

**COMMON INDICATORS:  
TRANSFORMING THE CULTURE OF EVALUATION IN CAREER  
DEVELOPMENT AND EMPLOYMENT SERVICES**

**REPORT NO. 1**

**SYNOPSIS FOR PROJECT # 011186210**

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on Evidence-Based Practice in Career Development**



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## SYNOPSIS REPORT FOR PROJECT #011186210

### COMMON INDICATORS: TRANSFORMING THE CULTURE OF EVALUATION IN CAREER DEVELOPMENT AND EMPLOYMENT SERVICES

This project included two distinct activities to collect information and data. The first activity was empirical research conducted over an eleven month period (May, 2012-March, 2013) in English in Saskatchewan, English and French in New Brunswick and French in Québec. The second activity was a working symposium bringing together researchers, policy makers, and managers of career and employment services in the provinces and territories to synthesize what has been learned under two major HRSDC research funding envelopes over the past five years; what research beyond the HRSDC envelopes has contributed to understanding what works in career and employment services (including what works in labour market information) ; as well as to explore innovations at the provincial/territorial levels and to collectively arrive at a series of recommendations for next steps needed to solidify and continue to advance the evidence base for career and employment services. This Synopsis Report provided highlights of the findings from the research study in all provinces as well as insights and recommendations from the Working Symposium titled “From Research to Practice”.

### BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT:

Career development and employment services consume significant financial resources from various levels of government, affect citizens’ lives in powerful and enduring ways, involve the expertise and emotional investment of thousands of practitioners meeting face-to-face with clients in need, and foster incalculable and considerable economic, health and social well-being benefits (Jarvis, 2012; Redekopp, 2009). Given the cost and significance of these services, one would expect they would be accompanied by rigorous measurement, standardized metrics for performance and outputs, and large data sets that could be compared country to country, province to province and region to region. This is not the case, however.

Elements of evaluation exist, of course, but at a level that is extremely crude. As a country, we measure whether clients become employed or not (and sometimes how long that takes) and, often, the nature of the employment (e.g., full-time or part-time). Below is an example of the kinds of indicators most often tracked and reported:

- Current employment status of client
- Current education level of client
- Designated group status of client
- Client participation in:
  - Employment Services:
    - Interventions by Employability Dimension

- Skills Development and Upgrading
- Work Experience
- Combination of work experience and skills development
- Workplace Based Skills Development
- Action Plans Opened and Completed
- Labour Force Attachment at end of service and at 3 and 6 months post service
  - Client earnings

Traditional performance measurement systems measure very little about fundamental concerns such as the quality of employment (Does it fit with the person? Will they stick with it? Is it suited to their skill set?), the means by which the client went from being unemployed to employed (What interventions work?; How does self-help differ from practitioner-help?); the context in which the client is seeking a change (Is training available near them? Is work readily available?), or the living context the client carries with them as they walk in the door of the employment office (How hopeful are they? What needs do they have? What barriers are in their way?).

Our lack of consistent measurement on the above indicators means that we cannot empirically connect how these indicators affect each other in a meaningful manner. We do not know, for example, to what degree employment services help individuals find work or enter training that fits with their skills or personal visions, to what degree seeing a client five times is different than seeing a client twice, or to what degree clients are likely to succeed in work or education if they feel high self-efficacy versus low self-efficacy or high optimism versus high pessimism.

This study was an effort to address both issues raised above: consistent measures, and connections between what they measure. The first aim of the study was to use, develop or adapt measures that could be used as common indicators for key inputs (e.g., client characteristics; employment opportunities; employment needs), processes (e.g., the kinds of services provided; the working alliance between practitioner and client) and outcomes (e.g., the degree to which employment fits a client's skills and qualifications; the adequacy of the standard of living afforded by the employment). The second aim was to make as many connections as possible between the inputs, processes and outcomes that were measured (e.g., labour market outcome achieved and employment need; level of services provided and labour market outcome; specific kind of service and degree of change in knowledge and skill acquired to support work search).

The CRWG had adopted a variation of a simple Input → Process → Outcome framework and conducted research that tested and validated specific components of the framework and specific employment interventions. The studies were able to demonstrate the impact of specific interventions on client knowledge and skill acquisition, specific client personal attributes and employment and training outcomes over a three month period. Tracking and capturing data on knowledge, skill and personal attribute variables was an innovation in performance measurement systems. The earlier studies confirmed the potential of specific aspects of the CRWG model to capture more comprehensive and meaningful performance measures but did not test all components of the framework in a range of service settings with typical clients of career and employment service centres. The Common Indicators Research Project was the first opportunity to test the full framework.

