

Employment and Training Services for Women in Metro Toronto

by Karen Lior and Ann Zelechow

Cet article examine les besoins en d'emploi et en apprentissage provenant du Toronto Métropolitain et cherche à savoir dans quelle mesure les programmes d'emploi offerts sont capables de répondre aux besoins des femmes en recherche de ces services.

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In January 1997, Advocates for Community-Based Training and Education for Women (ACTEW) produced the ACTEW Survey of Employment and Training Services for Women in Metro Toronto (A-Z Learning Associates). This article is an excerpt from that report. The survey forms part of a larger information-gathering project with other components; research into programs serving immigrants, research into programs serving youth, a project designed to collect the training needs of the Francophone community, and a project directed to the training needs of racial minorities. Taken as a whole picture, the information provides an overall picture of the training and employment needs in Metro Toronto and how programs and services are meeting or missing those needs.¹

For the ACTEW study we surveyed training and employment agencies including community-based training programs, private trainers, and colleges. We also held focus groups with women either in training programs or trying to enter training and employment services. Training and employment services were asked to define their practice, to discuss what they "do best," and to describe what they are not "doing well."

Our interviews with clients demonstrated that many of the problems women face in training programs are the result of the contradictory demands placed upon women in this culture. Working, training, and employment programs demand professional attitudes while many of women's other roles devalue or dismiss these skills. We found that a client-centred model for finding and keeping a job calls for an entrepreneurial spirit of independence and self-reliance. Women described how they learned to identify unknown skills while participating in their competency-building programs. Their successes were sometimes defeated when husbands or sons insisted that the skill tests must have been made extra easy for women.

Tools and resources

We met with women who were primarily clients enrolled in community-based training programs. The programs provided a variety of tools which aided them in their journey towards independence. The women emphasized their need for the following tools and resources.

- *Information:* including the ability to find and access information about income support, the job market, labour trends, appropriate training linked to career choices.

- *Adequate financial support:* including support for continuous upgrading, loans without penalty, enough money to access training and eat. Clients on social assistance, if they make a credible plan for educating themselves, should not have to take out loans, such as OSAP, for which they will be liable whether or not they find work.

- *Programs designed to provide knowledge and tools that help women make their own choices:* including skills training, hard skills (literacy, computer literacy, technology) professional accreditation, and soft skills (personal management, communication).

- *A supportive learning environment:* an environment which supports personal discovery and the possibility of making mistakes, recognition and assessment of prior learning and previous experience, help with finding affordable, quality daycare.

- *Support in planning and executing long-term goals.*

- *A continuous learning environment* designed for the special needs of women: including training centres close to home, training delivered in flexible blocks of time, input into course and program design, a variety of resources and approaches to match individual conditions and learning styles.

Previous research shows that generally people looking for work need to be competent in four areas to successfully find and keep a job (Hoffman and Vodden). We define competency to mean: being empowered to do the tasks of job finding by having both the tools and the skills required to do the tasks involved. Women who participated in the focus groups were asked to envision a successful training experience. They discussed their experiences in terms of the following five employability dimensions or competencies: (1) the ability to make career and/or occupation decisions; (2) possessing the skills necessary to be successful in the chosen career or occupation; (3) having the necessary job search skills; (4) having the skills necessary to maintain employment; (5) having the ability to find and access the resources to master the other four competencies.

Without exception, all the clients interviewed mentioned how difficult it had been to find information about where to go to get the skills they needed to find a job. Some

women had been ready to seek employment for years but lacked the knowledge that there were resources and programs available. Although the women we talked to had obviously found the appropriate resources, the question remains how many women are out there who need help they are not able to find. For this reason we added a fifth competency: the ability to find and access the resources to master the other four. This "competency" should be first on the list. Below is the list of "competencies" defined and expanded by the women we interviewed.

- The ability to find and access the resources to master the other four competencies. All the clients stressed that they wanted services that would help them be independent in their job search.

- The ability to decide on a career or occupation. We were struck by how easy it is for women to lose their self-confidence when they are unemployed. The women stressed to need to build self-confidence and said that was the most important thing they gained from their training program. The women also talked about having adequate financial resources as part of deciding on a career or occupation as well as a supportive learning environment.

- Possessing the skills necessary to be successful in the chosen career or occupation. This would include the ability to do realistic self-assessment, learn new attitudes toward succeeding at work, improve interpersonal skills, learn to set personal goals, learn to budget money, and learn to communicate better.

- Having the necessary job-search skills. Looking for a job requires strong marketing skills including learning to promote and market oneself, learning to clearly define job-search goals, and forming and maintaining a support group during the job search.

- Having the skills to maintain employment which includes learning to manage in "Canadian work culture."

