



Insights from the Front Lines: Job Seekers' Recommendations for More Responsive and Results-Focused Employment Services

Focus Group Report

Social | CAPITAL
PARTNERS

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Executive Summary

From the beginning of our evolution until now, Social Capital Partners has been actively engaged in finding better ways to connect job seekers who face barriers to the labour market with decent and sustainable employment. To learn more about the existing employment services available to these job seekers, and specifically to gain insight into what has and hasn't been working, we convened focus groups of Greater Toronto Area (GTA) residents who have accessed support from publicly funded (i.e. not-for-profit) employment service providers (ESPs).

We divided the groups into former job seekers who had worked with one or more ESps to successfully secure employment, and current job seekers who had registered with a provider while continuing to actively pursue employment. Our focus group participants were candid, thoughtful and generous in sharing their first-hand experiences and insights regarding the strengths and pitfalls of these employment programs and services. Along these lines, we have synthesized the diverse range of observations and recommendations shared by our participants within the following sections:

1. Current Gaps, Issues and Challenges

Participants shared what they perceived to be the most critical flaws and missing pieces within the current network of service providers. While our focus groups acknowledged that there are some exceptional service providers who perform well in areas that the rest of the network has struggled with, participants agreed that the following core issues need to be addressed for service providers to provide more consistently and directly impactful assistance to job seekers:

- Inconsistent and Fragmented Service; Disruptions in Service Provision
- One Size Fits All/Cookie-Cutter Approach
- Lack of Employer Connections and Market Responsiveness
- Gaps in ESP Staff Capacity, Competence and Expertise
- Absence of Post-Employment Supports
- Focus on "Getting Numbers" Rather Than Achieving Genuine Outcomes

2. Potentially Scalable Successes and Best Practices

In this section, we explore the best practices identified by participants who had positive experiences when working with employment service providers. Focus group members believed that these practices, which in most cases were exemplified by a few top-performing providers, could be scaled across the network to improve overall service quality and innovation and to

address some of the specific challenges and gaps highlighted in the previous section. These best practices include:

- Customized Individual Assistance
- Face-Time with Employers
- Labour Market Intelligence
- Staff with Passion for What They Do
- Consistent and Frequent Follow-Up

3. Recommendations for Systems Change

In this final and most critical component of our report, we present our participants' recommendations for strengthening the development, delivery and performance management of employment services:

- Deepen, Expand and Diversify Employer Networks
- Embed Customization and Segmentation into Service Design and Delivery
- Hold Providers Accountable for Achieving Authentic Employment and Retention Outcomes
- Strengthen Staff Capacity and Expertise
- Ensure Access, Equity and Inclusion
- Provide Consistent, Standardized and Seamless Service

We thank our focus group participants for their generous and insightful contributions and wish them great success in their chosen career paths. We look forward to integrating these learnings into our initiatives with public, private and non-profit partners to design, test and scale better solutions to unemployment. We have recently engaged several industry partners, along with federal and provincial stakeholders, in demonstration projects to advance “demand-led systems change,” by which we mean transforming the design and delivery of employment and training services to become much more responsive to the needs of employers and job seekers. As we move forward with our demand-led demonstration projects, the insights and recommendations from these focus groups will prove invaluable to us as we test which key levers and best practices have the most potential for helping the system do a better job of serving all of its stakeholders.

Introduction

In February of 2014, we conducted three focus groups with job seekers from the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) who had registered with publicly funded employment service providers (ESPs). These providers predominantly deliver the Employment Ontario suite of employment services that receives provincial government funding from the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities. Some of these providers also offer employment and training programs funded by other provincial ministries, different levels of government, donors, foundations and corporate sponsors.

In order to recruit groups of participants who would be representative of the diverse needs and backgrounds of local job seekers, we reached out to a wide range of employment service providers in the GTA, sending our Call for Participants to numerous local providers with general mandates along with those who have expertise serving specific populations. Rather than referring participants directly to us, these service providers simply shared the Call for Participants with the clients in their databases, and interested individuals contacted us directly to obtain more information about our initiative.

Our focus group members had first-hand knowledge of the specific needs and challenges experienced by a diverse range of job seekers including internationally trained professionals, persons with disabilities, older workers and youth. Two of our focus groups were made up of job seekers who were actively working with an ESP and had not yet secured employment. The other focus group comprised individuals who had successfully found employment either primarily or partly through the assistance of a provider. In total, thirty-three (33) individuals participated in the focus group series. Each focus group spanned two hours in length. Focus group members received a modest honorarium as compensation for their participation.

We facilitated each focus group to elicit their feedback in response to a structured series of questions on specific topics that we wanted to learn more about. Sample questions included:

- What have you found most useful about your provider's services?
- Is there anything that you believe employment service providers could do differently?
- How has your service provider helped you to determine your most effective route to employment?
- What advice or support did you receive from the employment counsellor and/or job developer assigned to you?
- Now that you have found a job, do you still keep in touch with your provider and would you contact them for assistance with issues that could come up at work?

