

BC Partners in Workforce Innovation Increasing Employment Through Inclusive Workplaces Project

Interim Report

MARCH 2021

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INTRODUCTION

BC Partners in Workforce Innovation (BC WiN) is a pilot project that is testing an employer-focused recruitment model to support BC-based employers seeking to diversify their workplace and meet their workforce needs. Initially created in 2013, BC WiN was developed by the Employment Action Committee—a group of disability-serving agencies in the Lower Mainland of BC working together to coordinate their employer engagement activities—as a three-year research initiative that aimed to create a more coordinated and employer-focused approach to meeting the workforce needs of key sectors in BC facing labour shortages at that time. Based on its successful outcomes involving a small group of Lower Mainland employer partners in its first phase of operations, the model has continued to grow and adapt to a changing labour market, as well as respond to the increasing demand among employers who are looking for support in achieving their diversity and inclusion (D&I) objectives.

The BC WiN model is unique in that it is centred around an Inclusive Workforce Consultant (IWC) team of experienced HR professionals whose primary client is the employer partner. When an employer partners with BC WiN, the IWC team works closely with the employer to ensure that they are well-positioned to recruit and onboard candidates with diverse abilities.¹ When the employer partner has an available job opening, the IWC team recruits on the employer's behalf, sourcing qualified candidates through the BC WiN's network of service agency partners that are located throughout the province. The IWC team pre-screens candidates to ensure that they are qualified, committed and prepared for the opportunity prior to referring them to the employer's recruitment process.

The team is well-positioned to support the entire hiring process to ensure a successful outcome for both the employer and the candidate, including the identification of additional supports or adjustments that may be required either as part of the recruitment or onboarding process. These supports can include consultation, training or workplace adjustments that are sourced through the project's service partner network. Through the innovation of this intermediary role, the BC WiN model represents a collaborative approach involving employers, service agencies, researchers, and human resources professionals to support more inclusive recruitment and retention practices on the part of employers to generate career-oriented employment opportunities for job seekers with diverse abilities in BC.

¹ The BC WiN team encourages the use of “diverse abilities” among its partners and stakeholders to emphasize valuing a person's abilities and attributes when considering an employment opportunity. We therefore use this term throughout the report when describing the population served by the project.

The current project, *Increasing Employment Through Inclusive Workplaces* project, represents a further development of the BC WiN model to develop and test enhanced D&I strategies and supports for a larger group of employer partners to transform their recruitment and workplace practices to be more welcoming and supportive of employees with diverse abilities. The project's IWC team is also working closely with employer partners and key service agency partners to develop talent pipelines that will facilitate the recruitment of diverse talent for current and future employment opportunities. The current phase of the initiative is building on the lessons learned from the initial pilot while exploring and testing options with partners to sustain and expand this initiative as they realize the benefits of the approach. Through these efforts, the project is aiming to expand the reach of the project to include a more diverse group of employer partners, including small and medium-sized enterprises, that will increase the number of well-paid and career-focused employment opportunities for job seekers with diverse abilities.

As a research project, BC WiN continues to provide SRDC and its partners with the opportunity to conduct a process and outcomes evaluation of the model. The focus of this evaluation is to assess how enhanced employer supports as well as supported workplace experiences can enable BC employers to achieve their D&I strategies by establishing more inclusive workplaces that will ultimately improve employment outcomes for people with diverse abilities. It is also capturing the impact of the model on job seekers with diverse abilities who are recruited to employment opportunities with BC WiN employer partners in terms of their employment and related outcomes over a one-year period.

This interim report reviews the initial developments and presents the early findings from SRDC's evaluation of the project. In this report, we provide an overview of the project model and detail the implementation of the approach since its launch in July 2019, including the impact that the COVID-19 shutdown had on recruitment and retention for BC WiN employers and job seekers with diverse abilities. We summarize the results of an ad hoc survey the team conducted of service providers and social enterprises in the province to understand the circumstances and experiences of people with diverse abilities during the pandemic. Finally, we discuss recent developments for the project as well as its planned activities and next steps for the following twelve months of operations.

OVERVIEW OF PROJECT GOALS

The overall objective of the *Increasing Employment Through Inclusive Workplaces* project aims to build on the efforts of the initial pilot by providing employer partners with enhanced supports to develop and implement comprehensive diversity and inclusion (D&I) strategies, transform their recruitment and workplace practices, and engage in the process of developing talent pipelines that facilitate the recruitment and integration of job seekers with diverse abilities in their workplaces in accordance with their D&I objectives. The objective is to work with 15 (or

more) employer partners primarily located in the Greater Vancouver region, while exploring opportunities to expand to other regions in BC. The project also aims to increase the proportion of small and medium-size business (SME) representation to two-thirds of its total partnerships. Through exploring and testing a more comprehensive suite of supports and services with project partners, the project will also examine how such an initiative can be sustained and expanded as more employers and other stakeholders realize the benefits of the approach.

The ultimate aim of the project is to serve at least 200 job seekers with diverse abilities by March 2022 that will result in the successful job matching of a minimum of 150 BC WiN participants, with the goal of 125 participants remaining employed with the employer partner after six months. Among these candidates, the initiative will be focusing on achieving greater gender parity through its recruitment activities, as up to this point, women have only represented one-third of candidates who have been referred by the project's partners. In this phase, the BC WiN team is aiming to increase this proportion to 50% through targeted campaigns and outreach to service organizations that focus on supporting women facing diverse abilities, particularly in the area of mental health.

