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July 2006

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### **Canada's Technology-Centric Workfare On-Line Employment Services**

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Sandy Kitchen and Mary Milliken

#### **Abstract**

*Canada's knowledge society labour policy is reflected in the federal government's re-designing and re-scaling of the welfare state. Part of this re-designing has been connecting labour market and social policy – that is combining the 'workfare model' with the 'social investment model' of lifelong learning. These changes are reflected in the 1995 Employment Insurance Act (EIA) with an emphasis on the re-commodification of labour and the importance of active reemployment. Under this policy, all working age individuals' have a duty and obligation to work whether they receive social assistance, employment insurance benefits or a disability pension. In addition to tightening employment insurance eligibility requirements the Act has also shortened benefit periods. The Act is also accompanied by a minimal safety net that offers short-term employment public programs, available on a competitive basis to community non-government organizations, ostensibly to assist those who have been previously excluded from the workforce. An emphasis has been placed on life-long learning and skills and training for those planning on entering or re-entering the workforce. More recently the federal government has launched, what it refers to as a citizen-centric on-line employment services. Client services include: the on-line data Job Bank, a web-based network of Canadian job postings; the Electronic Labour Exchange (ELE), that matches job seekers with businesses; on-line Employment Insurance (EI), reporting for those out-of work and receiving benefits, as well as the on-line Web Record of Employment (ROE).*

*This paper assesses the impact these on-line services have had on a community intermediary, a not-for-profit organization, providing on-line employment resource services. It also investigates the clients' experiences with the Job Bank, ELE and EI, as well as their views of the life-long learning skills and training programs they receive from the intermediary. The research for this paper is based on empirical evidence gathered at one of the case studies from the Community Intermediary Research Study (CIRP). The two-year (2004-2006) CIRP project involved field work at four intermediary non-government community-based organizations (NGOs) that deliver on-line services and information to clients. A mixed methods approach was used to gather data from in-depth staff interviews, client and staff focus panel discussions, client and staff surveys, as well as analysis of the intermediary's documents and web site.*

*The authors argue that despite best efforts employment services delivery is contingent due to the contract fee-for-service relationship between the community organization and the Department of Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC), the department that previously delivered these services. This relationship has a significant impact on the organization's financial, human and technology resources resulting in a barely sustainable devolution of employment service delivery. It is further argued that based on client and staff interviews and responses 'on-line employment services' tend to*

*be technology-centric rather than client-centric. Research from the case study reveals numerous technological barriers to on-line employment services. First the community intermediary and its satellite offices are located in rural and remote areas with inadequate and uneven access to local communication infrastructure. Second, high-speed service access and up-to-date computer hardware and software is required for clients to interact with on-line employment services. Third, client barriers such as low education and literacy levels, fear of electronic technology and inadequate staff and client information technology training needs to be addressed to ensure that an already contingent workforce is included rather than excluded from the Canadian knowledge society.*

## **Introduction**

Canada's labour policy for a knowledge society is reflected in the federal government re-designing and re-scaling the previous welfare policy framework to workfare (Peck, 2002:334; Johnson and Mahon, 2005). The emphasis in this paradigm shift is on the re-commodification of labour, which has been designed to support the changing economic functions of the state in advanced Capitalist societies. The new type of state for a knowledge-based economy, described in the critical political economy literature, is the 'Shumpeterian competition state'; that promotes technological change and innovation, as well as enterprise in developing a new technical method of government and governance (Jessop, 2002:95-96).

Workfare regulatory reform has addressed the demands of the new economy through work activism and employability programs, which emphasize re-skilling and lifelong learning. Employment benefits are linked to work training and programs that are designed to move all people who are not working into employment (Jessop, 2002:156). Active employment policies that involve training may be more or less empowering or coercive for the unemployed, lone parents and the disabled. One of the major purposes of active employment is to "demonstrate that work pays" (2002:154).

A workfare regulatory framework also enhances labour market flexibility and helps to set the terms and the tone of low-wage employment relationships, contributing to the reproduction of a contingent workforce (Peck, 2001: 21). In his critical analysis of workfare policy in the United Kingdom, the United States and Canada, Peck explains that when "stripped down to its labor-regulatory essence workfare is not about creating jobs for people that don't have them; its about creating workers for jobs that nobody wants" (2001:6).

Until the mid 1990s the Canadian unemployment insurance program was relatively sufficient for all workers whether they were employed on a full time, part-time or seasonal basis (Johnson and Mahon, 2005:10). The redesigned 1995 Employment Insurance Act (EIA) and related provincial workfare policies have supported labour market flexibility policies by tightening employment insurance (EI) eligibility requirements and social assistance, as well as reducing EI entitlements and placing time limits on them. Recent evidence demonstrates that workfare policy in Canada has polarized the labour market with low-paid employment accounting for one quarter of the full-time workforce (Johnson and Mahon, 2005:12).

With few exceptions, relatively little critical research has been conducted on the technological approaches taken by governments for the delivery of government services to citizens. The research that has taken place notes that governments' intended policy

outcomes for using the Internet and ICTs to deliver employment services are to facilitate social inclusion and develop human capital (McQuaid, Lindsay, and Greg, 2004; Selwyn, 2002; Borgida, Sullivan, Oxendine, Jackson and Reidel, 2002; Haddon, 2000).

