The Community Ideas Factory: Fundable Solutions in Employment Equity

Abridged summary of research findings from:
"Assessing Barriers within Employment Supports: A Joint Initiative to Explore Employment Supports in the Halton Region"

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The Community Ideas Factory is a community-college partnership exploring social innovations within the charitable sector of the Halton Region. The Community Ideas Factory is made possible by the College-Community Social Innovation Fund of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC).

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Project Partners:

The Oakville Community Foundation plays an influential role in the Town of Oakville by linking philanthropic families and organizations with the needs of the local community.   Managing the contributions of Oakville's generous donors, the Foundation seeks to ensure that funds are utilized in a way that they can continually make an impact on the local community year after year. As the 10th largest Community Foundation within the Canadian Community Foundations of Canada network, the Foundation helps to ensure that the philanthropic efforts of Oakville's donors are utilized in meaningful and sustainable ways.

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The Community Ideas Factory and Employment Supports

The Oakville Community Foundation's Vital Signs® report indicated that one of the most pressing issues facing the region was the equity gap between the rich and the poor. One of the most salient issues identified amongst the low-income population in Halton was an inability to find and maintain secure employment thus the Community Ideas Factory explored the myriad of employment supports offered throughout the Region. First, a literature review was conducted to ascertain the extent of unemployment in Canada and to identify the groups most affected. Second, an environmental scan of Employment Support Programs (ES) across the Halton Region was conducted. When information on the program was not readily available or was difficult to understand, qualitative telephone interviews were completed with representatives of the particular program. Third, surveys were conducted with employment support program participants across the Halton Region. Lastly, CPS sessions were conducted that included focus groups with Employment Support Program providers. This report contains an abridged overview of each segment of the research and concludes with recommendations for improving the ES sector.

Phase One: Summary of the Literature Review

Rising unemployment leads to multiple issues for the vulnerable sectors discussed throughout this paper. Unemployment leads to a ripple effect of issues; financial insecurity can result in depression, lowered self-esteem, and isolation to name a few. Despite the unemployment rates however Canada is in dire need of labour power as the older generation is retiring and the population is not increasing. Immigrants and refugees thus become vital to fill in gaps of various positions, however, the systemic barriers they face continue to increase their inability to gain employment. Ex-offenders who are eager and willing to secure employment after incarceration are unable to do so due to stigmatization and underdeveloped skills. It is particularly crucial for ex-offenders to be offered employment as that greatly reduces recidivism rates and builds a healthier community. Individuals with mental or physical disabilities can also contribute valuable labour power but are often viewed as unwelcome in the workplace due to their conditions. Individuals with mental and substance abuse disorders are stigmatized, unable to access appropriate resources to develop work related skill, and may not have the support needed to overcome issues they may face. Barriers to employment are also gendered as the section on lone mothers demonstrated. Mothers are more likely to have sole care for their children and yet are unable to support their family financially as employment programs place them in part time, low income work that is typically preserved for women. In the youth sector they continue to face record low job opportunities, youth today are more educated than ever before but are underemployed/unemployed. Lastly, Aboriginal People are extremely disadvantaged in the labour market due to social barriers, being less educated, under skilled, and having higher incarceration rates compared to their Canadian counterparts. Each group requires direct focus in order to establish a diverse and healthy workforce where every person is given an equal opportunity to attain employment.

Understanding that the vulnerable populations identified in the academic literature review were also groups recognized to be marginalized in Halton, the Community Ideas Factory embarked on Halton-centric research in an effort to better understand the services provided within the region.

Phase Two: Environmental Scan

A qualitative analysis of perceived organizational strengths indicates that many representatives believe the breadth of services offered by their organization, or their organization's ability to serve

clients' unique needs, is their organization's greatest asset. Notably, however, relatively few representatives mentioned long-term client outcomes when describing organizational strengths. Alone, the fact that client outcomes were not frequently discussed does not indicate that positive outcomes are not being attained. This may indicate, however, a lack of focus on the long-term outcomes that clients are attaining by using the various employment services. To address broad employment issues in the Halton Region, a steadfast focus on long-term outcomes is likely necessary.

Future Growth Prospects

In terms of future growth prospects, many representatives communicated that their organizations would like to begin reaching out to new client segments to increase organizational reach. While the utility of these expansion plans cannot be honestly evaluated without an in-depth understanding of each organization, the upcoming client focus group may provide insights on whether current client segments are being effectively served. If current clients communicate that their needs are not being adequately addressed, it may be wiser for organizations to focus on improving current service offerings before expanding to new client segments.

Perceived Barriers to Employment in the Halton Region

Representatives' views pertaining to major employment issues in the Halton Region were particularly useful for obtaining an understanding of the complexity of unemployment in the community. While many of the challenges mentioned reflected the specific client bases targeted by each organization, certain issues stood out as presenting barriers to wide cross-sections of the public. One of these issues was transportation. Representatives communicated that, frequently, individuals who are struggling with unemployment do not have access to a personal vehicle, and in some cases, cannot even afford to take public transportation regularly. As a result, these individuals' already limited job opportunities are further constrained by the requirement that potential workplaces must be within walking distance of the individuals' households. Additionally, many representatives noted that, even if individuals can afford daily public transportation, the Halton transit system is unpredictable, convoluted, and does not provide easy access to many parts of the Halton Region. Resultantly, the struggle to find an accessible job continues to exist, even for people who can afford public transit.

Other issues which were commonly identified by organizational representatives included the lack of recognition of foreign credentials or experience, a lack of employer education on how to adequately accommodate people with disabilities at the jobsite, and the systemic mismatch that exists between current (postsecondary) education trends and the skills that are needed to succeed in various jobs. While some of these issues are difficult to resolve, as they exist on a systemic level, other issues, such as employer accommodation of persons with disabilities, may be partly ameliorated through creative problem solving. It will be particularly important to determine whether these perceived issues, as communicated by employment service providers, are consistent with the issues perceived by people who have used organizations' employment services to find a job.

Additional Insights

A final insight is that, as a researcher, it was quite difficult to gather information on the employment support organizations that serve the Halton Region. Despite considerable experience with the internet, the assistance of individuals who are familiar with navigating Halton Region services, and virtually unlimited access to technology, information pertaining to which organizations exist, what services those organizations offer, and the eligibility criteria for using those services, remained challenging to

locate without specifically-worded internet searches. Many of the individuals who struggle with unemployment have disabilities, are low-income, or are recent immigrants who may not be fully familiar with the English language or the Canadian employment environment. The challenges that these individuals would experience when searching for organizational information would likely be amplified. Thus, the accessibility of employment organization information is also an issue that should be addressed.