The global COVID-19 pandemic has represented an unanticipated disruption that has affected all aspect of project activities, particularly among people with diverse abilities who are typically in a more vulnerable position with respect to physical and/or mental health concerns as well as being more likely to be holding precarious jobs. After the BC economy was placed in shutdown by the provincial health authority in March 2020, service providers were reporting that they were observing high levels of disengagement from the labour market among their clients with diverse abilities. Due to the lack of real-time data to provide better insights into the current situation facing this population, SRDC and the IWC team developed an ad hoc survey to engage service providers in BC to capture their perspectives on the challenges facing this population in terms of being ready and willing to work at this time. The results are discussed in the *Survey on Impact of COVID-19* section of this report. We also discuss how the results of the survey are informing project activities as the IWC team, partners and stakeholders continue to adjust to the current reality of recruiting and supporting both employers and job seekers with diverse abilities during the pandemic.

KEY PARTNER ROLES

As the project evaluator, SRDC has been involved in project development from the outset. In 2012, SRDC was engaged by what is now the BC Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction to form the BC Centre for Employment Excellence (CfEE) which had the mandate to support the research and evaluation needs of employment service providers and employers in BC. As a new employment-focused research centre, the CfEE was invited to join the EAC's discussions concerning employer engagement, resulting in it playing a key role in working with

the partners to develop the concept and ultimately lead the three-year project that established the BC WiN model.

After the three-year pilot, SRDC and its BC WiN partners were able to secure two years of funding through the federal Opportunities Fund to expand project activities and re-focus the initiative on providing employer D&I capacity supports and job-matching services to connect a larger number of people with diverse abilities to employment. In addition to serving as project lead, the SRDC team is also conducting the project's evaluation activities, where it is utilizing a developmental evaluation (DE) approach to support the project's iterative development process to ensure that it is meeting the needs of partners and able to achieve its objectives.

Through its DE activities, SRDC plays an active role in providing ongoing feedback through formative and process evaluation approaches to support the project's development and decision-making activities. In addition to administering and analyzing evaluation data, the evaluation team has participated in regular meetings to help delineate and refine project roles, activities, and deliverables. The evaluation team has also taken part in brainstorming and planning for enhancing the model and its approaches to working with partners and stakeholders. Throughout the process, evaluators have worked collaboratively with BC WiN's IWC team to develop research instruments to capture project outcomes most effectively.

Alongside the DE activities, SRDC evaluators are also conducting an outcomes evaluation to assess the effectiveness of the initiative in meeting employer needs and achieving sustainable employment outcomes for job seekers with diverse abilities who are referred to job opportunities through the project.

A key partner on BC WiN since its inception has been MacLeod Silver HR Business Partners (MacLeod Silver). MacLeod Silver Recruitment Specialists have over 25 years of HR expertise, with a particular focus on organizational D&I practices. MacLeod Silver was a member of the original group that developed the idea for BC WiN, and was selected through an open bidding process by SRDC and members of the EAC to form the original team of HR specialists to lead the project's employer engagement and recruitment activities. Through their knowledge and expertise as HR specialists who have developed strong partnerships with BC WiN's employer and service partners, MacLeod Silver HR specialists played a key role in expanding and refocusing the initiative for its current phase and remain actively involved in the project's design and ongoing development.

For the current project, MacLeod Silver is being supported by specialists from the Pacific Autism Family Network, which has extensive experience providing recruitment services and workplace training to employers to hire people on the Autism Spectrum. While members of both organizations had been working together informally to support their respective demand-led recruitment initiatives since the beginning of BC WiN, PAFN has joined the project as official

partner to play a specialized role in supporting employers recruit people with Autism Spectrum Disorder—a group that has represented an increasing share of candidates who have been referred to BC WiN employment opportunities in recent years.

BC WiN continues to be supported by the members of the EAC leadership group that inspired its development. This informal group of executives from Lower Mainland disability-serving agencies formed in 2012 around the common goal of coordinating their employer engagement efforts when working with them to identify employment opportunities for their clients. In addition to providing the original guidance to form the initiative, the EAC has continued to provide ongoing support and advice for the BC WiN team as the project has evolved over time.

OVERVIEW OF EVALUATION STRATEGY

The evaluation team’s formative evaluation aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the implementation successes and challenges of the BC WiN project during this phase of the project covered in this Interim Report. The following section provides a brief summary of how the project is fulfilling its key objectives of supporting employer partners in developing their capacity for hiring and retaining people with diverse abilities, as well as helping candidates who are referred to the project prepare for, obtain, and retain employment through the project’s job-matching process. The outcomes evaluation, which will be covered in the final report, will capture the longer-term results of this innovative approach in terms of its ability to address two key research questions:

- How does this integrated demand-led approach support employer partners in developing and implementing inclusive recruitment and retention strategies?
- What is the effectiveness of providing job-matching services through a specialized team of Inclusive Workplace Consultants in terms of meeting employer workforce needs and connecting job seekers with diverse abilities to sustainable and rewarding career opportunities?

PROJECT ACTIVITIES TO DATE

The evaluation team’s approach to the evaluation of the project centres on activities delivered in distinct (yet potentially overlapping) phases:

PHASE I: PROJECT START UP

The goal of Phase 1 was to establishing project roles and responsibilities, staff, partners, and targets, the development of research materials and collecting baseline data from employer and agency partners. During Phase 1, SRDC established agreements with MacLeod Silver and the PAFN and established an integrated Inclusive Workforce Consulting team from both organizations that has the capacity and specialized expertise to engage employers, lead the development of employer training and supports, and deliver a job-matching process to connect job seekers with a diverse array of abilities to available employment opportunities with employer partners.