Drawing on the example of Scotland, policy makers in the government have taken a techno-optimistic view that having Internet access to electronic government services will reduce geographic barriers to health, education and employment services (McQuaid et al 2004:369). However McQuaid et al maintain that while on-line job searching is a useful additional tool, it should not be seen as a replacement for local services. In many of the European Union countries the low take-up and use of government on-line services has occurred in part because of a lack of public awareness about this mode of delivery. But as Servaes and Heinderyck argue the larger problem is the result of digital divide income issues and geographic barriers in accessing technology-based services (2002:109).

The United Kingdom's Modernizing Government strategy offers electronic access through television, telephone or a computer. The official line from the Blair government is that access to on-line employment services is a more democratic approach to inclusion for previously socially excluded citizens. Yet Selwyn argues that the government's primary focus has been with education and learning activities rather than employment. He also maintains that the reconfiguration of the workforce by ICT policies obscures the deeper structural inequalities of the capitalist system (2002:8).

Like the governments of other developed countries, the Canadian government has made a series of investments in information and communication technologies (ICTs) and Internet infrastructure (Menzies 1996:53; Regan-Shade, 1994:53-9; Rideout, 2003/2). An additional investment of 880 million dollars was provided recently for the design and development of electronic government services under the Government On-Line Initiative. Successive government on-line reports emphasize that the primary objective of the service transformation initiative was to provide clients with more accessible, efficient electronic services and information, based on clients' needs, using a model that is referred to as client-driven services or citizen-centric service delivery (Canada 2006:1-2). One hundred and thirty services are now available electronically to complement traditional delivery channels such as in-person, telephone and mail services. The most commonly used on-line transaction services permit clients to interact with the federal government, for: border services; business and individual taxes; passport services; Canada pension and old age security; employment related services; and employment insurance services (Canada, 2006: 74-78). The Deputy-Minister of Public Works and Government Services Canada has declared with great aplomb that the on-line services initiative has ended with the 'mission accomplished' (Canada, 2006:1).

Labour market services have been made available on-line by the Department of Human Resources and Social Services (formally Human Resources and Skills Development Canada) to individuals and businesses since 2002. A web-based network of Canadian job postings is available at the on-line data Job Bank. Another service Electronic Labour Exchange (ELE) matches job seekers with businesses. People looking for work may access the ELE to identify their skills, education and experience with the hope that their credentials will be of interest to employers. Those who receive employment benefits now report their activity on the Employment Insurance (EI) on-line network. Employers also record the number of weeks an individual has worked using the on-line Record of Employment (ROE) (Canada, 2006; Treasury Board of Canada, 2003).

## **Outline of paper and methodology**

The paper assesses the impact that delivering government employment on-line services and information has had on the skills and training community intermediary and its clients. It investigates the clients' experiences with the Job Bank, ELE and EI, as well as their views of the on-line employment services format. The research for this paper is based on the empirical evidence gathered at one of the case studies from the Community Intermediary Research Study (CIRP) and the Community Intermediaries in the Knowledge Society (2006) final report. The two-year (2004-2006) CIRP project involved fieldwork at four community intermediaries - non-government organizations (NGOs) - who deliver government on-line services and information to clients. For the purposes of this paper, community intermediary is defined as an employment resource organization that acts as a link between the federal and/or provincial governments and citizens, providing social services and information.

A mixed methods approach was used to gather data from in-depth staff interviews, client and staff focus panel discussions and client and staff surveys. As well, the intermediary's documents and web site were also analyzed. The authors argue that despite the best efforts of the organization, employment services delivery is contingent due to the contract fee-for-service relationship between the community intermediary and the Department of Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC), the department that previously delivered these services. This relationship has a significant impact on the organization's financial, human and technology resources, which has resulted in a barely sustainable devolution of employment service delivery. It is further argued that, based on client and staff interviews and survey responses, on-line employment services tend to be 'technology-centric' rather than client-centric. Research from this case study reveals numerous social and technological barriers intrinsic to electronic employment services. First, the community intermediary and its satellite offices are located in rural and remote areas with inadequate and uneven access to local communication infrastructure. Second, high-speed service access and up-to-date computer hardware and software are required for clients to interact with on-line employment services, but those expenses are not funded. Third, client barriers such as low education and literacy levels, fear of electronic technology and inadequate staff and client information technology training need to be addressed to ensure that an already contingent workforce is included in, rather than excluded from, the Canadian knowledge society.

## **Skills and training community intermediary**

### *Client composition*

The skills and training intermediary delivers formal and informal training and skills services/programs to clients living in more than 90 small communities in geographically dispersed rural and remote areas. The organization creates a link between adult education and employment services as part of a community-driven social and economic strategic plan to support regional development (Rideout et al, 2006).

The unemployment rate in the area has been consistently much higher than the national average of 6.5 per cent. Of the estimated 15,880 people in the labour force in the region in 2003, 52 per cent received employment insurance (EI) benefits throughout the year. A

majority of the EI recipients are within the prime labour force age rate between the ages of 25 to 54. Sixty two per cent of those who receive EI benefits were male and the average benefits received were 6,900 dollars. The leading employment categories include: sales and service occupations; trades, transport and equipment operators; manufacturing and processing (fishing); as well as primary industries (forestry and fishing) (Newfoundland and Labrador, Community Accounts, 2003).

