

When Training Works: Promising workforce development practices

SEPTEMBER 2020

by Danielle Olsen and John MacLaughlin



Metcalf Foundation

The Metcalf Foundation helps Canadians imagine and build a just, healthy, and creative society by supporting dynamic leaders who are strengthening their communities, nurturing innovative approaches to persistent problems, and encouraging dialogue and learning to inform action.

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The purpose of the Metcalf Innovation Fellowship is to give people of vision the opportunity to investigate ideas, models, and practices that have the potential to lead to transformational change.

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In 2011, John acted as principal designer of Elevate, a program which trains individuals for entry level occupations in the food and beverage industry. Continuing his work in this sector he authored *Finding the Right Ingredients*, a paper which examines workforce challenges within the food and beverage manufacturing sector. He is currently working on several labour market reports for the automotive sector in Canada.

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FOREWORD

Over the past ten years, a significant focus of our work at the Metcalf Foundation has been to create better economic opportunities for low-income people in Toronto. Increasingly, we have come to realize that if we want employment to be an effective pathway out of poverty, then the labour market needs to offer good jobs — jobs that provide more than just low wages, uncertain work hours and schedules, minimal benefits, and little or no prospects for advancement.

Our efforts have been informed, in part, by the work of two Metcalf Innovation Fellows: Tom Zizys and John Stapleton. Zizys has examined the shape of Ontario's labour market, pointing to its hourglass shape, with jobs clustered at both the lower and often precarious end as well as the higher end. Zizys has tracked the decline of mid-income jobs, and the increasing lack of mobility combined with waning career opportunities. Stapleton's multi-year examination of census data shows us that full-time employment itself is often not an antidote to poverty, that the number of working poor in Toronto continues to increase, and that its burdens are carried disproportionately by racialized communities.

Through our work with many pioneering non-profit employment-focussed organizations, we have become deeply aware of how many job seekers there are who require supports beyond what conventional training programs provide. And we have also witnessed the troubling paradox that while many people struggle to find work, employers struggle to find workers to fill job vacancies. At the same time we have witnessed the extraordinary promise of workforce development when it is directed, in tandem, at both local economic development and economic inclusion.

Crafting solutions that improve economic outcomes for workers is complex and shaped by many factors: the local labour market, the assets and needs of local workers, the resources and capacity of institutions, the policy and funding environment, and existing partnerships and initiatives. Over the past four years, Metcalf has sought to fuel such robust solutions through our direct development and delivery of the Toronto Sector Skills Academy (TSSA). The TSSA is an intensive year-long learning opportunity designed to help workforce development leaders strengthen their knowledge, skills, and networks. A critical component of the program is the opportunity to analyze successful workforce development models

that are grounded in community practice. Finding research based on Canadian examples has been a challenge.

We hope that this report, written by Metcalf Innovation Fellow Danielle Olsen, together with John MacLaughlin, will help address the dearth of Canadian analysis of community-based workforce development. Olsen and MacLaughlin profile four remarkable organizations that have demonstrated success by designing and delivering training with creativity and flexibility. The organizations share a deep and enduring commitment to the success of job seekers, and an ability to align the interests of employers, workers, and public and private investments. This paper has special significance to the Metcalf Foundation as all four organizations have participated in the TSSA, and we are a funding partner to both Building Up and NPower Canada.

When Training Works: Promising workforce development practices seeks to deepen our understanding of how to connect job seekers to good jobs by celebrating the work of innovators who are leading the way in demonstrating how workforce solutions can be poverty reduction strategies. It's inspiring to note that the elements which make these organizations successful are available, replicable, and scalable.

As we find ourselves in a dramatically different labour market, where COVID-19 has disproportionately affected low-income people, these innovative strategies and the ecosystem of organizations that generate and implement them represent a key element for Ontario's economic recovery.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

August 2020

Workers laid-off due to the pandemic are nervous about their futures. Youth just entering into the labour market and those unemployed before the COVID-19 pandemic now have far bleaker employment opportunities. Businesses across Ontario are trying to adjust quickly to the impacts of disease prevention protocols, government required closures, reduced supply chains, and the economic impact of over one million people being laid off within two months.

Now, five months into the pandemic and the worst economic shock to the province since the 1930s, the inherent challenges for the workforce system have become even more amplified. What is clear is that, in order to be able to accelerate assistance to those impacted by the economic downturn, we need to urgently rethink and shift our approach to how we provide support. Even prior to the new range of labour market challenges — from social distancing, to a COVID-induced recession, to automation — it had already been acknowledged that Ontario needs a more effective workforce development system.¹

Ontario's public workforce development system comprises a broad range of funding mechanisms administered through the provincial, federal, and municipal governments. Job search services, vocational training, skills upgrading, youth employment preparation programs, and various wage incentives and subsidies are delivered by a multitude of agencies and institutions. These publicly-funded actors engage with job seekers, workers, and employers to help people develop the skills needed for jobs in today's economy.

Yet numerous reports and studies have indicated that Ontario's workforce development system has significant room for improvement.² General consensus is that the system primarily provides “generic” and “off-the-shelf” services, lacks

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¹ Ontario Auditor General Report 2016, Chapter 3.04. “Our audit found that key programs offered by Employment Ontario are not effective in helping Ontarians find full-time employment.” In February 2020, the province acknowledged the findings of the auditor's report and announced that the employment and training system would be modernized. Retrieved from: https://www.auditor.on.ca/en/content/annualreports/arreports/en16/v1_304en16.pdf

² The weaknesses in Ontario's workforce development have been highlighted in a number of important reports over the last decade including the Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario's *Brighter Prospects: Transforming Social Assistance in Ontario* (2013) and Don Drummond's *Commission on the Reform of Ontario's Public Services* (2012). These reports note that our employment and training systems poorly serve low-income, low-skilled adults, and in particular those on income support. Further, both reports note that our system is not well connected to employers nor has it the necessary flexibility to develop innovative and effective practices to help those who are distanced from the labour market, develop marketable skills or earn postsecondary credentials.

flexibility, and is not particularly effective for either multi-barriered job seekers or many of the province's employers.

