Collaborative Research Grant Initiative: Mental Wellness in Seniors and Persons with Disabilities

Ideas Fund Final Report

March 31, 2012 - Debi Lafavire
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Youth Workplace Mentorship project (YWMP) is a demonstration project created to build an employment mentorship program for young adults with complex service needs (i.e. developmental disability and co-occurring mental illness). The program will prepare youth to gain the skills and confidence that they need to enter the workforce and find long-term employment. Similarly, employers will be educated about hiring and keeping young employees with disabilities.

Through the background research completed in Phase 1 key results will be used to develop Phase 2 of the YWMP. The environmental scan and consultations with community members produced the following recommendations for a strength-based workplace mentorship program for youth with complex needs:

- The youth would be assessed for:
  - Motivation level
  - Strengths
  - Goals

- A careful screening of potential employers to make sure they:
  - Believe in the mentorship philosophy
  - Are committed to putting in the time and effort to make the program a success
  - Understand the benefits of: 1) being a part of a mentorship program, 2) being educated about having an employee with a disability, and 3) having an inclusive workforce

- Flexibility:
  - The YWMP will look different for each individual because their experiences in the program (training, employment matching, support) will be matched specifically to that individual’s needs

This background research will be used to inform the next steps for the YWMP and will be shared with community disability practitioners working with youth with complex needs.

RESEARCH OVERVIEW

Objectives
The objectives of the YWMP are to: 1) increase the employability of youth with complex needs through the acquisition of skills and experience by being involved in a workplace mentorship program; and 2) increase community involvement and inclusion by educating employers about people with developmental disabilities and how they can make a valuable contribution in the workplace.

Background
Individuals with developmental disabilities often experience limited success in terms of finding sustained and meaningful employment. Youth with developmental disabilities, in particular, are at a greater disadvantage when it comes to securing and retaining employment upon exiting high school in comparison to their same aged peers without disabilities. This is due in part to many barriers such as: limited work experience, attitudinal barriers from employers, low literacy, issues of low self-esteem and in some cases, limited access to appropriate employment preparation and placement services (Certo et. al., 2003; The Minister’s Council on Employment for Persons with Disabilities, 2003). There are many barriers that lead to persons with developmental disabilities being underrepresented in the workforce. Addressing workplace skills is one way to bridge that gap in the labour market, but it is far from the only barrier or solution. Employers are often both unaware and unprepared to have a person with a developmental disability enter their work environment.
The YWMP will use a strength-based approach to building work skills and securing employment for youth with complex needs. The emphasis will be on the youths’ strengths and abilities and will build upon those strengths to gain appropriate work and life experience. This program will create the opportunity for growth and change by enhancing self-confidence and incorporating the necessary flexibility to respond to each participant’s unique situation. Support and training will also be provided to the mentors and employers involved in the program.

**Approach and Methods**

An environmental scan was conducted to research evidence-based best practices in curriculum design, content and delivery for strength-based employment training programs for youth with complex needs as well as workplace mentorship programs and programs specific to youth with complex needs.

A series of consultations (n=28) were conducted in the form of focus groups, interviews and questionnaires with employers, youth with complex needs, disability community practitioners and community experts. The consultations collected feedback from participants on topics such as:

- barriers faced by youth with complex needs when securing meaningful employment
- employer concerns around hiring employees with disabilities
- gaps in employment and life skills for youth with complex needs
- desirable qualities in a workplace mentor

An initial environmental scan was completed to identify employment supports available for youth with complex needs, best-practices in mentorships and strength based programs, and the barriers youth with complex needs face from employers. The data collected informed the consultation interview questions. In total 28 individuals participated in: six focus groups; two phone interviews; two in-person interviews; and one written questionnaire.

The findings from the consultations directed the focus for the remainder of the environmental scan in order to address the specific concerns and suggestions that the participants shared. For example, alternate ways of engaging the workforce other than a mentorship program and different teaching styles were investigated.

**Key Findings**

The key findings of the background research for the YWMP have been broken down into four areas of interest: consultations, mentorship programs, strength-based programs, and curriculum design.