A number of families and individuals also require some form of social assistance from the federal and provincial governments. Social assistance in the form of a Child Tax Benefit also makes up significant transfer of government income into the area at 13 per cent. Another thirty seven per cent of total income transfers for the region are in the form of federal goods and services tax (GST) credits – a consumption rebate aimed at lower and moderate-income families (Rideout et al, 2006).

The discrepancy between skills held and skills required, so important for good jobs in the knowledge society, is underscored by the level of education of residents in the area served by the skills and training organization. A majority of the residents, forty two per cent, have less than a high school education. Nineteen percent of the population have a high school diploma. And nineteen per cent have some post-secondary education or a trade diploma. Eleven percent of the residents have a college diploma and eight per cent of the populace possess a university degree (Rideout et al, 2006). Although improvements have occurred in the level of education in the province current levels are still consistently lower than the national level. The jobs that were available in the past in the fishing and forestry industries did not require high school diplomas. It was not uncommon for students to leave school in grade eight and get a job in the fish processing plants. Fishing and forestry employment was, and still is, seasonal with high unemployment rates. However, the collapse of the cod fishery in the province in 1992 lent urgency to the organization's mission to provide services that would enhance the vocational skills of the people in the region.

### *Services and programs*

A majority of the clients who use the skills and training organizations services/programs are young adults, between the ages of 19 and 35. As previously noted, they have low income and lower middle-income levels with a majority in the five to fifteen thousand dollars per annum range (Rideout et al, 2006:28). The organization responds to the clients' employment and learning needs, delivering approximately fifteen workfare employability programs. One of the more popular programs is targeted to under-educated adults who do not have a high school diploma and either receive social income support from the provincial government, or are eligible for employment insurance (E.I.). Other programs, which target youth, tend to focus on creating summer or temporary employment. Employment assistance programs are available for all age groups. The organization also assists clients to find short-term employment in the geographic area. All of these programs provide clients with jobs, work experience and in some cases formal learning. Other related economic/social services involve training clients to write resumes, to use spreadsheets and to create individual client portfolios. As well, the organization provides access to computers to conduct employment searches on-line in the Job Bank. Staff members explained the need to have a good understanding of HRSDC's programs in order to promote them to clients. This means that staff needs to know about market issues and labour market trends. They also need to have a good understanding of the social and economic landscape in the province, and have an

appreciation of economic generators and new businesses in the area. Furthermore, the organization has to know the local community-based organizations, and which ones tend to take the lead in community development. One staff member discussed the situation pointing out the complex relationship that exists between the organization, government departments and the clients.

*I definitely need the information in regards to the funding for the participants to do this program is either through Human Resources Labour and Employment, Social Assistance clients or eligible clients through HRSDC. It is very important for me to have a relationship with each department to understand because they still have control over the participants [clients] when they are in the program. So it is very important that I understand and have a relationship with these different departments that I know that if anything happened I could be on top of it. Or if things are not happening, I can get the ball rolling. Because participants in this program can be pulled out by their funding partner (Skills and Training, SI-6).*

To operate effectively, staff members need current and accurate HRSD/HRSDC program information. When programs change, they need the new information and accompanying forms as soon as possible. Staff explained that if program changes do not reach the organization in a reasonable amount of time, incorrect information is given to clients, which often results in clients submitting out-of-date forms. When that happens, staff and clients have to start from the beginning and resubmit the new form over again.

#### *Funding problems*

Funding is a major problem for the organization. The most significant change that has occurred to the organization in the last ten years was the move away from core funding. The organization receives all of its funding from federal and provincial government departments, based on a monthly fee-for-service payment for each program delivered. As a result, its mandate has shifted from providing a single service to help clients find employment, to providing a range of services under the Employment Assistance Services (EAS) program. The HRSDC - Employment Assistance Services (EAS) program requires a funding agreement that reimburses the organization for expenses for assessment employment counselling case management. One of the staff members described how the organization has adjusted to a changed mandate as follows.

*With all the changes that have gone on with HRSDC, they are getting out of the business of seeing clients face-to-face and so we have taken over that role. Our whole center itself has changed. We were a youth center that has this open space concept, very casual atmosphere. Dressing down, wearing the jeans and trying to act youthful, trying to do that. But now we are a little bit more formalized, we have our cubicles and we meet clients by appointment (Skills and Training, SI-7).*



Human Resources and Skills Development Canada personnel at local branch offices previously provided most of the employment programs. The authors found that many of the employment assistant officers who now work for the skills and training organization were formally HRSDC employees. The organization has had to develop a number of new programs for an increasing number of clients. Providing employment assistance services has also resulted in a much closer relationship between the organization and HRSDC – one based on contract government service delivery but with very little professional discretion for the organization.

The organization is required by HRSDC to reach a number of quantitative metrics including accountability targets for unemployed and self-employed clients. Staff members talked about the responsibilities and the pressure these changes have created. Fee-for-service funding requires evaluations that have to be submitted through quarterly and final reports, which has put pressure on the organization because a number of staff members did not initially have this expertise. Out of necessity they have learned on the job.

