

*Research for* **communities**

## PREPARING A DISADVANTAGED WORKFORCE FOR THE NEW ECONOMY

Creating the bridge between high-school leavers and high-tech jobs

**T**he global economy is shifting, and Manitoba's economy is shifting with it. Government and industry are eager to embrace the knowledge economy and to increase their competitiveness in high technology sectors. This can exacerbate the dilemma of workers who were already having a hard time finding employment in the Old Economy, especially those who did not finish high school and now lack the educational qualifications that many high-tech jobs require. But it doesn't all have to be a bad-news story.

### **MANY SUCCESSFUL MODELS EXIST**

The Manitoba Research Alliance on Community Economic Development in the New Economy recently completed a research project to examine opportunities for bridging the gap between high tech jobs and people who face barriers to employment. The most encouraging thing the research found is that there are many programs around the world (United States, Ireland, Europe, Australia) that are successfully creating the bridge between high-school leavers and high-tech jobs. Entitled *Moving*

*Low-Income People in Winnipeg's Inner City Into Good Jobs - Evidence on What Works Best* and co-written by Garry Loewen, Jim Silver, Martine August, Patrick Bruning, Michael MacKenzie, and Shauna Meyerson, the paper identified a set of "best practice" principles for how that is done. These are illustrated in the graphic on page 3. Five of them bear more elaboration.

- First, it is important to set your sights on good jobs before you even begin to plan your employment development program. If an employment development program defines "success" as helping a person with a long unemployment record to simply get a job, the long-term results are likely to be marginal. But if the focus from the outset is to provide the kinds of support that move people into skilled positions that provide a living wage, benefits, and opportunities for advancement, there is a better chance of success.
- Second, the best results are likely to be achieved if employers are engaged at every stage of the process. The programs

that work best are “demand driven”, more than “supply driven.” This means more than simply being connected to employers. It starts by having employers identify the positions for which they need workers, and the skills and attributes that are required to fill those positions. It includes having employers help design the employment programs, possibly release some of their supervisors to assist in some of the training, offer work experiences and internships to trainees, and commit to hiring job seekers who eventually graduate.

- Third, it is helpful if programs are comprehensive in the supports they provide. Many programs in Manitoba provide only a portion of the supports that a job-seeker needs to become competitive for employment. Programs typically offer some job readiness training, or job placement assistance, or job skill training, but seldom all of these. Each of these supports by themselves is helpful, and usually results in some success. But the success is greater when programs offer all of these supports, along with basic education upgrading, financial assistance, and post employment counseling or mentoring.
- Fourth, it is important that programs be networked. The most successful programs are made up of networks comprised of employers, community-based employment development organizations, unions, governments, and educational institutions. The networks that work best are highly formalized. Members of the network make

formal commitments as to the roles they will play, and are held accountable for the standard to which they play those roles.

Typically the collaboration between the members of the network is coordinated by an institution called a “Workforce Intermediary”. The role of the intermediary is to provide the opportunity for employers to identify their needs, and for each of the other representatives to agree about the part they will play in meeting those needs. The Workforce Intermediary brokers many of the relationships, facilitates the discussions, keeps record of the commitments, and provides technical assistance to help the various members work together. It is particularly important for the intermediary to be led by a champion who is well regarded within the employer community.

- Fifth, the results will be strongest if the employment development program is “interventionist,” that is, if it actually changes the local employment system to benefit disadvantaged workers. It can achieve this by changing the process by which companies in a particular sector recruit their workforce (for example, through a workforce intermediary), by changing employment qualifications to more realistically reflect actual requirements (for example, changing artificial academic requirements), or by changing the actual structure of the job to make it less complex.

