

**Report 8: Research Report**

**Career Self-Management in Organizations: My Career GPS**

**Executive Summary**

**Meeting Workplace Skill Needs:  
The Career Development Contribution**

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## **Note to Readers**

It is important to note that this research report is not presented in accordance with the standards normally required by university institutions for two reasons: the results appear before the method, and the data analysis and interpretation were carried out simultaneously rather than consecutively. The CRWG made this decision following discussions with the persons responsible for the WSI fund in October 2009.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### The Canadian Context

This new century will usher in a fundamental change in the nature of the psychological contract between employer and employee within an enterprise. In Canada, we are witnessing an unusual situation, i.e., four generations of workers in the labour market at the same time (Duxbury, 2010), and managers today need to understand these generational differences. Each generation is characterized by its attitudes and values in relation to work and life. The ability to effectively manage the issues involved in developing the skills of employees from various generational groups is therefore a considerable challenge for enterprises (Akremi, Guerrero, and Neveu, 2006). Also, workers today who are employed by a small or medium-sized enterprise (SME) are asked to learn to build and rebuild their skills in order to position themselves better and take more effective action in a given work context from a lifelong learning perspective.<sup>1</sup>

In Canada, most jobs are in enterprises with fewer than 50 employees, which account for 97.8% of all commercial establishments in Canada. Of those enterprises, 53.3% have no permanent staff and employ contract workers and family members, in addition to the owner. Medium-sized enterprises with 50 to 499 employees account for 2.1% of all enterprises in Canada (FIBC, 2010).

In terms of career development practices, SMEs face many challenges with regard to their employees. Indeed, small and medium-sized enterprises have to recruit and retain qualified employees, while promoting the development of their skills, despite a work ethic that differs by generational group. To keep their staff, innovative SMEs are open to various practices aimed at developing and maintaining worker skills (Goyer, 2010). Governments and organizations in the provinces of Canada invest a great deal in order to support workers and contribute to workforce development. In addition, the federal government offers grants aimed at providing innovative support for labour market initiatives.

The Canadian Research Working Group on Evidence-Based Practice in Career Development (CRWG) brought together its experts<sup>2</sup> to help in developing and validating a scientific evaluation framework that would make it possible to evaluate the quality of career services for Canadians. The conclusions presented in this research report contribute to that objective. These conclusions outline the results of the evaluation of the effects of a career self-management process, which is an emerging practice in Canada, as it is elsewhere in the world.<sup>3</sup> Very little

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<sup>1</sup> This premise is based on the work of Riverin-Simard and Simard (2005a; 2005b).

<sup>2</sup> Contribution of researchers specialized in career development from six Canadian universities and consultations with the CCDF.

<sup>3</sup> AOISP, November 2009, Wellington, New Zealand

empirical research on self-directed career management learning has been done in Canada (Goyer, 2010).

This research report presents the results of a study aimed at evaluating the effects of a career self-management process carried out by individuals employed by Canadian SMEs. The idea of self-management is based on the self-management and organizational environment management model developed by DeWaele, Morval, and Sheitoyan (1986). Already explored and tested in an organizational setting with individuals and groups (Goyer and St-Louis, 1991a; 1991b), the career planning and management intervention programs served as a basis for designing a self-directed guide for this project. Goyer (2009c) developed this self-directed guide in paper format, calling it *My Career GPS*. The material was designed such that it could eventually be made available online in a web-based format. The content of the seven sections of the guide and the self-directed nature of the exercises were subsequently validated with five experts and then adjusted. The material was translated into Canada's two official languages.

### **Goal, Objectives, and Research Methods**

As part of this research, we evaluated the effects of a career self-management process with individuals employed by SMEs. In doing so, we pursued the following specific objectives:

1. *Design a self-directed career management guide adapted to individuals employed by SMEs.*
2. *Explore and understand the career self-management process aimed at individuals employed by SMEs.*
3. *Evaluate the spinoffs of the process on different variables (self-esteem, feeling of personal efficacy, quality of management of work life, career self-management).*
4. *Evaluate the career self-management process from the users' point of view.*
5. *Identify effective learning strategies by cross-referencing the results obtained regarding the GPS effects.*

First, we used assessment sheets to evaluate the effects of the objectives being pursued and the changes before and immediately after completion of the Career GPS. Second, the effects of the process on the variables of personal efficacy, quality of management of work life, career self-management, and self-esteem were measured. The immediate subjective effects upon completion of the self-directed process *My Career GPS* were described by the participants in the study.