In addition to downsizing and funding cuts, social service mandates have narrowed throughout the past two decades for the non-profit social service sector. This sector has also been subjected to forms of public sector management – quantitative metrics such as accounting-like processes, best practices, competencies and benchmarking (Baines, 2006:195-6). Baines maintains that these quantitative projects have led to the erosion of professional discretion and that it has also had a negative effect on the quality of service (196).

As well, to obtain funding staff has to write numerous proposals. A staff member explained that for “*a volunteer group it's very difficult because you just don't have that level of expertise on staff in most volunteer organizations, to be able to even write these proposals let alone look after them*” (Skills and Training-SI-8). Needless to say staff members have found these changes to be very stressful.

The authors found that program/project funding is inadequate to cover the core costs of running the organization. The most obvious impact, aside from the low ICT capacity discussed later, is the effect on human resources. Because there is no core funding, staff members are on contracts. These funding arrangements are not enough to provide secure employment or good working conditions for the staff. As contract workers, staff members do not belong to a union or a representative association. Staff has also experienced inconsistency in salaries, which are dictated by how the federal and provincial governments fund different geographical areas. Some staff members are receiving less pay than others for doing the same work because of where their work is located. The staff has not had a salary increase, even for cost of living, for six years, and low staff salaries have contributed to rising rates of staff turnover. Moreover, staff members also put in long volunteer hours to write funding applications, and all of the staff has to work long hours to ensure they are paid an adequate income.

*I spend, I guess six days a week and a lot of nights, some weeks I have to go seven days just steady at it in order to be having enough programs up and going in order to be able to I guess keep myself employed. It gets really hard especially with me, I am by myself and I don't have any*

*assistance at it. ... I find it rather difficult at times (Skills and training organization, SI-1).*

In some of its offices, the number of staff is adequate to deliver the required services. In other offices, more staff is needed but there are no resources to hire more people. Volunteers to help paid staff are rare, with some former volunteers having left the province to seek paid employment. Also the organization does not have the staff resources or the ICT capacity to deliver information and services – including life-long learning services – using computers and the Internet in a sustainable way. This precarious funding situation has had a negative impact on the organization's capacity to deliver information and services, limiting what the organization can do. Moreover, the unsustainable funding situation has had a negative impact on its capacity to deliver online services despite great effort by the staff.

#### *Socio-economic client barriers*

To identify employment options, the counsellors conduct a client assessment, taking the client's interests into consideration. Goals are established such as completing secondary education, acquiring a community college diploma, pursuing a university degree, or obtaining a trade certificate. In addition employment counsellors provide career planning.

Client barriers include low education levels and a lack of employment skills, which affects the ability to progress both in their work and personal lives. One significant finding was the view of some staff of the lack of a work ethic in clients, their lack of experience with fulltime employment and not understanding the responsibility of full-time work. Staff members pointed out that some of the clients were afraid of full-time employment and the commitment it requires. These views tend to coincide with workfare policy that stresses government programs, emphasizing individual employability and work activism. As discussed above these barriers can be traced to previous seasonal work patterns where resource employment takes place at certain times of the year. The other client barriers included the frequency of low literacy skills, the prevalence of level one secondary education (grades 8 to 10), and the lack of a certificate, diploma or grade twelve-education level. In some cases barriers involve the frequency of alcohol and/or drug addiction or the presence of a mental or physical disability.

These and other barriers result in staff making a considerable investment of time and effort before a client can be trained or retrained to enter the work force. Training cannot commence until an employment counsellor conducts an aptitude test. If the client reaches test levels two or three, he or she is then eligible to go to an Adult Basic Education (ABE) centre to obtain a grade twelve education. Once the client receives his/her ABE certificate, the person can proceed to a trade school, community college or university. People with disabilities are referred to the Ability Employment Cooperation (AEC) program where, after another assessment, the AEC contacts employers on behalf of the clients for work placements. These findings coincide with those of Baines who found that the new public management model performance management indicators required by funding agencies of non-profit organizations do not take into consideration the time consuming needs of clients who require additional support (Baines, 2006:199). The impact on social service workers was increased intensity of bureaucratic and electronic supervision (201).

The criteria for service programs, however, do not always meet client needs. Many clients do not meet the minimum educational requirements – often a high school diploma – for the skills training programs. They often do not score high enough on the aptitude test to apply for educational upgrading. In these cases, the clients have to get help on their own and teach themselves before trying the aptitude test again. Because it may take years of intense training for clients to reach the required aptitude level, the challenge for the organization is keeping clients motivated.

Another service delivery challenge is that clients with disabilities often will not self-identify or admit to having a disability. In these cases, the organization cannot refer the client to the appropriate social services, and so clients with disabilities are not adequately served. The organization also has challenges reaching out to young people in the area because many young people do not listen to radio, watch TV or read the newspapers.

Despite the service delivery challenges clients who took part in the focus panel discussions considered they gained “*valuable work experience*” with help from the organization in the form of job interview training and the computer training to access the on-line Job Bank (Skills and Training-CF).