Phase Three: Surveys with Employment Support Service Users

The Oakville Community Foundation acted as the liaison between the researchers and the Employment Support agencies in an effort to facilitate engaging service users to participate in research for this project. In terms of survey participants, there was close to an equal split of participation with

self-identified women accounting for 52% of participants. The majority of participants were between the ages of 35 and 54 (73), followed by 31 individuals between the ages of 18 and 34. Twenty-six individuals were over the age of 55. The majority of individuals identified themselves as being part of a couple, either through marriage or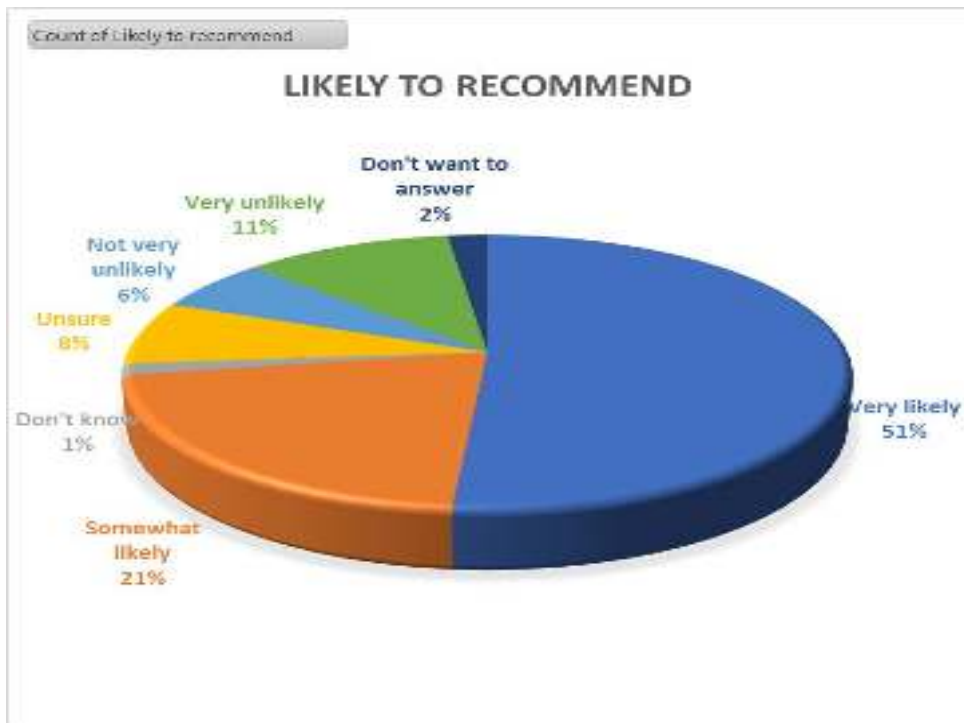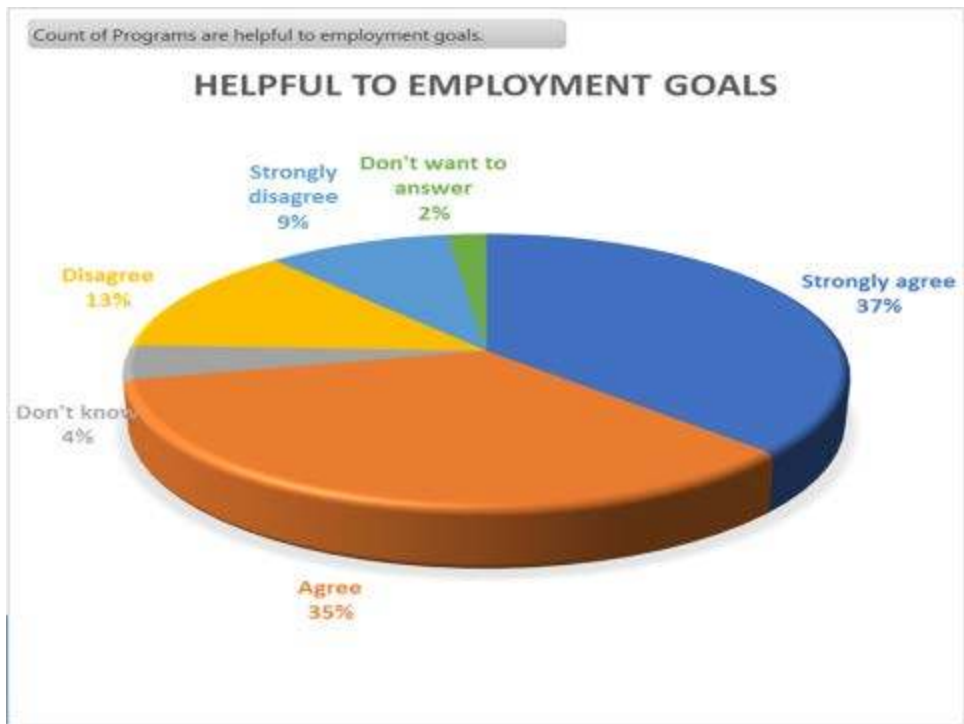 common-law living whereas 54 identified as single. The majority of the participants (86) stated that they did not have children currently living with them while 54 did. There were 95 children between those 54 participants. Ninety individuals identified themselves as a minority in Canada; immigrant, visible minority, disabled, or Aboriginal.

Count of Satisfied with overall service

SATISFIED W/ OVERALL SERVICE EMPLOYMENT

- Strongly Agree 36%
- Agree 40%
- Disagree 12%
- Disagree Strongly 9%
- Don't know 3%
- Don't want to answer 0%

In general, the quantitative data showed that the participants were satisfied with the services they had accessed in the Region. The front line workers of each of these facilities were rated extremely high for professionalism, ability to communicate, and their ability to address concerns in a timely manner. The majority of the participants (72%) felt that the programs they had utilized were helpful to their employment goals and that they would be likely to recommend the program to others. Interestingly, while over 70% of participants gave high ratings on the competencies of both the services and the front line workers in the employment support sector only 64% felt that their participation was useful in helping them obtain a job.

Count of Programs are helpful to employment goals.

