



Increasing Pathways to Secure, Meaningful Employment through Design and Implementation of Inclusive Skills Development Policies

Expanded measures of employment success: SRDC scan

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Increasing Pathways to Employment project

Women in Resource Development Corporation (WRDC) is leading the *Increasing Pathways to Secure, Meaningful Employment through Design and Implementation of Inclusive Skills Development Policies* project¹ to advance inclusive skills development policies and practices, create more equal distribution of economic resources, and remove barriers that prevent women from fully participating in economic spheres. This project has been funded through Women and Gender Equality Canada's Feminist Response and Recovery Fund.



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The Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC) is serving as a project partner to provide support and advice to WRDC in achieving the project's objectives.

SRDC scan: Purpose and method

One of WRDC's main project activities has been development of a Recommendations Report, informed by WRDC's research findings and the expertise of the project Advisory Committee, identifying considerations or possible next steps for advancing project aims over the longer term. Noted in the report is the tendency for much current reporting for employment supports and programming to focus on quantitative, short-term metrics – such as the number of clients or participants served, enrolled in training, or becoming employed – at the expense of other measures important for understanding the effects of the supports and programming on individuals' lives more broadly. As such, one of the action items identified in the report is, “Re-evaluating reporting outcomes to include additional measures of success, such as personal growth, increased confidence and resilience, quality of employment secured, and improved standard of living [to] illustrate more fully what it means to be employed.”¹

To help inform this area, between October 2023 and February 2024, we conducted an internal scan of SRDC reports, produced through decades of research and evaluation in the employment sector, to explore expanded or alternate measures of employment success outside the more traditional measures identified above. Our steps included:

- Reviewing a full list of descriptions of SRDC's employment-related projects dating back to 1996 (n=252) to determine their relevance to the current scan objective;

¹ See <https://wrdc.ca/programs/increasing-pathways-to-employment/> for more details on the project.

- Reviewing the contents of reports deemed potentially relevant and available for this research (n=43 out of 252) to determine which were in fact relevant; and
- Organizing pertinent findings from reports that were indeed relevant (n=16 out of 43) into key themes, as presented below; the reports included were completed between 2011 and 2023 and often focused on skill development and employment supports for vulnerable groups, such as multi-barriered youth and equity deserving populations.

Findings

Narrowly defined employment outcomes fail to provide a full picture of progress

- Scan results confirmed that a focus on high level and narrowly defined employment outcomes (e.g., whether employed or not, level of income from employment following uptake of services or training) fails to provide a full picture of an individual's progress toward meaningful employment.²⁻⁵ This narrow approach, for example, tends to inadequately capture one's initial distance from the labour market and the important intermediary steps needed to help reduce that distance.^{2,3}
- Such an approach also often fails to recognize personal circumstances that can result in non-linear or backward and forward progress along the employment pathway² along with systemic barriers and contextual factors (e.g., gender or race-based discrimination, lack of affordable childcare, lack of wrap-around supports) that can prevent one from securing adequate, meaningful employment.^{3,6-9} In addition, it runs the risk of incentivizing rapid employment in low-wage positions with little opportunity for advancement⁴ and ignoring outcomes that are more subjective or experiential (often captured qualitatively) that can be a valuable resource for assessing one's journey to success.^{2,3,10}

A milestone approach helps capture meaningful progress toward longer-term employment outcomes

- In contrast to more traditional approaches to measuring employment success, a milestone approach captures intermediary steps or outcomes considered meaningful along the employment pathway in pursuit of positive long-term employment outcomes.^{2,3,5-7,10-13} These steps may include, for example, improvements in soft skills (e.g., time management), career preparation and employment readiness, and career adaptability, which includes clarity in job search and self-efficacy in job search and career decision making overall.^{3,6} The importance of finding not just any job but rather good quality employment with adequate pay and benefits and on par with one's education and skills is also highlighted.^{3,6}

- Reports included in the scan also identified several positive effects of a milestone approach for both service providers and recipients. For example, the process of identifying milestones and associated indicators of progress and developing measurement processes has been shown to provide service providers with clarity and focus regarding what is being or should be measured and why it is important. It can also help boost their capacity to assess progress and address challenges for participants or with service delivery, ultimately improving programming as a whole.^{6,11,13} For service recipients, the milestone approach has been useful for tracking goals and steps toward success and can provide positive reinforcement in terms of their ability to see progress.^{6,11} It can also provide them with opportunities to celebrate success in all its forms, thereby bolstering their sense of empowerment and, in turn, helping them maintain momentum on their employment pathways.^{7,10}

The Skills for Success model recognizes the importance of broader skill development

- Several reports included in the scan profiled the Government of Canada's Skills for Success (SFS) model, which defines nine key skills – reading, writing, numeracy, digital skills, problem solving, communication, creativity & innovation, collaboration, and adaptability – needed by Canadians to participate in work, education, and training as well as in society more broadly.^{14,15} The model was launched in 2021 as a replacement for the previous Essential Skills framework. One of the changes reflected in SFS was an expanded emphasis on social emotional learning (SEL) skills (i.e., the latter four skills of communication, creativity & innovation, collaboration, and adaptability) in response to growing demand from Canadian employers for more SEL skills on the job.^{8,14-16}
- As a whole, the model considers the influence of different skills on service recipients' job readiness or distance from the labour market and allows them to see broader areas of progress on their employment pathways, in keeping with a milestone approach. It was intentionally designed to be applicable to a variety of job contexts and customizable to different populations, and the skills themselves are both trainable and measurable.^{7-9,14,15,17,18}