### *Life-long learning*

In addition to fee-for-service funding the organization also received lifelong learning program funding from the Office of Learning Technology (OLT), a branch of Human Resources and Skills Development Canada and Social Development. The Community Learning Networks (CLN) program supports innovative and sustainable uses of technologies, to strengthen social inclusion as well as increase the capacity of communities. The program is intended to further social and economic development through Internet-based computer networks by emphasizing workplace skills development, with an emphasis on technology skill upgrading through formal and informal learning environments (OLT, 2003).

The life-long learning programs offered by the skills and training organization are primarily for informal training and skills development. Services and programs include one-on-one assistance showing clients how to conduct a labour market research, an Internet job search, and resume writing. The programs that combine education upgrading, retraining and job placement are advertised on the organization’s web site. One program’s popularity is reflected in the 75 applications that the organization received for 10 to 20 participant spaces. The web site is not only informative, but it answers commonly asked questions before people physically visit the organization to check their eligibility for the program. Information and communication technology training is mandatory for clients that are accepted into this program.

All of the staff members interviewed was positive that the organization strengthens client’s lifelong learning using ICT, with the caveats that more financial and human resources were needed. Staff criticized the Community Learning Networks program because funding is short term - for only two to three years. Moreover, CLN funding can only be used to hire staff and train clients. Current technologies such as computer hardware and software and Internet connection services, which are required by the organization in order to deliver on-line employment services, are not eligible budget items for program funding. This is a serious problem because the organization’s

computers are older and the current dial-up Internet service is neither adequate for the heavy client use nor the advanced government on-line employment and EI services. The two Pentium II computers assigned for client use, combined with the slow Internet connection, often results in two to three hour job searches, problems accessing the Internet and frequent system crashes. Staff members find these problems particularly frustrating when they are trying to train clients to use the Internet. The Internet and ICTs are key resources, not only for client use, but also for effective day-to-day staff communication with the satellite offices that deliver programs to the remote communities.

### *Delivering on-line employment services*

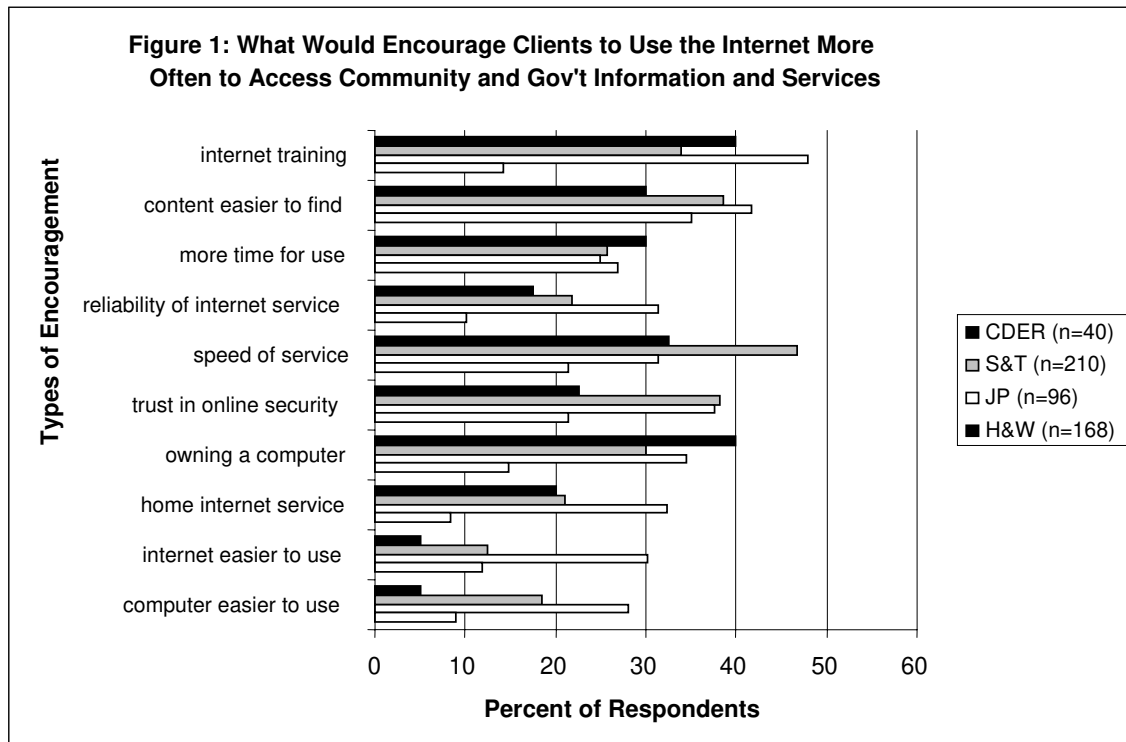
Clearly the most significant factor shaping the role of on-line employment services is the organization's funding situation. The skills and training organization is struggling with its role as an intermediary in e-government. As previously discussed, the organization serves a large rural and remote area. Most of the organization's staff members believe that it does not have the human, technological or financial capacities to use ICT to deliver either the existing services or additional government services. In order to deliver e-government services, the organization would need reliable and affordable access to high-speed Internet service, as well as new computers. It would also need additional trained staff and training for the existing personnel, all of which would necessitate additional financial support. As one staff member explained just one of the challenges related to the organization's low ICT capacity:

*Most computers can't handle...that stuff and a lot of the new government services on the Internet that are coming out there are very technical, very complicated, and the computer needs to be doing stuff at all time. But our computers, aside from X's are not able to do none of that stuff because they are just so old and slow. It is all dial-up too (Skills and Training, SI-3).*

The skills and training organization employs multiple methods to communicate with and disseminate information to clients. The organization conducts a significant amount of advertising using pamphlets, brochures, posters, flyers, business cards and community television and radio, as well as postings on the provincial web site. Some communication methods work better than others in different communities, so information and communication strategies are targeted to what works best in each community. Staff members confirmed that many clients find out about the organization and its services through word of mouth.