HELPFUL TO EMPLOYMENT GOALS

- Strongly disagree 9%
- Don't want to answer 2%
- Disagree 13%
- Don't know 4%
- Strongly agree 37%
- Agree 35%

Count of Likely to recommend

LIKELY TO RECOMMEND

- Very unlikely 11%
- Don't want to answer 2%
- Not very unlikely 6%
- Unsure 8%
- Don't know 1%
- Very likely 51%
- Somewhat likely 21%

Qualitative Survey Findings

The quantitative survey data aligned with some of the qualitative data such as above, indicating that the majority of respondents enjoyed positive experiences with Employment Support programming. The qualitative data findings however were more nuanced and revealed some areas where participants felt improvements could be made. These data shed light on the participants' perception

of why some of them are not finding employment despite using employment programs, and what employment support agencies could do to strengthen their services.

The findings from the qualitative data suggest that the participants' perception of their inability to find employment revolved around five different themes; lack of skills, lack of social capital, lack of Canadian experience, criminal records and insufficient employment opportunities. It should be noted that there is often not a clear delineation between these issues as some who lack Canadian experience, also lack social capital and as a result cannot find sufficient employment that aligns with their skill set. Not surprisingly, the recommendations for improving the services offered mostly align.

> *The [program I used] was the biggest waste of resources and my time. It did nothing for me as a middle-aged individual. All it basically provided were resources that one could do themselves without any assistance. It took over three or more weeks just to talk to a counselor. There was no training in such basic current skills such as Microsoft Office Basics training. I couldn't see another agency unless I fired the [the one I was using] which was more of a hassle than it was worth. I would never recommend them, ever.*
> Survey Respondent

Lack of Skills

There has long been an assumption that Employment Support programs are in place to help those who do not have skills to either find employment or opportunities to build those skills. In fact Ontario Works programming, which includes Community Participation, Employment Support and Employment Placement, has been designed with the explicit focus of building work capital. Interestingly however, very few participants attributed their inability to find a job to a lack of skills. Four participants articulated that they didn't have an appropriate skill set to find any job—one participant attributed this to a lack of English skills.

> *I am professional engineer[and have] worked mainly abroad. In Canada I do not know where to and how to restart.*
> Survey Respondent

A couple participants spoke specifically about programs offered through some of the agencies directed at improving their skill sets in particular area. In both cases the participants were disappointed with the services. One particular program user argued that they had difficulty even upgrading basic skills through their agency.

Lack of Social Capital

A large number of participants however, argued that they were indeed quite skilled however were rarely being called for interviews due to a lack of social capital. Over 65% of respondents stated that they didn't know the right people in their field of work thus were "*one of 777 people applying*". Some respondents expressed great frustration in attempting to navigate a job market that requires them to rely on electronically submitting their resumes.

Lack of Canadian Experience

Despite reporting high levels of education and skills, many participants attributed their inability to locate employment in Halton to their lack of Canadian work experience. Immigrants and Newcomers to Canada expressed the most frustration in their survey responses, however much of the anger is directed at a labour market that is unresponsive to this highly skilled and yet extremely underemployed segment of the population.

[Minimum wage] is not enough. [I am] so stretched.
Survey Respondent

Insufficient Employment Opportunities

Perhaps the most multifaceted issue reported by participants was a lack of sufficient employment opportunities. This theme included a lack of sufficient living wage, lack of knowledge about transferable skills, ageism within the labour market and a perception that the Employment Support agencies are overly focused on low waged, low skilled employment rather than helping to find career jobs.

Immigrants and Newcomers found this the most difficult barrier to overcome. Some argued that finding a job with minimum wage was very easy to find through and employment agency however "*[getting] a professional job is almost impossible*". One participant articulated the concerns of several when s/he argued that "*it seemed that these organizations are better equipped to deal with low skilled people looking for minimum wage jobs. Not all immigrants are unskilled".* This also remained a salient concern for those who considered themselves to be too old, yet too qualified for the low skilled labour market.

Age

A significant number of respondents, in relation to the age category to which they belonged, argued that ageism played a major role in their lack of labour market attachment, in addition to their relationship with the employment support agencies. Respondents over the age of 50 felt particularly despairing about their chances of finding suitable employment through the agencies.

Phase Four: Focus Groups and Creative Problem Solving

After the first three phases of the research were complete a Creative Problem Solving session was scheduled for December 4 2017.. Invitations to participate were sent via email by the Oakville Community Foundation to the 22 organizations whom we conducted interviews with during the environmental scan. Two emails were sent out, an initial invitation then a reminder email. Upon reviewing those who had registered, we also sent one targeted email each to organizations who were not represented on the registration list. Registration was done online using Eventbrite.

A total of 15 people registered for the event, representing 7 organizations. Participants' job titles included: (program/operations/general) manager, job developer (coordinator), executive director, senior programs coordinator, settlement & program integration coordinator, employment advisor, and placement student. After reviewing the research, it became clear that the research needed the

voices of the frontline workers prior to the commencement of any Creative Problem Solving sessions. For this reason, two focus groups were conducted for the first two hours of the research day. Participants were split between two groups and researchers ensured that each table had a mix of representation from each organization. Below are the qualitative findings from the focus groups. The two principle investigators, Dr. McNamara and Dr. Cumming each led one focus group.

Focus Group Findings

Each of the focus groups were asked to discuss their perceived strengths as well as weaknesses within the organizations they were representing. Not surprisingly many of the discussions centered on the same themes that came to light in the surveys with the clients. Employment Support providers recognized that there were group specific issues such as lack of Canadian experience, low youth and senior job placement and difficulty helping those with complex needs such as disability, mental health and addiction issues. The majority of the focus group discussions focused on how services could be improved for the client. Three themes emerged with the first being the most contentious—managing the clients expectations. The second theme is the need for networking opportunities to help clients build social capital. Employment support providers also recommended wraparounds to better serve clients complex needs, as well as offered other suggestions for improvement that will be discussed below.

Managing Expectations

Some of the clients surveyed in Phase Three of this research expressed extreme frustration with being told to lower their expectations when looking for employment. Interestingly, this theme emerged again in the service provider focus groups with employment support front line workers articulating their frustration with clients who have unrealistic expectations. The service providers recognize that many people who come through their doors are highly educated and at times have a plethora of experience in one particular field.