Other non-employment outcomes can also serve as meaningful indicators of success

- A number of reports included in the scan recommended or utilized holistic measures that are learner centred and aligned with participants' broader needs and preferences. Use of such measures recognizes the myriad of factors outside work itself that can influence an individual's success in finding and maintaining meaningful long-term employment.^{3-5,10,12} Examples cited included self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-worth; sense of

empowerment; and other measures of wellbeing.^{3,5,6,12} ‘Wins’ in these areas can support momentum along the employment pathway.^{2,12}

- Increased social capital (i.e., expanded social supports and networks) has also been linked to positive outcomes in terms of one’s ability to meet fellow training participants, service providers, employers, or others in the sector who can provide career help.^{6,11} As well, cultural safety and responsiveness in programming and the provision of wrap-around supports (e.g., housing, health support) to aid participants in accessing and completing programming were considered key factors to success.^{2-5,10,12} Tracking progress through measures that are learner centred and culturally respectful is also in keeping with a trauma and violence informed (TVI) approach, which is becoming increasingly recognized as important in service delivery and programming.¹⁰

Service recipients should play a role in identifying their own goals, milestones, and outcomes

- Multiple reports included in the scan, particularly those focused on employment support programs for vulnerable groups, recommended that service recipients play an active role in setting their own employment goals or milestones.^{2,3,12} Findings from a recent pilot, for example, showed that participants positively differentiated the pilot initiative from other programs in which they had participated by the fact that staff worked with them to identify their interests and aligned programming accordingly.¹² In addition, participants who progressed the most toward their goals tended to be those who engaged the most with the program and staff.¹² Other reports noted the utility of action plans developed jointly by service providers and recipients in identifying and tracking achievement of goals.^{2,3,11} Likewise, service recipient narratives were considered important and useful for documenting participants’ employment journeys, milestone completion, and skills achievements.^{2,10}
- In addition, user-led or participatory methods can provide service recipients with valuable opportunities to identify means to engage clients more effectively in programming and flag supports essential to their success.^{2,4} Such methods also allow opportunities for service providers to embed cultural values and essential wrap-around supports into programming, particularly important for multi-barriered participants, Indigenous Peoples, and other equity deserving groups.^{3,4} As well, integrating opportunities for collaboration or self-directed program choices can help shift the balance of power with respect to decision making from service providers to recipients,^{5,10} also in keeping with a TVI approach overall.¹⁰

Recognition of context is essential

- Scan results indicated that service recipients are best served when service providers consider contextual factors that can influence employment outcomes and subsequently design and tailor programming accordingly.^{3,6-9} Addressing these factors at the individual, organizational, and sector levels allows for and supports different kinds of success for service recipients, such as increased accessibility of programming (e.g., for persons with disabilities), increased essential skills, and overcoming personal or systemic barriers, all of which can help decrease their distance from the labour market.^{3,6-9}
- Likewise, service recipients' employment outcomes are best assessed using tools or frameworks that allow different measurement options in different contexts and consider potential variations among different populations or subgroups – particularly multi-barriered individuals or those from equity deserving groups – rather than one-size-fits-all approaches.^{2-4,7-9,17} SRDC's Customizable Outcomes Measurement and Skills Assessment (COMSA) survey builder is an example of a flexible tool, available online free of charge, that allows users to choose from a set of recommended Skills for Success aligned measures with added consideration for the many individual and contextual factors that influence employment progress or success.¹⁹

Summary

- **Narrowly defined employment outcomes fail to provide a full picture of progress.** A focus on high level, narrow outcomes tends to inadequately capture an individual's initial distance from the labour market and the important intermediary steps needed to reduce that distance. Such an approach also often fails to recognize personal circumstances, systemic barriers, and contextual factors that play a role in the employment pathway and can incentivize rapid employment in low-wage positions.
- **A milestone approach helps capture meaningful progress toward longer-term employment outcomes.** This approach captures intermediary steps or outcomes (e.g., improvements in soft skills or employment readiness) considered meaningful along the employment pathway. The importance of finding good quality employment is also highlighted. Positive effects of a milestone approach have been observed for service providers and service recipients.
- **The Skills for Success model recognizes the importance of broader skill development.** This model defines nine key skills needed by Canadians to participate in work, education, and training as well as in society more broadly. It considers the influence of different skills on service recipients' job readiness or distance from the labour market and allows them to

see broader areas of progress on their employment pathways, in keeping with a milestone approach.

- **Other non-employment outcomes can also serve as meaningful indicators of success.** Use of holistic measures that are learner centred and aligned with broader needs recognizes the myriad of factors outside work itself that can influence success in finding and maintaining meaningful long-term employment. For example, improvements in self-confidence can support momentum along the employment pathway while wrap-around supports can support program access and completion.
- **Service recipients should play a role in identifying their own goals, milestones, and outcomes.** Research has shown a benefit to doing so in terms of participants' later goal completion. User-led or participatory methods can also provide service recipients with opportunities to identify means to engage clients more effectively in programming and flag supports essential to their success. They also allow opportunities for service providers to embed cultural values and wrap-around supports.
- **Recognition of context is essential.** Service recipients are best served when service providers consider contextual factors that can influence employment outcomes and subsequently design and tailor programming accordingly. Likewise, employment outcomes are best assessed using tools or frameworks that allow different measurement options in different contexts and consider potential variations among different populations or subgroups rather than one-size-fits-all approaches.

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