- Would you recommend your provider to other job seekers? Why or why not?

We then documented individual responses to these questions within a group setting. Participants welcomed the opportunity to interact with each other, often echoing or adding to another's comments. Discussion flowed freely and participants did not hesitate to share their personal experiences and insights in response to our questions.

The following sections of this report synthesize what we heard and learned from our participants. We have grouped their feedback into three sections:

1. Current Gaps, Issues and Challenges
2. Potentially Scalable Successes and Best Practices
3. Recommendations for Systems Change

Current Gaps, Issues and Challenges

While we posed what we felt were a balanced series of questions to participants, meant to elicit substantive amounts of both positive and constructive feedback about their experiences with service providers, most focus group members primarily addressed what providers could improve on or do differently. For this reason, our findings in this section are more extensive than those presented in the following section on scalable successes and best practices.

In many instances, when sharing negative experiences or voicing frustrations with the existing network of providers, participants also acknowledged exceptional cases of higher-performing providers who demonstrated leadership and provided excellent service in areas where many other organizations can still develop. This perceived disparity in the quality of services offered across the network certainly informs the following core concerns shared by our focus groups:

A. Inconsistent and Fragmented Service

Working With Multiple Providers

All participants, including those who found employment as well as those who were still job searching, reported that they had worked with multiple employment service providers (ESPs), often due to their inability to receive all necessary supports from one provider. The majority of participants had worked with 2 to 3 agencies, while some had worked 4, 5 or more providers.

Since the introduction of Employment Ontario in 2010, job seeker clients of government-funded employment services have been prohibited from working with more than one ESP at a

time. While a few participants said that they understood that the rationale behind this change was to avoid duplication of services, the reality continued to be that many providers did not offer the “one-stop employment service solution” promised by EO. This meant that, when prevented from accessing concurrent supports from multiple providers, some of these job seekers’ core employment needs, such as access to networking contacts or skills training, remained unaddressed.

Disparities in Service Quality Between and Within ESPs

All participants agreed that many if not most ESPs fail to provide the same level of quality for each type of service they provide. Some participants gave examples of providers that were strong at resume-writing and interview coaching but did not work directly with many employers. Other participants cited providers that were skilled at placing people in entry-level jobs but lacked the contacts or expertise to connect skilled professionals and tradespeople to relevant employment opportunities.

Participants also pointed to disparities between the quality of service offered by individual providers within the Employment Ontario network. Each of our participants who had positive experiences with employment service providers also contrasted these success stories with negative experiences they had also had with at least one other employment service provider earlier in their job search.

Conflicting Advice and Information

4 or 5 participants also cited inconsistent service as an issue when sharing their experiences of receiving contradictory advice from different providers. This commonly came up when receiving assistance with their resumes. Participants described how, at their first meeting with an employment counsellor at their current ESP, the counsellor severely critiqued the resume that they had prepared with the assistance of their previous ESP. Participants received contradictory information on how to format their resume and which content to include or highlight, leading to uncertainty regarding how to effectively market themselves to employers.

Several focus group members also noted that too much time seemed to be spent on resume development, given that they had voiced other concerns to their counsellors, such as uncertainty about how to tap into the “hidden” or unadvertised job market, that participants felt were higher priority. Along these lines, some participants felt that resume critiques are often provided as “filler” when ESP personnel may not be able or willing to offer other more meaningful forms of assistance, such as facilitating direct connections to employers.

Inconsistencies in Maintaining Confidentiality

A few focus group members also shared experiences of the inconsistent safeguarding of confidentiality and personal information. Three participants cited instances of their personal information being shared without their consent by ESPs with other parties.

B. Breakdowns and Disruptions in Service Provision

Many participants also argued that the Employment Ontario network of providers has not yet achieved its objective of providing a “seamless client service path” for job seekers. Ideally, once registered with a provider, the job seeker is connected to a holistic range of supports customized to their needs, and these supports are provided until the individual secures and maintains employment aligned with their occupational goals. However, several of our focus group participants shared that they had not experienced this type of holistic and continuous service. Instead, they had experienced the following obstacles and disruptions:

High Staff Turnover

- One job seeker who has been working with his ESP for six years has been served by eleven consecutive job developers in that time. He shared that this frequent staff turnover made it difficult for him to feel connected to the service, and that the agency did not appear to manage the turnover well, in the sense that each new job developer assigned to his file did not seem familiar with his situation or with the activities performed by his previous job developers. Instead, he felt that the onus was put on him to re-explain his job search history and objectives to each new staff member assigned to his case, “starting all over again.”

Obstacles to Timely Service

A few other participants also noted that being assigned to multiple consecutive counsellors and job developers slowed down the process of receiving assistance, partly because it did not seem that new staff had access to case notes or other knowledge transferred from previous staff.

