

COVID-19 & THE CAREER DEVELOPMENT SECTOR: IMPACTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS April 2020

After receiving the invitation to provide input to ESDC on the impact and implications of COVID-19 for the career development sector, the Canadian Career Development Foundation (CCDF) put out a call to career development professionals across Canada. This document consolidates evidence-based Canadian and international research, along with input from professionals working in a wide range of delivery settings/communities with an equally wide range of individuals with diverse needs. The document delineates various impacts and associated evidence-based recommendations of measures to mitigate risks and/or capitalize on presenting opportunities. It also includes a variety of creative, out-of-the-box ideas for consideration as unprecedented times call for unprecedented creativity.

First, it is important to say how many representatives from the career development sector commended the federal and P/T governments for the response to COVID-19 to date. In this dynamic and quickly evolving reality, the commitment to providing information daily and proactive financial aid/subsidy programs has been exemplary. On behalf of our sector, thank you!

We begin with an overarching observation: ***The career development sector has robust theories and models, evidence-based strategies and tools, and deep experience in helping individuals to successfully navigate difficult and complex transitions in their lives.*** The career development sector is positioned now, in the midst of COVID-19 restrictions, to support a quicker recovery. This time of diminished employment is ideally focused on helping Canadians to build the self-awareness, labour market awareness and the skills/strategies they will need to be ready for recovery. This may mean preparing for a transition to a new and growing sector or building updated work search/creation strategies. Once recovery begins, the career development sector will be more needed than ever, helping people to make successful and sustainable transitions to the labour market.

The career development field is ready to answer the call to support Canadians wanting to get back to work. Our field has all the raw materials needed in this time of unprecedented transitions – the theoretical underpinnings, a robust competency framework guiding practice and evidence-based approaches. However, relative to international comparatives, the Canadian career development sector has been under-resourced. We will need the support and commitment of all levels of government to answer the call in these exceptional times. Based on rigorous research and international comparatives, our sector has delineated a set of benchmarks for a strong career development ecosystem ready to respond to the significant influx of demand that is anticipated during and post-pandemic.

We now turn to specific responses re: the impact of COVID-19 and associated recommendations. As noted, included herein are evidence-based recommendations as well as imaginative ideas submitted by stakeholders across the career development sector:

1. IMPACT ON MOST VULNERABLE INDIVIDUALS

The career development sector serves some of the most vulnerable and hardest hit by the virus. Those who are homeless cannot self-isolate; those without clean water cannot follow hand-washing protocols; those with active addictions, mental health challenges, living in violent homes, experiencing food insecurity or with cognitive impairments are in crisis as services and supports they rely on diminish or disappear. Pressures are

exacerbated with the closure of schools and daycares. Many do not have access to technology/internet so have no means of applying for financial assistance or access online job postings. Most have no financial reserves to tide them over. In many communities, the public employment service is the frontline – the first to identify needs and the intermediary coordinating the response.

RECOMMENDATIONS & IDEAS

- Consider the extreme circumstances that result from entering the COVID-19 pandemic from a place of pre-existing poverty when creating emergency response measures:
 - Consider a minimum guaranteed income for all, allowing individuals to maintain or access safe housing, attend to basic survival needs and get the training/career development support they need.
 - Extend eligibility for/access to subsidies/supports that promote employment (childcare, transportation, work equipment/clothing, etc.) both now and in the future, recognizing the critical need now (for example, childcare for single parent essential workers) and the increased need once recovery begins.
- Anticipate increased pressure on public employment services and increased demand on frontline staff to deal with a wide range of client and employer needs. Alleviation measures in this new environment could be reduced caseloads, hiring additional staff, and reframing outcomes-based measures connected to payment that reflect post-pandemic labour market constraints.
- Promote full recovery through investments in decent work opportunities rather than short-term, precarious work.
- Recognize the need to think beyond short-term technical skills training to include life skills, broader employability skills, skills to self-market/work remotely, and supports to build community, meaning, structure and security going forward.
- Ensure rapid collection and dissemination of LMI on sectors/occupations with growing opportunities forecasted and highlighting the range of jobs that can be performed remotely.
- Create a “Domestic Temporary Work Program”, that provides a centralized website where employers can post jobs for which they typically import workers. Allow Canadians who take a temporary position to retain full EI benefits.
- Create a “Digital Contribution Program” that identifies clusters of social need (such reaching isolated seniors, ensuring distribution of food to vulnerable individuals, promoting social connection during a time of physical distancing). Create an online open competition with a weekly cash award of an amount that is enough to garner participation (perhaps \$1,000).
- Consider working with established systems, such as the Distress Centre or Kids Help Line to offer a national 2-tiered Social Support Line: Tier 1 for people who simply need social connection and Tier 2 offering more specialized mental health support. Mobilize members of the career development and other helping professions who may be laid off or working reduced hours to meet the inevitable growing need for this kind of support.
- Provide incentive funding and associated training/resources for home-based start-ups.