It is important to note that provincial policymakers are working actively to respond to the economic crisis, and a large portion of the employment services system in Ontario is in the first phase of a service delivery transformation. This transformation includes significant changes to how the majority of employment services in Ontario are managed, including an integration of Employment Ontario's Employment Services Programs and the employment services administered by Ontario Works (OW) and the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP). These changes seek to bring about better outcomes for the most vulnerable in the labour market as well as employers. The implementation of the first phase of this transformation began in 2020 in three of 15 regions across the province.³ It is anticipated that implementation in the remaining 12 regions will occur following evaluations of the first three regions.⁴

As we move past the first phase of impacts from COVID-19 into what is likely to be a long and sustained recession,⁵ workforce development will need to play a critical role in Ontario's economic recovery. It is critical that the province's employment and skills training tools and levers be able to deliver responsive, creative, and flexible solutions that support both job seekers and employers.

The four workforce development programs profiled in this report offer many transferrable lessons and insights about how good training works. **NPower Canada, Building Up, Elevate Plus Manufacturing, and ACCES Employment** are each, in their own unique ways, impacting their communities by assisting both job seekers and local industries to achieve economic success. In particular:

1. **They treat both job seekers and employers as customers and use industry-specific approaches to designing and delivering their programs.**
2. **They focus on specific occupations within a particular industry sector,** usually through applied training, industry certifications, experience, direct connections to jobs, and industry-specific post-employment retention support.

³ <http://www.tcu.gov.on.ca/eng/eopg/publications/est-qs-as-service-system-manager-announcement-en.pdf>

⁴ *Backgrounder: Ontario Moving Ahead with the Reform of Employment Services*. Province of Ontario, February 2020. Retrieved from: <https://news.ontario.ca/mol/en/2020/02/ontario-moving-ahead-with-the-reform-of-employment-services.html>.

⁵ *Economic Outlook, Quarterly update on Canadian and international economic trends and events*. Deloitte Consulting, June 2020. Retrieved from: <https://www2.deloitte.com/ca/en/pages/finance/articles/economic-outlook.html>

3. **They are highly experiential and use applied learning methods.**
4. **They seek to connect people to jobs as effectively and efficiently as possible**, using short-term skills training with direct sightlines to employment.
5. **They understand the needs of their local labour markets.**
6. **They have robust screening mechanisms to decide who enters the program.**
7. **They have a culture of caring and of being supportive.**

Creating and operating these types of workforce development programs requires heavy lifting. These programs go well beyond the traditional notion of what constitutes job search assistance and retraining. Developing meaningful relationships with employers that can translate into sustainable jobs takes ongoing effort and diligence. Providing hands-on support to job seekers over extended periods of time increases caseloads for staff. Accessing funding that supports all aspects of these interventions is not simple. These types of programs do not adhere to the predefined and tidy check-boxes required by most funders.

Amidst the economic and labour market fallout induced by COVID-19, our workforce development system — including publicly-funded programs, public policies, training and employment organizations, and businesses — will be one of the key levers to unlock future prosperity. Our tools and levers need to evolve and become more adaptive and integrated with the needs, assets, and opportunities of regional economies.

We acknowledge the work of the Ontario government over the last two years to promote and advance industry-specific and more employer-driven workforce interventions, and to focus the new employment services system on job seekers with the greatest needs. This work is moving in the right direction. We believe that the four programs profiled in this report offer lessons and valuable insights, and can not only inform policy, but can also serve as templates for local workforce development initiatives in the coming year.

Unequivocally, the most effective way to invest in workforce development programs is to align them with economic development and the needs of local industry, while maintaining a focus on accessibility, and competitive and practical skills development.

These programs go well beyond the traditional notion of what constitutes job search assistance and retraining.

INTRODUCTION

Across a span of two short months, from February 2020 to April 2020, Ontario went from generational high employment rates of 62% and an unemployment rate of 5.5%,⁶ to job losses totalling well over a million due to the COVID-19 pandemic.⁷ While, the long-term impacts of the crisis remain a subject of conjecture, we can be relatively sure that the pandemic will have serious implications for many Ontario workers. We are already seeing that the pandemic has taken a particularly harsh toll on low-wage workers, youth, newcomers, and women.⁸ Furthermore, we know from other studies that racialized people, especially racialized women, are over-represented in precarious and low-paying jobs.⁹ These are the jobs which have been disproportionately impacted by the economic fallout caused by COVID-19.¹⁰

The current recession will generate significant challenges for workers, employers, and the economy.¹¹ Moreover, recessions can cause considerable scarring as short-term unemployment, for some, will migrate into permanent disconnection from the labour market.¹² There is also considerable evidence from past economic downturns in Ontario and elsewhere, that the pace of automation and new technologies will accelerate during this time. This will affect the type of employment available and the skills required to do them. Without meaningful intervention from government and well-designed employment and training programs, many workers displaced during the pandemic will not return to their previous level of employment and could face

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⁶ <https://www.ontario.ca/page/labour-market-report-february-2020>

⁷ <https://toronto.ctvnews.ca/more-than-one-million-jobs-lost-in-ontario-since-pandemic-was-declared-1.4970777>

⁸ *Ontario's Job Market During the COVID-19 Pandemic*, Financial Accountability Office of Ontario, May 2020. Retrieved from: [https://www.fao-on.org/web/default/files/publications/EC2004%20Labour%20Market%20Commentary%20-%20April/2020LabourMarket-April-EN.pdf](https://www.fao.on.org/web/default/files/publications/EC2004%20Labour%20Market%20Commentary%20-%20April/2020LabourMarket-April-EN.pdf)

⁹ Sheila Block and Grace-Edward Galabuzi, *Persistent Inequality: Ontario's Colour-coded Labour Market*, Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, December 2018; Sheila Block and Grace-Edward Galabuzi, *Canada's Colour Coded Labour Market: The Gap for Racialized Workers*, Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, The Wellesley Institute, March 2011. Also see: Dr. Suzanne Gagnon and Dr. Eddy Ng, *Employment Gaps and Underemployment for Racialized Workers Groups and Immigrants in Canada*, Future Skills Centre, Public Policy Forum, The Diversity Institute, January 2020.