Some participants voiced frustration with the length of time taken to move from one stage of service to another. When asked about how long they had waited after their initial registration to receive assistance from their providers, many respondents cited 2 to 3 weeks, and felt that this was a reasonable time frame, but others complained of having to wait one month or more,

and one participant said that she had waited eleven months after registering with one of her previous ESPs to meet individually with an employment counsellor.

One participant expressed disappointment about being subject to a “two-appointment limit” when registering with a particular provider. This ESP had informed her that, upon registration, she would only be entitled to a maximum of two appointments with her employment counsellor. The participant said that she was not given a rationale for this limit and was perplexed by the lack of connection to outcomes, since she would not be provided with further additional support after these two meetings even if she was still job searching.

Additionally, some participants were critical of what they felt were unnecessary steps they had to take in order to receive services more relevant to their needs. For example, about a third of participants shared that, upon registering with an ESP, they were then told that they had to attend a mandatory series of job search workshops before meeting with an individual counsellor or job developer.

Participants felt that, while the workshops had value to job seekers who were unfamiliar with basic resume writing or interview principles, these sessions were not of that much use to those who had completed similar workshops in the past. One participant believed that providers often ask participants to attend these workshops primarily as a “test of motivation” to determine whether individuals are committed to their job search and therefore “deserving” of assistance. The participant felt that this approach was patronizing and agreed with a fellow participant who went so far as to describe the workshops she was forced to attend as “a waste of time,” explaining that she had to take time away from direct job search activities in order to attend this group program as a precondition of receiving individual support.

Unhealthy Competition

A few participants also expressed frustration with poor relations and lack of communication between employment service providers. For example, one job seeker who wanted to transfer his file to another agency because it was closer to his home had to make repeated phone calls over several weeks to the agency he was attempting to leave in order for them to close his file. While he was provided with a rationale for these delays, he believes that his original agency wanted to keep his file open so that they could “keep the outcome” once he found employment, and include his success in their statistical reporting, rather than sacrifice this “stat” to a rival agency. Ultimately, as this job seeker explained, these delays, perhaps resulting from “unhealthy competition” between providers, cost him valuable time that could have devoted to working with his new agency on his job search much earlier.

Other participants described individual providers as “silos” who were encouraged to compete rather than collaborate in the best interests of the client. One participant mentioned that, while he felt some level of competition was healthy and perhaps encouraged better outcomes, it seems to have been taken to an extent where some Employment Ontario providers may be focused more on getting credit for individual statistics than attending to what is in the best interest of their job seeker clients.

Silos Within Silos

Some participants also voiced frustration with what could be termed “silos within silos,” referring to internal communication breakdowns or bottle necks that occur within some ESPs that can delay or disrupt service. For example, a few participants cited experiences of waiting several weeks or months after attending workshops to meet with their employment counsellor or job developer because individual staff had not been informed by the workshop facilitators or administrative personnel that these job seekers were ready to participate in the next stage of service.

C. One Size Fits All/Cookie-Cutter Approach

Job Leads/“Spaghetti Against the Wall”

Several participants expressed frustration with being on the receiving end of what they experienced as a “spaghetti against the wall” approach from job developers and employment counsellors who often sent seemingly random job postings and leads that were not aligned with their clients’ individual goals and skill sets. A few focus group members also shared that, as persons with disabilities, they sometimes received inappropriate postings from ESP personnel who seemed unaware of required accommodations.

Program Design and Delivery

Participants also expressed disappointment at the lack of customized services available at some of the ESPs they had worked with. Some felt that much of the group programming they had attended, which was sometimes a prerequisite for receiving individual assistance, could be characterized as “one size fits all.” One focus group member commented that a nine-week job search workshop series she had attended could have been distilled into one day. Other participants echoed this critique and argued for greater segmentation of programming.

For example, a more extensive multi-week full-day program may be required for job seekers who may have low literacy levels, lack computer skills, be unfamiliar with the local market or otherwise require more intensive supports, whereas other job seekers who are closer to the labour market may be best served through modular 90-minute sessions on targeted topics like building a LinkedIn profile or responding to behavioural interview questions.

Additional participants advocated for services specific to certain job seeker populations. For example, in our final focus group, several participants were experienced workers who shared that they faced specific challenges such as ageism that tended to be unaddressed by generic job search programs.

D. Lack of Employer Connections and Market Responsiveness

One of the most significant and pervasive criticisms made of the current system by our participants was the perceived failure of most ESPs to engage an extensive, diverse and actively hiring network of employers.

Many participants shared that the providers with whom they have worked only seem to have connections with employers hiring for entry-level jobs in factory work or retail. Several members of our focus group, some of whom were highly educated newcomers and mid-career professionals, felt frustrated that ESPs seemed to have very few or no job leads for skilled positions across a more diverse range of industries and occupations.