PHASE II: ESTABLISH EVALUATION INSTRUMENTS

Phase 2 involved the development of research instruments, surveys, interviews, analysis, and potential adjustments to the model based on formative research findings. During Phase 2, the evaluation team prepared an informed consent form and intake survey for job seeker participants and prepared follow-up surveys. The purpose of these surveys is to capture participant outcomes related to their perspectives on the nature of, and their satisfaction with, the employment opportunities offered through BC WiN's job matching process. These surveys are meant to complement the job matching reporting that the team is completing for the Opportunities Fund as part of its overall project reporting responsibilities. Following the shutdown in March 2020 as a result of the pandemic, the two follow-up surveys (at six months and 12 months of employment) were adapted to include questions about COVID-19 to gain a better understanding as to how participants' employment experiences have changed or have been affected by the pandemic.

SRDC evaluators worked with the IWC team to create an employer assessment to capture shifts in employer partners' diversity and inclusion policies and approaches over their involvement in the project. However, because of COVID-19 and its effects on overall employer engagement with the project, the employment assessment has been postponed to spring 2021 to respect the limited capacity of employers to engage in research activities at this time. Employer assessment interviews are planned for the next phase of the project, and the project team will continue to work with employers to confirm their capacity and the appropriate time to conduct such interviews.

PHASE III: MONITOR PROJECT DEVELOPMENT PROCESSES AND OUTCOMES

Phase 3 involves documenting the development and enhancement of employer diversity and inclusion supports as well as partnerships with employers, service providers and training institutions to create more effective pathways to employment for job seekers, particularly those who are at a great distance from the labour market. The evaluation team has played an active role in capturing challenges, gaps, and opportunities to report back to the team in support of the iterative development process.

The outcomes evaluation will rely on primary data collection, including participant surveys, employer assessments, interviews and focus groups, as well as secondary data provided by project partners and administrative data captured by the IWC team. During this phase, the evaluation team began to analyze project administrative data as well as participant survey data. In the next phase of the project, the team will also begin working with employers to capture and assess changes in their diversity and inclusion practices after having had some experience working with the IWC team to recruit and onboard job seekers with diverse abilities in their workplaces.

Partner Engagement

To date, the Inclusive Workforce Consultant team has engaged 15 employers, of which 6 are small or medium-sized businesses. These employers include:

- YVR, London Drugs, ICBC, Vancity, World Duty Free, Parq Vancouver, Port of Vancouver, Mission Possible, CleanStart BC, BCAA, BC Infrastructure Benefits (BCIB), Small Business BC, UBC Sauder School of Business, Destination BC, and Tacofino.

In the last two weeks of March 2021, Intact Financial Group and Leducor have reached out to the BC WiN IWC team to engage with recruitment and other COVID-19 related employment activities.

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON PROJECT ACTIVITIES

With the unanticipated shutdown that occurred in March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, project activities were greatly affected as all employer partners were forced to temporarily suspend business operations, redeploy staff, shift employees to remote work, and/or layoff staff which in some cases were permanent layoffs. Hiring halted. Service partners reported that they had lost touch with a large share of their clients, with many continuing to either remain unable

or unwilling to consider employment at this time. This resulted in decreased activities to support hiring efforts from within this particular pool of talent.

A number of planned BC WiN activities had been put on hold due to COVID-19:

- A paid Internship program at ICBC (10 positions), Port of Vancouver, UBC Sauder School of Business, London Drugs, Vancity, linking BC WiN candidates to 6-month paid opportunities, with commitment to hire permanently following.
- World Duty Free – audit assessment completed to support/prepare job seekers who are deaf and hard of hearing for employment at the WDF warehouse at YVR – 3 candidates screened-in, all hiring on hold due to decline in business in airports.
- Vancity – In process of developing a cohort for people with diverse abilities to join the Vancity call-centre, put on hold until further notice.
- Mission Possible and CleanStart BC– new hires on hold to refocus priorities in DTES.
- Untapped Talent B2B Guide on Inclusive Hiring and Retention, in-person launch of hardcopy March 2020 was postponed to a virtual launch in September, in recognition of Disability Employment Month in BC (BC WiN was a sponsor).
- Hiring with four employer partners are suspended indefinitely due to tourism and hospitality sector impacts, business closures or shutdowns. This includes Parq Vancouver, Destination BC, Tacofino, UBC Sauder School of Business, in addition to hiring at YVR greatly reduced.

COVID-19 Contingency

The IWC team recognized that the very people BC WiN works to connect to employment are still the most under-engaged in the workforce and will be even more vulnerable to being overlooked during and after the pandemic.

In the initial phases of this project the IWC team built and fostered strong relationships with employer partners. Early on during the pandemic, the HR teams of these employers were mostly all working remotely or temporarily laid-off, and the IWC team’s goal was to stay connected, relevant, and future-focused to support them as they shift from crisis management to forward planning. The IWC team members took the available time to redirect activities to scale the collective impact. This includes:

Employer-focused adjustments:

- Continuing to work with employers on enhancing, not abandoning, their inclusive recruitment and retention practices and re-focus activities that support employers, to make it easier for them to be inclusive when their focus returns to workforce development needs post-COVID;
- The team provided weekly BC WiN updates including employer focused resources like links to relevant resources that would support overall employment, as well as employment related to persons with diverse abilities during this period, including links to mental health supports, supports for people with autism, etc. (also distributed Opportunities Fund availability to support employers in retaining via assistive technology or re-training people with diverse abilities during COVID-19);
- Worked with the Presidents Group Accessibility Consultants to identify relevant e-learning opportunities that could be developed to support virtual learning with employers during and after the pandemic;
- Developed and delivered inclusive hiring training with Small Business BC members;
- Worked with Employee Resource Groups in employer partner organizations to assist with developing and launching their internal initiatives for 2020/2021; and
- Provided real-time information on how workforce and future labour market of employer partners are being impacted.

