

Labour Market **Dialogues** Phase 2
Summary Report

A REPORT OF THE



COMMUNITY
COUNCIL

MARCH 19, 2008

Labour Market
Dialogues

TAPPING INTO THE HIDDEN LABOUR MARKET

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Canada

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Labour Market Dialogues

TAPPING INTO THE HIDDEN LABOUR MARKET

CHALLENGES FOR EMPLOYERS

It's not easy being an employer in British Columbia's Capital Region these days. The labour market continues to provide challenges. Unemployment rates are low: in November 2007, the region's unemployment rate dropped to 2.8% - the second lowest in Canada. In addition, the skills and experience required by employers continue to be diverse.

The large number of entry-level jobs available is a sign of a growing economy. But economic growth isn't always good news for employers, who need stable and committed staff. Over the holiday season at the end of 2007, many employers could not find enough workers or workers with the right skills. In a 10-minute walk around downtown Victoria, an average of three "help wanted" signs could be seen in each block. Half of restaurants and other food service businesses either lost business or were forced to reduce services because of a shortage of staff.

Recruiting new staff is time-consuming and expensive. Staff turnover costs employers in many ways. Advertising for new staff, dealing with the administration related to an employee leaving and another starting, paying overtime to other staff while a position is vacant, and training new employees all directly affect employers' bottom line.

The challenges for employers will continue to grow with the coming demographic changes in Canada. The aging workforce, a shrinking pool of new workers aged 15 to 24, stiff international competition for new immigrant workers, and a growing economy will have a strong impact on the nature of work and the composition of the labour market. By 2010, the number of people leaving the workforce in British Columbia is expected to be larger than the number of people entering it. And by 2011, 100% of growth in the labour market is expected to come from immigration.

"I think simply being involved in anything that may improve hiring is incentive enough."

Comment from a participating employer.

THE LABOUR MARKET DIALOGUES: WHAT WE DID

The Labour Market Dialogues is a project of the Community Council, designed to explore ways in which employers in the Capital Region can be better supported in hiring and retaining people who are experiencing barriers to employment.

PHASE 1

In the fall of 2006, in partnership with six local community service agencies, we interviewed 60 employers, 42 clients and 10 representatives from community service agencies. Participants identified more than 1,700 barriers to employment, 1,000 existing supports for people facing barriers, and 200 ideas for addressing the gaps.

WHAT WE MEAN BY BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT

In this project, barriers to employment means issues that present people with obstacles to finding and keeping work. Barriers include (but are not limited to):

- being homeless
- having substance abuse issues
- having mental and physical health problems
- having a low level of life skills
- having a criminal record
- lacking work history
- being a sex worker
- having a history of violence and abuse
- being new to Canada
- not speaking English
- being a single parent
- discrimination
- illiteracy
- poverty.

Most people experiencing barriers in one of these areas also experience barriers in at least one other area.

PHASE 2

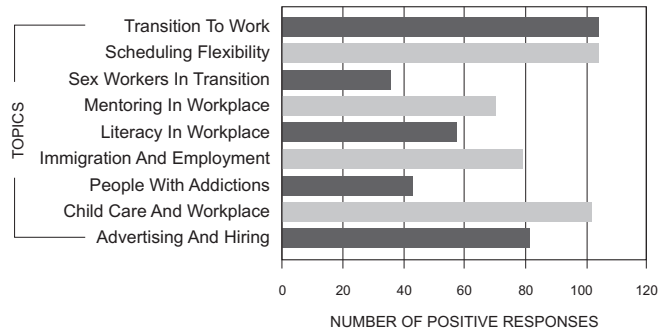
The issues identified in Phase 1 were used to design Phase 2 of the project, which took place between March 2007 and February 2008.

Phase 2 used a type of research called Appreciative Inquiry, which focuses on successes rather than difficulties. For example, rather than asking employers about the problems they have in finding and keeping employees, we asked them about their experience in hiring people with barriers to employment and what had been the best thing about that experience for them.

We began Phase 2 by collectively selecting nine research topics from the many issues raised during Phase 1. Over the summer of 2007, we wrote discussion papers on each of these topics and posted them on the Community Council's website. Each paper provides information on the topic and recommendations for employers, based on research and interviews, focus groups and dialogues with employers, service providers, service users and others in the community.