Two participants commented on what they felt were potentially contradictory messages relayed from ESPs to job seekers, describing how some providers advertise that they “connect you to employers,” but then upon meeting with ESP personnel, job seekers are told that the staff members “aren’t responsible for finding you a job.”

Another participant responded to these comments by countering that job seekers are in fact largely responsible for their own success. For example, as this participant asserted, even if a job seeker is given a direct and tangible job lead by a service provider, the job seeker is still responsible for showing up to the interview, making a good impression, answering the questions thoughtfully and performing to the best of their ability on the job if hired. However, this participant agreed with his fellow focus group members that the messaging from ESPs regarding “connections to employers” needs to be less ambiguous and potentially misleading.

While the group acknowledged that providers may not be able to guarantee a job for all of their clients, participants agreed that ESPs could be more concrete and effective at providing

opportunities for “employer connections” through activities including organizing networking events, facilitating internships, coordinating mentorship programs and other venues for job seekers to gain valuable “face time” with employers representing a wide range of industries and sectors.

Participants acknowledged that some of these employer-facing opportunities did exist, but saw these positive types of initiatives like the Career Edge internship programs and the TRIEC Mentoring Partnership as exceptions to the rule that ought to be enriched in scope, made more inclusive in their eligibility criteria, diversified to include more industries and occupations, and ultimately scaled across the network of providers.

E. Gaps in ESP Staff Capacity, Competence and Expertise

When describing inconsistencies in quality, delays in receiving assistance and other service issues, focus group members frequently referred to challenges they experienced when working and communicating with individual ESP staff. Some of the most common criticisms of staff included:

- Lack of labour market information, industry knowledge and direct connections to employers
- Apparent disinterest in helping people; not much empathy; very little passion for their profession
- Lack of specialized knowledge relevant to serving diverse groups of job seekers such as persons with disabilities, experienced workers and newcomers to Canada
- Short-term focus on placing people in “any job” regardless of whether it’s suitable for the individual job seeker; driven by “numbers game”
- Provide contradictory and inconsistent advice, e.g. the job developer criticizes the resume prepared by the counsellor at the same agency
- Lack of follow-up pre- and post-employment
- Uninformed regarding employer expectations and latest developments in HR and recruitment
- Difficult to get hold of; unresponsive

Several participants expressed their belief that these issues with individual employees were symptomatic of larger systemic challenges regarding how the employment and training system hires, trains and manages its personnel:

Under-Staffing

For example, some participants empathized with staff whom they were otherwise frustrated with due to lack of follow-up, because while these participants did not appreciate having to wait weeks to get a phone call back, they felt these delays were caused by too few staff managing too many clients. A few participants shared their belief that many employment service providers are under-resourced, at least in terms of staffing, and that the ability to hire more personnel would help build their capacity to provide more timely and responsive service.

One participant felt that under-staffing may also contribute to some providers' inability to retain employees, citing "burn-out" as a possible outcome of attempting to manage an overly large caseload, and fuelling the high turnover identified by other participants as a frequent reason for interrupted service, delays and communication breakdowns.

Lack of Standardized Recruitment

Many participants questioned whether employment service providers currently adhere to sufficiently comprehensive and rigorous standards when recruiting job developers and employment counsellors. Given the disparity noted in the individual knowledge and skill levels demonstrated by staff in areas such as labour market intelligence and social media networking, participants agreed that both individual providers and the EO network as a whole would benefit from having clear and concrete requirements from prospective recruits in terms of their credentials, knowledge base and sector-specific competencies.

Focus group members also emphasized that some competencies and aptitudes should be weighted more heavily than others when recruiting employment services personnel, and that the Employment Ontario network does not always get these priorities right. For example, some participants shared that a few of the staff whom they had worked with at their current and previous ESPs just didn't seem to have the passion or calling to work with people. A few focus group members suggested that these individuals may have been hired more for their administrative competencies to support providers' efforts to meet their statistical reporting requirements, rather than for their aptitude and inclination for assisting people.

Lack of Accountability and Proper Performance Management

Many participants also argued that ESP staff are often driven more by instructions from their management to capture data than by an impetus to serve people, and that the targets for which staff are accountable to achieve do not necessarily reflect real positive outcomes. For

example, several focus group members criticized the EO network for “taking credit” for the employment found by their job seeker clients, regardless of the extent to which providers played an active role in finding the job.

Participants also contended that some ESPs counted the placement of job seekers into “survival jobs,” contracts, seasonal work and other precarious forms of employment as positive employment outcomes. Additionally, they argued that, while ESPs are rewarded for job seekers’ entry into employment, these providers are insufficiently incentivized to help their clients keep their jobs and grow in their careers over the longer term.

F. Absence of Post-Employment Supports

An interesting point of debate occurred between participants concerning the role of ESPs in providing post-employment support. In our focus group comprised of ESP clients who had found employment, one participant was adamant in her belief that ESPs did not have a significant role to play in supporting their clients once hired, and conversely believed that this was the function of the employer’s human resources department or personnel.