In summary, women wanted to be able to ask and answer the following questions.

What do I want to do? Do I have the skills to do what I want to do? If I am disabled what are the special considerations I must make? Do I want to be an employee or do I want to own my own business? Am I looking for full or part-time work? Am I looking for work in permanent, casual, or contract positions? What do I need to know to be successful in any of the choices I make? How do I determine what jobs are available in Metro Toronto? Are my choices realistic in the current Metro Toronto job market? Can I get a suitable job now or do I need to upgrade my skills first?

Changing job market

Organizational re-structuring, work process re-design, and rapid technological change are re-shaping many jobs that women have traditionally held. Corporate responses to competition have led to downsizing, with concomitant re-design of work (Metro Toronto Clerical Workers Labour Adjustment Committee). This has led to new modes

of employment, including working part-time for temporary agencies, taking contract work, and becoming self-employed.

The ways the job market is changing combined with women's training needs creates a variety of areas in which clients must demonstrate some degree of expertise to successfully enter the workforce. Occupations in which women have traditionally found employment are disappearing or changing rapidly. Job seekers must either upgrade their skills continuously or look for work in non-traditional occupations. Yet women have special difficulties in upgrading their skills and are apprehensive about looking for work in non-traditional areas. The following six areas illustrate the changes and new demands.

- Ever-changing Business Technologies:* Any worker today is expected to have basic computer literacy and to know some or all of the common business applications.

- The Need for Continuous Learning:* If women are to stay marketable, they must continue learning even after they find work.

- Different Ways of Finding Work: The Project Manager Approach.* Women are learning that they must package and sell their skills the way that promoters market products. Older women need special assistance and specific programs in developing assertiveness skills.

- Different Ways of Advancing:* Much of the work that administrative workers used to do is now done by professional staff with additional skills. Those who find work as administrative workers can sometimes move into other positions if they are fast learners, willing to take risks, and able to present themselves as highly confident. This again was an issue for older women.

- Different Modes of Being Employed: Self-employment and Entrepreneurship, Part time and Contract Work:* None of the women interviewed mentioned an interest in either part-time or contract work. Some were exploring the possibility of going into business for themselves. The path to self-employment requires the most sophisticated combination of skills and resources. The women we interviewed were not well-prepared for the difficulties of starting and sustaining a business.

- Changing Occupations and a Broadened Vision of Career Paths:* Clients surveyed had a very limited perspective on vocations different from the traditional women's occupations. When we asked how many women were considering moving into technologically-based work such as becoming Local Area Network (LAN) administrators or engineers, no one knew what that was. Yet LAN management is a logical extension of clerical and administrative services.

The service providers

For women to be successful in training and in finding and retaining employment, it is important to understand the context of how women work and the greatly changed nature of that work. Our research helped us understand that a client-centred model requires a whole matrix of

resources and support services available to the woman who is looking for a job. We used this understanding of a client-centred model in evaluating the service providers. In addition, we compared the programs with the competencies described above. We talked to community-based training agencies, private vocational schools, and community colleges.

The service providers were able, for the most part, to accurately describe both the advantages of and limitations to their programs. The information gave us a better understanding of the continuum of services needed to help women meet and achieve their training and employment goals, and how each step along the continuum must be linked to the preceding and succeeding steps. Although not every individual will need all the services along the continuum, clearly those beginning in the most disadvantaged positions will need to acquire the most skills.

In our surveys of training organizations we were interested in how each type serves women looking for employment. Our focus was on the accessibility of the programs, the design of programs, and the measure and production of outcomes. In an ideal system, clients, informed about their needs, would determine the continuum of services. However, no provider we interviewed believed that it was currently delivering service solely on that basis. For all providers, program design is driven by three factors: client needs, sources of income, and business needs. Client needs are not always compatible with the other factors.

Community-based training programs

We interviewed program staff at Rexdale Microskills in north Etobicoke, Times Women's Change Employment Centre, STEP UP Program at Dixon Hall Community Centre, and Skills for Change. Although each training centre offers slightly different programs and services, the goals, atmosphere of delivery, and client profiles are similar across the sector. The programs serve as a small sample of the community-based programs across Metro.

Community-based training (CBT) programs are unique in their holistic approach to each person who is admitted into their programs. "Staff see their work as a mission, not a job" (A-Z Learning Associates 28). Community-based programs give women an almost complete set of job-searching skills in a supportive environment. This means that they try to meet all the needs that each person has in looking for work. Needs may vary for hard skills training, soft skills training, and basic needs of clothing, shelter, and nutrition. For each individual who is admitted, the question "what does each person need to go from where they are now to having a job?" is carefully considered and comprehensively addressed. They have the best ability to cope with the turmoil of women's lives and design programs accordingly.