The following chart shows how participants rated the nine research topics.

INDIVIDUAL TOPICS SELECTION





Small group discussion during the community consultation for the selection of the two research topics. November 6th, 2007 (Photo by Community Council)

NINE RESEARCH TOPICS

- Child care
- Immigration and employment
- Advertising and hiring
- Employing people with past or current problematic substance abuse
- Sex workers in transition
- Literacy in the workplace
- Mentoring in the workplace
- Transition to work
- Scheduling flexibility

We then brought together a group of 30 employers, service providers and other members of the community, including people with barriers to employment. The group worked together to reach a consensus on which two strategies could most benefit both employers and employees.

They chose:

- helping employers support people in the transition to employment, and
- offering flexible schedules.

In the fall of 2007, we undertook three outreach activities built around these two key strategies, to engage employers:

1. We interviewed more than 10 employers about their positive experiences using one or both of the strategies. We published their stories in the Community Council's Quality of Life CHALLENGE newsletter, which is received by more than 1,400 employers in the Capital region.
2. We produced a "reference card" containing tips and ideas from local employers who are using the strategies to hire and retain employees, and a list of relevant websites. We gave the cards to 316 local employers, and handed out an additional 250 cards during presentations and networking events.
3. We produced a PowerPoint presentation that we used in both group meetings and interviews with individuals.

Finally, we developed an evaluation and delivered or emailed it to more than 300 employers to evaluate the impact of our outreach activities and the information we were providing for employers.

You can find out how to access the discussion papers, newsletters and reference card on the last page of this report.

Labour Market Dialogues

TAPPING INTO THE HIDDEN LABOUR MARKET

Tap into hidden labour markets by re-thinking the way you hire and train staff:

- Create a \$500/month job for people receiving provincial disability benefits
...LIKE ROGERS' CHOCOLATES
- Hire new Canadians, Aboriginal people or people with different abilities
...LIKE SWAN'S SUITE HOTEL
- Put your interviewee at ease: focus on concrete job skills and ask soft-skill questions later in the interview
...LIKE THE COMMUNITY ACTION TEAM
- Build confidence: start training with simple tasks and let new staff know it is safe to ask for help
...LIKE THE BEACON THRIFT SHOP

You can't always keep your staff by paying more. Consider these other ideas to make you an "EMPLOYER OF CHOICE:"

- Offer job-sharing or alternative work schedules
...LIKE THE BOTTLE DEPOT
- Cross-train staff to accommodate flexible schedules
...LIKE EXECUTIVE PLACE SERVICES INC.
- Provide training, apprenticeships or mentors
...LIKE THRIFTY FOODS
- Encourage and use staff suggestions
...LIKE COLD STAR FREIGHT SYSTEMS INC.

For more suggestions on how to make your business more attractive to potential employees, join the Labour Market Dialogues.



Labour Market Dialogues

TAPPING INTO THE HIDDEN LABOUR MARKET

The Labour Market Dialogues is offering employers the chance to learn from other businesses about HR strategies that work.

GET INVOLVED! CONTACT:

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Information and outcomes from this Community Council project contribute to the work of the Quality of Life CHALLENGE.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

See WorkBC's website with tips for employers "looking for workers"
www.workbc.ca

See the 5-Step Solution website with helpful resources for successfully employing immigrants
www.5stepsolution.ca

See the Quality of Life CHALLENGE's "HR Options for Action" booklet with 50 tips about positive human resource practices: Click the "Helpful Resources" link, and go to "Employer Resources"
www.qolchallenge.ca

Vancity Credit Union has contributed funds to this project. The Government of Canada has contributed funding to this initiative.



WHAT WE LEARNED IN PHASE 2

THE TWO KEY STRATEGIES

The two key strategies chosen as having the most potential to benefit both employers and employees in the hiring and retaining of people facing barriers to employment were:

- **helping employees support people in the transition to employment, and**
- **offering flexible schedules.**

Transition supports help people with barriers to employment enter the workplace; offering flexible schedules is a simple and cost-effective way to help them stay and succeed in the workplace. (A summary of the discussion paper for each of these strategies can be found in the appendix.)