However, other participants argued that many employers lacked the human resources and expertise needed to support job seekers with the full range of difficulties they may encounter on the job, such as difficulties communicating with co-workers and supervisors, lack of clarity about workplace expectations, and other issues.

Also, some participants pointed out that, in cases of health and safety issues, harassment and discrimination or other matters that may involve employer culpability, the job seeker may not feel safe to approach human resources or senior management at their company for assistance for fear of retaliation, breach of confidentiality or another negative outcome.

These participants emphasized that ESPs can play a valuable role in providing these new hires with safe and confidential guidance regarding how to resolve challenges at work, including referrals to other supports such as mediation, personal counselling and advocacy services. In fact, the Employment Ontario Service Provider Guidelines mandate employment service providers to offer job retention supports as one of their core suites of services.¹

¹ Employment Ontario Service Provider Guidelines (Toronto: Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, Government of Ontario, 2014), retrieved on March 14, 2014 at http://www.tcu.gov.on.ca/eng/eopg/publications/es_2014_2015_sp_guidelines.pdf

G. Focus on “Getting Numbers” Rather Than Achieving Genuine Outcomes

As discussed in reference to issues with ESP staff and service quality, focus group members criticized the current employment and training system for focusing on achieving statistical outcomes that do not necessarily reflect direct assistance provided to clients.

As many participants pointed out, when job seekers register with employment service providers to find work, the provider is able to track this as a positive outcome, regardless of the extent to which they actually assisted the individual in securing the job. Focus group members acknowledged that ESPs did provide meaningful assistance in forms other than direct placement. For example, a few participants credited ESP staff with teaching them the self-marketing and networking strategies required to begin gaining traction with their job search. Another participant expressed appreciation to her ESP for helping her secure a volunteer position that boosted her confidence and provided her with additional marketable experience that helped her to land a job. Clearly, ESPs can play powerful facilitative roles in helping people find employment.

However, participants also contended that, even in instances where the provider has done nothing concrete to assist with their client’s job search, they can still capture this person’s successful self-directed job search as a positive outcome, and that this outcome is given equal weight to those obtained through more direct assistance from the provider. Many felt this equal weighting fails to incentivize, and perhaps even discourages, providers from being more pro-active in their efforts to expand their employer networks.

This leaves fairly muddled data for funders, employers, job seekers and other stakeholders to sort through when reviewing outcomes achieved by ESPs. For example, when an ESP reports that 71% of their job seeker clients have found employment, we have no way of knowing what proportion of these clients had found work through an actual job lead provided by the agency, or benefited from developing a more marketable resume and polishing their interview skills, or simply found work on their own. Focus group members argued that this confusion about outcomes prevents stakeholders from holding ESPs accountable for their performance. It also becomes difficult for job seekers to identify top-performing providers when looking for support.

Some participants also argued that the EO network’s focus on the number of people moved into employment, no matter how precarious the job or the extent of assistance actually provided, seemed to outweigh or preclude a focus on quality. A few focus group members said that they felt that some providers were so focused on “the numbers game” that they failed to treat job seekers as individual and unique human beings requiring holistic support.

For instance, a few participants shared experiences of attending job fairs organized by ESPs at which they seemed to be very few jobs actually available. In the meantime, before getting the opportunity to meet with participating employers, participants were asked to complete lengthy registration forms and share personal information. These participants felt that the job fairs may have been primarily organized as an exercise in registering new job seeker clients to meet statistical reporting requirements, rather than to get these individuals hired for real jobs.

H. Lack of Vocational Guidance: Career Exploration and Skills Assessment

Many participants reported that they did not receive support with career exploration when registering with their current or previous employment service providers. Instead, some focus group members complained that they were encouraged to take entry-level work unaligned with the career goals they wanted to pursue. Less than five percent of participants reported having had the opportunity to complete any aptitude testing or vocational assessments upon registering with their ESPs.

I. Insufficient Skills Development and On-the-Job Training Opportunities

Participants expressed frustration with what they perceived as limited opportunities for retraining through programs such as Second Career which were described by some as overly bureaucratic and difficult to access. Focus group members called for more on-the-job training in particular, whether through volunteer work, unpaid and paid internships, streamlined access to apprenticeships or other channels.

Potentially Scalable Successes and Best Practices

A. Customized Individual Assistance

Participants in all three focus groups consistently spoke to the value of one-to-one assistance. When sharing examples of services they had found the most useful, they echoed the benefits from receiving support specific to their individual needs and goals, particularly at the beginning of the process.

Individual Assessment and Supported Referrals

Several participants cited the benefits of a thorough and holistic individual assessment interview. When asked about effective forms of career and vocational assessments, the few

participants who had been offered and guided through an assessment process unanimously agreed that it was optimally facilitated through an in-person, exploratory discussion with an experienced, attentive and empathetic staff member, rather than through a paper test, website or group workshop.

