was wholly positive. Project staff were warmly welcomed at each agency, and ES representatives expressed a strong desire to work collaboratively to support experienced job seekers with low-literacy skills. Much valuable learning and a more connected Literacy/ES relationship was gained based on meetings with the following ES representatives:

John Griffiths, the Director of Workforce Development, Employment and Training Services, Goodwill Industries, Ontario Great Lakes

Julie Watson and Tricia Andary, Goodwill Intake Specialists

Louissa Regier, Employment Services Program Manager at the Ontario
March of Dimes (via teleconference)

Alison Sims, Career Counsellor/Facilitator at Nokee Kwe

Nadine Lalonde, Job Developer at Collège Boréal

Katya Noel, Employment Counsellor at Collège Boréal

Brian Malott, Resource & Information Officer at Community Employment
Services - Fanshawe College

Connie Hoffman - Intake Worker & Administrative Assistant, ATN Access
for Persons with Disabilities

Lisa Rusal, Client Services Manager, WIL Employment Connections

Kim Neable, Intake Specialist, Hutton House Learning Centre

Crystal Taylor, Administrative Support at Youth Opportunities Unlimited

Grant Whatford, Employment Services Manager, London Training Centre

Jerry Colwell, Director of Client Services Pathways Skill Development &
Placement Centre

Susan Crane, Job Developer at the London Employment Help Centre

To further our understanding of the client experience, project staff also attended 3 group information and intake sessions:

1. Goodwill Employment Centre's Community Training Service group intake session for Ontario Works clients
2. Goodwill Employment Centre's "Discover Your Options" group intake session for EOS clients
3. The London Training Centre Orientation Session for new ES clients

Lessons Learned

The 14 Employment Services (ES) site visits and 3 group intake sessions attended by project staff provided valuable insight and information. We now have a much clearer picture of both current processes and places where partnerships can be further developed between Literacy and ES to support experienced job seekers with low-literacy skills. Key points include:

- a. While the path through ES is similar from agency to agency, there are some significant differences. They include, but are not limited to
 - the length of time it takes to get an appointment with an Employment Counsellor
 - how intake is done
 - the in-house supports available for clients
 - the targeted clientele that the agency is "best suited" to support

- b. While all Employment Ontario (EO) funded agencies use the ES Participant Registration form, some have
 - clients fill out the form without supervision
 - staff fill out the form with clients
 - staff fill out the form for clients - decreasing that opportunity to discover undisclosed literacy issues

- c. Most agencies have in-house paperwork completed either by the client or by ES staff that complements or enhances the information required by the ES registration form. Literacy issues are often identified through those forms or through observation during workshops attended by the client.

- d. Some Employment Counsellors would like Literacy support when creating Training Plans for incoming clients. The best model would be to have Literacy staff working on-site with Employment Services (ES) in a consulting role.

- e. There are many specialty programs available through ES in London that might be particularly good fits for our target demographic. However, Literacy agencies may not be aware of them and therefore do not refer their clients. There are also community-based and Literacy programs that are geared to bring employment-specific learning to clients, which ES providers are not aware of. The key to getting clients accessing these programs is ensuring that both Literacy and ES staff are aware of the supports offered by each other's agencies. Since some ES staff stated that they have gaps in knowledge about what Literacy delivers in our area, there is clearly a need to support ES and Literacy in knowledge exchange.

- f. When asked about attrition rates for clients in our target demographic, many ES representatives reported lower patience for long-term support within the target group. Experienced workers with low literacy skills who have lost their jobs are in crisis. They want swift intervention, and bounce from agency to agency if the support they need isn't available quickly from the beginning. They will also leave ES/Literacy support behind if employment is obtained, even if their skills still need upgrading.

- g. Many Job Developers where Literacy and ES are co-located believe that the support and partnership necessary to bring the target market of clients to employment is either already in place or is more easily accessed than in those agencies that are not co-located.
- h. Job Developers offer training incentives to employers hiring new workers if the worker is a good fit for the company and the job. Further to that, employers don't know what sort of incentive is being offered (what amount of money or for how long) until after they agree to hire the client. This neutralizes the idea of offering an identified incentive to hire a specific potential employee (like the experienced worker with low literacy skills that we are targeting with this strategy).
- i. Many of the Employment Services (ES) staff that we spoke to believe that finding employers who would be willing to take a risk on a low-literacy worker would be ideal. They feel that the Job Developers are in the best position to make those connections. At the same time, the low-literacy worker's path through ES often includes upgrading to make them "job ready" before getting to the stage where they might work directly with a Job Developer. This would make finding employers for this scenario difficult to realize.
- j. There is great value in learning as much as possible from community partners about their programs and connections, even if their client group is not the same as the one we're focusing on. With the information about challenges and successes gleaned from these partners, we can turn the lens to our own client group. As an example, partnerships have been built between ES teams (like the March of Dimes) and employers that facilitate employers hiring clients that are not necessarily "job ready" - we can learn from those relationships and how they were built.