The table below lists the indicators that were tracked in the Common Indicators project:

- Inputs:
  - Regional profile of employment and training opportunities
  - Practitioner background and experience
  - Client employment potential:
    - Current employment status of client
    - Current education level of client
    - Designated group status of client
    - Employment history of client
    - Identification of any employment barriers: health; language; support system
- Process:
  - Intake Assessment: client needs identification in all five employability dimensions:
    - Rating scale of: Client needs assistance: not at all; not much; a little; quite a lot; a lot
  - Identification of Additional Life Circumstances that may impact on employability outcomes (i.e. improved housing needed; increased sense of responsibility needed; improved capacity to study needed)
  - Employment Goal and Action Plan
  - Identification of Personal Attribute Needs that may impact on employability (i.e. ability to self-manage; self-efficacy, self-esteem)
  - Quality of Working Alliance and Client Engagement
  - Client participation in:
    - Service Menu provided by office (as provided by participating offices)
  - Indicators of Client Change (+ or -) and Client Progress after each client contact
  - Revisions to Employment Goal and Action Plan
- Outcome:
  - Changes in any Employability Dimension (knowledge or skill)
  - Changes in Life Circumstances
  - Changes in Personal Attributes
  - Quality of Working Alliance and Client Engagement
  - Employment or Training Status (employed, in training or waitlisted, neither)
    - Fit of employment/training with skill and qualification levels
    - Fit of employment/training with goal
    - Fit of training with employment opportunities
    - Adequacy of salary
  - Neither employed nor in training:
    - Indications of client progression toward employment or training

The project was undertaken by the Canadian Research Working Group on Evidence Based Practice in Career Development (CRWG) in partnership with the Canadian Career Development Foundation (CCDF) and with the provinces of Saskatchewan, Québec and New Brunswick. The overall objective of the research was to develop and test a performance measurement tool that captured both elements of services already being captured **as well as** elements of services identified by front line practitioners and research studies as having impact on employability outcomes but not usually captured and reported.

## OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

The research questions addressed in the empirical research were:

- What common indicators are applicable across different client contexts, different client groups, different agencies and different interventions? and
- What statements about service effectiveness can be made by tracking common indicators of inputs, processes and outcomes? If numbers permit it will be possible to aggregate data to begin to address the ultimate question: What kinds of interventions in what contexts produce what kinds of results?

The first research question is critical. In order to build a strong evidence base for career and employment services, it is necessary to track common indicators across divergent client groups, different delivery settings and different labour markets. Different delivery settings can of course also gather data specific to their own realities along with common indicators but it is the common indicators that will build the foundation for evidence-based practice and the ability to make linkages between inputs, processes and outcomes.

New Brunswick Post-Secondary Education, Training & Labour (PETL), Saskatchewan Abilities Council (SAC) and eight employment offices in Québec agreed to participate in the research study. The study was especially fortunate to have these offices that serve different populations. PETL practitioners work in provincial government offices and clients are mainstream clients, many of whom are job-ready and do not have significant barriers to employment. PETL services are typically relatively short-term. SAC offices are part of a non-profit organization supported by the provincial government, working primarily with individuals with disabilities and one or more significant barriers to employment. SAC services are typically long-term. Clients in the Québec offices include both employment ready and non-employment ready. This diversity in work settings, service delivery models and client profiles afforded a valuable opportunity to test out the online tool in highly diverse settings.

Although we cannot be confident that the client sample was representative of the entire population of career and employment services clients across Canada, this diversity also provided a good sampling of individuals who are members of an aboriginal group and persons with a disability. It allowed us to test the online data gathering tool with a heterogeneous population and to test the workability and robustness of the system across different client groups and in different service settings.

The second question begins to address what really works in career and employment services. This research question was ambitious given the eleven month duration for the research. It was clear from the beginning that the research could not possibly answer the second question definitively. The research could, however, show tendencies and relationships with predictive value and thus show a pathway to measuring client progress in a meaningful way and connecting specific variables to labour market outcomes.

The research was conducted over an eleven month period (May, 2012-March, 2013) in English in Saskatchewan, English and French in New Brunswick and French in Québec.

In the Québec research study headed by Dr. Guylaine Michaud, Université de Sherbrooke, the major research focus was on studying if and how an online tool based on the CRWG model could be used effectively to track client progress, client change and service results as well as the impact of using such a tool on practitioner practice and on employment services overall.

