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# Case Study 3: Nova Scotia - Futureworx

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## Introduction

Education offerings for adults with limited literacy skills too often consist of stand-alone programs tied to specific funding objectives. Integrated programming, in contrast, offers the opportunity to combine programs and services in effective and meaningful ways to meet the needs of learners, not institutions.

While some have documented what integrated programming is and why it is worth considering, few have described the realities faced by those who attempt to implement it<sup>1</sup>. In order to address this knowledge gap, a two-year project, funded through Employment and Social Development Canada's Office of Literacy and Essential Skills, explored and documented the process of implementation in different contexts. *Designed to Work / Sur Mesure pour l'Emploi* worked in four provinces to support implementation sites as they set up integrated programming for adults with limited literacy skills. Within this project, research was conducted to identify the conditions that are conducive to the establishment of integrated programs. Case studies were used to explore how these programs are implemented.

## Research methods

This case study captures activities associated with the development and delivery of Futureworx's Environmental Services Technician program, developed between 2011 and 2012, and first offered in 2012. At the time of writing, Futureworx had just completed delivering the program for the fifth time.

Three data collection techniques were used to gather data from Futureworx to produce this case study: individual interviews, group interviews and document review. To carry out the research, one researcher conducted telephone interviews on two separate occasions, and visited the site for a half day in January 2015. The visit included an opportunity to speak with the program coordinator and trainers, and to gather program-related documents.

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<sup>1</sup> See RESDAC's report, *The what & why of integrated programming: A review of the literature*, by Geraci & Mazzulla (2013).



The following interviews were conducted:

- One telephone interview with the project manager
- One in-person interview with two trainers and the project manager
- One telephone interview with the project manager and two trainers
- One telephone interview with the executive director

Program staff reviewed several drafts of this case study to offer corrections and clarifications, and to elaborate on the contents as necessary.

## Case Study

### Program Description

The Environment Services Technician (EST) program offers integrated programming and industry-related certification to unemployed, under-employed and under-skilled individuals seeking employment in cleaning and janitorial services in the hospitality, retail, government, education and health care sectors. Developed by employment service provider Futureworx in consultation with employers and industry stakeholders, the program aims to develop the knowledge, skills and competencies necessary to work safely and effectively in cleaning and janitorial positions. Successful completion of the program yields participants a certificate produced by Futureworx that is recognized by Nova Scotia's Department of Labour and Advanced Education and by employers.

The integrated program offers essential, employability and technical skills development, and unpaid work placements described as work exposures. The program also integrates certification in a number of areas related to work in cleaning and healthcare settings.

The program is offered over a 23-week period with fixed start and end dates, and comprises approximately 413 theoretical and laboratory skills training hours and two 80-hour work exposure placements. Participants attend the skills upgrading portion of the program four days per week; during work exposure placements, participants are at the work site five days per week.

### Context

Part of a provincial network of employment service providers, Futureworx has been offering employment assistance programming, including career exploration and employment training, for more than 30 years. Integrated, occupation-specific programs such as the EST program, are

developed and offered in response to funders' requests for programming and industry-identified skills shortages. While Futureworx receives some core funding, most of its programs are funded through short-term project funding typically offered through Nova Scotia's Department of Labour and Advanced Education Skills Development Branch, or the Department of Community Services.

Based in Truro, Nova Scotia, their skills development and vocational training serves unemployed, under-employed and under-skilled individuals. All Futureworx programs target individuals with barriers to employment; these can include education, disability, age, income assistance dependency, family status, geography and low literacy. The individuals served by Futureworx often experience challenges gaining access to and succeeding in other training programs. They may lack the pre-requisite skills or credentials to qualify for existing training, or find course demands outstrip their abilities.

Futureworx offers customized programs to address the barriers this client group experiences while keeping their expectations high. Staff view the classroom as an extension of the workplace, and hold the same expectations of participants as employers will ultimately have. While their programs employ a variety of instructional methods, including role-play and projects, they emphasize teamwork and a hands-on approach to learning.