¹⁰ Statistics Canada's Labour Force Survey (LFS) does not keep data based on race. This may be changing with the recent announcement that they will begin a pilot, in August 2020, that will capture race-based data on employment status.

¹¹ The C.D. Howe Institute's Business Cycles Council declared Canada was in a recession in late April 2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/business/canada-recession-economy-1.5552135>

¹² Christopher Huckfeldt, *Understanding the Scarring Effect of Recessions*, Department of Economics, Cornell University, 2017.

... solutions to labour market challenges, by design, need to be flexible, adaptable, customized, and often quite innovative.

extended periods of unemployment and lower earnings. **Given what is at stake, it is critical that unemployed and newly displaced workers have access to income supports and reskilling opportunities that offer both immediate and long-term positive impacts.**

During previous serious economic downturns (1991 and 2008), the federal and provincial governments invested or enhanced a constellation of rapid re-employment services, wage incentives, and reskilling initiatives. Unfortunately, as the OECD has noted, these types of efforts, at best, generate mixed results.¹³ Indeed, in *No Shortage of Opportunity: Policy Ideas to Strengthen Canada's Labour Market in the Coming Decade*, written for the Institute for Research on Public Policy, Cliff Halliwell notes that: “training and active measures do work under certain conditions. Paradoxically, they likely work least well when they are most in need — that is, when the labour market is weak.”¹⁴

Furthermore, recessions are hardest on those people who are already working to overcome barriers to positive economic mobility.¹⁵ Finding labour market policies that translate into effective on-the-ground approaches for both the long-term unemployed and workers newly displaced by a recession is difficult. Business practices influence what skills are in demand. Yet people have complex lives, and diverse histories and skills. The needs of businesses and workers are not static, nor do they necessarily run in parallel lines. Because of this, in order to meaningfully support and align the needs of people and businesses, solutions to labour market challenges, by design, need to be flexible, adaptable, customized, and often quite innovative.

Due to the current state of Ontario's economy and the possible long-term consequences for those most severely impacted, it is critical that we achieve better results from our funded employment and training measures than we have in the past. Now, more than ever, we have an opportunity to do two things:

- align workforce programs to connect people with in-demand jobs, and
- partner with industry employers to invest in the skills of the current workforce to support competitive regional economies and economic mobility for workers.

If analysis of past government-led policy and program approaches during recessions does not point us in inspiring directions, perhaps we should look to existing programs in Ontario that are achieving positive results for both job seekers and employers. Perhaps it is better to look towards *real* and promising

¹³ *The Jobs Crisis: What Are the Implications for Employment and Social Policy?* OECD, 2009.

¹⁴ Cliff Halliwell, *No Shortage of Opportunity: Policy Ideas to Strengthen Canada's Labour Market in the Coming Decade*, Institute for Research on Public Policy, 2013, pp. 28-29.

¹⁵ *Most vulnerable to be hardest hit by the COVID-19 economic downturn*, Conference Board of Canada, March 2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.conferenceboard.ca/insights/blogs/most-vulnerable-to-be-hardest-hit-by-the-covid-19-economic-downturn?AspxAutoDetectCookieSupport=1>

on-the-ground strategies, or what the eminent educator Charles Pascal refers to as policy “informed by the simple practice of catching people and organizations doing the right things well.”¹⁶

As the authors of this report, together we have over five decades of experience running, designing, researching, and informing workforce programs and services that serve vulnerable workers and employers. This has included designing and running services for laid off workers in the 1990s through to designing provincial industry-specific programs, conducting many research studies, and developing policy. We share a passion for understanding and helping to promote and advance the factors that contribute to on-the-ground impact for people. From experience, we have come to appreciate the power of the lessons that can be garnered from the experience of effective programs, staff, and organizations that are achieving sustained results for people.

¹⁶ Charles E. Pascal, *With Our Best Future in Mind, Implementing Early Learning in Ontario*, Report to the Premier by the Special Advisor on Early Learning, 2009.

PROFILES OF FOUR PROMISING ORGANIZATIONS

... each program has become a trusted broker of talent within their respective industry.

Over the past year, and with support from the Metcalf Foundation's Innovation Fellowship program, we had the opportunity to study, firsthand, the work of four workforce development organizations in the province. The organizations behind **Building Up**, **NPower Canada**, **Elevate Plus Manufacturing**, and **ACCES Employment** — are drawing attention for their innovative and highly effective programs. We talked at length with staff, participants, and program leaders about how their training is designed, the nature of the supports they offer, and the relationships they have with local employers and their community. Our aim was to capture a thorough understanding of the tools, capacities, and culture required for them to deliver effective employment and training strategies.

Each of the four programs use a combination of training, direct on-the-job experience, and/or industry-recognized certifications to close the gap between participants and the skill requirements of local employers in a specific industry. They seek to address structural barriers experienced by job seekers and employers in the labour market. Barriers can be related to experience, education, and skill recognition, or issues like transportation, social connections, career mobility, and advancement support. It quickly became apparent to us that each program has become a trusted broker of talent within their respective industry.

We learned, often in unexpected ways, how embedded these programs are within their communities and with local employers. Our interview with one job developer was constantly interrupted as they answered urgent calls from several employers desperately looking for workers to start the following week. At another program, as we walked the main street of town with program staff, the owner of a local business came out and asked if the program had anyone available to start the following day. Given the tone of the interaction it was evident that this was not an unusual event.

All four programs have adopted intentional and deliberately designed approaches to ensure that participants receive the training, job-coaching, feedback, and required supports needed to secure targeted jobs while also addressing potential structural barriers. These barriers can include access to transportation, language skills, or experience in the criminal justice system.