These strategies provide an opportunity to benefit a large number of employers and employees, creating a stable, satisfied workforce and stronger communities. Both strategies can also incorporate other positive approaches, like thoughtful advertising and hiring.

When developing ways to address the transition and scheduling needs of people facing barriers to employment, it is important to keep in mind the communication, transition and capacity-building needs of employers as well.

Social inclusion barriers are most easily addressed while dealing with hands-on learning in areas like skill development, job search skills and gaining work experience. It is also important for people to be working and making money while they are learning in these areas.

Employment agencies need to be supported in developing programs that will include transition and scheduling strategies. One role that employment agencies can play is to help to arrange flexible schedules on behalf of a person with barriers entering a job. Negotiating for a flexible schedule requires good communication skills and can be intimidating for a person with barriers, especially when he

or she is competing for a job. Another might be to provide a service that assesses jobs and creates schedules and flexibility strategies for specific groups of people, which could be helpful for employers. Employers could also use more venues for sharing successful strategies for scheduling flexibility.

Finally, it is important to look at these and other strategies aimed at helping employers hire and retain people with barriers to employment as part of the big picture – the transition to sustainable incomes for vulnerable people.

SOCIAL INCLUSION BARRIERS

Social inclusion means everyone feeling able to participate in a way that matters to them. Barriers to social inclusion are things that make it hard to take part in learning, work or recreation opportunities, like gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, culture, disabilities, education, age and poverty. Social inclusion barriers that might affect a person's transition to work include for example: cost of transportation, housing, training and appropriate clothing, racism and discrimination.

OUR OUTREACH ACTIVITIES

We learned a number of things from our Phase 2 outreach activities that we will consider as we move into Phase 3 of the Labour Market Dialogues.

One of the strategies that we used to distribute the reference card was to walk through the business districts of three areas in the Capital Region – downtown Victoria, Langford and Oak Bay – and hand-deliver the cards to businesses. We found that these areas had different experiences of the labour market, as a result of different social and economic conditions.

WHAT WE LEARNED IN PHASE 2 (continued)

In contacting many small businesses, the Labour Market Dialogues project learned that small businesses and other employers have fewer opportunities to hear about resources, because service providers don't come to their workplaces.

Most of the employers who responded to the evaluation usually get Human Resources information from other employers and at networking events. Employer networks offer opportunities for employers to find about ways of solving their labour needs. Employer networks are also an

effective way for the Labour Market Dialogues to share information with employers.

Employers also like to get Human Resources information from websites and e-newsletters.

Personal contact and follow-up is the best way to engage employers. While personal contact can be the most time-consuming type of outreach, it is also the most supportive approach to building relationships with employers.

ENTRY-LEVEL JOBS

Employers named more than 25 kinds of entry-level position, including:

- receptionist
- gardener
- dishwasher
- housekeeping
- computer data-enterer
- truck driver
- security guard
- sales/service associate
- restaurant host
- kitchen helper
- construction crew worker
- cashier
- shipper
- labourer
- table busser
- dietary aide
- line supervisor
- processor
- custodian

“A socially inclusive workplace is one where employees are valued as humans through what they bring to the table, not what they’ve left behind.”

Comment from a participating employee.

THE INFORMATION WE PROVIDED

Employers in the Capital Region are very interested in alternative recruiting and hiring practices that will help them overcome the current labour market shortages.

Employers told us that the information that we provided during our outreach activities was most relevant to recruiting and hiring employees, retaining employees, and improving morale. The information was found to be least relevant to employers' interest in increasing productivity. This suggests that we need to explain the relationship between productivity and the Human Resources practices that we are promoting.

Employers in the Accommodation and Food Services, Trade, Building and Other Services sectors found the information that we provided to be most relevant to their business. The largest number of responses to our evaluation came from small business.

Employers in larger organizations expressed concern about having to meet the needs of their corporate headquarters, collective agreements and Human Resources departments before being able to introduce Human Resources practices like those we were suggesting.

The project raised interest in creating inclusive workplaces and improving accessibility of jobs, although these ideas were still of less interest to employers than hiring, recruiting and increasing productivity and morale. Many employers thought "inclusive workplaces" and "accessible jobs" meant employing new Canadians and people with disabilities. We need to promote a better understanding of the other, less visible barriers to employment, such as social inclusion barriers.