2. IMPACT ON YOUTH/YOUNG ADULTS

Students are seeing co-ops, internships and summer employment prospects disappear. The approaches being taken for secondary students vary across the country, no doubt resulting in Grade 12 students graduating at varying levels of readiness for post-secondary programs. Secondary school students are in limbo and have limited or no access to career guidance to help them manage uncertainty, readjust goals or learn how to succeed with online learning. Students need support in financing post-secondary given the loss of part-

time/summer income. Post-secondary students expecting to graduate this year or who have already recently graduated have found their employment opportunities slip away or become redundant. These post-secondary students looking to start their professional career find themselves in a new limbo, facing intense competition with more qualified candidates for limited opportunities, reducing their prospects to pay back student loans and/or support themselves financially.

RECOMMENDATIONS & IDEAS

- Provide additional investment in existing career development services and supports for students in public and post-secondary education so that they develop the career management skills they need to position themselves for success. Whether it is assistance to students in secondary to anchor their future plans/course choices to solid information about themselves and the emergent labour market or helping post-secondary students develop new self-marketing skills to navigate into a post-pandemic labour market, career development interventions will not only allay current anxieties, but will also position students for success in the future.
- Develop programs and policies that target quick labour market integration specific to graduates such as graduate guarantee programs. Graduate guarantee programs provide new graduates that have not found decent work with specific and targeted career interventions that include a range of programming strategies such as wage subsidy and/or training programs, study and work placements, and career workshops. Graduate guarantee programs have been extremely successful in integrating graduates in many European countries. It is an approach of limited use in Canada but has the potential to have significant impact in a post-pandemic labour market. One example of a graduate guarantee program could be extending SWPP funding to include jobs for new graduates.
- Establish a tuition credit program in which a percentage of tuition costs for the 2020-21 academic year are waived for all currently registered post-secondary students whose prospects for part-time/summer jobs critical for paying tuition and living costs been affected by COVID-19.
- Increase the grace period before student loans are payable and interest accrues to 18 months after graduation.
- Establish an “Intellectual Stimulus Program” – along the lines of common stimulus spending focused on infrastructure, but extended to fund post-secondary research on government, public policy and economic recovery priorities.
- Extend eligibility for EI/CERB to coop students and interns.
- Extend the timelines to apply for coop or new grad work permits for international students.
- Promote a coordinated approach to student financial aid for post-secondary students whose school year and/or prospects of income-generating work has been impacted by COVID-19.

3. IMPACT ON PUBLIC EMPLOYMENT SERVICES

Before COVID-19 hit, many provinces were in varying stages of implementing some form of “transformation” to public employment services. Generally, this has included a shift to a more outcome-based, centralized and backloaded funding model in which frontline agencies are paid based on finding employment for clients and are expected to absorb greater financial risks. This model was deeply flawed pre-COVID 19 because:

- Frontline services report increases in clients presenting with more complex and multifaceted needs related to health, housing, childcare and inter/intra-personal issues, such as unsafe relationships and lack of hope, motivation or self-esteem.
- These agencies often function on shoestring budgets with chronic shortages with respect to training/PD or access to evidence-based resources.

- With growing pressure to get clients quickly into employment in order to receive funding, there is a consistent cycle:
 - Time is not taken to assess the employability needs of service recipients;
 - They are referred too quickly to training or employment;
 - They do not succeed due of unresolved pre-pre-employability issues; and,
 - They return to services and the cycle repeats.

This cycle represents significant socio-economic costs to individuals, communities and industry sectors – increased toll on addictions, mental health, criminal justice, policing and, ultimately, public employment services as clients cycle back – this time with greater need and ever more distant from the labour market than before .

Now, this will be exacerbated by the increased competition for dwindling employment opportunities as so many workers have been laid off and so many organizations/businesses will constrict operations or remain closed permanently.