Key common characteristics of the programs are:

1. **They treat both job seekers and employers as customers and use industry-specific approaches to designing and delivering their programs.** They seek to address employers needs for workers as a way to create opportunities and eliminate barriers for their participants. They offer customized and intensive services to both clients and employers, which often involves occupation-specific skills training.
2. **They focus on specific occupations within a particular industry sector.** This approach allows for the development of customized knowledge and highly tailored solutions to employers and targeted job seekers. They develop and maintain deep knowledge of, and relationships to, the industries they work with, and design their interventions to close the existing gaps for their targeted participants. This is usually done through applied training, industry certifications, experience, direct connections to jobs, and industry-specific post-employment retention support. They also target industries and occupations that offer jobs with decent wages and advancement opportunities.
3. **They are highly experiential and use applied learning methods.** This normally entails using a group (cohort) based delivery model, delivering hand-on training and work experience, and ongoing coaching/mentoring that serves to build work-specific skills and confidence in program participants.
4. **They seek to connect people to jobs as effectively and efficiently as possible.** The program duration for participants is as short as possible with direct sightlines toward employment. This aligns with participant's goals to maintain momentum, complete the program, and access a job as quickly as possible.¹⁷
5. **They understand their local labour market needs.** They also are uniquely connected to their communities and are linked to a broad range of services and institutions ranging from mental health organizations to regional economic development offices.
6. **They have robust screening mechanisms to decide who enters the program.** They also offer detailed descriptions and often applied trial experiences for participants to be able to identify if the opportunity is right for them. However, this should not be construed as “cherry picking.” Each program was clear about participant characteristics and who would most benefit from their services. Indeed, by any measure, the

¹⁷ Evidence suggests that shorter program durations means job seekers are out of the labour market for less time, resulting in higher retention rates. *Clearer Sightlines to Employment*, Essential Skills Ontario, 2013.

programs assist participants who might be described as distant from employment or multiple-barriered.

7. **They have a culture of caring and of being supportive.** Program counselling wrap-around supports and emergency interventions are intensive and vigorous. As one program staff person noted: “If you don’t want ordinary results, you have to do things that are out-of-the ordinary.” Program staff believe in their participants and expect them to be successful.

Our hope is that reading the following profiles and seeing how they illustrate these characteristics in action will inspire program designers and practitioners, and provide practical guidance for determining which strategies and program components best support job seekers and employers.

In Halliwell’s robust analysis of Canada’s workforce development system, he articulates an important task for the coming decade. He proposes that, “what is needed is a serious rethink and redesign of training measures, including what we want to accomplish and for whom.”¹⁸ From our vantage point, the four programs we are profiling in this report are well on their way to addressing Halliwell’s “serious rethink.”

Finally, we cannot overstate our thanks to the staff and leadership of Building Up, NPower Canada, Elevate Plus Manufacturing, and ACCES Employment. We learned a lot from you. We hope this paper will give others the opportunity to learn as well.

¹⁸ Cliff Halliwell, p. 30.

NPOWER CANADA

Providing a launchpad for young adults' IT careers

npowercanada.ca

LAUNCHING TECH CAREERS.
TRANSFORMING LIVES.

Location:	Greater Toronto Area (GTA) and Calgary
Industry Focus:	Information technology
Client Target Group:	At-risk youth (ages 18 – 29), including racialized, newcomer, low-income, and youth in receipt of social assistance
Delivery Approach:	Hands-on occupational training, employability skills training, job placement, case management, and alumni career laddering services
Funding Model:	Combination of philanthropic, private, and public funding

NPower was founded in New York City in 2000. NPower Canada was established in Toronto in 2014, by leaders at Accenture and Cisco who had been involved with NPower in the States, along with other founding partners including CIBC, CivicAction, RBC, TD, Virgin Unite, and the United Way of Greater Toronto. In 2019, NPower Canada expanded to Calgary, guided by the thinking that if there are enough available junior-level IT jobs and support from industry employers within a region, then they will be able to build a program there to launch disadvantaged youth into good IT careers.

The program

NPower Canada offers programs for: Junior IT Analyst, Junior Security, and QA Analyst. The programs comprise 15 weeks of intensive, no-cost, professional and technical skills training, followed by industry certification, direct job placement, and five years of alumni career laddering services.

The training simulates the practices, expectations, and work environments that youth can expect to experience. For example, participants are trained in cohorts of 50 – 100 and are divided into smaller work teams that rotate every

This delivery model builds a culture and understanding of teamwork.

two weeks, simulating the common scrum methodology and agile project management methods used in many tech companies.

Participants receive technical skills training including programming languages, quality assurance, cloud computing, and IT troubleshooting. The training is designed to be as applied, interactive, and relevant as possible. For example, hardware installations are facilitated through assembly and disassembly relay races. This delivery model builds a culture and understanding of teamwork. And to build accountability for their individual learning, participants are required to report on homework assignments every day in morning stand-up meetings.

In the programs, participants prepare to complete industry certifications including Google IT Support Professional, CISCO IT Essentials, and CompTIA A+. Computers are available for participants to engage in self-study. Support for the certification exams includes one-on-one tutoring and online learning resources that are compatible with cell phones so participants can study on their personal phones after class.

NPower Canada's program design, delivery, and evaluation has been developed under the guidance of industry employers. An industry council, of approximately 10 employers including leading professional services, telecommunications, and financial services companies, meet bi-monthly to provide input regarding industry and market trends and to identify needs of specific firms. Employers on the council are actively involved in reviewing curriculum, serving as guest instructors, providing job shadowing, site tours, and speed networking for the program participants. The council also serves as a networking table for industry professionals.



Photo: Jason Cipporone

The participants

NPower Canada's recruitment, screening, and intake process looks for youth who would likely be unable to secure jobs in IT, but are motivated, have a general interest and curiosity in IT, a minimum of a high school education, and demonstrated English language proficiency. The program is specifically designed to be able to support youth with disabilities. To date, 13% of graduates have been youth with disabilities.

To expand their potential candidate pool, all interested candidates are given the opportunity to attend a career exploration bootcamp program. The bootcamp gives participants a sense of what they can expect in the training, and also what they can expect from a career in IT. The bootcamp doubles as part of NPower Canada's screening process. Before a participant formally joins a program, they must sign a charter that outlines the program norms and expectations. NPower Canada strives for gender parity in their selection process and, to date, 46% of alumni identify as women or non-binary.