*I think word of mouth probably gives us the best feedback. Clients come in to our office and we have a high percentage of clients who are very satisfied with the service that we provide and when people like the service they usually talk a lot about it (Skills and training organization, SI-4).*

Under the terms of its current contract with HRSDC, the organization is also required to conduct thirty-nine group communication sessions. These group sessions bring together the local stakeholders and affiliated organizations for public presentations at the schools, the high schools and the post-secondary institutions such as the community colleges.



Community Development and Employment Resources (CDER), Skills and Training (S&T), Job Placement (JP), Health and Wellness (H&W)

Using ICT to deliver information and services is a challenge for the skills and training intermediary given that many of their clients with the greatest needs do not use computers and the Internet. Clients indicated that there was a range of issues that would encourage them to use the Internet more often to access community and government information and services. Some of these reasons more than others may be unique to the organization itself, rather than larger trends/social concerns. For example, in Figure 1, we see that the majority of clients at the skills and training organization cited speed of service, easy to find content, trust in on-line security and Internet training. These particular issues pertain to using the on-line employment services for job searches and employment insurance reporting.

The intermediary also has a more complex use of ICT and the Internet. It also has a web-based computer system called Accountable Resource Management System (ARMS) to manage client cases. Client statistics are entered into ARMS, which tabulates client case results. The system generates mandatory HRSD weekly, monthly and yearly statistical reports for program tracking and accountability. For the most part the ARMS system works well and is liked by staff. Staff did not, however, question the on-going evaluation or the performance-based managerial aspects of the system.

The organization has a high use of e-mail for internal communications among staff. Two of the satellite offices have access to high-speed Internet service and can now communicate via videoconference. E-mail is useful for communication and collaboration, not only with dispersed satellite offices but also for the contract workers. For example most of the documents staff works on are e-mailed back and forth.

Lack of high-speed Internet infrastructure has had a major impact on service delivery for the organization. A significant portion of the clients (thirty three per cent) indicated that broadband services throughout the area are inadequate. Another fifteen per cent indicated that high-speed Internet service was missing. Our research reveals that high-speed infrastructure is very uneven over the catchment area of the skills and training organization. In some locations, there is adequate high-speed and cell phone coverage; in other locations neither is locally available. One of the organizations satellite offices does not have access to a broadband Internet server. Although dial-up Internet is adequate in some areas, it is slow in others. Dial-up in general is a constraint to delivering services and information because it ties up a telephone line. As one staff member described, using the Internet to do research meant that she could not receive phone calls. Once on-line, the out-dated computers, combined with the existing dial-up Internet service, are slow and often crash. One of the offices has satellite Internet service but it too is very slow:

*I tried to download government files before; I had to step away from the computer for an hour to let them download. That's ... an hour of your work-day (Skills and training organization, SF).*

Clients in some of the communities served by the skills and training organization experience considerable difficulty accessing services on-line because of the lack of access to high-speed Internet infrastructure. A staff member described the difficulty for clients attempting to complete on-line applications for Employment Insurance (EI) in an area without high-speed Internet:

*Right now there is no such thing as completing an application form to apply for EI anymore, everything has to be done on-line and with the service out in [one of the satellite offices], clients have gone in there and they have been trying to complete their application forms and there have been some of them who have been booted off the Internet probably a half dozen times before they could get the process completed. ... There have been some [that] ... just couldn't do it all and they just had to give up and walk out (Skills and training organization, SI-1).*

The clients understand the daily pressure the organization faces because of the lack of high speed Internet service. A client who took part in the focus group panel explained, "you can't get high speed and dial up is just sad. It is really sad. You get on you're kicked off, you get on you're kicked off (Skills and Training, CF).

As previously discussed, the organization provides clients with access to dedicated computers and the Internet to conduct job searches and access information for skills

upgrading and training. However, these organizations do not have sufficient capacity for ongoing maintenance of these computers. At times, there are not enough computers available to meet client demand, resulting in long waiting times and frustration for clients. The organization has plans to require that clients book appointments to use computers and access the Internet.

#### *ICT organization and staff benefits-barriers*

One of the major benefits for the organization and staff members of using the Internet is getting information to clients more quickly. Given its rural location and its remote satellite offices, Internet access is essential for providing services and information to clients as well as for inter-staff communication. The organization does almost everything on-line, from accessing funding and developing proposals, to obtaining job applications.