**Consultations**

Please refer to Table 1 for the results from the consultations.

**Table 1: Focus Group Results**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus Group Participants</th>
<th>Barriers, concerns and challenges</th>
<th>Contributors to success</th>
<th>Comments about a Youth Workplace Mentorship Program</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Employers</strong></td>
<td>A lack of communication</td>
<td>Disability education in the workplace – teaching that disability is not a scary thing</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Having an employee with a disability who is a poor match for the job</td>
<td>Being very clear about the roles and responsibilities of the employee with a disability e.g. having a task list, having set break times</td>
<td>Some employers may be reluctant to be in a program like this:</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o Ends up being a negative experience for both the employee and the employer</td>
<td>Matching the right</td>
<td>o They might feel like the onus is being put on the employer</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Concerns about the time, effort, accessibility and cost of hiring an employee with a disability – it would be</td>
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<td>o “My staff just do not have the time”</td>
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<td>Instead of only having one mentor to support an employee with a</td>
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Alberta Addiction and Mental Health Research Partnership Program
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|                          | easier just to hire an employee without a disability  
|                          | Concerns about job performance, lack of skill and need for supervision - “Can I count on them?” | youth to the right job – ensuring that the youth wants to be there  
|                          | When job searching have a realistic plan – being able to address any concerns that the employer might have proves that you are aware of potential concerns and know how to address them | disability, provide wider education about disability to the workplace  
|                          |                                                                                  | Participants (mentors and youth) would both have to volunteer and be motivated to be there  
|                          |                                                                                  | The mentor should not be a supervisor  
|                          |                                                                                  | Be very clear about the time commitment |
| Youth with Disabilities   | ● Filling out applications  
|                          |   o Help with reading and understanding certain words  
|                          |   ● The interview  
|                          |   o Remembering what to say  
|                          |   o Some of the questions are hard to answer  
|                          |   ● Having lots of supervisors  
|                          |   ● Being assigned more tasks than they can handle  
|                          |   ● The social aspect of working | “If it’s a position that I like I will stay there for longer”  
|                          |                                                                                  | Having just one supervisor, one person to report to  
|                          |                                                                                  | “I like them to talk to me like I’m normal, like I’m not a little kid anymore”  
|                          |                                                                                  | If they have feedback “just tell me so I can work on it and make improvements”  
|                          |                                                                                  | What skills would you like to learn in a program like this?  
|                          |                                                                                  | o How to interact with people  
|                          |                                                                                  | o How to keep your job  
|                          |                                                                                  | o How to keep your bosses happy  
|                          |                                                                                  | Why would you like to have an employment mentor at your job?  
|                          |                                                                                  | o Somebody to ask if you don’t know how to do something  
|                          |                                                                                  | o Help you out if you made a mistake |
| Community Disability Practitioners | ● Prejudice/attitude of the employers and not understanding the support worker’s role  
|                          |                                                                                  | Informing the employer that the youth has a disability and there are supports in place to address any concerns they might have  
|                          |                                                                                  | Emphasize the benefits of being a part of a mentorship program and employing youth with disabilities  
|                          |                                                                                  | Having flexibility in the workplace e.g. flexible start times  
|                          |                                                                                  | Finding a good fit between the youth and the employer  
|                          |                                                                                  | Lots of support and communication | Both the mentor and the mentee have to volunteer for the program and be passionate about it  
|                          |                                                                                  | Point out the benefits to the employer and the mentor so they can see the mutual benefit e.g. developing leadership skills, creating a sense of community in the workplace  
|                          |                                                                                  | The mentor would have to be willing to learn as well as be a leader  
|                          |                                                                                  | Have lots of support for the mentor and the employer |
Mentorship Program
For a mentorship program to be a success there are some key factors that need to be taken into consideration. Most notably, the people who are involved need to be invested in making the program work. It takes time and dedication from the employer, the mentor and the mentee to create a successful mentorship relationship. If any of those participants are not invested; there is a chance that the program may not work.