## Initiation

### *Needs identification*

The EST program originated from a need identified by employers in the healthcare sector. Several employers expressed a need for educational programming that would target occupations in health care support services. Futureworx used this information as a starting point to carry out a needs analysis, in which they sought evidence about the number and types of support services jobs in the field, as well as the employment outlook. Staff members approached sector councils and employers to find out what their hiring projections were over the next several years, and investigated the quality of jobs that would become available. From local employers, they learned that their methods of hiring environmental service workers, which included traditional recruitment methods and a few days of on-the-job training, were not resulting in a stable, reliable workforce. Skill requirements for these jobs were on the rise, largely out of concerns for health and safety, and employers acknowledged that new hires often did not have the skills required to manage the increased demands.

Futureworx's mandate is to create training for jobs in areas of the labour market with demand, but their focus is also on jobs that are likely to sustain the individual and provide them with financial independence. To this end, the needs analysis phase also investigated wages and the availability of benefits such as extended health care and pensions. Because many of the jobs initially identified were entry-level, Futureworx also tried to understand what type of advancement was available in the field. In their experience, focussing on quality jobs has a number of spin-off benefits. It is easier to recruit program participants, participants tend to be motivated to succeed and complete the programming, and once hired, employees are likely to remain in these jobs if pay and working conditions are on par with or exceed industry averages.

### *Steering Committee*

Futureworx found that local and regional employers were willing to participate as steering committee members in large part because they saw the need for workers in the field and so perceived a direct benefit for the time and effort they contributed. Steering committee members were identified through open meetings set up during the needs analysis phase. Through those initial efforts, Futureworx had gleaned that staff from long-term and acute-care health facilities were more likely to attend and contribute to the sessions. Just as importantly, these employment settings represented the highest proportion of destinations for EST workers, with wages and benefits set higher than the industry average. Apart from employers, steering committee members included representatives from government departments, as well as subject matter and industry experts.

The steering committee was initially struck to offer input on training content and the curriculum. They met regularly throughout the design phase. Their input was sought in helping to establish realistic criteria for participant selection, and to determine success criteria for program completion and certification. They were also consulted during program delivery to evaluate learner performance in work placements, discuss progress, brainstorm concerns as they arose, and advise on curriculum content.

Futureworx staff members contend that choosing an occupational focus in a sector that was actively seeking recruits translated to a high level of employer participation. Committee members were motivated to make the program work because they could see the benefits they would ultimately derive from good quality training. Steering committee members felt invested in the program, in part because they participated in its development. They knew first hand that training content was relevant and that graduates would have the requisite skills to be successful on the job. As a result, steering committee members were motivated to offer work placements to trainees, thereby creating a ready source of placement opportunities for program staff to

draw on. As the pilot program wrapped up, employers on the steering committee could see how well trained participants were, and how prepared they were to become valuable employees.

The need for ongoing steering committee involvement abated once the pilot was completed and the program had been formalized; however, employers still remain connected to the program in other ways. The program coordinator and instructors maintain their relationships with employers for the purpose of keeping the training relevant and of identifying changes in the industry that could have an impact on training outcomes. Employers continue to provide work exposure placements.

## Design

### *Program Design*

The program was organized into two levels, each of which includes classroom instruction and a work exposure. Participants who complete both levels spend approximately 17 weeks in a classroom setting, learning theory and skills related to the job of Environmental Service Technician. Participants attend the classroom portion of the training four days a week, from 8:30 to 4:30. The emphasis is on hands-on activities that combine theory and application, including labs and project-based learning. Two 40-hour work exposures are integrated into the program: the first is scheduled at the end of Level 1, and occurs in an education, hospitality, retail or office setting. The second work exposure occurs towards the end of Level 2, and takes place in a long-term care or acute care facility. Some flexibility is built into the program schedule to accommodate participant orientation and program wrap-up, as well as variations in participants' work exposure schedules.

Having the two levels was viewed as a way for participants who are not able to complete the full program to achieve some skills and qualifications. While participants must complete both levels to work in healthcare settings, participants who successfully complete only Level 1 can work in non-healthcare settings where EST jobs do not require the same degree of training and certification. While these lower qualifications are reflected in lower rates of pay, the jobs serve the needs and abilities of some trainees.