Staff members were resoundingly unanimous that the organization does not have adequate ICT hardware and software capacity to deliver client services and information. Some of the fax machines in the satellite offices do not work properly. Not enough computers are available for client job bank searches and resume writing. Client demand has resulted in long waiting times. Staff spoke of either not having computers at all or not having enough computers. In one location, the seven staff members share one computer. Because of funding constraints, the organization purchases the least expensive computers, which may not have the capacity or reliability needed. Other problems were described as outdated computers, cheap computers, computer crashes, inadequate technical support, no high-speed access, dial-up access tying up the phone line, and in some locations, dial-up access being very slow. There is also inadequate information technology (IT) technical support for computer and network troubleshooting and maintenance. One staff member explained the organization's troubleshooting as "we just kind of go on a wing and a prayer" (*Skills and training organization, SI-7*).

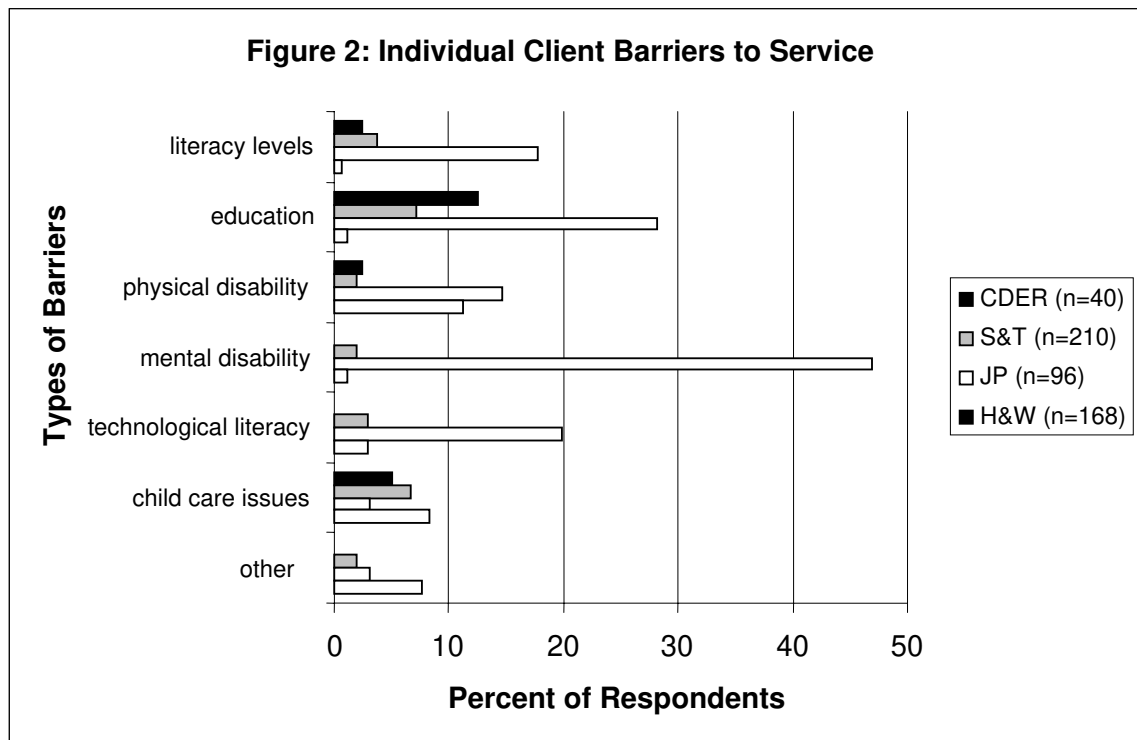
The skills and training organization also has no specific ICT training policy in place. Information technology training sessions do occur for the Employment Assistance Services (EAS) offices administrative staff. These one or two-day courses conducted at the community college include training in Microsoft Office and Corel applications. Advanced workshops for Microsoft applications have also occurred, but as one staff member explained, only a few sessions have taken place because of the lack of funding.

Another staff member also expressed the frustration and the sense of socio-economic isolation she has experienced working in a rural part of the country that does not have broadband Internet service.

*I'm living proof of trying to live and work...from a rural community which is an hour and forty-five minutes away from this main office. So you are doing everything on line and I am still on snail mail, is what I call it because I don't have high speed .... So how frustrating is it to tap into some of the services not only for the organization but for everything, banking and the whole works (*Skills and Training, SI-9*).*