In the New Brunswick and Saskatchewan research study headed by Dr. Dave Redekopp, Life-Role Development Group, the major research focus was on identifying and exploring relationships among the input, process and outcome indicators in the CRWG model and on studying and tracking client changes in learning, personal attributes and labour market outcomes over an eight week intervention period (1 week for assessment and intake into the research; 6 weeks of services; 1 week for exit from the research). This study began to explore the predictive power of any of the indicators on client labour market outcomes.

With respect to the actual online tool, the versions used in New Brunswick and Saskatchewan (French and English) were identical. The French tool developed for Québec included a number of variations adapted to the Québec context and the service delivery setting but the similarities between the tools far exceeded the differences. For example, in the Québec version, there were a few additional indicators outlining need in each employability dimension (employability dimensions were identical), a few additional life circumstances and a few more personal and direct questions in the client demographic survey that researchers were asked to not include in the Saskatchewan survey. Personal attributes were also assessed using a somewhat different method. The differences were in the details included in the online versions but there were no substantive differences in the common indicators themselves.

There was also one difference in the research protocols for the practitioners between the provinces as follows:

- Practitioners in Québec were required to record change or progress in the Personal Attributes of the client and in the Working Alliance between client and practitioner after every client contact;
- Practitioners in New Brunswick and Saskatchewan were encouraged but not required to record any change or progress on the part of the client in learning across the employability dimensions as well as personal attributes and working alliance.

Finally, there was an important difference in the surveys completed by clients participating in the study as follows:

- Clients in the Québec study completed three separate standardized tests measuring Self-Esteem, Self-Efficacy and Coping Behaviours before entering the study and also at exit from the study;
- Clients in the New Brunswick and Saskatchewan study completed one non-standardized survey giving their own self-assessment of changes in learning and personal attributes that had occurred over the 6 weeks in which they received services. At the exit interview they were asked to estimate where they were with respect to each indicator when they entered the research (pre) and to estimate where they were at the end of the research (post). They were also asked to what they attributed any change, be it positive or negative.

These differences resulted from distinct differences in implementing the project with the career and employment service offices in each province and also from the very tight timeframe for the study.

Because delivery systems and contexts differ in francophone New Brunswick and in Québec, it was necessary to develop three different versions of the online tool, an English version for Saskatchewan and New Brunswick, a French version for New Brunswick and a French version for Québec. This was not anticipated in the workplan and was more resource intensive than anticipated. The three versions were developed collaboratively.

With respect to the research protocols and implementation, researchers worked more independently as there was insufficient time for extensive collaboration if we were to meet the implementation dates for the system to track clients over an eight week period. This resulted in both research teams taking somewhat different approaches to the research and focusing on specific aspects of the research questions. In the end, this proved to be added value to the project. The Québec project focus was on studying the validity of the online tool using the CRWG model, how it might be used and improved and what it might contribute to practice and services. The Québec research emphasis was focused on question 1: What common indicators are applicable across different client contexts, different client groups, different agencies and different interventions? The focus of the New Brunswick and Saskatchewan research was on exploring relationships between input, process and outcome variables and exploring the predictive power of any of these relationships. The New Brunswick/Saskatchewan research emphasis was on question 2: What statements about service effectiveness can be made by tracking common indicators of inputs, processes and outcomes? If numbers permit it will be possible to aggregate data to begin to address the ultimate question: What kinds of interventions in what contexts produce what kinds of results?

These provincial differences proved to be a rich source of information on divergent aspects of the online tool, how it might be used, what it might contribute to practice and to services, its potential predictive power, and how it may assist in transforming the culture of evaluation in career and employment services.

## HIGHLIGHTS OF QUEBEC RESULTS

The Québec study shed light on how implementation of an online tool based on the CRWG's evaluation model may contribute to transforming the culture of evaluation in employability services in Canada. The following are the key findings:

- 3 categories of common indicators were clearly identified. These categories are:
  - Employability Context: Client employment needs and overall life circumstances; employment and training opportunity realities; practitioner background and experience;
  - Progress: Actions taken and progress made resulting from program and service interventions;
  - Outcomes: Achievement of goals related to changes across all five employability dimensions including labour market outcomes.

These categories take the CRWG model to another level of precision and consistency and refine considerably the understanding and implementation of the Inputs, Processes and Outcomes framework.

- Six of the seven personal attribute indicators were shown to be valid and able to be followed and tracked consistently by practitioners. These indicators are:
  - Self-Efficacy
  - Client Engagement
  - Working Alliance
  - Self Esteem
  - Self-Management
  - Self Awareness

Well-being was the seventh personal attribute and was not sufficiently robust to be retained.