Program features have remained relatively stable since its inception, with technical, essential and employability skills (sometimes referred to as soft skills) developed concurrently. The majority of program participants have training needs in one or all areas; as such, the program maintains an emphasis on helping participants develop all three skills sets in order to make a successful transition to employment. It has been the experience of Futureworx staff that traditional, sequential programming does not work well for their clients. The traditional pathway

of literacy to skills training to employment skills programs takes too long, costs too much and yields few results for their clients. Furthermore, employability skills are often not part of the equation, with traditional courses tending to focus on either the technical or the literacy skills. Futureworx staff find that addressing all three skill areas is a better recipe for success. Skills are integrated in a way that truly reflects workplace expectations, which in turn helps participants see the relevance of what they are learning.

Staff members maintain strict expectations on the submission of assignments, completion of homework and overall demonstration of acceptable employability skills, both during class time and in work exposures. Participants are expected to meet all program requirements including submitting assignments and completing tests on schedule. Punctuality and attendance are strictly monitored to reflect workplace expectations.

### *Staffing Model*

The instructors and program manager work together closely from the participant selection process through graduation. One instructor focuses on technical skills instruction and the other is responsible for employability and essential skills development. The program manager oversees work placements and maintains close contact with employers throughout.

Since the program is offered on an as-needed basis, instructors may need to be hired to teach a new program cycle, or they may be selected from current staff members. The program manager feels it is necessary to have enough time before the program begins to hire or select appropriate staff. In addition to content knowledge, the program manager looks for strong interpersonal and communication skills when hiring instructional staff, finding those qualities to be critical to working in the small team teaching and coaching environment. She finds that instructors' personalities have to complement each other, and offer a balance in perspectives. Having the time to invest in developing relationships between staff members before they have participants in front of them is key to success.

Program staff begin working on the program several weeks prior to program start-up. This gives instructors time to become familiar with the curriculum and the delivery method, consult with employers, funders and referral agents, and start the participant selection process.

During the program, staff members draw on their own work experiences to emphasize and teach the combination of skills and attitudes that will help participants become successful employees. Both instructors feel setting high expectations for participants reinforces the behaviours that employers will ultimately value. At the same time, the instructors place emphasis on fostering a supportive training environment. They find the 23-week program period

is adequate for staff and participants to get to know each other and to build trust. The instructors feel this sense of community and trust is a key ingredient for learning, particularly with the emphasis on employability skills. They acknowledge that group building can be a challenge. There is often a period of “storming” when it is necessary to manage the group more closely. Understanding group dynamics and the stages people go through when working together allows them to move through the uncomfortable stages and develop a sense of shared purpose.

Time is built into the program schedule for staff to meet, plan and work together to address any concerns. Participants are not on-site one day per week, and this is the day staff spend time meeting, planning lessons, visiting employers and attending professional development.

### *Resources*

The biggest challenge Futureworx experiences lies in securing timely funding for their integrated programs. Futureworx knows the need for this type of programming is constant; however, they are only able to offer integrated programs when dedicated funding is available. They are often in a position where they receive referrals but cannot confirm when they will be able to offer the requested program. At other times, they need to begin offering a program with very little notice as funding becomes available. The uncertainty of funding makes maintaining program staff difficult.

The fact that employers endorse their program offerings means that funders are typically willing to offer their support when funding is available. To keep start-up periods as contained as possible, Futureworx maintains industry and referral agency relationships and usually has a waitlist of applicants who are interested in the program. Their organizational structure allows them to manage some of the ups and downs experienced by short-term changes in funding levels. The agency has core, head office and casual staff members who can be assigned to short-term initiatives such as needs analyses or curriculum development as the need arises.

## Program Delivery

### *Recruitment and Outreach*

Most outreach takes the form of ongoing communication with intermediaries, such as case workers and employment counsellors, who make referrals to Futureworx. Because staff members have established relationships with caseworkers and other intermediaries, they field questions about upcoming programs and assemble lists of interested candidates. Staff members participate in sector council meetings, and present at job fairs and other forums to promote the

EST and other programs. The project manager also represents the program at provincial conferences and maintains ongoing contact with funding agencies.

