

Strategy 7: Clearer Sightlines to Employment in Dufferin County

Peel-Halton-Dufferin Adult Learning Network (PHDALN)

In Dufferin County¹, as is found in many parts of Ontario, there is a lack of occupational-specific skills development programs for participants in the Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) system and to a lesser extent Employment Ontario (EO) clients, in general. The development of such a program would lead to better opportunities for job-seekers, especially those who do not have a high school diploma.

We proposed to conduct research to identify the industry sectors in and near Dufferin County that would most benefit from an employment skills training program. The focus would be for entry-level workers not requiring (or not immediately requiring) a post-secondary education credential.

In addition, we set out to identify the parameters of a community partnership with EO programs (LBS, Employment Services - ES) and others required to develop a skills training program that would prepare unemployed and underemployed adults (especially young adults) for the identified employment opportunities.

Finally, we planned to examine the program characteristics that would be needed to increase the likelihood of success for participants with low educational attainment. Our research looked at the feasibility of some of the approaches outlined in recent Essential Skills Ontario (ESO) publications in their Becoming State of Art series of research briefs, including

- a. **Industry Shared Approaches: Aligning Literacy and Essential Skills with Economic Development²**
- b. **Clearer Sightlines to Employment: What Works for Job-Seekers with Low Educational Attainment?³**

Our objectives in this strategy were to:

1. Assess the readiness of Employment Ontario (EO) service providers to deliver programs for adults with low educational attainment. The programs would be structured around a demand-side approach that is geared to the immediate labour market needs of employers.
2. Educate community stakeholders about the need for greater service coordination to develop pathways that would support this approach to programming.
3. Determine which elements of the approach outlined in recent research could be feasible for local EO service providers to deliver this type of program in a demonstration project, which could be phase 2 of this project.

We chose this approach and this set of objectives for a few reasons:

1. Most importantly, we must strive to bring supply and demand side needs closer together. Finding an approach that meets job seekers' near-term employment goals with local employers' hiring needs is essential for a labour market development system.
2. We were also very interested in researching how able our service providers are to adopt program designs that have been researched and proven effective for adults with lower educational attainment.

At the local level, this strategy will improve service planning and coordination including

- spurring discussion about improving client pathways
- spreading labour market information

- increasing knowledge about referral options for EO clients

Our preferred approach in pursuing this strategy was one which coordinates multiple organizations in Dufferin County to efficiently create the most direct pathways to in-demand entry-level positions. This broad coordination would enable an individual to find out about these types of programs from various points of entry in the community. Aside from published data and labour market information, we also were prepared to embrace other forms of intelligence about what local employers are and will be looking for in entry-level positions.

As mentioned above, some of the theoretical grounding of our strategy came from recent publications about workforce development. In particular we were interested in how it describes the shift from sequential to integrated models of workforce development. This is why we focused so heavily on the community-wide service coordination piece of the strategy.

We wanted to know if we could adopt elements from other jurisdictions that have bridged the divide between work-first and adult basic skills through hybrid models that blend adult learning with more clearly defined and immediate employment opportunities. As summarized elegantly in the publication, “employment & training systems have learned that, in order to increase client persistence in literacy & basic skills delivery, there needs to be a clearer sightline to an immediate job and a chance at a career.”

In short, we were asking the question “What works for job seekers with low educational attainment in Dufferin County?”

Partners

Our strategy included two sets of partners: planning and delivery. Planning partners provided insight, advice and feedback as the project activities proceeded. Delivery partners worked with us on the actual activities.

The primary planning partners included

- Georgian College (Orangeville Campus)
- Upper Grand District School Board (Dufferin Continuing Education)
- Centre for Career and Employment Services

All of these organizations were project committee members. They made connections with local key informants and provided other support in gathering information.

Secondary, but essential, planning partners included

- Workforce Planning Board of Waterloo Wellington Dufferin
- County of Dufferin Community Services

These organizations provided important local insights at key points of the project.

Our primary delivery partner was Centre for Career and Employment Services (CCES). CCES played a central role in the strategy's two main activities – the service coordination event and the employability training pilot.

In addition to official project partners, we formed several service coordination relationships with the following organizations

- Community Living Dufferin
- Family Transition Place
- Dufferin Child and Family Services
- County of Wellington Settlement Services
- Canadian Mental Health Association (Trellis)
- Supportive Housing in Peel
- Peace Ranch

- Humber College – Orangeville Campus
- Employment Access (Coalition for Persons with Disabilities)
- Contact North
- Orangeville and Area Small Business Enterprise Centre

Activities

Our strategy centred around two major activities:

1. A community-wide service coordination event.
2. An employability training pilot program.

Neither activity was considered at the outset of the project, but both emerged as key activities as the project unfolded through our research and through discussions with local service providers.