Recommendations

The second phase of this Labour Market Partnership Project won't include a focus on experienced workers with low-literacy skills. However, the lessons learned, described earlier, have inspired the Advisory Committee and project staff to make several recommendations for next steps. While there are no quick fixes for the issues faced by this client group, it is our belief that if implemented, many of these recommendations would help decrease barriers to employment.

1. Shorten the length of time it takes for clients to move through the Employment Services (ES) system. Ensure that clients begin their ES journey at the agency that is best suited to serve them, rather than having the client "try on" several different agencies before finding one that fits their needs. The Advisory Committee advocates the creation of an Information and Referral chart for ES, much like the one that exists for Literacy agencies.

The chart would outline the unique differences between ES providers as well as

- agency hours
- bus routes
- other information to support effective referrals by Literacy providers

2. Identify those outside the Literacy field who are referring clients to ES and ensure they are given support tools to make effective formal and informal referrals. The Advisory Committee identified several non-traditional points for recommendations to ES, including

- Service Ontario
- libraries
- neighbourhood resource centres
- Ontario's 211 service

The Advisory Committee recommends developing relationships with each of these organizations to facilitate more effective referrals. **Please see Appendix 5.**

3. Have support for ES when making referrals. For referrals to Literacy, agencies are encouraged to call Literacy Link South Central (LLSC) to get recommendations about which Literacy program would suit their clients' needs. The Advisory Committee suggests having a similar support agency for ES, such as the Employment Sector Council of London-Middlesex (ESCLM). This service would allow Employment specialists to provide referral support via phone calls in a similar fashion to the Goodwill "no wrong door" 1-800 #, which is no longer active.
4. Offer Clear Writing sessions to Employment Services (ES) agencies to help them update their informational brochures and workshop training materials. Using clear writing will increase access to information by the experienced workers with low literacy skills. Project staff would ideally like to see time built in to these ES Clear Writing sessions for attendees to work together with the support of a Clear Writing Consultant to modify some of their currently used communication material.
5. Create training for use at Literacy programs outlining what the ES experience will look like. This will help the experienced workers with low literacy skills who are transitioning to ES, to know what to expect and to not be intimidated. Include in this information or training
 - samples of the paperwork that they will be required to fill out
 - customer-service friendly touches like photographs of the agency from both the outside and inside
 - information about the support available at ES agencies
 - names and job titles of the staff that they will encounter

- workshops available to learners once they become clients of the agency

A second stage of this recommendation would be to partner with ES to create an information session that could be held in a high-traffic area like the public library. This session would outline the support available not only through Employment Services, but also Literacy Services, the Health Unit, housing and other services most often needed by experienced job seekers with low literacy skills.

6. Continue to enhance the relationship between Employment Service (ES) and Literacy Link South Central (LLSC). Through ongoing outreach visits to ES agencies by LLSC staff, ES representatives will feel comfortable calling LLSC to ask questions about literacy support for their clients.

A second stage of this recommendation would be to establish a Literacy and Employment Advocate position. The role of the Literacy and Employment Advocate would be to travel to both Literacy Services and ES to answer questions about each service and offer their support as an on-site reference. The Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU) Vision for Employment Ontario (EO) includes the concept of a fully-integrated system that appears seamless from the client perspective. The advocate position would enhance partnerships between Literacy Services and ES, leading to smoother transitions from Literacy to employment for clients.

7. Coordinate ES and Literacy Service hours to allow more learners to access support from both ES and Literacy concurrently rather than sequentially. This is most easily done with programs that are co-located. Through the coordination of service schedules, experienced workers with low literacy skills who leave programming once they achieve employment may be more likely to continue their upgrading.

A second stage of this recommendation would be to research potential incentives for these learners to stay in the program even after obtaining employment.

Achieving Employment Ontario (EO) Mission and Vision

As this project progressed, our ultimate focus was to increase opportunities for

disadvantaged workers in the Western Region of Ontario to connect with gainful employment. Keeping in mind the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU) Vision, we focused on research and recommendations that bring lower-skilled job-seekers up to their potential so they can utilize their skills in the workforce once again. With the further understanding that the MTCU Vision for Employment Ontario (EO) includes a fully-integrated system that appears seamless from the client perspective, our research and recommendations focused on changes needed to create a smoother transition from Literacy to employment for clients.

MTCU Vision: “Ontario will have the most educated people and highly skilled workforce in the world to build the province's competitive advantage and quality of life.”

Conclusion

Through this research project, Literacy Link South Central (LLSC) has increased their understanding of the opportunities, supports, challenges and changes required to best support experienced job seekers with low literacy skills. We welcomed the opportunity to share that learning with others in Ontario. To that end, we hosted a webinar on Monday December 9, 2014 to share the results of both this strategy and the second of LLSC’s strategies “Literacy and the Young Single Male”. **Please see Appendix 7 & 8.**

In the process of working on this project, we also strengthened our relationship with Employment Services (ES) and have already seen the result of that enhanced

relationship in an increase in phone calls asking for Literacy programming suggestions for their clients.

It is our hope that through the recommendations outlined in this report we can further develop those relationships, enabling an Employment Services (ES) and Literacy Service collaboration that more thoroughly supports experienced workers with low literacy skills as they move through the Employment Ontario system to employment.