Job seeker-focused adjustments:

- BC WiN meetings with candidates, employers, service partners or as a team, conducted via phone or zoom during this period;
- Explored ways to hold virtual interviews and learning opportunities to prepare candidate pools for known future opportunities;
- Incorporated Health and Safety related questions for screening candidates during COVID-19, in light of PHA isolation guidelines (to screen-in candidates who can work, and screen-out candidates who pose a risk); and
- Worked to build a pipeline of candidates who are ready to go when recruitment resumes.

Other adjustments:

- Weekly team meetings were introduced to continually move ahead with innovative new areas that would be of value now to employers, and/or in future;

- Researched future workforce demographics/labour market data post-COVID, bringing together groups to identify new messaging around value of being an inclusive employer as we move out of the pandemic;
- Focused on enhancing Service Partner engagement to get through the initial period;
- Focused on the research associated with BC WiN's approach and sharing out early lessons learned, gathering information on how employers are responding with disability retention practices and identifying/sharing best practices; and
- Designed and implemented a survey of service partners, to understand how their clients with diverse abilities are currently being impacted by COVID-19 (detailed results provided below).

National Workplace Accessibility Stream (NWAS) Activities

In fall 2020, the BC WiN team was provided additional limited-time funding through the Opportunities Fund's National Workplace Accessibility Stream (NWAS) to expand its activities to address the workplace challenges of employers and job seekers with diverse abilities who have been affected by the COVID-19. These activities built on BC WiN's current partnerships to support employers in their efforts to create inclusive workplaces, whether virtual or physical, for people with diverse abilities during the pandemic, and to expand online training and training for in-demand jobs for workers who had been displaced by the pandemic and/or who were looking for new employment.

These measures included working with BC WiN employer partners to develop and implement accessible and effective work-from-home measures to connect people with diverse abilities who are able to work remotely (e.g., from home) to employment. The funding supported these activities until March 2021, with the intention of generating new approaches and opportunities for further training and recruitment that would be sustained until the end of the project.

Through the NWAS activities, the BC WiN team was able to achieve the following outcomes with employer partners by March 2021: Stream:

- Continued recruitment for employer partners, as businesses began to open and had needs to hire additional staff;
- With BC WiN service delivery partners, the coordination and delivery of two cohort training sessions for three in-demand occupations, with employer recruitment from the trainees following;

- Development of the Untapped Talent – B2B Inclusive Recruitment and Retention E-learning series, with eight employer partners committed (to date) to participate in the one hour – three module training, to be launched May 15, 2021;
- Completion of five recruitment practices reviews, including review of career websites for inclusive language, review of job descriptions and revision of behaviour-based interview guides (for people who are neuro-diverse) with employer partners;
- Facilitation of four remote work opportunities for BC WiN candidates, with additional candidates still under consideration;
- Development and delivery of two virtual Inclusive Hiring Manager Training sessions for larger organizations, and one D&I Respectful Workplace training session for a medium sized employer;
- Development and delivery of two virtual training sessions for HR teams on how to Influence Hiring Managers when presenting candidates with diverse abilities;
- Development and delivery of one virtual Autism-specific recruitment and retention training session delivered for hiring managers;
- Development of the first video vignette to highlight entry retail employment opportunities – this vignette targets people who are neurodiverse and would benefit from the visuals of ‘a day in the life of’ Stockers and Cashiers;
- As a lead sponsor, participated in a Virtual Career Fair for UBC, SFU and University of Victoria, aiming to attract students, graduates, or alumni with disabilities for employment opportunities, and presented to each institution separately; and
- Completion of five employment retention activities to support employees who are neurodiverse and concerned about returning to their previous positions due to COVID and one additional retention activity for an individual who is neurodiverse whose job was at risk.

Job Matching Outcomes as of March 31, 2021

To date, the job matching activities of the BC WiN IWC team since project launch have led to the following outcomes:

- Number of recruitment campaigns launched for employer opportunities: 43 (including several posting multiple opportunities in one campaign);

- Number of job seekers referred and interviewed by the IWC team for job matching opportunities: 197;
- Number of referrals to employer partners for employment: 140;
- Number of successful job matches to date: 34 (an additional 5 candidates are in final interviews with hiring managers at Vancity and BCAA);
- Number of job losses due to participants quitting their positions: 1; and
- Number of job losses due to COVID-19: 3.

BC WIN SURVEY - IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON PEOPLE WITH DIVERSE ABILITIES

Over the initial months of the pandemic, the BC WiN team was hearing from its employment service providers that COVID-19 was having a sustained impact on the employment availability for many, if not all, of their clients with diverse abilities. As employers began to start rehiring for specific opportunities into the spring and summer of 2020, the team faced the challenge of sourcing available talent to fill these positions. More specifically, the team was concerned that it did not have the information it needed to effectively engage and support people with diverse abilities during the recruitment process to address their vulnerabilities due to any fears or health concerns they may have about working during a pandemic.

Through its scan of available data sources, the SRDC research team came to the realization that there was a lack real-time information on the situation facing people with diverse abilities in terms of their ability or willingness to engage in employment during COVID-19. As a result, the BC WiN team decided to create a survey that would be targeted at service providers and social enterprises in BC to learn more about their experiences working with clients or employees with diverse abilities during COVID-19 to assess the impact the pandemic is having on their ability and readiness to engage in employment. Since the team was not able to engage job seekers directly, the purpose of this survey was to gather and share timely information and insights from front-line staff to understand the particular employment-related challenges that the job seekers they are supporting may be experiencing as a result of the pandemic.

Survey Participation

The survey asked organizations that had more than one service location or multiple staff supporting the same clients to coordinate responses to a single survey response, to minimize data duplication while ensuring full coverage across organizations.

The survey link was sent out among BC WiN's network of service provider partners and was open for 5 weeks from September – October 2020. Responses were collected from twenty service providers or teams. In total across these 20 responses, these service providers served approximately 556 clients with diverse abilities. Survey respondents provided a wide range of support services to people with diverse abilities, with the majority (80 per cent) providing employment readiness programming.