As our understanding of how to develop solid pathways to employment for lower skilled youth and adults grew, we increasingly became convinced of the need to increase the scope of organizations that could potentially play a role. While our primary project partners had good linkages with a few organizations in the community, there were many more where there was only a slight awareness and very limited interaction.

Two elements were significant in helping us figure out what could be done to increase service coordination.

1. The memory of a community-wide information sharing event that took place several years ago.
2. The soon-to-be-opened multi-service centre in the heart of Orangeville.

Several years ago, an event labelled Engage, Share, Network was held in Orangeville that coincided with the launch of Employment Ontario (EO). This event featured

- panel presentations
- networking
- agency displays

It was designed as a one-time event meant to increase information about programs and services in Dufferin for those in attendance. The event was well received and so our project committee thought we could

- revive the brand
- refresh the concept
- use it as a launching point to greater service coordination in Dufferin

Our version of Engage, Share, Network was held on June 20, 2013 in Orangeville.⁴ Fifty people representing over 20 organizations attended the full-day event. This event served to bring multiple and diverse stakeholders together to discuss the employment and training needs of clients and residents as well as how services and programs could become better connected to achieve better outcomes for these clients.

Many interesting ideas and concepts were exchanged during the event including several suggestions that provided a road map for the next steps in building greater service coordination. One of those suggestions was that we should have a space for service providers to connect, chat and keep one another updated on what's happening with their programs.⁵

Survey results told us that there is great interest in developing deeper connections among service providers. We will be formally launching a new Engage, Share, Network committee at a meeting to be held in early 2014.

This new committee will aim to create a permanent community-wide table to improve service coordination and partnerships across various social service sectors (employment, training, mental health, youth and disabilities). We expect to learn if the online communication platform we chose (Facebook) works as a way to keep informed about service providers.

In the midst of our discussions around the feasibility and readiness of Employment Ontario (EO) service providers to deliver a program that better meets the labour force needs of local employers, the Province of Ontario announced the Youth Employment Fund (YEF). We immediately realized the merit of actually testing feasibility rather than merely speculating about it.

The YEF gave us an opportunity to accelerate our plans to identify pathways into entry-level positions for underemployed individuals. We quickly made plans to deliver a 1 month skills training program for YEF participants in advance of a 4-month work placement at in-demand positions in Dufferin County – namely, in hospitality, recreation and food service.

All our service coordination activities from the spring event immediately paid off. We formed a committee of

- job developers
- employment counsellors
- curriculum developers
- trainers
- potential referral partners

Most of the committee members had attended the Engage, Share, Network event in June.

Discussions with local employers generated an impressive list of potential positions ideal for young adults with limited employment experience. Youth were screened for the Youth Employment Fund (YEF) eligibility and suitability and a pool of candidates were identified as potential participants in a short-term employment skills training program.

Meanwhile, curriculum developers were identifying the skills and requirements common to many of the jobs available across the retail, food services and hospitality and tourism sectors.

This led to the development of a modular curriculum consisting of

- technical skills
- employability skills
- occupational certifications⁶

Topics included

- money math
- computers
- customer service
- teamwork
- Workplace Hazardous Materials Information Systems

In addition, we planned for the provision of key wraparound supports such as employment supports and team counselling.

With a short lead time, our team was able to deliver a 30-hour training program to 6 clients (ages 17 – 28) that covered some of the curriculum developed. These clients were initially turned down by employers for the Youth Employment Fund (YEF) generated positions, and so this training program served as an excellent next step to

prepare those clients for the next round of YEF job placements. Participants responded enthusiastically to the program.

Our evaluation will continue into 2014, but there is consensus that participants benefited and there is certainly a need to keep running this program as a pre-YEF intervention.

What started as a feasibility study turned into a full blown pilot program by the end of the project. Our project committee now has the task of sifting through the data collected and analyzing recent experiences to develop a plan on how to sustain the work that was done.

Lessons Learned

There were many lessons learned throughout the course of executing this strategy. Some of these lessons were directly related to our strategy and others simply came about during the project activities.

- a. We learned quite a bit about service coordination. Results from our large community event confirmed our belief that basic knowledge about other providers can be gained through simple discussions. Addressing more complicated issues (such as moving people with barriers into sustainable training and employment) will take much more time, creativity and energy. In addition, local community organizations claim to have good service coordination, but evidence is harder to come by. This may be a result of people not knowing what excellent service coordination looks like.
- b. Another insight from the service coordination event was that even in small communities there are many service providers to keep track of. The decision to bring organizations together without prescriptive solutions was rewarded as the

solutions we were interested in hearing emerged voluntarily from the participants. The format of the event contributed greatly to this. Momentum was created and there is genuine interest in moving forward. Our planning committee is certain that the format and approach we took would be just as effective in other communities. For regional organizations, we recommend working with local informants to do on the ground work related to community consultation / service coordination events.