These focus group members explained that participating in the individual assessment process had given their job search a clearer direction at the outset, and in some cases these assessments also resulted in referrals to other supports, such as adaptive software training and financial support for credentialing, that proved critical to participants' ability to secure employment.

Customized and Blended Service

Similarly, participants cited the benefits of receiving individual support along subsequent stages of the employment services continuum including employment counselling, job development and retention supports. One participant who was an internationally accountant shared how, in contrast to her experience with an earlier ESP whose staff had told her that factory work was her only option, her service from her most recent provider was much more aligned with her specific goals and expertise. Her employment counsellor helped her with setting short-term and long-term job goals that were achievable and in line with the action plan that they developed collaboratively, the counsellor helped place this participant in an administrative position within a financial services environment.

Additionally, rather than terminating the relationship upon placement, this counsellor continued working with the participant to coordinate financial support for her to write her Canadian Securities Course (CSC) exam so that she can target even more rewarding opportunities in her field.

Individual Skills Development and Mentorship

Another participant, also from the focus group of former job seekers who had successfully found employment at least partly through the help of an ESP, shared his experience of learning how to market himself to employers through working with a job developer with a strong sales and marketing background. This job developer had taught him to better articulate his value proposition in the marketplace and had not only helped him to find employment but to discover a whole new career path as a motivational speaker.

Another participant spoke highly of an employment counsellor who had invested the time in meeting with her multiple times on a one-to-one basis to teach her the skill of writing a customized resume. The participant reporting feeling empowered by having acquired the ability to produce a strong targeted resume on her own, rather than having to contact an ESP for help every time she wanted to customize her resume for a new job application. She explained that, by providing her with the individual training in resume-writing upfront, her employment counsellor helped her to secure employment faster than she may have otherwise.

B. Face-Time with Employers

Networking Events

Some participants also cited the benefits of attending networking events with employers. A few participants who had the opportunity to participating in meet and greet-style events with local companies said that, even if these interactions had not resulted directly in employment, participants still gained valuable experience with practicing their elevator pitch and refreshing their professional communication skills in a real-world, real-time setting. Two participants shared that these types of experiences had boosted their confidence and better prepared them for future interactions with employers, either in other networking venues or at job interviews.

Volunteer Work

Another participant cited volunteer work as a valuable opportunity to gaining more face-time with employers and familiarity with workplace expectations. She shared how her employment counsellor connected her with meaningful volunteer work with a non-profit organization, which then helped her gain the communication skills and confidence necessary to find work. As an internationally experienced professional, this participant credits her volunteer placement with helping her to learn how to navigate the Canadian workplace and strengthen her English-language professional communication skills.

Access to Contacts and Information Interviews

Two participants said that their most effective employment counsellors and job developers had connected them to contacts in their own professional networks for information interviews. Even though not all of these contacts had resulted in job leads, both participants spoke of the benefits of information interviewing. They learned about trends in their targets industries and professions, gained more specifics on what employers expected from new hires, and got the chance to practice and hone their professional communication skills.

C. Labour Market Intelligence

For those participants who had positive experiences with ESPs, when asked what it was about these particular staff that had impressed them, some cited labour market intelligence as a key attribute. For example, one participant described how her employment counsellor had taught her how to utilize key words in her resume so that her application would be favourably evaluated by the automated tracking system (ATS) deployed by many larger employers to filter through large pools of applicants. She was impressed by her counsellor's knowledge of specific recruitment strategies utilized by a particular segment of employers and her practical guidance on how to navigate these systems.

D. Staff with a Passion for What They Do

When asked to identify characteristics of effective employment counsellors and job developers, participants were unanimous in also emphasizing soft skills, particularly active listening and empathy. They reported feeling a greater sense of rapport, connecting and trust with staff who came across as genuinely concerned for their well-being, attentive to their needs and invested in their success. Focus group reports agreed that these particularly exemplary staff seemed to enjoy their jobs and to have a sincere passion for helping others.

E. Consistent and Frequent Follow-Up

When sharing positive experiences of working with ESPs, another common theme was frequent touch points and follow up during pre- and post-employment stages of service. Regardless of whether these touch points took place over the phone, in person or via e-mail, the participants appreciated that staff took the time and initiative to check in about how things were going, and more importantly, to offer further assistance.

Recommendations for Systems Change

A. Deepen, Expand and Diversify Employer Networks

Perhaps the strongest and overarching recommendation made by all of three of our focus groups concerned employer engagement. Our participants unanimously called for employment service providers to devote far greater resources, time and effort to cultivating, strengthening and diversifying their employer networks. This includes diversification across the board in terms of size, location, accessibility, sector, industry, hiring need and so forth. As discussed regarding

the recommendation to invest in ESP staff capacity and expertise, enrichment and diversification of employer networks would partly be accomplished by upskilling existing personnel and recruiting new staff with stronger sales, marketing and account management capabilities.