The survey included questions in the following areas: current client engagement, reasons for disengagement, number of clients served, and insights as to why clients may be disengaging from employment during COVID-19.

Summary of Findings

The survey showed that all but one of the service providers who completed the survey indicated that their clients with diverse abilities have been impacted due to COVID-19 in terms of their current engagement with employment. Respondents indicated that their clients are disengaging by not wanting to accept or return to available employment opportunities and/or are not currently seeking employment. When asked about the reason for this disengagement, the most common and widespread reasons were (1) clients' decreased motivation due to stress or anxieties as a result of COVID-19, (2) clients' personal health concerns/vulnerability, (3) and clients' concerns regarding potential exposure to COVID-19 in the workplace. Notably, concerns regarding losing financial supports, such as CERB and Disability Assistance, were the *least* common reasons for disengagement.

Detailed open-ended responses indicated that the shift in the labour-market has put persons with diverse abilities at an additional disadvantage. For instance, one service provider spoke to the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on those with diverse abilities:

“Clients who already face multiple barriers seemed to demonstrate less resilience and more anxiety around COVID.”

Another described that employers are resisting hiring persons who need additional support:

“With the shift to an employer's labour market, the incentive to hire new workers, and those of diversity who may need extra supports likely diminishes.”

Thus, not only are job seekers with diverse abilities disengaging from employment, but service providers are finding that employers they are working with are also more hesitant to hire persons with diverse abilities in the current climate. The results from the survey suggest that additional supports for both employers and job seekers are needed to ensure a safe employment during COVID-19. These results suggest that the pandemic has exacerbated the gap between job

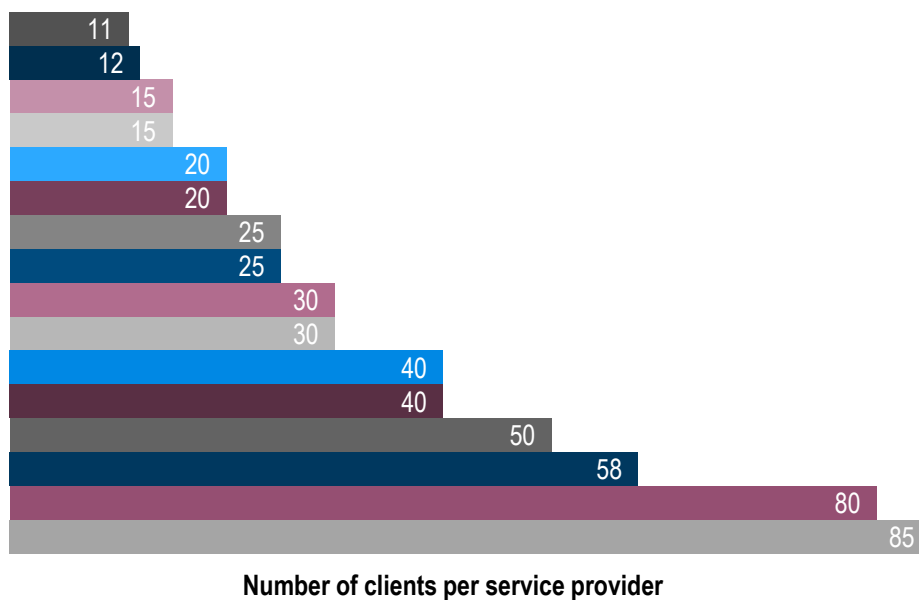
seekers with diverse abilities and employers. Such findings suggest that BC WiN’s approach, of offering adaptable supports to both job seekers and inclusive employers, can fill a gap in the employment sector, by addressing any concerns created by COVID-19.

Detailed Survey Results

Below we provide the detailed responses provided by service providers to the survey questions. The first questions provide background information about the service providers, who they serve and what services they offer. The next responses reflect the impact of COVID-19 on their clients.

Respondents reported serving a range of clients from 11 up to 85. On average, service providers served 35 clients with diverse abilities. The number of clients per service provider was used to weight the responses to the rest of the survey to provide a more representative perspective of the experiences of people with diverse abilities across the 20 service providers that responded to the survey.² As a result, the results shown below—unless indicated otherwise—are reported in terms of total clients represented by all respondents.