Most positions that NPower Canada graduates fill would normally require a Bachelor's degree. The relationship and trust built through the program and the credibility of the training play an important role to build confidence among employers to hire candidates from NPower Canada, 70% of whom have not completed a four-year post-secondary degree.

Many participants have experienced significant barriers and life challenges, often related to poverty. Recognizing that even the most motivated candidate may be struggling with issues that can undermine their ability to succeed, NPower Canada employ human services professionals who provide case management and counselling services as issues arise. Because personal or family issues do not necessarily end once an individual is employed, NPower Canada provides alumni services for five years after someone is hired.

As entry level IT jobs are often contract, alumni services also provide ongoing networking and support for graduates to continue to grow their careers. Services include access to mentorship (with a focus on racialized women in IT professions mentoring young racialized female NPower Canada alumni), continued skills upgrading through specific industry certifications, as well as self-directed online learning supported through peer-to-peer study groups and ad hoc counselling as needed.

Before a participant formally joins a program, they must sign a charter that outlines the program norms and expectations.

Growing to meet the need

In 2015, NPower Canada worked with 87 low-income youth at a single location in Toronto. In 2019, close to 600 youth enrolled in its GTA and Calgary programs. In 2020, they anticipate serving 1,010 youth. To date, 83% of all program graduates are employed within six months, with 80% retaining their employment after 24 months. The average starting salary for graduates is \$38,210. Based on NPower Canada's data, in many cases these starting salaries are more than double the graduate's prior household income. Among all participants served in 2018, 87% were from racialized backgrounds, 39% were in receipt of government income assistance (OW, ODSP), and 38% were newcomers to Canada.

BUILDING UP

Building stable pathways to careers in construction



Location:	Toronto
Industry Focus:	Construction
Client Target Group:	Unemployed and low-income job seekers, including those in receipt of social assistance
Delivery Approach:	Social enterprise, employability skills, hands-on paid occupational training and work experience, apprenticeship preparation, job placement, case management, wrap-around supports, and post-employment supports
Funding Model:	Social enterprise revenue (70%), public, and philanthropic funding

Building Up is a social enterprise in the business of building careers for disadvantaged job seekers in the construction industry. Modelled on BUILD Inc., from Winnipeg, Manitoba, it was established in 2015 in Toronto's west end. Building Up trains and employs people with foundational construction skills and provides experience through their own business operations.

The business and the program

Originally launched to provide energy efficient water retrofits, the business side of Building Up has since expanded its operations into general contracting and labour services. In their first three years of operations, revenue grew at a rate of close to 100% a year. In 2019 their annual budget was \$4 million, 70% of which is revenue generated through their business operations.

Building Up provides competitive training and employment for job seekers in the Toronto area who are interested in a career in construction, but do not have the previous experience or networks to break into the industry on their own. Once accepted into the program, participants receive 16 weeks of combined in-class and on-the-job training, during which they are paid a minimum wage.

Building Up constantly tailors their training to respond to the needs of specific employers, unions, or segments of the industry that are in higher demand.

As a business, it's critical to Building Up that their participants are trained as effectively and efficiently as possible. And as a sector-focused training program, Building Up ensures that people have the skills and experience required by employers and unions before they are placed in a job. Building Up constantly tailors their training to respond to the needs of specific employers, unions, or segments of the industry that are in higher demand. This training helps participants gain the skills to move more directly into apprenticeships and segments of the industry that are hiring.

The goal is that when participants leave Building Up, in addition to being able to perform the core construction skills required to build a room: framing, flooring, drywall and painting, they have also demonstrated reliability and consistent work habits. The program emphasizes punctuality, effective communication, and accountability. It is not uncommon for participants to be suspended for between one and three days for failing to call in advance if they are going to be late or not show up.

Training and experience are tailored to participant's individual interests and aptitude. For example, participants who are interested and have the aptitude to pursue an apprenticeship and career path in carpentry will be supported with the necessary academic upgrading and experience to meet the math and entry requirements of that trade. Similarly, if some individuals need more time and experience before they are ready to be referred to employment with one of Building Up's partners, the social enterprise provides the option to adapt the length of training to meet the learning needs of the participant. As a social enterprise, Building Up is uniquely positioned to provide training with considerable flexibility, as 70% of their operating budget comes through sales from the business.



Photo: Guntar Kravis

Building Up focuses not only on connecting people to jobs, but connecting them to careers. For this reason, Building Up works with many of the construction unions in Toronto, and with companies that offer apprenticeships, living wages, and advancement opportunities.

The participants

Building Up performs a rigorous screening and selection process that often involves the entire staff. They look for individuals who show initiative, interest in the industry, and a desire to make a positive change in their lives. Often the screening process will include a general labour day, during which candidates' aptitudes are physically tested to ensure they can meet the requirements of the industry.

The majority of Building Up's training participants are low-income. Approximately 35 – 45% have had previous involvement in the criminal justice system, which in many industries can create barriers to employment. Fortunately, construction is a generally accessible industry where background checks are not a standard requirement.

Building Up's training is delivered through a cohort model designed to support a sense of team identity, peer support, and community. In addition to technical skills, all participants receive one-on-one case management and counselling. This can include support navigating various services and systems related to housing, mental health, or obtaining a family doctor. Building Up's staff help participants obtain their school transcripts required for apprenticeship, enroll in driving lessons, or get their driver's license — often a requirement for construction work. Staff help participants access available subsidies for apprenticeship training costs that they will incur when they leave the program, as well as financial supports to buy things like clothing, tools, and in rare cases, even low-interest loan programs to purchase a vehicle.

Because advancing economic sustainability and mobility is a core priority for Building Up, the organization continues to provide support to participants even once they are working in the industry. Opportunities include being able to come back to gain additional leadership and supervisory experience to support their development and career progression. This flexibility also provides alumni access to employment should they be temporarily out of work. This is valuable as the construction industry is project-based and can be seasonal. As Building Up's business is largely indoors, it is not impacted by seasonality and can help to keep people working in the slower winter months.

... training is delivered through a cohort model designed to support a sense of team identity, peer support, and community.

