

LABOUR MARKET DIALOGUES: TRANSITION TO WORK

Labour Market Dialogues is a project of the Community Council designed to explore how employers in BC's Capital Region may be better supported to hire and retain people experiencing barriers to employment. This is one of nine discussion papers that share information on each barrier, with recommendations that could strengthen employers' success in recruiting and retaining staff.

This project focused on understanding gaps around employers hiring people with barriers to paid employment making the transition from not working to working. The research involved looking at background information on transition to work, reviewing Labour Market Dialogues Phase I data, interviewing local community agencies who provide supports to people returning to or entering the workforce, and a small survey of employment assistance service clients.

If you don't have a job, there's something wrong with you

Even with the low unemployment rates today, there is still competition for jobs. A person who has been out of the labour force is competing with others who have more recent job history, who are already working and who may be perceived as a lower risk for the employer.

Many employers are not yet comfortable with the idea of hiring at-risk youth (including aboriginal youths) with less developed skills or work experience.

Agencies report serving a greater number of clients who have barriers to work or who are in transition and need extra support.

As noted by agency staff, there are a number of different transitions-to-work that vulnerable people in the Capital Region are experiencing at this time. There are people with deeply-rooted barriers and youth at-risk. There are also older workers, recent immigrants, women 45+ who need to be self-sufficient for possibly the first time, and people starting new careers by unforeseen and unhappy circumstances, such as dismissal, or mental or physical health issues.

Changing needs, changing supports

There are a variety of approaches to support people in "transition to work" across Canada-- these include programs that include pre-employment training and preparing for job entry, to being on the job for the first few months, adjusting to new work responsibilities and new challenges in interpersonal relationships. New approaches are also developing partnerships between agencies and businesses.

Employment agencies in our community provide job search skills for their clients such

as resume and cover letter writing, as well as provide "soft" supports such as encouragement and following up on and practicing interviews to build confidence.

Job-entry and on-the-job supports are also being considered or being developed to help people get and stay on the job. Counsellors informally provide people with job retention advice or follow up with clients with barriers to employment. "Job development" is another step some local agencies are taking to build relationships with employers.

In working with people with multiple barriers in transition to work, agencies report new approaches such as:

- ongoing contact with program participants to support them with tangible life skills such as waking up for work, making bank deposits, and providing transportation to work
- going for walks or coffee, checking with them on the job, and getting groups together where they can comfortably talk with counsellors and peers.

What's missing?

Not everyone can access all the services at local employment agencies in the community— many services are available as a first priority to employment insurance (EI) clients or to others with visible minorities or physical disabilities. Some transition-to-work programs are for recipients of income assistance only and it is difficult to qualify for these programs.

While there are work-entry programs for youth and people with disabilities, agencies note that others that are unattached to EI or have been out of the workforce for several years can't often access services, such as a mother who hasn't worked in five years or an individual who for some reason hasn't worked for an extended period of time. There are very few

resources and supports out there to help these individuals get back into the workforce.

Also, survey findings support reports from agencies that older workers, particularly women, would like more support of a personal nature in their work search. Personal supports are generally those that provide friendship and guidance and contribute to developing confidence and independence.

Some people with barriers, and often those with multiple barriers, need special accommodations on the job that can require extra communication and time management skills. For example, managing mental or physical health medication and a job is a challenge, one that can also cause a person to stand out and not fit-in. Many people with multiple barriers have pre-employment needs that employers cannot usually address, or at least not on their own.

Finally, there are very few resources for people who may be in the workforce but are having difficulty staying on the job.

Recommendations

This research piece stresses the need for supporting employment service agencies in developing their programs. One recommendation is to further advance this work by helping employers develop practices to hire and retain people with barriers and develop their employability skills, as part of the big picture of transition to sustainable incomes.

In general, employers could adopt a variety of strategies to address barriers faced by people in transition to work in the areas of job-entry and being on the job. These could be developed in business practices such as hiring, scheduling and job orientation. Employers could also help people in transition build confidence on the job by providing mentoring and skill development opportunities to support their "transition to work."

A number of specific recommendations for employers were offered by agencies:

- Design simple, friendly hiring and orientation practices including:
 - streamline policies and procedures to remove extra challenges for employees, such as extra written materials that are not essential
 - find a workplace mentor in an experienced employee for the new employee to ask questions of and check in with at the end of the day (for example, to simply ask, "did I do ok?")
 - build confidence by starting people out with simple tasks, then building up to more complicated tasks such as being on the phone, the till, etc.
 - find a way to help people having difficulties do their task in a different way or find a way to set up the task so they can do a part of it (called "job carving" on the Triumph Vocational Services *Employer Services* webpage¹);
 - make it clear and safe that people can always ask for help
 - acknowledge people's strengths and empower them.
- Raise wages and benefits. Provide bus passes or transportation. Provide qualitative benefits, for example, where increased pay is not an option, promote skill development such as apprenticeships.
- Promote people from inside. Make it clear to employees how to get on that path.

One finding of this research is that *Social Inclusion* barriers are better and more easily tackled while addressing hands-on issues like skill development, job search or gaining work experience. It is also critical for people to be working and making money while they are learning these pieces, which supports merging these findings with other summer research projects that address business practices.

¹ www.triumphvocational.com/text_only/employer/choices.htm#2 <accessed Sept. 23, 2007>.

Vancity Credit Union has contributed funds to this project.