Figure 1 **Number of clients with disabilities served per service provider**



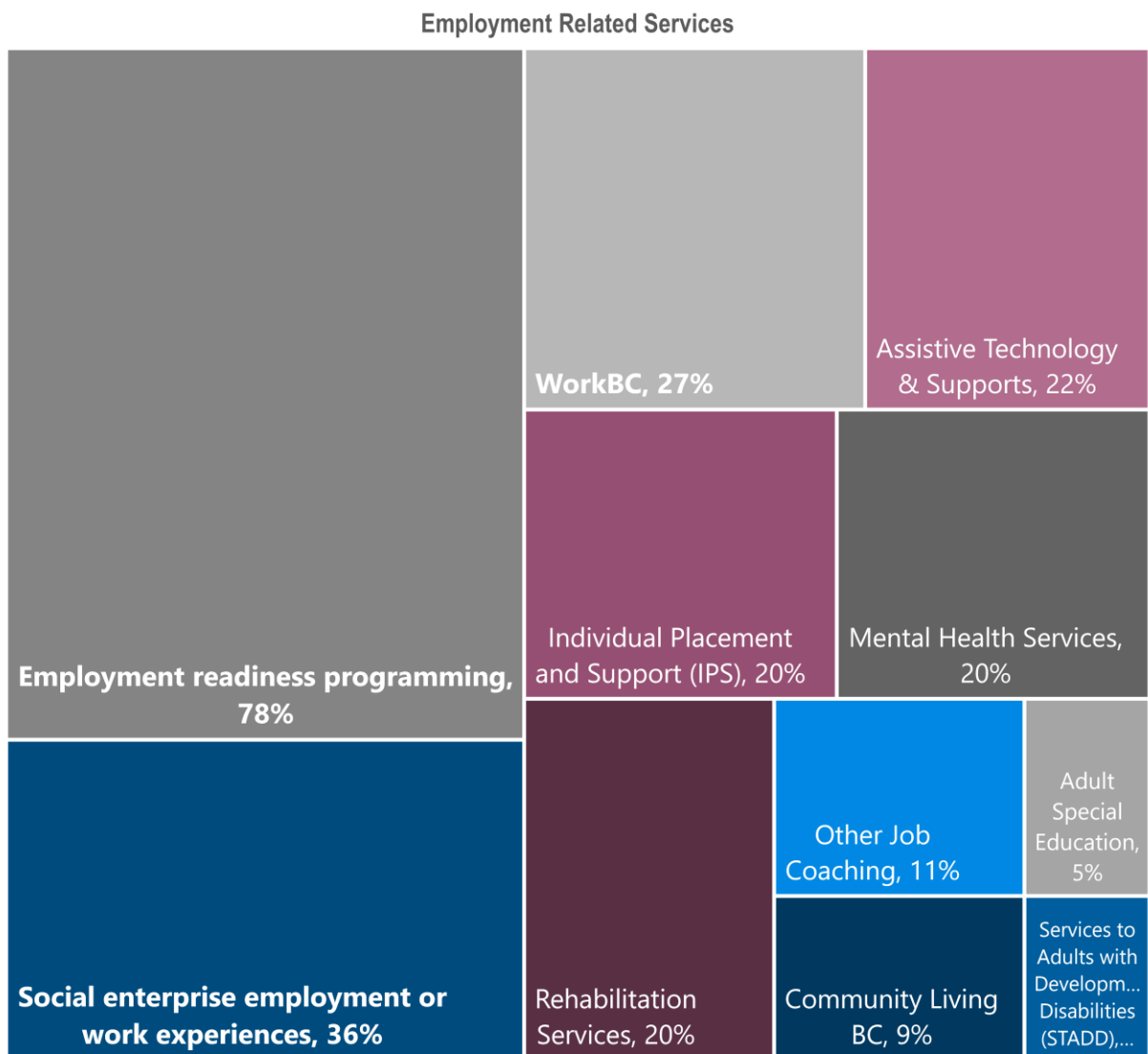
Note: 3 service providers did not provide this data

² It should be noted that while the survey responses were weighted to provide a more representative perspective of the clients served by all respondents, these results should not be generalized to the population of BC residents with diverse abilities.

What employment-related services are offered?

Service providers provided a wide range of services to clients. Most service providers offered employment readiness services, serving 78 per cent of clients (N = 436) reported on in the survey, followed by social enterprise employment or work experiences (36 per cent), Work BC services (27 per cent), and assistive technology supports (22 per cent). Other supports included individual placement supports, rehabilitation services, mental health services, community living BC, special education, STADD, and other job coaching.

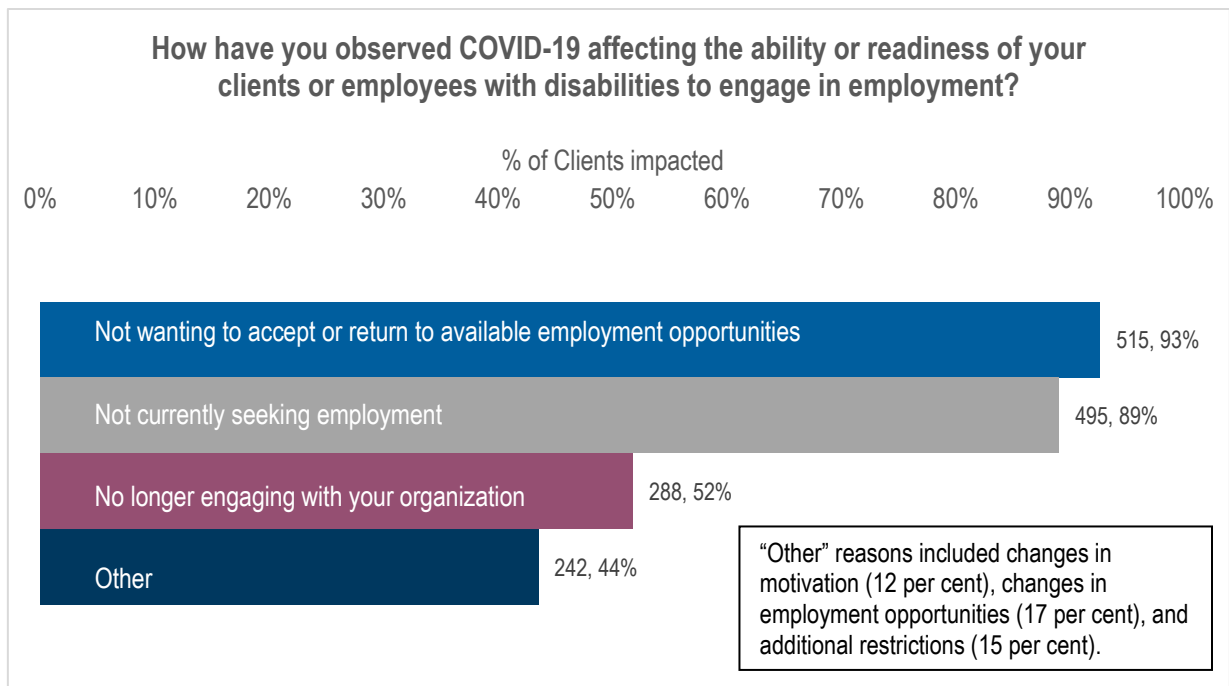
Figure 2 Employment related services, by per cent of total clients served (N = 556)



How are clients impacted by COVID-19?