The providers contend that there is indeed work available however many of their clients have high expectations about the type of job and the amount of pay they are willing to accept. Christy, an employment support provider with a not-for-profit, argued that she has many calls for workers that go unanswered;

> *"last six months is I've never seen so many employers contact us to say I need people. I need 40 people tomorrow. I need this. And it's not the high level type jobs, it's the light industrial manufacturing types of positions and they're paying around 15, 16, some 20 dollars an hour. But here in Halton? We can't fill the jobs. I do not have people that will go out and do that".*

She went on to explain it's not just highly qualified and educated individuals turning down work, rather its also youth with no work experience at all;

> "The youth don't want to do it either [*construction work*] because they're told 'high skills, high skills, parents say…'… But we've been pushing graduation rates. Push, push, push. 84% graduate grade 12… So now, when we used to have the early school leavers back in the day… You know, you left grade 10, you left

> grade 11, *you would go to a factory, you would work,*
> *and you would fill those jobs. Now kids who graduated*
> *high school think that they are too skilled to take this*
> *type of work. It's not minimum wage either, I mean, 17*
> *bucks an hour is not…"*

Julie agreed with Christy's assessment of youth, arguing that she sees high school graduates that only want to work in computers and preferably in offices. She asserts that there is zero desire to work on an assembly line or to do production work. Many of the participants agreed that "managing the client's expectations is one of the things that [is most] challenging" (Jasmine).

The service providers also recognized that even those who are highly educated had expectations that were hard for the organizations to meet. For example, Shannon acknowledged that the immigrants they see generally come through the scoring system have higher education, and strong language ability thus they assume that they will quickly have employment once they arrive in Canada. However, most employers are requiring Canadian experience making it tough for them to find jobs that meet their education and previous work experiences. Julie argued however, that she sees the same issues with Canadian born college and university graduates who have put many years in their education and have high debt and as a result are unwilling to accept nonprofessional jobs. Samantha echoed the sentiments of many of the participants when she asserted that "education's a checkbox. It qualifies you for the minimum requirement of a job. It doesn't constitute experience" (Samantha). Olive argued that this issues also persists with clients who have worked as professionals in their respective areas prior to experiencing a sudden loss of employment. She highlights that many
"have no idea how to write a resume, and how to interview".

There was a real recognition by many of the focus group participants that the majority of the jobs that they have or are able to link clients to are indeed entry-level jobs. Olive stated that the fact is that most of the clients are in fact looking qualified for entry-level thus there services have rarely been geared to the highly qualified individual. On the flip-side of that, Christy maintained that many employers also maintain unrealistic expectations about the labour pool. She noted that many still believe newcomers to Canada should be thrilled to do jobs that Canadian born workers are not interested in doing, not understanding the depth of skill and experience our immigrant population possess.

Networking
The employment support workers recognized that social networking needs to play a role in their clients paths to success in the labour market. As noted above, many already have education and experience however are just one of hundreds of people in stacks of resumes that are being sent to job postings. The workers acknowledged that when it comes to finding a job the old adage *'it's not what you know, it's who you know'* that often olds true. As a result, when asked what programs were working the best, or that they were most proud of many spoke of organized networking opportunities with employers;

> *[My favourite program is a networking day] as well as*
> *getting guest speakers… having those guest speakers*
> *come in and any employers that might not be hiring but*
> *come in as guest speakers that they can explain to our*
> *clients as employers how to navigate the system (Olive)*

> *we are doing the same, trying to… um… connect with*
> *employers and organize job fairs, events, to make it*
> *available for our clients. The coaching, the job*
> *developers we have as well connecting with the*
> *employers to make those connections possible as well*
> *and opportunities for clients (Ana)*

Some participants stated that having people come in to speak to clients also helps to inform the frontline workers of employment possibilities or programs that are available in the community. Olive spoke of a particularly useful talk given by the Halton Small Business Association;

> *Halton small business come to talk to our team and*
> *we're going to have them present throughout the year*
> *to our clients… They're doing the programs for youth,*
> *programs for 18 to 40, I think 39… General information,*
> *you can meet one-on-one with business consultants,*
> *they can help you with business plans, and they're just*
> *starting a social enterprise route… that would be my*
> *big recommendation for any of the employment centers*
> *is get them out there and in front of clients because, like*
> *I said I just, I was unaware of all the different programs*
> *that they have, and they have so many neat, really neat*
> *programs to help clients, and even for, like, students for*
> *the summer. They give up to $4000 for a student to*
> *start their own company and support them that way, so*

Other participants recognized the need for some type of social networking beyond direct links to employment. Jasmine noted that many clients she sees are socially isolated, sometimes newcomers, that do not have any type of network in the region to socialize with. There was recognition that meeting people who are in similar situations helps clients in other areas of their lives as well and allows for an informal network to share information through. Jasmine pondered the idea of developing these types of networking opportunities;

> *we see a lot of clients who are coming in to our resource*
> *who are repeat… I don't want to say they're lonely, but*
> *it's the social outlet that they get… So we see the same*
> *people typically day after day that are sitting at the*
> *computers. I wonder if there's something like a*
> *networking group that would engage those people*

A few of the participants stated that their organizations had already incorporated these types of networking opportunities, however they did not exist in the majority of organizations represented at the focus groups.

Wrap around Services

The Halton Region's employment support providers recognized that the clients they see are rarely experiencing one hardship—lack of employment—rather, most have a myriad of complex issues

that will not be easily solved by simply finding a job. Issues such as mental health and addictions, lack of stable housing, lack of transportation and weak English skills were all noted by the frontline workers as significant barriers to employment for many clients. Frontline workers such as Holly articulated shortcomings in the way that clients are currently serviced;

> *… I'm thinking of a couple of examples of clients that are hard [to place in employment]… we could do a better job with as a community is when they're tapping into… when you have a vulnerable client who is tapping, who taps into housing, food securities, a systems issue. You're trying to work on the employability element, but it's trying to get all of the other players to coordinate the case management and connect a holistic plan for that person. And that's been a huge frustration I've experienced*

Samantha also noted that simply getting to an employment Centre is difficult for many;

> *A big barrier, both from a transportation as well as time-consuming from the client perspective because they've… clients I've worked with spend considerable amount of time. It takes a day if you're using public transit to go to say a meeting with OW and a meeting with the school around a child's issue and then a meeting with us on employment and then a meeting with somebody else around a legal issue. And that's pretty much your week*

Julie agreed adding *"navigating all those services is already enough of a barrier before they even get to us".*

As mentioned earlier, each focus group was asked what programs were working particularly well or what were they were doing as an organization that they were particularly proud of. Seven of the fifteen participants discussed either pilot programs or small group efforts that were integrating services for an individual. The front line workers were emphatic about the need to keep trying to wrap services around clients.