- Practitioners confirmed the value of using an on-line tool that helps them track specific variables considered to have impact on client employability (progress within the framework of the employability dimensions, progress indicators with respect to personal attributes). With respect to the Client Employment Potential and Employment/Training Opportunity Structure, the tool needs to be tailored more specifically to specific communities and clientele profiles but the potential is there.
- Using the on-line tool had an impact on practice in the following ways:
  - Development of practitioner competencies in tracking complex client variables
  - Using multiple sources of information to assess client employability
  - Positive impact on reflective practice; tracking progress indicators encourages reflection on appropriateness of interventions
  - Increased recognition of the complexity of employability influences, interventions and change; it is not possible to evaluate career and employment services using only statistical analysis
- Confirmation of the potential of an online tool for credibly evaluating and tracking the various effects of interventions and services using the CRWG evaluation model and for contributing to transforming the culture of evaluation in career and employment services. At the same time, recognition that clarity on how results will be used by those responsible for employability services (practitioners, managers, policy makers, and researchers) will be essential to such a transformation.
- The study has demonstrated the potential of a tool to provide answers to the question: with whom, in what context, with what types of services do we achieve what results? There are revisions, improvements, refinements and additional experimentation needed in order to be able to do the analysis necessary to respond satisfactorily to this question but this study has demonstrated significant progress.

## HIGHLIGHTS OF THE NEW BRUNSWICK AND SASKATCHEWAN RESULTS

A major contribution from the New Brunswick/ Saskatchewan study was its focus on exploring the indicators that contribute to positive labour market outcomes and the indicators that appear to hold promise of predictive power. Of particular note are the following:

- The Working Alliance appears to predict positive labour market outcomes, improvements in learning and positive changes in personal attributes. Both practitioner and client self-

assessments of the working alliance were consistently strong and positive. These findings suggest that a strong and positive working alliance between practitioner and client is not a nice to have; it is a need to have.

- Positive change in personal attributes appears to influence client learning and also positive labour market outcomes.
- The ability to assume personal responsibility and to have access to strong support systems appear to be among the most influential life circumstances with respect to outcomes but more study is needed.
- Positive changes in learning across the employability dimensions occur in a six week period as reported by both practitioners and clients. Specific dimensions appear to have stronger impact. For example, needs for skill enhancement identified in the initial assessment interview were negatively correlated with employment outcomes whereas improvements in career decision making identified at the exit interview were positively correlated with positive employment outcomes.
- Overall, 31% of the 313 clients for whom outcome data exist were employed, 17% were in a training/education program and 7% were waitlisted for a program by the end of the intervention period. Whereas 65% of clients were not employed, in a program or on a waitlist before the intervention, 45% were after the intervention period, a decrease of almost one-third. It must be noted that close to 55% of the clients in the study were still receiving services at the end of the 8 week research period and as a result there was no outcome data for these clients;
- The following items were shown to have statistically significant connections to employment outcomes:
  - Employability Dimension needs (each dimension as well as a composite score)
  - Personal Responsibility and Support System
  - Personal Attributes (self-esteem; self-awareness; self-efficacy; self-management)
  - Working Alliance and Client Engagement (each as well as a composite)
- Practitioners were cautious in reporting client change in any of the indicators. Their assessments of change were modest whereas client self-assessments of change were very strong. This was especially so with respect to changes in personal attributes. More study is needed but the finding lends further support to the emphasis in the Québec study on the need for additional professional training and supervision in identifying changes in complex and subtle indicators. It also reinforces that this is not a linear model with simple cause and effects; it is multi-dimensional and complex. It is also very promising. From the client perspective, it was clear that clients valued the services they had received and they felt they had made substantial improvements.

## CONCLUSION

The research in all three provinces has demonstrated the robustness and the practicality of the CRWG model in actual career and employment services settings. The “common indicators” included in the online tool have been received by practitioners in all provinces as accurately reflecting their scope of practice and as making sense across divergent service settings. The potential for such an online tool to contribute to quality service and to a transformation of evaluation in career and employment services is significant.

With respect to employment services, this project urges policy makers to aim for a standardized approach to basic data collection, taking into account the recommendations for improvement of the online tool contained in the research reports. For the planning and improvement of career and employment services, evidence collection is critical; longitudinal data collection is important, but even more important is basic data collection across all provinces and territories. The Federal Government's research scope needs to be expanded to test what is currently working well and build upon that base.

To the question of whether there is enough similarity in career and employment services that the measurement of common indicators across service settings could contribute significantly over time to helping find out what works, what works best and for whom, this research provide evidence of a positive answer. To do so, larger samples and longer data collection periods are crucial.