Key Elements for a workplace mentorship program
- Three principal functions for workplace mentors:
  - Initiating the mentee to the workplace culture
  - Advising on career directions and opportunities
  - Helping the mentee solve problems – including personal differences or conflicts with co-workers or supervisors
- It is important to select the right participants to be a part of the program:
  - The mentor should not be a supervisor (National Institute for Work and Learning/Academy for Educational Development, 1995).
  - The mentor needs to volunteer to be a part of the program and believe in the mentorship process
  - The mentor needs to be able to commit time to being a part of that mentoring relationship
  - The mentee needs to be motivated and invested in the mentoring relationship
  - The relationship will be more successful if there is a balance between building a safe, fun and enjoyable relationship versus just being a teacher
- Potential barriers to success include:
  - Understanding the possibility of a difference in culture between the mentor and the mentee – be it age, experience, or disability. It is easy for there to be misunderstandings if the two people do not understand where the other is coming from e.g. the mentor could be trying to be supportive while the mentee might feel like they are being checked in on.
  - Time constraints are a significant concern. This was identified in the literature as a significant barrier as well as by the employers in the focus groups.
  - It was warned that mentorship arrangements are “neither cheap nor easy and employers are often reluctant to consistently provide staff resources required for effective mentorship”.
- Key factors specific to disability:
  - Have clear expectations of the youth
  - Have clearly defined roles for the mentor and support staff (if applicable)
  - Have well-structured feedback on performance

Strength-based Program
Strength-based programs are particularly beneficial for youth with complex needs as the people in their lives often focus on the things that they cannot do instead of what they are good at. A person’s strengths are the parts of their lives that are easy, invigorating, and allows them to be creative. Everyone has strengths and by focusing on the strengths of the youth in the YWMP we can change learning and employment from a negative experience to a positive one.

Strength-based programs identified in the background research include:
- The Marcus Buckingham Strengths program
- The Strengths Movement for Youth and the Affinities Program/Strong Planet by Jennifer Fox
- New Zealand’s Youth Mentoring Network

Key elements of a strength-based program include:
- The three different types of strengths (Fox, n.d.).
  - Activity Strengths (things you do)
  - Relationship Strengths (things you do for and with others)
  - Learning Strengths (the ways you learn best)
• Being able to identify the factors that help people lead happy and productive lives and supporting them to do those activities (Barwick, 2004).
• Understanding and appreciating that everyone is unique and that the strengths of each individual and their circumstances will be different (Barwick, 2004).
• Having the participants be fully involved and engaged in identifying their goals and building on their strengths and resources (Barwick, 2004).

Curriculum Design
The key findings from the curriculum development resource scan indicated that any curriculum developed for this program will have to be flexible and have elements that can be structured to address the participant’s individual learning styles and strengths. That being said, some of the innovative ideas that were identified in the resource scan included:

• The nine Literacy and Essential skills (reading, writing, document use, numeracy, computer use, thinking, oral communication, working with others, and continuous learning) will be incorporated into all the training, learning and skills development activities.
• All program material and training will be in Plain Language.
• The learning will include hands-on, experiential learning that engages all five senses.
• The learning opportunities and training will be flexible depending on the learner’s strengths and goals. For example, they might participate in a training program developed within the program or they might be referred to an existing training program if it is a better fit with their learning needs.
• The average person starts to lose attention in 10-15 minutes. The 10-minute rule is a lecture design that teaches lessons in 10 minute segments. At the end of the 10 minutes the concept being taught is related to another element, such as an anecdote or a video clip, in order to create a specific memory to help better encode that piece of information (Medina, 2008).
• The instructors will make sure that the learners retain their knowledge by repeating the information 90-120 minutes after it was taught in order to promote retention (Medina, 2008).