> *… being able to integrate services, for us, a really big benefit is having the mental health team connected with our client services (Samantha).*

> *we do lots of services. For example, we bring other service provider to come and provide services out of our locations. So that way, that newcomer that they cannot go and access the Ministry services, they could access it in our premises. Then it will help them too, I think, to overcome the transportation barriers (Shannon).*

> *we do a hope centered program. And it's myself and*
> *the career development specialist who work there,*
> *and we're just two people in that office. Um, so we*
> *really focus on the individual, the individual's needs.*
> *Along with workshops, we have at least two*
> *workshops per week and they change every week.*
> *And then we do a lot of mock interviews (Ellyet).*

While understanding the need to improve their ability to "meet individuals where they are, with the needs they have" (Anne) some expressed frustration that the community wasn't doing a better job of this. Samantha noted that case managers generally show a willingness to work together however in each case she has personally witnessed it has taken a major escalation in someone's life to bring all case managers to one table. The service providers asserted this should indeed be the norm not the exception.

Suggestions for Improvements

Frontline service providers have the most contact with marginalized populations and usually come to understand their complex needs in ways that others cannot. In addition to wrap around services discussed above, participants put forth a number of suggestions to improve the ways, in which organizations are funded, their ability to work together and the types of skills and training that could be provided.

Increased Funding

As in the housing and food security sectors in Halton, the employment support sector also maintained that a shift in the way that programs and projects are funded would be highly beneficial to the organizations. Sustainable funding, rather than short term special project funding, as well as funding to increase staff to help provide the essential one on one services many clients require.

> *I think ongoing funding instead of that, again, one*
> *year, two year, three year would be very helpful, if*
> *they could give you some base funding to increase*
> *your staffing or increase your resource center*
> *(Penelope)*

Julie argued that in addition to personnel, the organizations desperately need funding to improve their technology and systems;

> *Yes, so I mean our tech – we're running on old*
> *systems, there's no money there to develop*
> *technologies or interfacings to support services that*
> *are not face to face, so, you know*

Molly articulated frustration with a funding model that calls for creative and innovative ideas in the employment support sector, while never actually showing any creativity in what gets funded. She called on the philanthropic sector to offer funding for special projects that showed some innovative thinking;

> *fund some special projects that don't fit in our*
> *current funding models... launch a particular*

> *initiative or maybe it's develop some resources or*
> *some specialty things that don't fit into our regular*
> *budget, that that would be a way to enhance our*
> *services (Molly).*

Innovative Training Opportunities

There was widespread agreement amongst the participants that most employment support services have been designed around the entry-level worker. In addition, participants recognized that the requirements of many jobs have changed drastically over the last few years. For example office administration, which at one time was a good entry level position that many women desired, has been drastically downsized and now requires a high level of technological know-how, as well as specified terminology. In addition, many women at one time chose to go into programs that trained them for caretaking work such as Personal Support Worker, however that work has been mostly moved out of public health care to private homes that require split shifts, weekends, heavy lifting and transportation to get in between clients homes. Both Samantha and Molly recognized the impact of these shifts on their clients and argued that we need to shift how we think about building skills and helping clients gain experience.

Training clients in the skills and trades that are currently in demand throughout the region was argued to be highly beneficial. Olive, explained a program that had been deemed successful within her organization as a model;

> *[a local emergency property restoration company]*
> *trained our clients on certain kinds of things, entry*
> *level carpentry and entry level... um... certain*
> *different, you know, different skills that they could*
> *learn with clean up and general maintenance, and*
> *then [the company] hired them on. So, you know, I*
> *know there's kind of some meetings maybe with*
> *Habitat for Humanity, like, getting your clients in*
> *learning*

The idea of finding partnerships with businesses within the community came up several times. Ana and Ellyet below both discussed the possibility of different companies acting as an apprenticeship or mentorship for clients to help build their skills;

> *How about like a volunteer... like a mentorship*
> *program? Not only for newcomers but also for*
> *people who have been working a specific*
> *occupation (Ana).*

> *What about using apprenticeship, that sort of*
> *model, and not just in the trades but also in IT. And*
> *so we have an employer that's getting a wage*
> *incentive, but what if we were to offer a bonus on*
> *top of that after the client's been there for six*
> *months... that sort of thing to entice employers to*
> *come to us to help find good employees (Ellyet).*

In addition several frontline workers sang the praises of social enterprises that had been incorporated successfully inside and outside of the Halton Region. Jasmine felt particularly strong that social enterprise is a business model that is good for the community and also for clients who may be particularly disadvantaged in the labour market.

Centralizing some services

Although one of the least discussed recommendations, it is important to note that at least three of the participants discussed the need to have more cooperation and sharing of information and clients between the agencies despite a funding model that mostly encourages competition. Specifically, participants discussed the need to at the very minimum centralize job development. Rather than having all agencies out in the community, have one person or group that works on job development and shares the information with all of the organizations. Anne and Olive felt strongly that more employers may take an active roll in getting involved with the employment support providers if they didn't feel as through they were "being bombarded" by multiple agencies simultaneously. In addition, if one group was responsible for job development the others would have more time and energy to focus on their clients individual needs.

Creative Problem-Solving Activities

Building upon the findings from the focus group interviews, groups then transitioned to a creative problem-solving (CPS) activities wherein they would set to task to build out 'fundable solutions' at a conceptual level. To begin the CPS activity, facilitators from Sheridan issued a broadly conceived 'challenge statement' in order to help groups frame and align the focus of the CPS session around the key issues and opportunities identified through the focus group discussions. The challenge statement for the opening exercises was: In what ways might we respond to the identified issues (of the focus group) through new program innovations (aka. 'fundable solutions')?
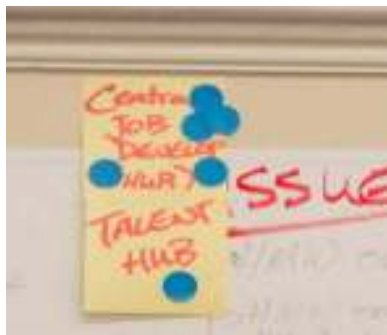

After a short discussion, review, and clarification of the challenge statements, the Sheridan facilitators invited participants to engage in a process of *idea generation*. During ideation, participants were asked to respond to the *challenge statement* by using a divergent thinking tool known as *stick em up brainstorming*. The hallmark of this problem-solving stage is the discrete separation of *divergent thinking* (a broad search for many diverse and novel alternatives) and *convergent thinking* (a focused and affirmative

evaluation of novel alternatives). By using 'stick-em up brainstorming', participants were encouraged to generate and explore lots of options, ideas, and possibilities in response to their challenge statement. Specifically, participants were asked to write their ideas

down on a sticky note, say their idea out load in order to spark 'new associations' for their group, and to post their idea on the working board. Participants were also encouraged by facilitators to generate as many options as possible, to suspend evaluation (defer judgement) of all ideas, to build upon the ideas of others, and to embrace wild and/or unusual ideas. These principles were encouraged with a view towards encouraging maximum participation, diversity, novelty, and creative expression.