Participants also encouraged ESPs to be more creative in how they engage employers. For example, rather than only getting in touch with local companies to ask when they are hiring, why not encourage employers to participate in onsite networking events with job seekers for a “try it before you buy it” preview of potential candidates whom they may be more motivated to consider for opportunities after a face-to-face meeting. Or invite employers to be guest speakers at workshops on topics like interview preparation so that job seekers gain first-hand insights about what recruiters and hiring managers are looking for. All focus group members agreed that employers and job seekers would both benefit from a greater and more frequent range of opportunities to connect.

Participants also recommended that employment service providers focus on building links not only with employers themselves but with recruiters such as private-sector agencies whom ESP could liaise with and learn from. Focus group members also called upon providers to engage local entrepreneurs as mentors for individuals considering self-employment, since aside from the Ontario Self-Employment Benefit (OSEB) program and a few organizations like Enterprise Toronto and the Toronto Business Development Centre, participants were unaware of other self-employment supports that a broader range of individuals would be eligible for.

Ultimately, focus group members advocated for employment service providers to prioritize employer engagement in the form of direct connections with employers through a range of innovative avenues, along with building productive and mutually beneficial relationships with recruiters and local entrepreneurs.

B. Embed Customization and Segmentation into Service Design and Delivery

Participants also advocated for the customization and segmentation according to job seekers’ occupational goals, specific needs and distance from the labour market. Rather than, as one participant put it, “trying to push a square peg into a round hole,” ESPs would do better to offer a suite of services that could be customized for specific streams or “segments” of job seekers.

For example, a group of job seekers who had already completed numerous preparatory steps, including career exploration, producing a marketable resume, learning how to research companies and so forth, might benefit more from short-term, targeted and modular training on

specific topics such as networking through social media in order to immediately close any remaining gaps on their path to employment. By contrast, job seekers with low levels of education who have just been downsized by an employer for whom they had worked as semi-skilled labourers for 25 years may benefit from far more extensive pre-employment support, such a 12-week career assessment, skills training and job readiness program, in order to secure a decent new job.

Ultimately, by providing customized service streams to job seekers according to skill level, interest and proximity to the labour market, resources would be invested in the activities most beneficial for specific job seekers, while eliminating the waste, frustration and delays produced by forcing people to enrol in extensive programs and services that may not be appropriate or useful for them.

C. Hold Providers Accountable for Achieving Authentic Employment and Retention Outcomes

Measurable Results: Direct Assistance to Find and Retain Work

Participants strongly recommended that ESPs be held accountable for achieving a series of concrete, measurable and enforceable outcomes. As one participant asked, “where are the KPIs (key performance indicators)?” Rather than providers receiving credit for the number of job seekers who find employment, regardless of the extent to which the ESP actually helped these individuals, participants advocated that providers be measured according to the direct results of the assistance they provide. Focus group members also emphasized that providers be held accountable not for placing people into “any job,” but into work aligned with job seekers’ skills and objectives.

Additionally, several participants believed that ESPs ought to be measured on supporting job seekers to not only find but keep their employment. This could be achieved by job developers focusing more on sourcing permanent full-time positions, along with ESP management supporting all front-line personnel to focus more of their energies on assisted onboarding, on-the-job coaching, coordinating mentorships and other post-employment services.

Enforcement, Compliance and Quality Assurance

Many focus group members also maintained that setting targets was insufficient in and of itself – the achievement of these outcomes also has to be monitored and enforced. Participants brainstormed regarding how compliance could be audited and incentivized. A few participants

suggested the establishment of a Quality Assurance or Compliance Team that could conduct more frequent outcome-focused audits of ESP service quality, focusing not just on “meeting numbers” but on the range and depth of services provided, and assessing which services were most impactful. The Team could collect this information by interviewing several job seekers and employers working with each of the providers to assess customer satisfaction, service quality and the outcomes achieved by each of the supports offered.

One participant also suggested the establishment of an Ombudsperson for the employment service providers’ network that could respond with immediacy and authority to address a host of issues ranging from customer service complaints to breaches of ethics such as the unauthorized sharing of confidential information.

How Should Providers Be Funded? Outcome-Based Investments and Alternative Models

In terms of longer-term enforcement, many participants tied this directly to funding by calling for the termination of funding to ESPs who could not meet these more robust targets after being given the opportunity and support to do so during a trial or probationary period. However, rather than seeing these funding dollars disappear entirely from the network, several participants advocated for top-performing ESPs to be awarded higher levels of funding which could be paid for by dollars saved through the termination of contracts with ineffective providers. Essentially, participants called for the dollars to follow proven success.