- 19 out of 20 reported that they have they noticed an impact of COVID-19 on their clients with diverse abilities' ability or readiness to engage in employment at this time.³
- When asked to indicate how clients are being impacted by COVID-19, by selecting as many responses as applicable, service providers reported that 93 per cent of clients (N = 515) are not wanting to accept or return to available employment opportunities. Similarly, 89 per cent of clients (N = 495) are no longer seeking employment. Just over half (52 per cent) of clients are no longer engaging with the service provider organization due to COVID-19.

Figure 3 How clients have been disengaging in employment



Note: Total number of clients N = 566.

What are the reasons for disengagement from employment?

Service providers were asked to specify the different reasons for clients' disengagement in employment, selecting all possible reasons, and indicating what percentage of their clients experienced each of the concerns. The most common reason for disengagement was decreased

³ The one service provider who indicated that they did not notice an impact of COVID-19 did not provide the number of clients they serve.

motivation due to stress or anxieties as a result of COVID-19 (45 per cent). Concerns regarding potential exposure to COVID-19 in the workplace was the second most common reason cited (41 per cent), followed by personal health concerns/vulnerability (41 per cent) and concerns of exposure to COVID-19 on public transit (38 per cent). The least commonly cited reasons were concerns related to losing financial supports (Disability Assistance or CERB, both 20 per cent). Table 1 displays the responses to all options provided.

Table 1 Reason for disengagement

Reason	N clients impacted	% of clients
Decreased motivation to pursue employment due to personal stresses or anxieties as a result of COVID-19	252	45%
Concerns regarding potential exposure to COVID-19 in the workplace	226	41%
Personal health concerns/vulnerability	226	41%
Concerns regarding potential exposure to COVID-19 on public transit	210	38%
Concerns or resistance from family members	158	28%
Uncertainty of job security	155	28%
Family responsibilities (caring for, or concern for, vulnerable family members)	130	23%
Concerns related to their receipt of the Canada Emergency Response Benefit	111	20%
Concerns related to losing access to Disability Assistance or other supports	110	20%
Unknown	75	13%

Service Partner Insights into COVID-19 Challenges

Service providers provided further insights regarding the reasons for disengagement in employment during COVID-19, which are summarized in five thematic areas below (full quotes from service providers provided in the survey are included in the Appendix of this report):

- **Safety concerns** – Service providers spoke to the situation of many of their clients who have ongoing health challenges and for whom personal safety is of even greater concern during a pandemic where they may be more susceptible to infection. For these clients, concerns about safety extend beyond the workplace to transportation to and from work—particularly when clients need to rely on transit—to navigating public spaces in close proximity to other people.
- **Additional (mental health) Challenges** – Respondents spoke to the additional challenges that they observed among clients who already struggle day-to-day with health concerns or other challenges related to their circumstances, reporting higher rates of stress, anxiety, and depression as well as lower levels of motivation to conduct a job search.
- **Uncertainty in the labour market** – With the uncertainty of how the pandemic would unfold and affect business operations, service providers reported that many clients simply chose to withdraw from the labour market until conditions improve.
- **Need to convince clients that jobs exist** – Service providers reported that with news of business closures and widespread layoffs, they found that they were in a position where they have to convince clients that there are employers who are recruiting for current or future positions. However, for some clients, these they may have to be flexible and open to new opportunities that they may not have considered previously.
- **Hesitation by employers** – Respondents noted challenges they were having in engaging employers with respect to hiring their clients with diverse abilities. For these employers, the uncertain economic conditions as a result of COVID-19 have made it difficult for them to focus on other matters, such as diversity and inclusion, while they are preoccupied with maintaining their business operations and safeguarding their workplaces.

Next Steps for BC WiN

Discussions with job seekers with diverse abilities, employer partners, and the survey of service partners have provided insights into the reality that clients with diverse abilities are currently facing due to COVID-19. Not only has the labour market shifted and employers are facing unique challenges in the pandemic economy, but clients with diverse abilities are facing additional barriers to accessing and maintaining employment.

The BC WiN team will continue to seek out opportunities to collaborate and discuss adaptive responses to the impact of COVID-19. For instance, the team has presented the survey results at the Disability and Work Canada virtual conference November 2020 as well as participated on a Work Wellness Institute panel entitled *Using the COVID-19 recovery to increase employment of persons with disabilities* in February 2021.

Given the impacts of COVID-19 on personal health, the safety and well-being of all partners and clients involved with BC WiN is a top priority for the team and project partners to address in the coming year. The BC WiN team continues to monitor the situation with employers and job seekers as the pandemic continues and will build on the activities it has introduced with its partners through the project's National Workplace Accessibility Stream (NWAS) activities. These activities will continue to focus on supporting BC WiN partners as they respond and adapt to changing circumstances while identifying and preparing for upcoming opportunities as employers begin to resume recruitment and/or shift to alternate work arrangements, including remote work, to ensure that workers are safe and productive in their roles. The IWC team is seeing increased interest in remote work opportunities during and eventually post-pandemic.

BC WiN has just confirmed with the Opportunities Fund that the timelines for the project will be extended to March 2022. This additional funding will enable the project to expand its current activities with a growing number of employer partners to support them in developing and implementing their diversity and inclusion (D&I) strategies to increase career-focused employment opportunities for people with diverse abilities. The extended timeline will be an opportunity to build on the NWAS activities that have placed the team in a strong position to support a growing group of BC WiN employer partners to make the necessary adjustments to engage a more diverse workforce in the coming months and beyond COVID-19. We look forward to building on these early successes to generate further job-matching opportunities over the course of the next fiscal year.