Once a sufficiently diverse set of options was generated in the divergent thinking activity, participants were then guided through convergent thinking exercises. In the process of convergent thinking, participants are asked to use positive affirmations to vet, evaluate, discuss and ultimately select a series of promising ideas for further consideration, discussion, and development. Here, the convergent thinking tools used were idea clustering and dot-voting. Idea clustering is used to categorize a large number of ideas so that they might be analyzed more easily and precisely. Dot-voting is a technique that requires participants 'vote' on ideas which they deem to be a) most promising in the short-term; and b) blue-sky ideas that hold promise but require more considerable, long-term planning. This method for 'convergence' is deemed to effective as it leverages the collective wisdom of the group and provides an equal opportunity for the voices of all participants to be heard and considered in the prioritizing key opportunities.

Upon completion of the idea clustering and dot-voting exercises, groups were then encouraged to discuss, evaluate and select of one-to-two viable solutions that they could agree should be brought forward for further development. Once ideas for further development had been discussed and selected, groups were asked to create a *solution statement* (ex., what I see us doing is…) that best expresses their chosen alternatives.

Discussion and Development of "Fundable Solutions":

The third phase of the CPS activity engaged participants in the development and refinement of their chosen solutions into a more robust, concrete program innovation. Here, the Sheridan Facilitation team asked participants to consider the positives (how the concept might improve system effectiveness and efficiencies), the issues (the challenges that might need to be overcome for the program innovation to take root in practice), new thinking (ideas for how challenges might be resolved, and resources (the material resources and stakeholders that would need to be called upon

if the refined program innovation were to be pursued and implemented). We present the findings from these discussions below:

Group One and the "Talent Hub" Concept

The first group (led by McNamara) selected a centralized "talent hub" as the promising solution to be developed. In discussing and developing the concept of a "Centralized Talent Hub", participant began with fluid discussion of both the challenges inherent in the current system as well as the opportunities presented by a centralized talent hub for overcoming those challenges. In their discussion of the challenges, the group highlighted (and reiterated) many of the challenges identified in the focus group discussions.

Current Inefficiencies in Employer Relationships: The Pros of a Talent Hub

Participants were quick to agree that the current system is inherently inefficient and, subsequently, counter-productive in the job-developer/employer interface. This sentiment is well expressed in the following discussion provided by one participant:

> "How it works now is that we all have all these Employment Ontario offices with a bunch of different job developers working specifically for those organizations. And what could happen is there could be a job developer with the Centre, a job developer with... you know... The Region of Halton, another job developer for Goodwill, for STRIDE, all contacting the Royal Bank and saying 'hey! Listen to our services, we have a training incentive, we have this, we have that...', and they [the employer] could get six calls from six different job developers because those job developers don't actually know that 'okay, STRIDE already has a connection with them'"

One participant recognized that, for employers, the potentiality of being inundated with requests from job-developers may end up dis-incentivizing employers from participating in Employment Ontario programs.

> "they're getting flooded with calls, can we meet for an appointment, I'd love to talk to you... And I know for our job developers, one hundred percent it's the same... So now all of a sudden you're tainting kind of the whole idea of what we do with these employers because they're just kind of sick of getting all these calls."

Efficiencies and Effectiveness Gains of a "Talent Hub"

There was a consensus amongst the participants that a 'centralized talent hub' would help alleviate this situation as well as improve on a number of other inefficiencies in the current system. Specifically, participants identified the following items as 'positive' or 'gains' from the prospective innovation:
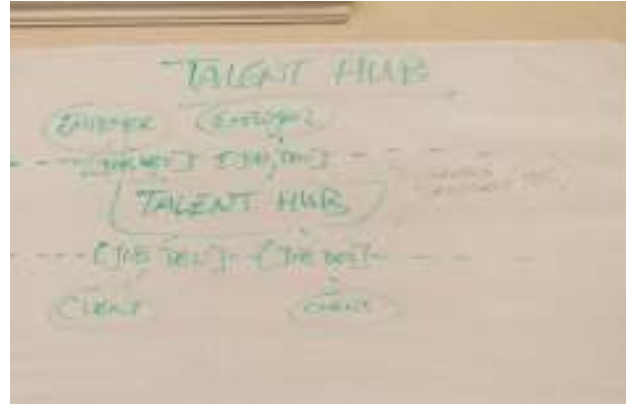
- -More efficient workflows for job developers
- -More efficient 'matching' of employers and clients
- -Consistent 'program' messaging to all stakeholders
- -Consistency of 'experience' for all stakeholders
- -Tailoring experience to Employer Needs

- -Better vetting/screening of Employers
- -Expanded opportunities for clients and employers

We develop some of these 'positives' below:

Stream-lining the Transaction Interface with Employers

As a 'centralized talent hub' for Employment Ontario programming in the Halton Region, participants envisioned a more stream-lined system to help employers, job seekers, and job developers (and their agencies) alike navigate, manage and access relationships, programs, and services across the system. Loosely conceived, the Talent Hub would allow Employers to work with a single point of contact, who would source out the top qualified candidates from a system-wide job seeker pool and stream potential candidates (and other relevant services) according to the Employers specific needs and recruitment processes. For the employer, this means they do not have to build or manage relationships with different Employment agencies, essentially saving Employers time, energy and effort.

As one participant explained:

> "So this would be like a central area that now we could offer employers a lot more different clientele, and not just our own, but a lot more different and I think that creates that competition. And we're only going to have employers that are open and receptive to hiring our clientele, right? So we're not going to have employers... And so why are we wasting our time with those people that you know that when you knock on their door, they're like 'oh, I'm never going to hire STRIDE clients', right? Then we're going to be working with employers who are open to hiring our individuals with diverse needs."

Expanding Opportunities for Employers and Clients Alike

The job-developer, serving as the 'single point of contact' for the Employer, would have access to *all* clients registered in the system (not just the clients registered with their Employment agencies). This arrangement would not only expands the candidate pool for Employers; it would also expand the potential Employer pool for clients. In doing so, it was felt the Hub concept would exponentially expand the opportunities for a 'match'. This sentiment is well expressed in the conversation:

> Participant A: "Yes, so if I come with a job, I tell my employers, not only do I have access to the Burlington and Oakville clients, I have access to Burlington and Oakville Goodwill clients, the Centre's clients and so on and so on."