Initially, 72 individuals expressed an interest in participating in the career self-management study. Of that number, 56 actually did participate. Our sample consisted of 56 employed individuals (12 men and 44 women, aged 24 to 59) from 28 small and medium-sized enterprises

in a variety of economic activity sectors. The research team comprised two guidance counsellors, including the principal researcher, two Canadian certified counsellors, and a graduate student in Career Counselling. Three members of the research team had organizational human resources experience in the workplace.

The evaluative research used a mixed methodology incorporating quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative data were collected using a variety of methods in order to increase the validity of the results obtained. Those methods consisted of a variety of collection tools (assessment sheets, questionnaires, interview protocol, research memos), which were translated into English on the basis of the original versions of the questionnaires. As a result, eight integrated assessment sheets adapted to the Career GPS were collected, generating quantitative data.

In addition, four questionnaires supplied data on several variables: feeling of personal efficacy adapted for the Career GPS based on the questionnaire of Michaud and Savard (2008; 2010) and the work of Bandura (2003), quality of management of work life based on the questionnaire of Lamarche, Limoges, Guédon, and Caron, 2006 (Lamarche, 2006; 2008), career self-management based on the CWRG-GDRC questionnaire (2008) validated by Hiebert et al. in 2008-2009, and self-esteem based on the questionnaire of Nugent and Thomas (1993). These data were collected at four points in time: before the GPS (T1), immediately after the GPS (T2), three months after the GPS (T3), and six months after the GPS (T4).

Also, during the process, semi-structured participant interviews lasting an average of one hour were recorded on audiotape, after which a synthesis summary of the recordings was prepared. Research notes were collected throughout the process by means of logbooks completed by the research team members. These handwritten notes were shared during meetings of the research team and used during data analysis. Lastly, the quantitative and qualitative data were cross-referenced during data analysis, making it possible to state that the knowledge acquired during the course of this career self-management study is scientifically valid.

## **Results**

In this study, the Career GPS (Goyer, 2009c) proposes a self-directed guide enabling individuals to assess their current life path, notably their personal characteristics, in order to identify personal projects including skills development. The Career GPS has five objectives aimed at teaching individuals how to 1) take stock of their current situation, 2) identify their personal characteristics at work, 3) identify their plans as an employed person, 4) appreciate their workplace experience, and 5) set goals to provide impetus for achieving their development plans.

The data analysis made it possible to identify particularly effective learning strategies concerning career self-management. It is important to note that several of the self-directed exercises in the Career GPS incorporate a form of self-support. Indeed, it should be mentioned

that a self-directed practice like the Career GPS explicitly proposes, through the formulation of its objectives, content description, process organization, and resource selection, a structure similar to an implicit form of support. In addition, the study results show that the combination of these factors (see, in particular, the results of the assessment grids at the end of each GPS section) was very useful in terms of the positive changes perceived by the users. Furthermore, the analysis and cross-referencing of the quantitative and qualitative data pointed to the relevance and effectiveness of 10 self-directed learning strategies concerning career self-management. Those strategies are as follows:

1. identify key career self-management elements to be worked on on a priority basis;
2. identify generic and specific competencies to be developed;
3. identify personality traits in terms of strengths and limitations;
4. identify the fundamental values that guide one's actions and future;
5. evaluate/synthesize all of one's characteristics on the basis of one's life path;
6. identify key dimensions (health, family/couple, social, financial, spiritual, personal development) to be developed on a priority basis;
7. describe one's optimum work situation;
8. formulate workplace development plans to be worked on on a priority basis;
9. seek information and feedback about oneself, the organizational environment, and one's plans, including skills development;
10. identify objectives that are specific, measurable, realistic, positive, and personal.