The objectives of the proposed additional activities will extend the project from its current end date of June 30, 2021 to March 2022, and will include the following:

- Continuing to support recruitment and retention of people with diverse abilities with employer partners, building on recent growth in opportunities from employer partners to achieve 150 total (50 additional) job matches by March 2022;
- Supporting employers to develop and implement accessible and effective work-from-home measures to enable people with diverse abilities who are, or are able to, work from home;
- Providing employer-focused supports to create inclusive workplaces, whether virtual or physical, and exploring ways to accelerate hiring with employers who are highly motivated and committed; and
- Expanding the project's current offering of online training, e-learning and training for in-demand jobs.

To achieve these objectives, the team will work with employer partners to successfully recruit and retain people with diverse abilities to work from home or on-site in a safe and comfortable manner. It will also develop customized online training for cohorts of people with diverse abilities to prepare for jobs currently in need, or that are expected to be in demand as recruitment resumes. This includes working with partners who have specific current recruitment needs now, such as several employers who currently seeking candidates to fill call centre roles, as well as new cohorts to prepare candidates for large-scale hiring with employer partners. This training will be co-designed with employers and will involve virtual interviewing and multi-media (including video) job previews and scenario-based learning vignettes for anticipated in-demand positions. This approach will serve as the foundation for developing talent pipelines that enable BC WiN employer partners to engage qualified and employment-ready candidates who would otherwise not be recruited for these roles.

The team is also expanding its capacity supports to employers through new remote learning opportunities that will extend the project's current Untapped Talent e-learning series to incorporate the new Worktopia Toolkit in an online learning platform for employer partners. As restrictions ease over the coming months, the team is also planning to host a Learning Summit for employer partners to share experiences and lessons learned from the project's recruitment activities among current and prospective employer partners in British Columbia. These opportunities will enable employers to continue to build their capacity to recruit and retain diverse talent, while informing further adjustments to the project's recruitment model and employer training approaches to build current and future capacity to recruit and retain people with diverse abilities during and following the pandemic.

The SRDC research team will be continuing its efforts to support the project by conducting further research on the experiences of people with diverse abilities in terms of their willingness and ability to engage in employment over the coming year. Beginning in spring 2021, the team will continue to conduct accessibility reviews of employer partners' current recruitment and

employment practices to build current and future capacity to recruit and retain people with diverse abilities during and post-pandemic. These reviews will inform the range of supports and new approaches to supporting employer partners based on current capacity as well as current and future workforce needs.

Finally, the project will continue to seek opportunities to communicate the results of these activities through its stakeholder network, partnership meetings, and broader employer engagement activities. The focus of these communications will be to share outcomes and lessons learned of this innovative approach to stimulate further employer participation in inclusive employment practices and to inform policy and program development with respect to stimulate further employer participation in inclusive employment practices and to inform policy and program development that will support better diversity and inclusion outcomes for both employers and job seekers with diverse abilities.

APPENDIX A: SERVICE PARTNER PERSPECTIVES FROM THE COVID-19 SURVEY

Comments shared by service providers on the reasons for client disengagement:

- “There are many **unknowns around COVID-19 and future employment** opportunities - most people appear to be in a "wait and see" type mentality.”
- “Clients who already face multiple barriers seemed to demonstrate **less resilience and more anxiety** around COVID. **Fear of contraction** for some, especially those who have compromised immune systems, meant that they were/are still home for months with out physical interaction. Isolation took it's tole on some individuals.”
- “The **shifting labour market** which has added a complex layer to most businesses - the physical distancing, PPE, having to think about another layer of accommodation is very challenging for employers. In some instances, they are **not able/willing to accommodate** job coaching because of COVID requirements.”
- “The feeling of a more competitive job market and **hesitation of employers** to take on new employees generally.”
- “Clients have **impression from media, friends and family that no one is hiring or there aren't any jobs due to COVID-19**. Some have been laid off or not hired in their desired industry because of company shut down or staff reduction. Particularly in tourism, food (restaurant) industry. Some feel that **people without diverse abilities have a better chance of getting the limited jobs**. Competition for entry level positions is higher. Many more jobs require Full-time commitment and most of my clients want or are only able to do part-time work.”
- “I have found rates of **depression and panic attacks** have appeared to increase amongst participants of the [training program]. There is also a dramatic reduction in motivation - both for searching for work and applying for jobs.”
- “Any individuals who already struggle in their day to day would **need more support during this time**. Persons facing multiple barriers may not have had the luxury of working from home, ordering groceries online, and not taking public transit. In my experience, disability is often associated with **socio-economic challenges**, which in turn, added to clients **stress levels**.”
- “With the shift to an **employer's labour market**, the incentive to hire new workers, and those of diversity who may need extra supports likely diminishes. **Employers overall**

seems to be focused on their bottom line, ensuring a safe work environment during a pandemic, and getting their best workers. We are not hearing from employers a focus on diversity after the pandemic hit. This **shift in the labour market** is likely to continue for some time. I believe we need to demonstrate to the employers to an even greater degree that we are there for them and really listen to their concerns, challenges and get a good dialogue going. It will take more quality connections and positioning ourselves and the conversation to make that kind of space. My thoughts about solving some of the problems. Digital literacy and access to technology is a magnified barrier to employer for persons of disability during a pandemic.”

- “For those who were still searching for employment in March/April. They were reasonably more selective and **interested in how the employer was implementing covid-19 related health and safety measures** for staff and patrons. Their preference leaned towards shops, specifically grocery stores who were more prepared to offer free PPE and set up the plexiglass barriers between staff and clients.”
- “The tougher job is **convincing clients that there are still jobs out there**. The job search has had to be broadened and focus on transferable skills is key.”