> Participant B: "Yes. Yes. Instead of 200 clients, now it's like 2000."

> Facilitator: "So this would lead to greater matches?"

Group: "Yes. Way better matching"

Overcoming Identified Issues:

Participants recognized that several challenges would need to be overcome if the 'talent hub' were to be realized. Specifically, the group identified the following issues as inherent to the concept of a 'hub':

- -Agencies interest to 'protect'/'not to share' their Employer relationships/Employer opportunities
- -Overcoming the 'Silo-effect' (the tendency of Agencies to operate in isolation from like-agencies)
- -The Need for a champion of the 'hub concept'
- -Managing 'wage-incentive' offerings to Employers

While the group did not manage to resolve all of these issues, they did propose some interesting ideas for resolving some of them. We take these proposed resolutions in order below:

Re-configuring Incentives in the best interest of Clients and Employers

Jasmin: "Okay, job developers like to keep their contacts private."

Facilitator: "Like protective?"

Jasmin: "Yes. Very protective. So getting some job developers to buy into this model might be a challenge."

If we consider the current incentive structures for Employment Ontario agencies, it is readily apparent that Agencies do not have any interest in sharing information and partner relationships even if doing so is in the best interest of clients and employers alike. Specifically, for Agency (and the job developers who work for them), performance is currently measured by the number of placements made. Hence, Agencies are incentivized to keep their contacts private- meaning, there is no incentive to share those contacts with another Agency for fear that the outside agency may receive credit for the placement. This is illustrated in the following exchange:

Participant A: So, if I have a client, and let's say they go to the Centre because the Centre has this job and then they place them with some sort of incentive, I have to close her file as employed which the Centre could open up and take it as her client. Which means if she's been working with them for six months, but now she has to close it because I've taken them, at a different place, then we lose that stat too...I've just invested six months in going to workshops, one-on-one counselling, and now within a matter of 24 hours, you now have a close stat.

Participant B: Yeah, you don't want to lose that. You don't want to lose that client. If you've devoted six months?

Participant A: But that's for me. You throw that job out there knowing that could be closed, knowing that a Centre client can take it. Like, I think… I think you have to let it go.

Participant C: I agree. It has to be about the client.

In discussing this challenge of incentives, one participant suggest the possibility that credit for a 'placement' (aka. File closure) be reconfigured to recognize the contributions of those who assisted with the placement, but did not make the placement.

Participant: "Maybe there's a way with the Ministry to say you know what? You've worked with them for six months. The Centre now has a job. We're going to open, but you know what? You need to get credit just like we need to get credit"

Another participant suggested viewing the entire transaction in a different light; wherein clients and client relationships are not viewed as being 'owned' by one Agency or job-developer; but are rather viewed, conceived, and facilitated as being constituent of the Talent Hub network.

Participant: "You throw that job out there knowing that could be closed, knowing that a Centre client can take it. Like, I think… I think you have to let it go. It has to be about the client."

Resources and Implementation:

Participants were then afforded the opportunity to discuss "Resources" needed for the implementing the concept. Here, it was mentioned that a similar model was already in existence and should be either replicated or expanded into their respective territory. Specifically, the group identified the "Talent Hub" of the Peel-Halton Local Employment Council as promising approach for the concept.

ANNA: So it actually says on their website a little bit, so it says "The Talent Hub reflects the initiative of the Peel-Halton local planning council represents an innovate network of ten community based employment agencies that work in collaboration to meet the hiring needs of local employers. Um… So, they will source out the top qualified candidates to your networks, stream them according to your recruitment process. You as an employer do not have to organically manage a one-on-one relationship with so many employment agencies, saving you time and effort'. There are some other things here…

Participant B: There you go. That's perfect

Participant C: Yes! To bring it here. Or maybe it already exists here and just the communication hasn't… I don't know.

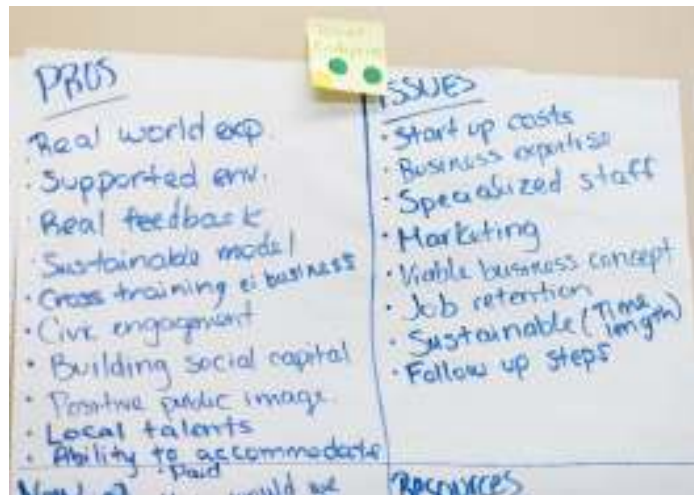## *Group Two and the "Social Enterprise" Concept*

Group Two converged on the idea of 'social enterprises' as a program innovation concept for improving efficiencies in the Employment Ontario system. While various definitions abound, social

enterprises are loosely understood to refer to business ventures, operated by non-profits, which sell goods or services in the market for the purpose of creating a blended financial and social return on investment. Social enterprises have become a popular mechanism for non-profit ventures since the model decreases their reliance on government/donor funding and incentivizing them to be more responsive to market and/or community demand.

In the Employment sector, the social enterprise model has shown promise. Several social enterprises have emerged in this space with view towards offering services in the private marketplace while at the same time providing unique employment training opportunities for in-need individuals. A good example of this is STRIDE's social enterprise. Part of STRIDE's social enterprise handles packaging and assembly for more than 40 companies including Tim Hortons, Bell Sympatico and the Oakville Chamber of Commerce.

The participants of group two strongly supported the idea of the social enterprise as a business model that might significantly enhance the prospects for those disadvantaged in the labour market. Specifically, the group members identified the following 'positives' when discussing the concept of 'social enterprise:

- -Real World Experience
- -Supported/Supportive Environment
- -Real World Feedback
- -Sustainable Model
- -Cross-training
- -Civic Engagement
- -Building Social Capital
- -Positive public image
- -Local Talent
- -Ability to Accommodate paid positions

We discuss some of these in turn.