These 10 strategies were identified through the cross-referencing of evidence-based quantitative data and meaningful qualitative data, giving a valid result. The study results make it possible to conclude that all of these learning strategies are very effective. The self-directed exercises proposed by the Career GPS were done systematically (high level of adherence to the model), and the analyses made it possible to identify effective strategies.

Generally, the Career GPS enabled employed individuals to increase their feelings of personal efficacy, the quality of their management of work life, their career self-management, and their self-esteem. The results of the effects of the Career GPS on the basis of these four variables are positive. These findings were identified through the cross-referencing of evidence-based quantitative data and meaningful qualitative data<sup>4</sup> from the study, giving a valid result.

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<sup>4</sup> Data saturation

The increase in the feeling of personal efficacy was maintained throughout the four measurement times over a period of six months. In the study, the feeling of personal efficacy comprised three factors: 1) ability to perform tasks, 2) ability to identify and recognize skills, and 3) ability to be motivated to develop an action plan or a project. The results show that the Career GPS promotes an increase in feelings of personal efficacy in relation to these three factors. Those results serve to validate the effects of the Career GPS on people's ability to take action on developing their plans, including skills development. That implies that a self-managed process such as the Career GPS could have a positive effect on performance for the enterprise by increasing employees' feelings of personal efficacy. However, other studies will have to be conducted in order to validate this hypothesis.

With regard to quality of management of work life, the data indicate a positive increase three and six months after completion of the Career GPS. The questionnaire evaluates six affective states and seven strategies related to quality of management of work life. A more detailed analysis of the data showed that the GPS approach has a positive effect on four elements: 1) feeling of adequate workload management (state), 2) positive feeling about career (state), 3) feeling of physical and emotional health (state), and 4) not overinvesting in work (strategy). In actual fact, there was no significant change immediately afterwards in any aspect (state or strategy). These results seem to indicate that a self-directed process such as the Career GPS has a positive effect in the medium term (three months) on the quality of management of work life. Indeed, certain changes are noted in Time 3 (three months after completion of the GPS). The change in the average of all states and strategies is significant between Time 1 and Time 3.

The self-esteem evaluated in this study concerns social competence, problem-solving ability, intellectual ability, and value in relation to others. The data show a positive increase in self-esteem six months after the process but no significant change after three months or immediately following completion of the Career GPS. Those results indicate that the Career GPS has a positive effect on self-esteem and on quality of management of work life in the medium term (six months). That implies that a Career GPS approach could have a positive effect by increasing self-esteem when employees make changes in their lives and develop their plans. However, other studies will need to be carried out to validate that hypothesis.

As for career self-management, the data show a positive increase that is maintained over time in relation to three dimensions: taking appropriate action with strategic individuals at the right moment; identifying competencies in a CV or portfolio; and identifying short-, medium-, and long-term career plans and having realistic action plans.

Another important aspect is finding and processing the information required for project development. The study results show that individuals who complete all of the sections of the Career GPS actively seek out the information needed to validate and develop their plans<sup>5</sup> over a

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<sup>5</sup> Project includes skills development

six-month period. This refers to learning how to seek out information relating to self-validation and project validation in or outside the workplace. Section 6 of the Career GPS is a good example of this and encourages this type of action. The data in section 6 of the Career GPS and the qualitative data (semi-structured conversations) showed that access to information for developing career plans is important when it comes to career self-management. The follow-up conversations revealed that there are a number of situations that impede access to information for developing one's plans, including skills development in an SME. Such situations include the diversity and complexity of information, as well as difficulties matching the worker's resources with the enterprise's demands/requirements.

In the study, it was noted as well that the project development process of employed persons may start before or during the Career GPS process and that the purpose of information is to activate career plans. That structured activation process drives the relationship between continuing education and work. In other words, it promotes the link between training and work, as well as the social and economic participation of employed individuals. From a learning organization standpoint, this self-managed process promotes self-learning and environmental learning through its structured organization.