## Employment Interventions

### Comprehensive, Networked, & Interventionist Approaches

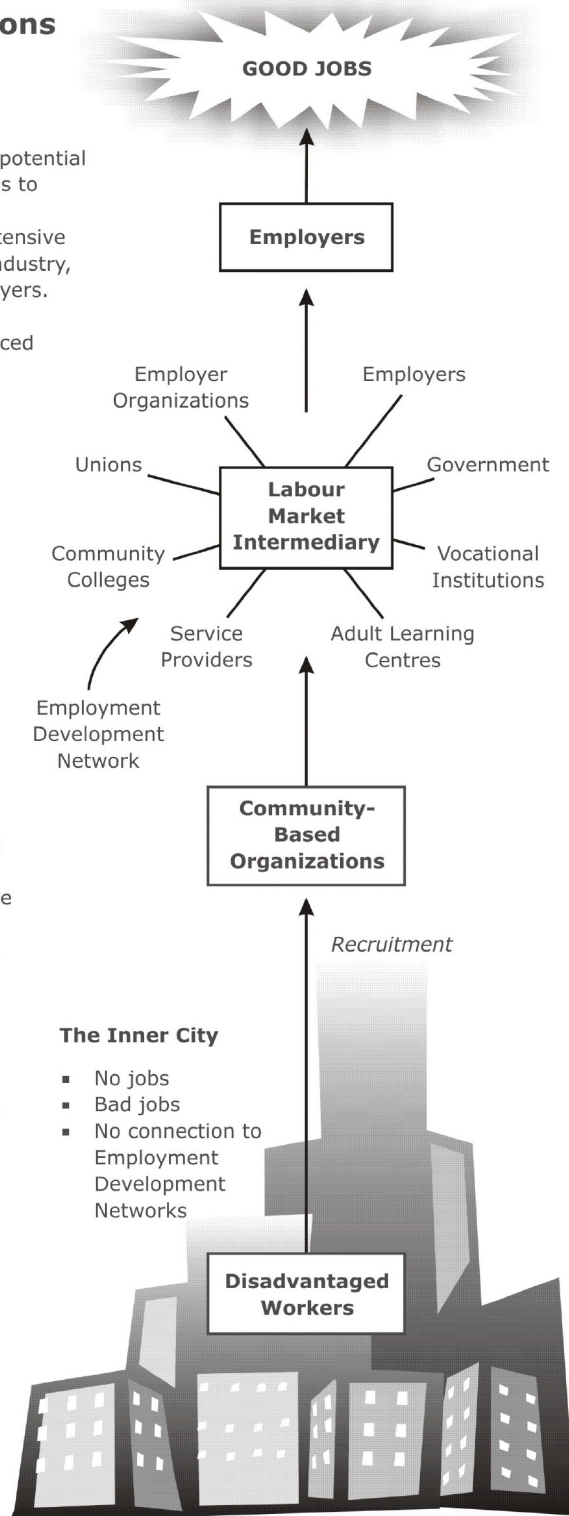
- Sectoral Approaches: Target a high potential industry and intervene in its practices to benefit disadvantaged job-seekers.
- Customized Training: Short-term, intensive training for specific jobs in a given industry, designed in collaboration with employers.
- Bridge Programs: Training for disadvantaged adults to enter advanced technology trades.
- Apprenticeship Programs

### Traditional Community Development Approach

Delivering a comprehensive array of needed resources to disadvantaged people.

### Stand-Alone Programs

- Technical (Hard Skills) Training programs: Technical skill training at a college or vocational school.
- Basic Education Programs: Teaching math, writing, and reading.
- Soft Skills Training (Job Readiness): Teaching job-seekers to adapt to the norms of the workplace looking at punctuality, proper dress, appropriate language, etc.
- Support services: Offered by service agencies, job-seekers receive supports to help them overcome their barriers to employment (e.g., childcare; drug, alcohol, or abuse counselling; financial assistance for housing, transportation, health care, phone, etc.).
- Job Search Activities: Resumé-writing, interview skills, access to employment kiosks, help with job search, work experience placements.
- Post-Employment Counselling or Mentoring
- Motivation and Advocacy programs: Campaigns/career fairs to introduce job-seekers to opportunities and motivate them to find work.
- Job Placement Activities: Job developers match job-seekers with employment.