Hard to Come-by Soft-Skills Training Experience for Clients

It was generally agreed that experience working in/for a social enterprise not only provides valuable working experience; it also provides unique opportunities for developing the softer aptitudes that are critical for success in the job market. This idea is well expressed in the following discussion:
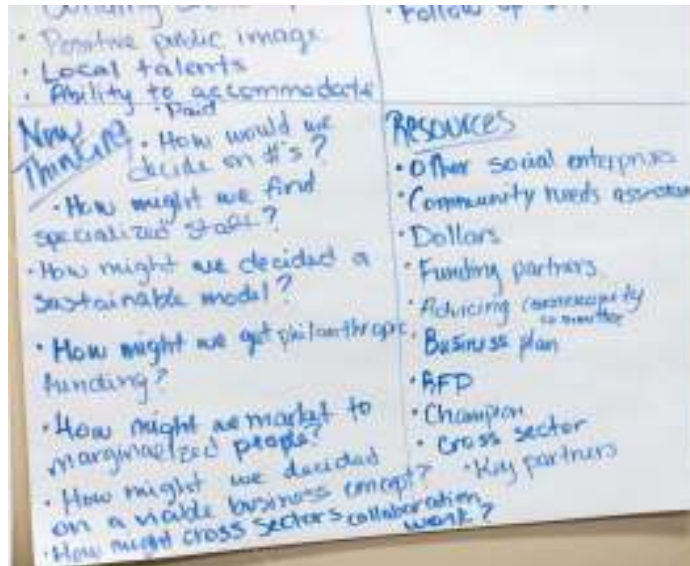
> ANNA: "I think the training opportunities could be focused more short term on job and/or soft skills training. Because there's a lot on the technical skills in the programs with the colleges, right? And then, people do find a way to get funding for those type of program and especially now with OSAP can make that more affordable, so there's a larger population that can go for that, but I find there's pretty much nothing out there for the soft skills. And separately from the corporate ones, which are time management and leadership and all of that, the rest? There's very few that are affordable and people

are not so much going into. And then on the job training could be, because we talked about social enterprise, it could be a very short term training on how to use a cashier, cash register, sorry. Or… Customer service."

Notable Challenges

The participants also identified some notable challenges in the 'social enterprise' concept; namely:

- Start-up costs
- Business Expenses
- Specialized Staff
- Marketing
- Viable Business Concept
- Job retention
- Sustainability
- Follow-up Steps

Participants rightly recognized that the 'social enterprise' concept, the issues associated with it, and the required resources would need to be considered and resolved on a case by case basis; tailoring the specifications and supports to the nature of the newly proposed venture. Group members recognized that there were a number of promising examples to draw upon when considering this option. Pathways Skill Development serves as a notable example to be considered. Pathways Skill Development is an Employment Support Agency that assists individuals in overcoming barriers to meaningful employment. They provide employment preparation services, skills training, and advising support from an employment placement team. Additionally, Pathways operates three social enterprises with the twin goal of generating income and achieving the social mission of connecting people to jobs and jobs to people. The social enterprises are: Clean Works (a commercial cleaning company), Build Works (a construction company) and the London Community Woodshop (a place for residents to gain new skills in woodworking).

Summary Insights and Recommendations for Program Innovations

Clearly, this report has demonstrated that unemployment and under-employment leads to a ripple effect of social and financial issues. The report has also drawn attention to confluence of socio-economic factors that mitigate against marginalized groups in their attempt to procure and retain gainful, productive, and fulfilling employment; even where Employment Support services are available.

Some of the notable barriers identified in this research, and summarized here, include, but are not limited to:

- Lack of Transportation to Service sites/ Job sites
- Lack of recognition of foreign credentials or experience
- Lack of employer education on how to adequately accommodate people with disabilities at the jobsite
- Systemic mismatch between current (postsecondary) education trends and the skills that are needed to succeed in various jobs.
- Accessibility of employment organization information is also an issue that should be addressed

On the positive side, the surveys in this research study show that an overwhelming majority of the employment support program users surveyed perceive the programs they utilize as being useful and helpful. That said, clearly particular groups of people are experiencing more difficulty navigating the labour market through employment supports; namely, immigrants and newcomers, highly skilled individuals and those over the age of 50.

Recommendations from survey respondents included earlier and/or later operating hours, improving communication protocols, and expanding service provisions beyond resume writing support. Furthermore, suggestions also included sensitivity training to ensure that staff are not inadvertently offending their highly qualified clients. Survey respondents also identified the potential value of bridging programs, mentorship programs, and expanding networking opportunities in the market. In all instances, there seems to be an acknowledgement of the value of a more creative approach to Employment Supports service programming.

Program Innovations and Fundable Solutions

In our discussions with service providers, there appears to be a general consensus amongst those we talked to about ways in which we might improve and transform programming. We summarize these emergent recommendations here:

- **Enhancing Networking Opportunities for Clients**: Clients and service providers alike highlighted the multiple benefits of expanded networking opportunities. These perceived benefits of networking range from helping clients better understand employer expectations and culture to helping clients cope with their own isolation, anxiety, and depression through peer-to-peer support interactions.

- **Wrap-around services**: Service providers overwhelming supported a 'wrap-around' service approach.

- **Creating New and more Innovative Training Opportunities**: Service providers repeatedly mentioned the value of social enterprise opportunities, mentorship programs, and other novel training opportunities that would afford clients and opportunity to develop the softer aptitudes, technical skills, and Canadian work experience in order to improve their prospects for gainful employment.

- **A Central Talent Hub**: As one of the two "fundable solutions" developed by the service providers in this study, the Talent Hub provides some unique opportunities for improving both the effectiveness and efficiency of Employment support programming in Halton. By allowing employers to work with a single point of contact, who would source out the top qualified candidates from a system-wide job seeker

pool, the Hub model is seen as yielding tremendous gains in efficiency; gains which would ultimately save employers, agencies, and clients alike a great deal of time, energy and effort. Critical to this effort is the need to confront existing incentive structures of the current system, which prevent inter-agency data-sharing and collaboration.

- **Supporting new Social Enterprise Ventures**: As the second "fundable solutions" produced by the service providers in this study, the 'social enterprise solution' is seen as a viable opportunity for expanding job readiness training opportunities for those in need while simultaneously making an important contribution to the local economy. Here, there are numerous examples from which to draw upon and learn from. Granted, the form, structure, content, and resource requirements for any SE start-up would be contingent upon the nature of the market opportunity being pursued.