Pathways to careers

Staff believe that the program's success can, in part, be attributed to the continuity of their relationship with trainees after they leave the program. In addition to the ability to return for work, the organization provides ongoing support and case management to past participants. Staff anticipate providing this support for about five years, or until people are financially self-sufficient.

Since 2015, Building Up has trained 332 people — 94% of whom have been employed by Building Up. Of all trainees, 80% are eventually referred to jobs outside of the organization and more than 45% have registered in an apprenticeship. Of those who are placed in employment, more than 85% remain employed 12 months later. Participants initial wages are \$20 to \$22 per hour.

Overwhelmingly, Building Up staff see opportunity and potential in their participants. An informal motto at Building Up is: “what do you need and what can we do to support you in accessing a career in construction?” Another principle that guides Building Up's operation is, “what makes the most sense to address this problem?” The answer often involves making systems work for people, instead of following a set of existing guidelines. The flexibility of the social enterprise allows the staff to take an entrepreneurial approach to addressing problems, removing barriers, and preparing people with competitive skills for in-demand jobs and careers in the construction industry.

ELEVATE PLUS MANUFACTURING

Supporting regional economic development through job training



Location:	Eastern Ontario
Industry Focus:	Manufacturing and food processing
Client Target Group:	Social assistance recipients
Delivery Approach:	Technical skills, industry certifications, essential skills, intensive case management, job placement, wrap-around supports, and post-employment supports
Funding Model:	Public provincial funding

Elevate Plus Manufacturing was created through a partnership with the Loyalist Training and Knowledge Centre (LTKC) at Loyalist College and the Quinte Economic Development Commission (QEDC), which are located down the hall from one another at Loyalist College in Belleville, Ontario. The focus of the LTKC is to help provide local businesses and organizations with the skills and talent they need. The QEDC's mandate is to support the development of the manufacturing and technology sectors and attract new industry to the Bay of Quinte region.

The Elevate Plus Manufacturing program is based on the belief that workforce development is synonymous with economic development. Their tagline is: "jobs for people, people for jobs." The predecessor to Elevate Plus Manufacturing — Elevate — began in 2013 through a federally-funded pilot program in partnership with Essential Skills Ontario. It evolved into the independent program Elevate Plus, then Elevate Plus Manufacturing, through the expertise and capacity of the LTKC, the QEDC, and a diverse range of local partnerships in the Quinte community.

The program

The goal of the program is to reduce costs and increase productivity for the food processing and manufacturing industries in the Quinte area by creating an

The majority of participants are hired directly by the employer where they complete their job trials.

ongoing talent pool of screened and trained candidates to fill frontline vacancies, while also providing job training and pathways to employment for local residents.

The six-week program is delivered in a cohort model with 10 – 17 participants. The program is comprised of classroom and on-the-job training that is tuition-free for participants. The curriculum includes Lean Manufacturing essentials, 5S Visual Workplace methodology, HACCP training, Good Manufacturing Practice methods (GMPs), Health and Safety, as well as a strong emphasis on communication, conflict resolution skills, teamwork, and accountability.

In the fourth and fifth weeks of the program, participants are placed on a two-week work trial with an employer partner. The goal of the job trial is for participants to experience firsthand the nature of the work they will be doing after the program, demonstrate their skills and reliability on the job, gain feedback from managers and supervisors outside of the program, build their confidence, meet hiring managers, and gain a reference from industry professionals. The majority of participants are hired directly by the employer where they complete their job trials.

A key design element of the program is to identify specific qualities that are important to being successful in the targeted positions. These can include: the ability to work continuously in a cold environment, schedule availability, physical capacity, and an interest in a career within the industry. At recruitment information sessions, program staff are detailed about what participants can expect on the job and what they will gain in terms of skills, experience, and career prospects. Information sessions are followed by interviews with each potential participant, during which key challenges, growth opportunities, and success factors are explored in-depth. These result in a detailed Success Plan that includes supports tailored for each participant.



Photo: Neil Dick

Participants and the role of staff

The program largely targets people who have had difficulty accessing employment and are lower skilled and lower income. Currently over 90% of program participants have been in receipt of OW or ODSP, and 28% have been unemployed for between one and six years. Recently, the program was expanded, through Elevate Plus Military, to also serve the unique needs of Canada's veterans and military families.

Since 2016, the program has trained over 197 people, with a graduation rate of 88% and employment rate of 100% among those who graduate. A year after completing the program, 75% of graduates are either employed, in school, or running a business, and 68% are in full-time positions.

Although the program only enrolls participants who show interest and motivation to work in the industry, many are also experiencing challenges in other areas of their lives. A critical element of the program is creating a team environment and culture of active support from peers and staff. In addition to a lead instructor, who is a former manager from the manufacturing industry, there are several job coaches on staff. Job coaches are available throughout the program to address issues participants may be experiencing.

The role of all program staff is to make sure that participants succeed. This is demonstrated by staff who take phone calls after hours from program participants who need immediate support, or who go to the homes of participants who don't show up to the program and bring them in. By demonstrating genuine care and a belief in the success of participants, a strong rapport is established. Staff acknowledge that many participants are successful because they don't want to disappoint staff and break their trust. The Elevate Plus team places a strong focus on personal growth and developing resilience, through applied programming and one-on-one coaching that focuses on emotional intelligence, mental health, and wellness.

Once participants are placed in jobs, program staff continue to follow-up closely with employers. Often, if an issue arises once someone is hired, Elevate Plus staff are often the first contact to be called. Based on strong program employment outcomes including quality and retention, employers are very supportive of the program and often have a greater demand for program participants than Elevate Plus Manufacturing can supply.

The role of all program staff is to make sure that participants succeed.

Relationship with employers

Elevate Plus Manufacturing is currently working with approximately 16 local manufacturing employers in two regions. In exchange for receiving candidates from the program, employers are expected to provide training placements with adequate supervision, as well as participate in the ongoing development of the program.

Based on the strength of the program, Elevate Plus Manufacturing has worked with several employers to recognize completion of the program, in lieu of the often-required GED. This change in hiring policy gives employers access to a larger trained and pre-screened talent pool while providing program participants — many of whom do not have their GED — with immediate access to a job.