The characteristics of a self-directed process among employed individuals and the presence of an employer required attention. When the field work began, the issue of the confidentiality of the Career GPS approach did not interfere with its accessibility for employed individuals. The qualitative data demonstrated that the importance of the confidentiality of the Career GPS material is related to the organizational context as perceived by the employee. SMEs experiencing economic growth seemed more likely to take an interest in the effects of the research on their employees' personal guidance projects. For example, in organizational environments that value the importance of skills development and work life, employee attitudes were characterized by transparency and proactiveness with regard to their career self-management in their immediate environment. Consequently, a number of the participants informed their management of, and discussed with their managers, the results of the assessment they did after the Career GPS. Others informed their supervisors and validated their results during the process itself.

Conversely, when SMEs are in a more economically and financially precarious situation (survival mode) or do not consider career development as an investment in their human resources, they seem to adopt a less open attitude towards employee development. A number of employees pointed out that they did not want to share the results of the Career GPS process with their managers. It should be noted that, when we issued the invitation to participate in the research, we received a few defensive comments from SMEs regarding the introduction of career self-management (*My Career GPS*). The need to explore that finding in subsequent studies by delving more deeply into organizational culture in terms of employee career development seems pertinent and supported by the data.

Despite a career self-management process designed to be carried out by the individual, i.e., without the support of a career guidance professional, it seems important to understand the need expressed for support. Indeed, most participants mentioned that they would have liked to receive ad hoc or preventive support during or after the Career GPS process. Several participants indicated clearly that they did not need support, whereas those who expressed complex needs did not wait until the end of the Career GPS to approach a specialist. In only two cases did the need expressed (making a decision about a vertical promotion, work/family balance relating to re-entry) require professional remedial support. The data collected point to the usefulness of putting in place mixed, accessible support procedures combining more integrated understanding of the functioning of individuals, resources, and organizational environment conditions. Lastly, with regard to the location where the Career GPS is to be carried out (in the workplace, at home, or elsewhere), the analysis of the qualitative data shows that more than 80% (the majority) of employees completed their Career GPS at home or elsewhere, i.e., outside the workplace.

Each of the sections of the Career GPS required an investment of one to two hours of time. On average, 12 hours were required to complete the process. The results seem to imply that stressing the need to take the necessary time to do an in-depth self-exploration could have positive effects on the entire process, and particularly on the perception of the quality of the work accomplished. More than 76% of the employed individuals attributed the changes they had made to the Career GPS. The results tend to show that all of the sections of *My Career GPS* had a positive effect on the employed individuals. However, it would be worthwhile to incorporate regular employer feedback into our future studies.

In addition, in the study, the employed individuals who completed the Career GPS reported, in their follow-up interviews, that the process had enabled them to gain a comprehensive picture of their situation and to validate certain aspects of their professional and personal lives. In order to do that in-depth self-reflection, they recognized the need for support during the process from a guidance counsellor or career guidance specialist. Lack of support was viewed negatively by a few of the participants, whereas others indicated their satisfaction with doing the exercise on their own. It should be noted that most of the participants greatly appreciated this downtime, which helped them to gain better self-knowledge and enabled them to reflect on their work life. They became more motivated to take action. These evidence-based results make it possible to validate the effectiveness of a Career GPS process. This type of process therefore benefits employed individuals, which seems to indicate that it is also beneficial for the enterprises that employ them. It is a self-directed career development practice that is simple, promising, inexpensive, and accessible, and it supports the importance of lifelong learning.

## **Recommendations**

Some recommendations, based on the results of the study, which validate the effectiveness of the Career GPS process, are set out below:

1. Make the Career GPS available online as part of a research and development project.
2. Support programs incorporating self-directed practices with a mixture of career development practices in the workplace. Incorporate periodic validation and verification of process quality by certified career guidance professionals.
3. Offer employed individuals who are interested the opportunity to receive periodic follow-up after completing the Career GPS process.
4. Offer HR or other managers periodic supervision including the ethical issues in the light of the evaluation framework for career development among employed individuals.
5. Promote partnerships between groups of SMEs and specialized researchers affiliated with research centres for the purpose of developing quality mechanisms incorporating a common evaluation framework in order to document the effects of career (work life) development on employed individuals and on organizations. This could take the form of mutual support among the partners.
6. Offer a tax incentive (e.g., tax credit) directly to employed individuals for completing a self-directed career management process at regular intervals, which is validated and certified by career development professionals.
7. Set up a pan-Canadian consortium to support research and development particularly on self-directed career development practices using methods including and excluding support in targeted sectors of economic activity.
8. Promote access to a certified professional front-line or telephone service that addresses requests for ad hoc, preventive, and even remedial assistance, as well as to referrals to credible services when a request for career-related assistance is made.
9. Stress the alignment between the skills development of employed individuals and the enterprise's strategic development goals, while supporting the implementation of a self-directed assistance mechanism that incorporates a rigorous evaluation framework from a lifelong learning perspective.
10. Promote a partnership in order to establish virtual support spaces for more effective skills development among employed individuals and increase enterprise productivity.
11. Incorporate self-directed career management practices into the other functions of SME human resources.

12. Develop a guide for supervising self-directed career-management practices based on the various intervention practices offered in partnership with enterprises.

### **Future Research on Career GPS**

1. Make the Career GPS available online as part of a pan-Canadian study, while documenting the effects of this self-directed process within a variety of organizational contexts and taking into account different populations and their career development, work adjustment, and re-entry issues.
2. Continue to validate the Career GPS process with employed individuals in other provinces and with a variety of population groups.
3. Develop specifications for possible forms of cooperation between a self-directed career management practice and prior learning recognition in sectors viewed as priorities.
4. Conduct a study of the transfer of learning about the processing of the information required for project development, including skills development. There seems to have been learning and the transfer of that learning to the seeking out of information, but more comprehensive studies need to be conducted in order to better support such transferability. Currently, there does not seem to be any specific data for evaluating the transfer of this knowledge, which is considered fundamental to project development, including skills development.
5. It would be worthwhile to better document the effects of the Career GPS in relation to the seeking out of information through relationships, decisions, and actions. Those processes should be delved into more deeply in order to generate evidence-based data for better documenting the context.
6. A future study should investigate whether undertaking this type of process may enable employed individuals to achieve certain goals and enterprises to increase their productivity and better manage their workforce.
7. Preparing a CV or skills-based portfolio is an effective strategy. It would be worthwhile to conduct a specific study with different types of CVs and portfolios for certain employed populations.
8. During the study (Goyer, 2009-2010), qualitative data were collected, but they will be destroyed in five years time if they are not transcribed and rendered anonymous. The recorded interviews with the employed individuals were consulted but not transcribed. However, a synopsis of those interviews was transcribed. It would be useful to do some case studies in order to broaden our understanding the Career GPS process with these

data, which would require another grant for transcribing the follow-up interviews and doing a comprehensive analysis of the data.

9. Conduct a pilot study in which online services would be offered on the basis of the literature on the subject. This study would make it possible to evaluate the relevance and effectiveness of this type of service with regard to the evaluation framework developed by the CRWG (2007).
10. Career self-management practices can be delivered electronically. "The demand for career guidance services exceeds its supply. More flexible delivery methods, including use of ICT and of call centres, have great potential for extending access" (OECD, 2004b, p. 7). While there are several reasons that mitigate in favour of such delivery methods, it is urgent to give direction to future research. While international consensus anticipates that electronic delivery will be highly effective (Yang et al. 2007; Riverin-Simard, 2010), it is obvious that caution is required in relation to online career management programs. There is no exhaustive review of the scientific literature on this topic. According to Plant (2002), some programs need to be complemented by an in-person interview or telephone conversation. However, proposing online programs requires prior selection based on rigorous criteria. According to Savikas et al. (2009; 2010) and Plant (2005), most of these programs seem to adopt a reductive approach to career guidance. Complements or corrections to those programs must be developed by recognized, certified practitioners in the guidance field or at least under their supervision. The offer of such intervention tools would be one of the conditions necessary for workplace career management programs to be delivered from a lifelong learning standpoint. **It is urgent that this issue be documented through evaluative research based on empirical data.**