Conclusions
A Youth Workplace Mentorship Program has the potential to be an enormous benefit to both youth with complex needs and employers. The primary feedback from employers was that they had limited time and might feel like a program of this kind would be putting the “burden” of integrating and supporting an employee with a disability on them – instead of viewing it as a resource to access an untapped labour market. This type of mentorship program should be developed with motivated employers in order to ensure that it fits with their needs as well as the needs of youth with complex needs in Calgary. To ensure success for both the employers and the youth involved in the YWMP the following key elements are recommended:

• A rigorous participant intake assessment to determine:
  o Motivation level
  o Strengths
  o Goals

• A careful screening of potential employers to ensure they:
  o Are willing to embody the mentorship philosophy
  o Are committed to putting in the time and effort to make the program a success
  o Understand the benefits of: 1) being a part of a mentorship program, 2) being educated about having an employee with a disability, and 3) having a diversified workforce

• Flexibility:
  o The YWMP will look different for each individual because their experiences in the program (training, employment matching, support) will be matched specifically to that individual’s needs

To ensure that all of these key elements are met it is also recommended that the program pilot a small number of participants to ensure that that high level of flexibility and personalization is met and to give the participants the best possible chance for success.
IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY OR PRACTICE
The results from Phase 1 will be used in Phase 2 to develop: 1) the components that will be included in the program; and 2) the standard training for both the youth and the mentor. With the development of this program the intention is to create a shift in culture around hiring employees with disabilities. In addition to changing the attitudes of employers, it is the goal of the program to use a strength-based approach in order to impact how youth with complex needs perceive themselves and the successes in their lives.

DIRECTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH
Based on the research that was gathered for this initiative, it is determined that the disability sector would greatly benefit from further research into ways of engaging employers to see the benefit of hiring employees with disabilities. A recurring question has been “how do you engage the employers who are reluctant to put in the time or learn about the benefits of hiring a person with a developmental disability?” In order to address these concerns, research into ways of engaging and educating reluctant employers is much needed.

KNOWLEDGE DISSEMINATION AND TRANSLATION ACTIVITIES
The background research for the program will be used to develop the YWMP. The findings from the background research will be summarized and disseminated through Vecova Research Services’ website, Vecova Research Services’ e-Newsletter, to Vecova Community Disability Practitioners working with youth with complex needs through Vecova’s Youth Resource Group and through networking opportunities with appropriate members of the disability community and select employers who have expressed interest in the research activities. Information about this program will also be shared through Vecova’s social media sites (Facebook and Twitter).

PRINCIPAL APPLICANT (TEAM LEADER)

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<tr>
<th>Name</th>
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<th>Topics of interest</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Debi Lefaivre</td>
<td>Director of Services, Vecova Centre for Disability Services and Research</td>
<td>Research involving persons with developmental disabilities</td>
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PROJECT PARTNERS (TEAM MEMBERS)

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<tr>
<th>Name</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Curtis Slater</td>
<td>Research Coordinator, Vecova Centre for Disability Services and Research</td>
<td>Project manager: project supervision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michelle Stiphout</td>
<td>Researcher, Vecova Centre for Disability Services and Research</td>
<td>Project researcher: data collection, data analysis, data synthesis, final reporting, dissemination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aiofe Freeman</td>
<td>Researcher, Vecova Centre for Disability Services and Research</td>
<td>Project researcher: data collection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marnie Quan</td>
<td>Employment Specialist, Vecova Centre for Disability Services and Research</td>
<td>Project partner: data collection, dissemination</td>
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PUBLICATIONS AND PRESENTATIONS
ABOUT THE ALBERTA ADDICTION AND MENTAL HEALTH RESEARCH PARTNERSHIP PROGRAM

The Alberta Addiction and Mental Health Research Partnership Program is comprised of a broad-based multi-sectoral group, representing service providers, academic researchers, policy-makers and consumer groups, working together to improve the coordination and implementation of practice-based addiction and mental health research in Alberta.

The mission of the Research Partnership Program is to improve addiction and mental health outcomes for Albertans along identified research priority themes, by generating evidence and expediting its transfer into addiction and mental health promotion, prevention of mental illness, and innovative service delivery.

The Research Partnership Program sets out to increase Alberta’s excellence and output of addiction and mental health research findings, and to better translate of these findings into practice improvements.

REFERENCES