Over the years, staff at Elevate Plus became aware that employers were experiencing challenges with the capacity of their managers to assist with the onboarding and training of new hires. In turn, this was impacting retention. Elevate Plus Manufacturing estimates the costs of employee turnover for entry level positions is between 30 – 50% of an employee's annual salary. Using an average of 40%, this cost is calculated at \$12,000 a year for job paying \$15 per hour. They use these numbers to demonstrate the business case to employers to help prevent and address issues related to turnover.

In response to this, Loyalist College developed a program for industry supervisors and managers to hone their skills in performance coaching, mentoring, and training. The emphasis of the program is on improving workplace culture and integrating continuous improvement processes and organizational responsiveness to employees, markets, and clients, while reducing staffing related costs from turnover and absenteeism. Subsequently modules on mental health awareness and train-the-trainer have also been added to improve employers' capabilities to support program participants as well as their existing staff. The Elevate Plus team has embedded a core principle and practice of continuous improvement using intelligence and data from employers and participants.

In 2019, the program introduced a new training element to prepare incumbent workers for supervisory positions, either on a full time or temporary as needed basis. Since this time, a third of incumbent workers trained in the Elevate Plus Manufacturing program have received wage increases.

ACCES EMPLOYMENT

Leadership connections for highly skilled immigrants



Location:	Greater Toronto Area (GTA)
Industry Focus:	Multiple
Client Target Group:	Foreign-trained immigrant professionals
Delivery Approach:	Occupation specific skills training, coaching, language training, job placement, and post-employment coaching
Funding Model:	Public funding and corporate sponsorship

ACCES Employment was established in 1986 with a mandate to focus on providing employment services to recently arrived immigrants to Toronto. Since that time ACCES's services have evolved to provide broader employment services to job seekers across the GTA as part of Employment Ontario, while maintaining specialized programs and services to effectively connect newcomers with work in Canada based on their international experience and expertise. These services include bridging programs.

Bridging programs help newcomers — with professional experience and education from other countries — obtain Canadian industry-specific certification and/or a certificate through a Canadian institution. They aim to do this in a condensed period of time to help newcomers quickly secure employment in the same field they were working in prior to immigrating to Canada.

In many cases the absence of Canadian experience, education, and local professional networks create barriers for newcomers that make it challenging to secure work in the field in which they are trained and experienced. These challenges can be amplified by potential language barriers and international differences in workplace and job search cultural norms. A common barrier identified by ACCES's staff is that often people *just don't know what they don't*

know, regarding differences between the Canadian market and the norms of their home country.

The programs

ACCES Employment has been delivering **Bridge Training** programs since 2003. These programs are between five to seven weeks in duration, and comprise industry recognized certification such as The Investment Funds in Canada (IFIC certification) in the Financial Connections program, business language training, experiential learning projects, sector specific coaches, workplace soft skills, speed mentoring®, and referrals to hiring employers in the industry. Today, ACCES serves over 750 people a year and delivers nine bridge training programs including: Engineering, Electrical Engineering, Financial Services, Human Resources, Information Technology, Leadership, Sales and Marketing, Supply Chain, and Business Connections en Francais.

The emphasis is on how to effectively coach and manage staff, as well as business English training.

While delivering these programs, ACCES observed that many professionals, with executive management experience, often accept entry level work in Canada within their industry, that does not lead to advancement or mobility opportunities. This led to the creation of ACCES's **Leadership Connections** program. Leadership Connections specifically targets newcomers with a minimum of two years of international senior management experience with the goal of connecting them with work in Canada that is commensurate with their previous experience.

Leadership Connections is a five-week cohort-based program. The cost is \$500, and bursaries are available for cost reimbursement. The program includes a leadership training certificate through Humber College, which focuses on leading and managing in a Canadian context. The emphasis is on how to effectively coach and manage staff, as well as business English training. Participants have access to coaches with industry specific expertise who can help them navigate and manage issues specific to the Canadian workplace.



Photo: ACCES Employment

The participants and sector coaches

The majority of program participants are executives with finance and IT backgrounds. Since 2012, over 600 internationally trained professionals have completed the Leadership Connections program with over 80% of participants finding work commensurate with their experience within a year of completing the program. Almost half of graduates are hired into positions earning salaries of \$68,000 or higher.

An important component of the programs is the role of sector coaches who help prepare participants for the nuances and expectations of the Canadian workplace, with a focus on communication, interpersonal skills, and dynamics. They also provide support for people once they are employed to help navigate and mitigate potential issues that may arise. Coaches have expertise and knowledge of the industry in which a participant is placed and are also certified to teach English as a second language.

For recent newcomers to Canada, communication issues can often arise after they are in a job. The coaches will work with alumni one-on-one to craft emails or to prepare for meetings or negotiations where they are unsure of the proper protocol. ACCES staff also support graduates on an ongoing basis to help alumni negotiate promotions and engage with HR departments as they progress in their new positions. To support program improvement, staff perform one-on-one consultations and conduct surveys among participants to collect feedback about areas of the program where participants would like more support or time. Course plans are regularly adapted based on recommendations.

They also provide support for people once they are employed to help navigate and mitigate potential issues that may arise.

Matching newcomers with commensurate employment

In addition to surveying participants, ACCES works with industry-specific employer advisory groups that include employers, alumni, associations, and academic institutions. Advisory groups meet twice a year and provide feedback on program curriculum, learning outcomes, and participant progress in order to inform future program changes and enhancements.

ACCES's philosophy is to "fail fast and fail forward," as they develop and test solutions. Their approach to program design is intentionally flexible, not prescriptive, and seeks to address the needs of job seekers and employers as effectively and efficiently as possible. ACCES attributes a big part of their success, to their ability to experiment and test different approaches in program delivery to align the needs of the employers with the needs of their clients.

NIMBLE RESPONSES DURING UNPRECEDENTED TIMES

... case managers and program staff have transitioned to making wellness calls to hundreds of alumni.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic led to an official shutdown of non-essential services in Ontario in mid-March, these four programs have responded quickly to adapt to the needs of their clients. In all cases, they have put a strong emphasis and focus on alumni support. In the case of NPower, this has meant quickly offering a new alumni certification program in partnership with Google to keep people engaged until employers begin to hire at pre-COVID rates.