Employers expressed little interest in our suggestion to create \$500/month jobs. They were not sure why this would be useful. We will need to explain this idea more clearly to employers.

Finally, employers listed a variety of other topics that they would like to get information about, including evaluating a professional degree, better communicating the job being offered, accessing out-of-country hires, and designing a proper interview.

CREATE A \$500/MONTH JOB

People with disabilities or other barriers who are receiving benefits from the government are often allowed to earn up to \$500 a month without losing any of their benefits. Creating jobs that pay up to \$500 a month will give people with these barriers an opportunity to gain work experience and gain a sustainable income, while providing employers with a new pool of labour.

WHAT'S NEXT: PHASE 3

Phase 3 of the Labour Market Dialogues project will run from March 2008 to January 2009.

We will continue to identify positive and innovative practices used by local employers in successfully hiring and retaining people who have transition and scheduling barriers to employment.

We will then work closely with local business and employer networks (such as the Better Business Bureau, the Victoria

Downtown Business Association and the Human Resource Managers Association) to communicate to employers the most successful practices that we have identified.

Finally, we will design a Human Relations pilot plan to address the hiring and retention needs of employers in the Capital Region. The plan will focus on practices that address transition and scheduling barriers. It will be tested by a number of employers, and then evaluated to produce relevant, practical recommendations for local employers.

APPLYING THE LESSONS FROM PHASE 2

- Maintain dialogues with employers, addressing specific business needs as well as overall Human Resources approaches.
- Consult with employers to better understand the nature of the issues they have identified as most important (recruiting and hiring practices that help them overcome the current labour market shortages).
- Address other interests that employers identified.
- Clarify the relationship between productivity and the Human Resource practices that we are promoting.
- Address the concerns of employers from larger organizations about meeting the needs of corporate headquarters and unions when introducing alternative Human Resource practices.
- Identify factors that contribute to the different labour market needs in different business areas in the region.
- Continue to work with employers on a one-to-one basis, but also do networking and group presentation activities.
- Offer the Poverty Experience to employers as group activity.
- Provide busy employers with information in the form of simple e-newsletters.
- Strengthen relationships with relevant service providers, both private and community-based, in order to be better able to access other resources and help promote coordination among peer organizations.
- Create a discussion forum involving employers, agency representatives and people facing barriers to provide feedback on alternative practices that may result from discussions with employers.
- Use a personal approach to gathering feedback on the information we are providing, while still using impersonal outreach methods (such as unaddressed ad-mail, media promotion or placement of the reference card in key locations) to get the information out to a large number of employers and increase the visibility of the project in the business community.

THE POVERTY EXPERIENCE

The Poverty Experience is a learning tool that shows participants the impact that relatively small events can have on a person trying to move out of poverty.

Developed in 2003 by the Community Action Team, a partner with the Quality of Life CHALLENGE, the Poverty Experience has been used to help various groups understand the realities of low-income life.

Trained facilitators, who have experienced life on a low income, present a scenario and guide discussion groups through a series of choices and events from the perspective of a character who is trying to participate fully in the community.

“When employees are freed from some concerns about issues such as childcare, scheduling, benefits, barriers, their performance and productivity are bound to improve.”

Comment from a participating employee.

APPENDIX: TWO KEY STRATEGIES

In the fall of 2007, a group of 30 employers, service providers and other members of the community, including people with barriers to employment, looked at nine issues that we had identified as being important for employers hiring and retaining people with barriers to employment. The two strategies that they felt could most benefit both employers and employees were:

- helping employers support people in the transition to employment, and
- offering flexible schedules.

SUPPORTING PEOPLE IN THE TRANSITION TO WORK

Even with today's low unemployment rates, there is still competition for jobs. Someone who has not been in the labour force, or who has been out of the labour force for a long time, will be competing with others who have more recent work history or are already working, and who may be seen as a lower risk by employers.

There are a number of different groups of vulnerable people in the Capital Region who may need support with the transition to work. They include at-risk youth, people with deeply rooted barriers, older workers, recent immigrants, women over 45 who may need to be self-sufficient for the first time, and people starting new careers as a result of difficulties such as dismissal or mental or physical health issues.