A few participants also questioned the nature of how ESPs are funded. The current system awards annual contracts to providers largely based on how many and what percentage of their job seekers would be expected to find employment, and then at end of year, government reassesses each ESP’s level of funding upward or downward for the next year based on whether the provider has met, exceeded or failed to achieve these annual targets. However, some focus group members argued that this model does not adequately prioritize outcomes and that other approaches might be considered.

Rather than issuing a block of funding at the beginning of each fiscal year, another model might involve, for example, compensating a provider for each individual job seeker that they have directly placed into suitable employment with a payment at the time of placement, and then issuing a subsequent payment for each of those individuals still employed six months later.

While participants did not explore this in detail or reach a consensus about which funding model might prove to be the best alternative to the current structure, there was broad agreement that system stakeholders would benefit from considering different approaches.

D. Strengthen Staff Capacity and Expertise

Consistent and Rigorous Standards When Recruiting Personnel

Participants recommended that employment services personnel demonstrate a higher level of competency and expertise in areas such as:

- Labour market intelligence
- Industry and sector specific knowledge
- Familiarity with employers' hiring expectations and recruitment processes
- Networking and self-marketing
- Social media

Above all, participants advocated for hiring staff with a strong inclination and aptitude for helping others.

Coordinating and Leveraging Individual Staff Strengths

One participant drew an analogy between visiting a family physician, who then issues referrals to allied specialists to address specific issues, and meeting with an employment counsellor who connects job seekers to an array of customized services, such as resume writing for IT professionals or training in social media, to target and strength core elements of individual employability.

This generalist-specialist approach could be coordinated between multiple staff within the same ESP or across multiple ESPs. For example, one service provider may not have any job developers on staff with specific expertise and contacts in the logistics and supply chain sector, so to be able to effectively serve individuals searching for work in that field, this provider should be able to connect them with a job developer at another provider who does have those relevant connections and industry knowledge.

Invest in Training and Professional Development

Participants advocated for ESPs to invest in continually training their staff so that employment counsellors and job developers keep up to date with proven best practices, resources and tools for assisting job seekers in today's marketplace.

Several participants also emphasized that staff would benefit from being trained to better understand the needs of specific job seeker populations such as newcomers and persons with disabilities.

When describing her most positive experience of working with ESP staff, one participant explained that, partly because her job developer had been knowledgeable about her specific disability, she knew how to market her effectively to employers along with being able to negotiate and arrange required accommodations.

E. Ensure Access, Equity and Inclusion

Another focal point informing several best practices and recommendations advanced by the group pertained to improving access, ensuring equity and facilitating inclusiveness across the employment service network. They spoke for the need for more accessible and appropriate supports across the board.

For example, when discussing the competencies and expertise that employment services require to be effective, several participants asserted that job developers needed to have far greater background and skill in negotiating workplace accommodations with employers for their clients who are persons with disabilities. Similarly, one sixty-year-old focus group member felt that an employment counsellor who asked her about her “short and long term goals” was speaking with her as if she were a recent graduate needing to pay her dues in order to eventually reach her goals, instead of someone near the end of her career whom, in the participant’s own words, was simply “looking for a decent job for the next five years.”

Participants agreed that gaining more specific knowledge about the diverse challenges and barriers job seekers face, along with improving their capacity to listen to and empathize with their clients, providers would ultimately offer much more accessible, inclusive and relevant service.

F. Provide Consistent, Standardized and Seamless Service

A common theme throughout many of the existing best practices identified and recommendations made by our focus groups has been that of achieving much greater consistency and standardization across the network of employment service providers.

For instance, when discussing improvements to ESP personnel, several participants advocated for more consistent standards for recruiting and training employment counsellors and job

developers. Also, when the group tackled issues of accountability and performance management, many members called for standardized targets that all ESPs would be held accountable to.

Participants also perceived consistency and standardization through an equity lens, emphasizing that all job seekers should have access to the same quality of service and to meaningful and sustainable employment opportunities.

Conclusion

Our dynamic, engaged and diverse focus groups had many valuable insights to share about publicly funded employment services in Ontario. Our participants, including those who had found employment and others who were still actively searching for work, drew upon the first-hand experience with accessing these services to provide us with a holistic and honest assessment of what's working, what's not and how things could be done differently. While focus group members identified several best practices that have already been implemented by some top-performing providers, these innovations tend to exist in isolated pockets rather than being scaled and made available across the network.

Participants' key recommendations focused on strengthening and diversifying employer engagement, improving accessibility and inclusion, investing in front-line staff capacity and expertise, offering customized service instead of a "one size fits all" approach, and ultimately holding all providers accountable to genuine employment outcomes.

Social Capital Partners thanks our participants once more for their openness and generosity in sharing their insights and experiences. Their recommendations will add significant value to the design and delivery of our demand-led systems change initiatives, and we hope that this report provides similarly powerful inspiration to other private, public and non-profit stakeholders committed to connecting more job seekers with rewarding and sustainable employment.