To support program alumni who had been laid-off, case managers and program staff have transitioned to making wellness calls to hundreds of alumni. The organizations all noted the impact of social isolation on their clients, and that the time involved in delivering case management has gone up significantly. In two cases, organizations focused on fundraising to ensure that alumni had their basic needs met prior to the federal government announcing the Canada Emergency Response Benefit.

Like all organizations, how to operate while ensuring public safety became a top priority in March. For all but one program this meant shifting, overnight, all program delivery to online and over the phone. Although there is a recognition that applied training is not as effective when delivered online, there is also an acknowledgement that it is possible to do more online than previously believed. It is also acknowledged that moving to an online cohort-based program, with the same high touch supports, has provided the opportunity to teach workplace soft skills and communication in a simulated environment that likely reflects what participants must now be prepared to experience on the job.

Where industries have been impacted, these organizations have quickly adapted the focus of their curriculum. For NPower this has meant a focus on cloud-based computing and security, which aligns with the growing need in technology. For ACCES, this has meant an increased need for the Healthcare Connections program, which connects internationally trained professionals with medical backgrounds with career pathways in clinical research and pharmaceutical sector jobs. For example, a graduate of the Healthcare Connections program is now working on COVID-19 specific research at Toronto General Hospital.

We contacted each of the organizations 12 weeks after the economic shutdown to see how they were doing. Understandably, staff described a very stressful few months of seeking to balance providing the best services possible to participants under new conditions, with also maintaining commitments to their funders. They attribute their abilities to respond quickly to an existing practice of being responsive to industry employers, and of customizing services to meet changing industry needs. They also noted that where funders have provided flexibility it has enabled them to shift and pivot their services quickly.

KEY LESSONS FOR PRACTITIONERS AND POLICYMAKERS

The profiles in this report are based on how the programs were able to deliver during times of historic low unemployment and economic prosperity (the unemployment rate in December 2019 was 5.3%). Nevertheless, they still contain key lessons — amidst the current unpredictable economy — for practitioners and policymakers who are seeking to support both laid-off workers and those who were unemployed prior to the impacts of COVID-19.

The profiles illustrate the extraordinary impact of programs that customize workforce interventions to the operations and needs of specific industries, while effectively preparing adults with industry-recognized applied skills, new personal habits, and greater resilience.

Key characteristics of these programs include:

- They are highly adaptative and responsive.
- They are designed to meet the specific operational needs of industry employers, while addressing barriers experienced by vulnerable job seekers.
- They utilize adult learning best practices.
- They focus on sustainable employment, economic mobility, and advancement.

As noted earlier, Ontario is in the midst of a significant service delivery transformation, which seeks to help existing employment and training programs evolve to better:

- Support job seekers at the margins of the labour market.
- Align workforce programs with the needs of employers.
- Connect people to quality in-demand jobs.

Building on the examples of NPower, Building Up, Elevate Plus Manufacturing, and ACCES Employment we believe that practitioners, policymakers, and funders of employment and job training programs need to foster the following practices:

- Financial investment in the capacity of organizations to build relationships, perform analysis, and co-develop solutions to the needs of employers while removing barriers for job seekers. This requires

supporting needs assessments, partnerships of substance, and resources to test flexible and adaptative workforce programming approaches.

- Provide, incentivize, and practice creative and holistic case management that supports people during training, as well as while in employment. A focus is needed on removing barriers to access, advancement, and employment retention, while continuing to work closely with industry employers.
- Align training investments with key regional sectors. Ensure that employers validate and recognize training, and that programs recruit and screen candidates based on the requirements of specific occupations.

It is important to note that there are other organizations doing very good work across Ontario that successfully integrate the needs of employers and job seekers in order to have a lasting impact on businesses and the community. These include, but are not limited to, the work of Palette, the Ontario Disability Employment Network, Ontario Electrical League, building trade unions, and others. The four programs featured here were selected based on the depth of their work with industry employers, as well as their focus in removing barriers faced by disadvantaged job seekers and supporting access to quality jobs and economic mobility.

CONCLUSION

There is reason to believe that if agencies were given a greater degree of flexibility in the design and delivery of service, they would be more successful.

In this paper, we have sought to convey that effective programs are as much a result of thoughtful and committed staff, as they are effective program design. Both are equally important. We are deeply grateful to the staff at NPower, Building Up, Elevate Plus Manufacturing, and ACCES Employment for showing us how true this is.

As noted in the Introduction, these programs gave us the opportunity of “catching people and organizations doing the right things well.” For the most part, these programs were initiated, developed, and nurtured well outside of the province’s primary approach to supporting job seekers.

While the intent of this paper was to document practical lessons learned from high quality workforce development programs in order to inform those who provide employment and training services, we believe we also gained valuable insight for policymakers. There is reason to believe that if agencies were given a greater degree of flexibility in the design and delivery of service, they would be more successful. Local employment services and training providers should have the ability to plan, design, implement, and deliver programs with an eye to the needs of local job seekers and employers alike. They also need to be able to nimbly adjust what they do and for whom based on local economic conditions, characteristics of job seekers, and the needs of local industry.

Policies and funding need to give sufficient latitude to employment and training service providers, employers, and communities, so that they can determine how to address the new labour market realities in a post-COVID economy. We recommend efforts to seed initiatives and build capacity of programs that further align the needs of employers, job seekers, and laid-off workers, with a lens on long-term workforce and economic recovery and sustainability.

Building on the ingenuity and leadership of the programs profiled in this report, as well as others in the province, we have an enormous collective opportunity to bolster and expedite the flexibility and adaptability of Ontario’s workforce system. Our efforts should prioritize and incent employment and skills training interventions that prepare people for quality, in-demand jobs, while also supporting inclusive, resilient, and competitive regional economies, industries, and labour markets. The imperative for solutions of this nature has clearly only increased over recent months.

When Training Works

Promising workforce development practices

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