## Best Practices

### Focus on High Quality Jobs

Jobs alone will not help disadvantaged people out of poverty. They must offer benefits, opportunities for advancement, and good pay.

### Engage the Employer

Involve employers from beginning to end in designing the initiative. They can identify jobs, identify desired skills, help design training curricula, offer jobs to participants.

### Build Networks & Create Partnerships

No group can do workforce development alone. Neighbourhood community-based organizations, community colleges and vocational institutions, government, unions, and especially employers need to collaborate to get people into jobs. A *labour market intermediary* works to bring these diverse stakeholders together.

### Enlist stakeholders with clout

### Offer comprehensive training with supports

The best initiatives combine not only technical (hard skill) training and basic education, but also soft skills ("job readiness") training and job search/placement assistance. Furthermore, they provide a range of support services (childcare, transportation and financial assistance, drug/substance abuse counselling, etc.) to help clients overcome their barriers to employment.

### Create training environments that simulate the real work place

### Provide Post-Employment Support

Successful initiatives provide supports, mentoring, and/or follow-up counselling after a client is working to increase job retention.

### Promote "cultural competence" for both employers & job-seekers

### Alter the structure of the labour market

Promote changes in the local employment system that will benefit disadvantaged job-seekers.

Source: Making Waves: Canada's CED Magazine, 16, 4, Winter 2005. Used with permission.

**CANADIAN CENTRE  
FOR POLICY  
ALTERNATIVES-MB**

309-323 Portage Ave.

Winnipeg, MB

Canada R3B 2C1

ph: (204) 927-3200

fax: (204) 927-3201

ccpamb@policyalternatives.ca

www.policyalternatives.ca

**EMPLOYERS ARE WILLING TO PARTICIPATE**

The researchers interviewed about three dozen Manitoba employers from two industrial sectors to test the potential for replication of those programs and practices here. Employers in the advanced manufacturing sector indicated they are desperate for skilled workers. Of manufacturers recently surveyed by the Canadian Manufacturer's Association, 94% indicate a concern about having enough skilled workers to remain competitive. While employers in the IT sector are not experiencing skills shortages currently (at least, not within the positions that disadvantaged workers can be readily trained for), they were projecting shortages in the next five years as their workforce ages. Many of the employers interviewed, whether or not they were experiencing skills shortages, concurred with the need to create bridges for disadvantaged workers, and indicated a willingness to play a role in that.

A range of factors increase the likelihood that employers will participate in programs to build such bridges. A program is more likely to be attractive to employers if it is led by a champion they respect. It should address some of their human-resource issues and bring some additional training and HR development resources to the table. It should create some positive profile for employers in the community, but allow their commitments to be tentative until results are proven (internships/co-operative work experiences). Finally, the programs most appealing to employers are those that don't take huge amounts of their planning time.

**CONCLUSION**

Employers in New Economy industries are already experiencing skills shortages and are prepared to participate in programs directed at disadvantaged workers. Models of best practice are available. They have been tested in many jurisdictions, and have a proven track record of success.

With thought and care, we can replicate that success. Community-based practitioners need to link their practical knowledge of disadvantaged workers with strategies that are comprehensive, networked, and interventionist. Governments must be prepared to provide funding. Champions must be ready to pull together the major players—employers, unions, community-based organizations, governments, and educational institutions—by means of a workforce intermediary. When we apply models of best practice in combination with these additional factors, there is hope for high-school leavers who aspire to good jobs in the New Economy.



 Social Sciences and Humanities  
Research Council of Canada



This is one of a series of reports published by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives-Manitoba, based on the research conducted by the Manitoba Research Alliance on Community Economic Development in the New Economy. We are pleased to acknowledge the generous financial support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, grant # 502-2005-0006. The full reports are available online at [www.policyalternatives.ca](http://www.policyalternatives.ca),