- c. Our project team increased its understanding of the local labour market in Dufferin County. There are some local industries (for example, equestrian-related services, outdoor recreation and tourism) that may have good potential for employment for lower skilled adults. These types of industries and jobs rarely make the national and provincial reports about areas with skills shortages and potential for employment growth. This speaks to the need for an effective placed-based strategy for local labour market development programs. We strongly believe that this placed-based approach to gathering intelligence about the local labour market is transferrable.
- d. In addition to opportunities, we heard about potential barriers. Lack of local transportation (and its impact on clients participating in services and in employment) is the major issue cited. There is however strong willingness to address this issue collaboratively. The lack of industry / occupation diversity in the local labour market also poses a problem for clients who aspire to more meaningful and sustainable local employment.
- e. Single men are emerging as a new group that is experiencing challenges in the labour market. That demographic group accounts for 47% of the Ontario Works case load. Policy and program responses have been slow to get underway as the issue is still below the radar.

Challenges

This project did come with some challenges – some we anticipated and some that emerged as our ambitions increased.

As we speculated about in the “**Lesson Learned**” section, there may not be widespread understanding about what excellent service coordination looks like. This issue is a contributing factor to the challenge that we experienced as we tried to discuss possible solutions at the service coordination event.

There is some resistance to think holistically about a segment of the community (that is, lower skilled adults) and design programs for their needs as opposed to meeting individual client needs within the existing structure of current programs. Our hope for subsequent community consultation meetings is that by hearing many voices talking about the needs of this client group, it will

- foster greater attention to client needs
- motivate organizations to commit to some programming changes

Our recent experiences with the pilot training program has already helped in this regard.

We also experienced the challenge of having our assumptions tested and having to decide how to interpret new or unexpected information. For example, some of our initial thoughts about specific labour market sectors that would be good opportunities for Dufferin did not materialize in our canvassing of local employers.

There are also systemic challenges with service coordination in Employment Ontario (EO). It's

- not always immediately apparent where the natural intersection points are between programs and services
- not entirely understood which clients benefit from accessing more than one service
- also difficult to know why some people who should fit in programs don't access the system at all

Only when collaborative programs like our pilot training program are put into place do we allow ourselves a chance to really see how service coordination in EO can work.

Knowledge Transfer

Locally, the main knowledge transfer opportunity was the service coordination event that we held in Orangeville. Due to the high turnout and wide distribution of organizations represented, we achieved a high impact of knowledge transferred.

Our knowledge transfer activity outside of the local community took place in the form of a 1-hour webinar delivered in December 2013. Feedback was very positive about this webinar.⁷

Achieving Employment Ontario (EO) Mission and Vision

This strategy explores the feasibility of developing employment skills training programs that would

- make services more effective to meet job seekers' career goals and local employers' hiring needs
- provide opportunities for individuals to improve skills directly related to local employment needs

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."

- use an approach that coordinates multiple organizations in Dufferin County to efficiently create most direct pathways to in-demand entry level positions
- enable an individual to find out about these type of programs from various points of entry in the community
- rely on local labour market information and other timely intelligence of what local employers are and will be looking for in entry level positions

While these characteristics describe the existing EO system in a nutshell, we sought to add considerable value to the system by purposely blending different program and service elements in order to create something new in the community to fill an identified gap.

Conclusion

Our strategy has provided a clearer sightline to employment in Dufferin County. We now know what it takes. Through the serendipity of the launching of the Youth Jobs Strategy, we were able to give ourselves a glimpse of what an enhanced pathway to employment through excellent service coordination looks like.

Although, the pilot program should best be described as employment readiness as opposed to full scale occupational training, it marks an important first step in the development of this much needed pathway. It provided an opportunity to test the readiness of local Employment Ontario (EO) service providers to build a program together in direct response to demand-side needs while taking into consideration the strengths and weaknesses of the local labour pool.

We look forward to building and sustaining this giant leap forward in 2014 in phase 2 of this labour market partnership project and through regular service planning and coordination activities.

¹ Dufferin is made up of 1,486 square kilometers and is home to 56,881 people (2011 Census). There are eight local municipalities, including the Townships of Amaranth, East Garafraxa, the Town of Grand Valley, Melancthon, Mulmur and the Towns of Mono, Orangeville and Shelburne.

² <http://www.essentialskillsontario.ca/content/becoming-state-art-industry-shared-approaches>

³ <http://www.essentialskillsontario.ca/content/becoming-state-art-clearer-sightlines-employment-2012>

⁴ See appendix documents for additional information about this event.

⁵ We thought Facebook might be a good place to start, so we created the "Dufferin Community Connections" group.

⁶ See appendix for a full description of the training program.

⁷ A recording of the webinar can be viewed at <http://www.llsc.on.ca/what-we-do/projects>