Overall, this study has shown a pathway to measuring client progress in a meaningful way and provided a line of sight to the ability to connect interventions with changes in skills, knowledge and personal attributes, and to connect these changes with successful labour market outcomes.

There are many cautions and much more research needed to move such a transformation forward. A transformed evaluation culture requires buy-in from all levels, including funders, policy makers, managers, practitioners and agencies. The online tool requires refinement and can be made simpler. The New Brunswick/Saskatchewan study concluded that the number of indicators listed under each employability dimension can be reduced and still be assessed accurately. The Québec report suggests that the online tool be refined to include more functions for stronger statistical analysis. As well, the input, process and outcome indicators can be more clearly defined. The current research study did not explore the impacts of specific interventions beyond the Québec study that demonstrated greater change as a result of individual as opposed to group services. More understanding of what services actually include is a necessary next step. Longer research timeframes and client follow-up are essential to determine if the predictive potential of the tool and the several indicators sustain over time. Larger samples are needed to begin to develop the indices that could greatly strengthen the tool. These include a client employability potential index, a labour market attachment index and an employment opportunity structure index. Practitioner training, support and supervision in using the tool are required.

At the same time as there are cautions, the research studies have also demonstrated significant progress. Capturing common indicators across diverse employment and career service settings has been well demonstrated. Early indications suggest that the model has the capacity to begin to answer what kinds of services work for what kinds of clients under what kinds of circumstances. Indications are also very strong that using the CRWG model has the potential to strengthen practitioner competencies and practice and to contribute to a true transformation from a traditional “what does not work” evaluation culture to a “what works” quality service evaluation culture focused on client change.

## FROM RESEARCH TO PRACTICE: WORKING SYMPOSIUM

### QUALITATIVE INSIGHTS FROM THE WORKING SYMPOSIUM

As an addendum to this research project, a two day Symposium designed to connect research to practice was conducted and included a combination of thought-provoking speakers setting context, research panels reporting results, provincial /territorial panels presenting innovations, and working groups. The focus was on the practical applications of the research to direct services and in particular on their applications to youth and Canadian adults with low skill and/or weak labour market attachment.

The following were key findings/observations from the working groups based on having heard speakers and results of research projects:

- We need coordinating bodies that support strategic partnerships across jurisdictions and provinces/territories. These bodies (e.g. CLFDB; FLMM Career Services Working Group) have disappeared and have left a huge void that needs to be addressed. This would permit sharing of research results across the country as well as a forum for sharing promising provincial/territorial service innovations;
- Our approach across Canada is very fragmented—we have interventions that have demonstrated effectiveness and evidence based results; we have no mechanisms for widespread dissemination and implementation;
- Budgets are not influenced by research that points to evidence based practices that work; budgets remain fixed for much too long and are unresponsive (e.g. interventions such as motivational interviewing that have been demonstrated to work have no mechanism to access funding for training practitioners);
- With respect to LMI, pathways out of entry level jobs need to be transparent;
- Research results seem to still have limited influence on policy; there remains an overall single aim of a job as the only valid outcome from career and employment services. The evidence base including progress indicators needs much greater profile and influence;
- There is a need to research current practices and not just innovations; many current practices are achieving promising results and are neither evaluated nor credited.

The following overall recommendations emerged from the Symposium:

- A national Career Development Strategy that addresses individual needs, labour force participation, inequality and national productivity is required;
- A National Forum for knowledge and innovative practice sharing that meets regularly and includes federal, provincial, education, labour and non-profit representation needs to be established;
- Colleges and universities need to connect more directly to labour market realities. Effective strategies for youth including early intervention and post-graduation strategies need to be

increased and to do so, increased involvement of employers in the whole continuum of career and employment services is necessary;

- For low skilled adults, as indicated in the program evaluations of the Labour Market Development Agreement (LMDA), there is a high degree of variation in participant outcomes across Canadian jurisdictions; studies to identify how these differences arise could contribute to more effective services;
- Focus and funding are needed to support implementation strategies for career interventions that have been researched and have demonstrated effectiveness.

A future research agenda to continue to expand the evidence base:

- Research current practices; we do not really know what is working well now and the results that are currently being achieved;
- Research assessment processes to uncover what works; build a consistent approach to assessment based on evidence;
- Conduct further research with both employers and young adults to address career development programs and initiatives that would begin to bridge supply and demand;
- Identify funding sources and new partnerships.

The full research reports and the Symposium Report are available at [www.crwg-gdrc.ca](http://www.crwg-gdrc.ca) and at [www.ccdf.ca](http://www.ccdf.ca).