A variety of approaches to supporting people in the transition to work are used across Canada. Programs provide job-search skills, pre-employment training, preparation for job entry, and on-the-job supports. Community agencies and businesses are also developing partnerships aimed at supporting people in the transition to work.

However, not everyone can access all or any of the programs that are available. And for some groups, there are very few resources that can meet their needs.

Local agencies offered employers these recommendations for supporting people in the transition to work:

1. **Develop simple, friendly hiring and orientation practices.** For example, remove extra challenges for employees, like written materials that are not essential. Provide mentors (experienced workers) for new employees. Build confidence by starting new employees with simple tasks. If employees are having trouble with tasks, find other ways for them to do the tasks, or to do part of a task. Make it clear that people can always ask for help. Acknowledge strengths.
2. **Raise wages and provide benefits.** Provide bus passes or other transportation. Where increasing pay is not an option, provide other benefits, like ways to develop new skills.
3. **Promote people.** Make it clear to employees how they can be promoted.

OFFERING FLEXIBLE SCHEDULES

Offering flexible schedules is a simple and cost-effective way to attract employees and help them stay and succeed.

Lower-wage workers have smaller budgets for dealing with problems that sometimes arise with child care, transportation, housing and other challenges that face low-income individuals and families. They also have a higher risk of burnout, because of the nature of their jobs and limited access to time off.

Employers may be unaware of the reasons why employees need flexible scheduling.

Ongoing issues can include:

- child care (especially for shift work, split shifts, weekend work, and changing start and end times)
- public transportation schedules
- education and training (such as skill development, literacy training, and English as a Second Language classes)
- probation meetings, which can be ongoing and regular or called at short notice and mandatory
- physical and emotional strain of shift work or other schedules for some people
- mental and physical health conditions, which can make it hard for people to work full-time.

Temporary issues that might arise while an employee is making the transition to work include:

- adjusting to the length of shifts or of work weeks (some people might need to begin with shorter shifts or work weeks)
- time management (some people who are getting used to working again might have difficulty managing their time).

Periodic or repeating issues can include:

- numerous medical appointments
- legal issues that require time in court
- drug or alcohol treatment program meetings or the need for extra support meetings
- illness of an employee or employee's family member, with acute symptoms or relapses that require time off.

Employers can create jobs with flexible schedules and promote them among people who are looking for flexibility.

For example:

- Create a \$500/month job for people with disabilities or other barriers who are allowed to earn up to \$500 without affecting their benefits.

- Create casual work opportunities for people with temporary needs.
- Promote evening jobs for people who take classes during the day or work full-time.
- Advertise training, skill development and advancement opportunities, especially for women and people with barriers.

General flexibility strategies for employers include:

- accepting schedule changes (with notice)
- accepting shift swapping and requests for desired shifts
- preparing schedules in advance
- giving notice of schedule changes ahead of time
- using a scheduling system that employees can access, allowing for self-scheduling
- allowing employees to use vacation time in days rather than in weeks
- creating sick-leave banks for employees to use for their own or family members' illnesses and medical appointments
- accepting the need for unpaid short-term and long-term leave, sometimes with short notice
- cross-training staff and/or using temporary employees to accommodate absences
- giving employees more control over how work is accomplished
- allowing part-time schedules, job-sharing or voluntarily reduced time and salary
- allowing telecommuting or working from home
- granting flex-time (daily variation of work time around core hours), which can include using banked time off for extra hours worked.

Employment agencies can help arrange flexible schedules on behalf of people with barriers who are entering jobs.

HOW TO ACCESS OUR HUMAN RESOURCES INFORMATION

DISCUSSION PAPERS on the nine research topics are available at:

<http://www.communitycouncil.ca/activities.php#lmd>

CASE STUDIES of local employers using successful transition to work and flexible scheduling strategies, published in the Community Council's Quality of Life CHALLENGE newsletter, are available at:

<http://www.qolchallenge.ca/achievements/stories.php?viewType=all&subjectFilter=sustainableincomes>

The Labour Market Dialogues **REFERENCE CARD** is available at:

<http://www.communitycouncil.ca/activities.php#lmd>

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