RECOMMENDATIONS & IDEAS

- Adjust funding models away from outcome-based funding that is limited to blunt measures of employment/training contingent on factors beyond service providers’ control to incorporate a more nuanced and evidence-based model that also recognizes progress toward employment/training. Rigorous indicators of progress have been developed and tested, based on almost a decade of Canadian research. This research should be reflected in funding models.
- Provide leadership by sharing this evidence-based research with all P/Ts.
- Augment LMDA/WDA funds to ensure adequate funding to existing public employment services so increased demands are met through these challenging times and to prevent a loss of existing expertise in the community that would result from agency closures.
- Actively support the significant adjustment involved in shifting from face-to-face to online/remote services (IT/technical support, new reporting protocols/funding models to reflect labour market realities, support to protect the transmission of sensitive data and the creation of safe hubs for clients requiring face-to-face services and access to computers/internet.
- Provide public employment services across Canada with a timely, accurate and clear information on emergency response measures, including financial supports available to individuals and service delivery agencies federally and from P/Ts. Also provide LMI projections on sectors that are growing/constricting in response to COVID-19 to inform individuals/services.
- Make targeted training available to frontline professionals so that they are equipped to deliver evidence-based career services that reflect new labour market realities created by COVID-19.
- Broaden the mandate and resources available to existing services now so they can offer unemployed Canadians expert supports to set viable employment goals, inventory their marketable skills, learn new strategies to secure work or valuable experience during this time of constriction and be ready for recovery.
- Mobilize the existing infrastructure and expertise of employment service providers as vital intermediaries for employers as they navigate wage subsidies and evolving emergency relief programs.
- Gather, critically analyze and share pan-Canadian data on what works – and what doesn’t work – with respect to how public employment services are delivered and funded

4. IMPACT ON HOW CAREER/EMPLOYMENT SERVICES ARE DELIVERED

Services are scrambling to shift from dominantly face-to-face delivery to a range of remote strategies. Almost all frontline professionals who contributed responded to the call for input indicated that they are actively

working with clients by phone, email, Zoom or other online platform. While this works for some clients and some activities, it does not for others. There are very few digital channels developed specifically for online career development and, with few exceptions, those that exist are grossly inadequate. Too often, they have been developed by teams with no career development expertise and, as a result, may have technical bells and whistles but are simplistic/superficial in approach, limited in content and grounded in outdated thinking/theory. Reliance on these during this pandemic shines a spotlight on their inadequacy and on the need for evidence-based alternatives informed by career development theory, research and practice.

RECOMMENDATIONS & IDEAS

- Learn from countries/jurisdictions with evidence-based examples of digital channels that garner sustainable results and adapt for scalability within the Canadian context.
- Commission the development of a simple “how-to” guide to supporting clients of career/employment services remotely based on best practices in Canada and internationally.
- We know that engaging in career development has a positive impact on health. Consider how extended health benefits could cover paying for career/employment services or implement a tax credit for accessing these services.
- Undertake a national recovery initiative focused around providing individuals with free or highly subsidized access to professional career services.
- Provide a one-time fund for non-profit agencies to support their transition to remote provision of much-needed career/employment services. The fund could be used to ensure all home-based offices have the needed internet/technology, to provide rent-relief for empty office space or allow for the implementation of strategies to protect sensitive data.
- Implement measures to ensure every home has a computer with basic internet access. This is a big ask, but the need has been a long time coming and is now critical.
- Given that the general public is often unaware of the availability of career development professional services in their community, invest in a public awareness campaign to ensure Canadian know that help is available to them.

5. IMPACT ON CAREER DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONALS

Many CDPs are struggling both personally and professionally with the impacts of COVID-19. Many have been laid off; others are scrambling to meet spikes in demand while adjusting services to remote offerings.

RECOMMENDATIONS & IDEAS

- Provide stimulus funding to professional associations for career development professionals, including career counsellors, so they can provide the leadership, training and other supports needed across the sector to support standards and ethical practice as services transition to remote/ e-delivery.
- Ensure supports/subsidies include self-employed career development professionals, those working in the gig economy and small business owners.
- Provide increased incentives to employers providing outplacement services to employees.
- Create a fund for upgrading home-based technology and for reimbursing workers for use of their home internet/personal cell phones for work-related purposes.
- Free access to training for effectively working remotely, converting face-to-face programming to online and coping with social isolation and anxiety related to the pandemic.