Program information is sent to local and regional job search centres and to social services caseworkers with invitations to refer their clients. Interested candidates' names are added to a waiting list until such time as Futureworx is able to offer a program. While any interested client can apply to the program, funding guidelines may dictate selection priority. For example, where one government department offers full funding, it may restrict seats to those who are in receipt of specific government benefits or income assistance.

### *Intake*

The program usually accepts 15 participants to start. The intake process is fairly rigorous, and begins at least four weeks prior to program start. The goal of the screening activities that occur during intake is to identify candidates who are motivated to learn and work, and able to acquire the skills set out in the training program.

Once funding is in place to offer a program, Futureworx typically starts by advertising the program; potential participants can self-refer or be referred through an intermediary. Staff hold one or more information sessions to provide interested candidates with a program description and selection criteria. Staff members try to paint a realistic view of employment conditions and of employer requirements; in this way, individuals are able to make informed decisions about whether their backgrounds, current life circumstances and future goals align with program and employment opportunities. In addition to attending an information session, participants must complete a placement test, participate in a one-to-one interview with staff, and have their references checked.

For the EST program, a decision was made to select participants with essential skills in the level 2 range. The entry requirements were determined as part of the curriculum development process and stakeholder consultations and informed by both data collected during the needs analysis phase and Employment and Social Development Canada's Essential Skills Profiles. CAMERA Placement<sup>2</sup> is used to screen candidates and determine whether their essential skills are in the level 2 range. If applicants' assessment results are lower than the minimum entrance requirements, they are given feedback regarding where the gaps are, and provided with contact

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<sup>2</sup> CAMERA (Communications and Numeracy Employment Readiness Assessment) is a literacy and numeracy assessment system designed for workforce programming. The French-language version is known as CAMERA *en français*. CAMERA is available through PTP Adult Learning and Employment Programs, Toronto, Ontario. [www.ptp.ca](http://www.ptp.ca).

information for community resources that may be able to help them bridge the gaps. These are typically providers who focus on literacy or essential skills enhancement.

Staff members carry out an internal applicant review during which candidates who meet the screening criteria are discussed. Each application is reviewed to evaluate suitability and to identify existing barriers to employment. The final stage in the process includes the selection of participants with employer involvement. When possible, employers attend a selection panel session that allows them to meet candidates in person and conduct an abbreviated job interview. If a face-to-face selection panel is not possible, employers and Futureworx staff conduct a selection meeting during which employers are provided with a summary of the candidates along with recommendations by Futureworx staff.

Futureworx feels employers' early involvement means they are more invested in the participants and have more trust in the program itself. Staff members acknowledge it is a time consuming process, but feel it is worthwhile given their program generally has a retention rate of over 80% and a post-program employment rate of more than 70%.

Course expectations and policies are set out in a participant handout. Once participants are accepted into and start the program, they are asked to sign an agreement acknowledging they understand program expectations and agree to adhere to the policies governing their participation in the classroom and work exposures.

### *Curriculum*

The original program curriculum was developed with input from the steering committee who themselves represented industry, education and government. The development process took close to a year to complete, with frequent opportunities for review and input from the steering committee. Those with occupational expertise were hired to advise on the curriculum to ensure it reflected the most current requirements within the sector. Curriculum developers shadowed workers on job sites, conducted interviews with workers, supervisors and employers, and collected authentic workplace documents to understand both what the jobs entailed, and the essential skills requirements of the occupation. Program staff, some of whom were involved in the curriculum design process, feel the time they took to seek input was well worth the effort. They are convinced that the process resulted in employer buy-in before the program had even started, and that the resulting curriculum is an accurate reflection of occupational demands. Upon completion of the initial pilot, Futureworx worked with an expert in occupational standards development who reviewed the curriculum and assisted in further enhancement of the curriculum. There continues to be ongoing program evaluation, both during and after each program cycle. Meetings are held regularly with employers who offer work exposure placements

to discuss the effectiveness of the program in preparing workers, and program staff regularly discuss points of adjustment that merit consideration.

The EST program curriculum has a total of 15 modules, nine in Level 1 and six in Level 2, and includes seven external certificates and two work exposures. The external certificates included in the program are: WHMIS, Occupational Health and Safety, Emergency First Aid/CR, Palliative Care, ADODCC (Alzheimer Disease and Other Dementia Care Course), Food Handlers, World Host, Introduction to Mental Health First Aid, and Non-Violent Crisis Intervention.