When we asked the representatives of the community-based organizations what they do best, they said that they care about the individual and that their programs are

integrated. These programs are exceedingly creative in finding different solutions for different individuals. Rexdale Microskills, for example, offers some career training, adapts courses as the market changes, and finds cooperative placements for people with professional skills who need Canadian experience. Because of their integrative and caring approach, community-based programs are the best place for the most disadvantaged women and new immigrants to prepare themselves for the job market.

While CBT does not have the resources to provide women with professionally accredited or degree granting programs, they try to overcome this shortcoming. Some train for a specific set of jobs. Other programs form links with institutions with more resources such as the regional adult education systems to bring teachers onto the community-based program site. These links provide basic literacy and high school upgrading. Several programs involve their trainees in cooperative work placements so that clients leave with job-finding skills and work experience. These programs do not have the resources to provide a variety of professional skills. Thus, a woman who wants training, for example, as a programmer, social worker, teacher, or engineer has to go elsewhere, generally to a community college or university, to do this.

Community colleges

The basic function of community colleges is to provide professionally-accredited degree-granting programs. Most of these programs require several years of full-time study. The community colleges have in the past and still continue to work with Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) to provide transition programs to those on Employment Insurance (EI) or others who need help finding employment. We interviewed the director of the Women into Trades and Technologies (WITT) program at Humber College in Etobicoke and the manager of training services at George Brown College, Casa Loma Campus. Both colleges offer a multitude of services in pre-employment.

The community college system offers an immense array of resources including instructors, equipment, and locations. They are best at providing training solutions that can add value to a client's employability skills by giving her professional certification, which may require several years of commitment and considerable expense to complete. In addition, colleges in the past and still, to a lesser extent, continue to provide transition programs to those on EI or others who need help finding employment.

Community colleges are not able to provide, for the most part, short-term programs. They do not offer flexible study arrangements and the locations may be difficult to access, either hard to reach or intimidating.

Private training companies

There are two types of private training companies. The

first offer professional certification for specific trades and the second offer courses in specific skills. A company which grants professional certification tends to offer full-time studies at a fairly high cost which does not fit the needs of Employment Insurance recipients who want to find jobs quickly at low cost. The other training companies tend to offer individual basic courses on a part-time basis but do not provide the substantial training that is required to secure employment. We interviewed one full time computer training program, York University Corporate Computer Studies and two private trainers which focus on individual skill development, the Drake Institute and the Academy of Learning. The design of programs at private training companies is driven by profit. Three major sources of income have been: (1) businesses that pay to train their employees; (2) block purchases by HRDC for EI clients; and (3) fees from students who often borrow from OSAP. As funding from HRDC has become increasingly unreliable, private training companies cannot build a business serving those looking for employment. Private companies are successful only to the extent that they satisfy the needs of business.

The advantages of private training companies are that they can offer timely training, in convenient locations around the city, at convenient times, on the most up-to-date equipment. They are most useful to those who are confident of their job-finding skills, but need to quickly upgrade their basic business skills.

Private training schools cannot provide the full range of competencies needed by many women looking for work. They do not help women to overcome basic barriers to employment, such as child care, and do not see their focus as working primarily with the unemployed.

What we learned

Analyzing responses from clients and training organizations led us to draw conclusions about what ways training and employment programs are able to meet and match the needs of women seeking these services. We found which programs met what needs and that a continuum of services is required to enable people to match their training needs and lives to training and employment services. We learned that women want a client-centred model, which respects the ability of women to make intelligent choices by providing them with adequate information and a variety of services that match their needs. We were able to show that there is a place for all the three approaches to service delivery along a continuum of services. However, there must be clarity regarding the function and ability of each sector as well as links to and from the various programs. Women need to be able to access training at a variety of points along this continuum. This extends from pre-employment services (employment assistance services) such as counselling, goal planning, financial planning, choosing careers, employability skills to more advanced skills training, such as career orientation workshops, co-op

or job placements, and job-finding clubs. Women also expressed a need for mutual support clubs so that they can help each other after the completion of training. We heard that many women need a variety of approaches including the validation of work/life experience through systematic prior learning assessment and recognition. This would counteract the undervaluing of women's skills by the labour market.

It takes all the talents of a skilled project manager to find a job. Those who begin in the most disadvantaged positions need to master the greatest number of skills and competencies. Therefore, those with the least resources need to acquire the most skills and they require additional types of support. We interviewed women and were told of others looking for work who were hungry, who did not have telephones, or who could not dress properly for an interview. These are the most basic of resources necessary for the project of looking for a job.

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