Each classroom module and work exposure has its own set of learning outcomes and objectives. Instructors work from a curriculum guide that provides them with an overall course structure while allowing them the freedom to customize learning activities as they see fit. While instructors can make learning activity adjustments independently, changes to learning outcomes or curriculum content require the input and approval of the program manager.

The ESAT tool is used throughout the program to focus discussion and development of participants' employability skills<sup>3</sup>. The tool, developed by Futureworx, emphasizes the significant role that soft skills play at work and in everyday life, and helps participants identify abilities and behaviours that will enable them to succeed on the job. Staff members find the ESAT tool helpful because it provides a structure through which sometimes-difficult discussions can take place. Program staff set expectations and provide feedback to individuals on a continuous basis. They set aside time to discuss any issues that arise, and to address any concerns directly with participants. Each participant has three check-in points over the 23-week program period to view areas of strength and growth, and to identify areas for further development.

Instruction in the EST program is divided between two instructors, one of whom is responsible for teaching the technical skills while the other coaches and addresses employability and essential skills. There is an emphasis on participatory approaches to learning, with much of the curriculum supported by opportunities for projects, team work and group discussions. Guest speakers, who are typically industry representatives, employers and subject matter experts, are brought in regularly to share their perspectives and knowledge on a range of topics.

### *Assessment*

In addition to the assessments used at intake, assessment occurs throughout the program to ensure participants understand what is taught and can apply the skills and knowledge gained

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<sup>3</sup> ESAT (Employability Skills Assessment Tool) includes a framework for developing and assessing nine employability skills. It is available through Futureworx, Truro, Nova Scotia.  
<http://futureworx.ca/content/esat>

during class time and work exposures. The learning outcomes that provide the basis for classroom learning and work placements have associated objectives that are used to assess participants' progress. Progress is measured using projects, presentations, quizzes and tests.

Employability skills development is tracked through ESAT, a tool that draws on multiple sources of information to gauge growth in nine related skills. Participants and instructors use multiple data points to monitor participants' employability skill development, including self-evaluation and evaluation data from instructors and employers. The EST program also uses a competency assessment tool (CAT) that was designed as part of the curriculum development process. The CAT, which comprises a series of observation and evaluation checklists, is used by program staff as well as work placement employers and mentors to document learners' developing employability and technical competencies. To achieve external certificates, participants must meet required outcomes set by certification bodies. All certificates must be successfully completed in order to meet the requirements of the EST program.

Participants are expected to maintain regular attendance in class, labs and placements and keep a record of their work exposure hours. Assessment within the technical skills component is carried out through a combination of quizzes and labs.

Participants are not able to proceed to a work exposure unless their instructor is confident that they can complete the work required in a safe and effective manner. This includes demonstrating a suitable degree of employability skills through the ESAT tool and meeting minimum benchmarks on the CAT prior to participating in work exposures

Instructors maintain close contact with employers throughout the work placement stages to ensure participants are integrating successfully and to identify any matters that require their attention. They emphasize the proactive nature of this approach, which enables them to manage any difficulties participants may be experiencing before they become troublesome for the employers. Futureworx relies on the good reputation it has developed with employers over the years, and program staff members recognize that employers must perceive the work placements in a positive light if they are to continue their relationship with the training provider.

## Program Evaluation

The EST program, like all integrated programs offered by Futureworx, must meet funders' evaluation criteria, which typically include program completion rates and employment rates. With high numbers of participants leaving for employment, Futureworx programs tend to deliver results well above the threshold set by funders.

In addition to statistical reporting, Futureworx carries out its own program evaluations. This is done informally and in real time as the program is being delivered, as well as more formally through staff meetings and survey data gathered from employers and participants. At the end of each program delivery cycle, staff members review the program critically to check its relevance. When employment rates in one sector start to wane, they may discontinue that program until such time as employment prospects improve. Futureworx management does not strive to offer the same training product time after time, but rather to use the same process to develop meaningful, time-sensitive training.

## Looking Forward

At the time of writing, employment opportunities continued to exist within the environmental services field, and as such another EST program was scheduled to begin soon afterwards.