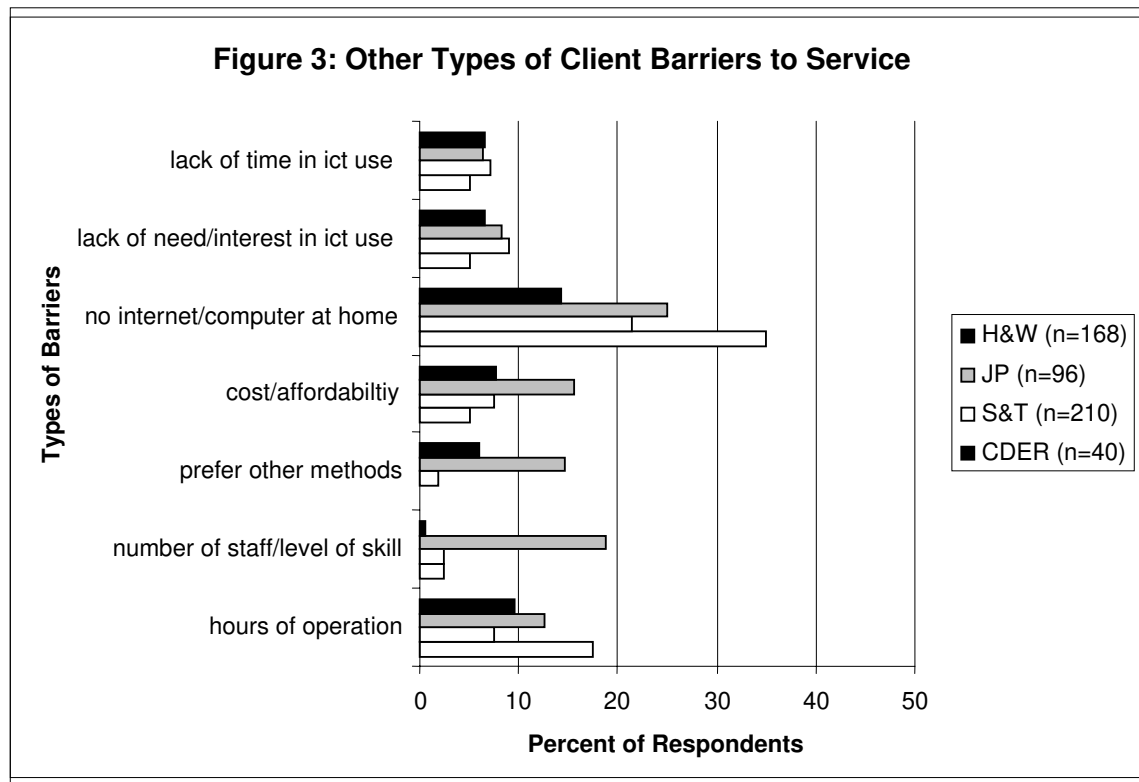
### *Client barriers and challenges*

As previously discussed clients face a number of barriers and challenges that make it difficult for them to use the on-line employment services and information provided by the organization. Two of the most common barriers for clients at the skills and training organization are low levels of education and high levels of illiteracy as Figure 2 indicates. Client responses to identifying illiteracy as a barrier to services seemed surprisingly low considering the information provided by staff that a number of clients were illiterate. When questioned further, staff members explained that often people who are illiterate tended to not self-identify.



Community Development and Employment Resources (CDER), Skills and Training (S&T), Job Placement (JP), Health and Wellness (H&W)





Community Development and Employment Resources (CDER), Skills and Training (S&T), Job Placement (JP), Health and Wellness (H&W)

Other barriers to on-line service delivery include: no Internet or computer at home; cost and affordability; lack of need or interest in ICTs use; and hours of operation for public computer access sites, indicated in Figure 3. Clients without home computer and Internet access can - in theory - use public access sites.

However, public computer access points in the communities are heavily used, sometimes making it difficult for clients to access the Internet at all. Staff members pointed out that people in the area are more likely to use the computers and access the Internet from the skills and training organization because they are open from nine to five, five days of the week. Although community access program (CAP) sites are located in many of the out-port communities, they are only open a few hours a day because they tend to be located in schools or public libraries. Additionally, clients feel uncomfortable using these public sites if they have low education levels or have reading difficulties.

Most clients who took part in the focus panel preferred to learn how to use ICT by having experienced staff or counsellors show them how. One participant explained, *"hands-on is a lot easier to learn than reading a pamphlet or a book about new technology"* (Skills and training organization, CF). The clients also expressed frustration with not having ICT support when problems arise, including difficulties with outdated web sites and dealing with pornographic web sites. One staff member explained that some clients are very fearful of technologies such as fax machines and cellular phones. Our research indicated that many of the clients who live in these rural and remote communities are apprehensive about using on-line services to complete an application. Moreover, a

number of the older people in these communities are very resistant to technological changes and uncomfortable doing on-line job searches.

## **Conclusion**

Electronic government employment service delivery by the skills and training community intermediary helps to support Canadian workfare labour policy. Staff at the intermediary provided clients with the basic training required to conduct job searches, advertising their skill and education levels, and reporting activity to receive employment insurance benefits. Reflecting on Pecks ideas about workfare, poor quality jobs and the lack of choice of jobs these clients have been quite accepting of the workfare reform because these are people who have experienced long periods of being out of work; they are now desperate for jobs and work pays. The evidence from this case study reveals that clients' have a number of socio-economic barriers – low education, inadequate skills (certificate, diploma, degree), high illiteracy, income and technological – that must be addressed under workfare reform. Also reconfiguring workfare through electronic government service delivery glosses over the identified systemic inequalities and a geographic digital divide. The limited capacity of the e-government programs to address these inequalities contributes to the clients' ghettoization as members of the contingent workforce in the knowledge society.

The Government on-line employment services have also had a major impact on the skills and training organization. The skills and training intermediary, due to government program changes have been victimized as, or pushed into, a workfare role and mode of operation. The organization has been under-funded and staff members have been over-stretched. Ironically the funds for information and communication technology upgrades and high speed Internet services, necessary to deliver on-line employment services to clients are expenses that are excluded from the Community Learning Networks program as well as the fee-for-employment assistance services. On-line workfare has also been extended to the skills and training staff through their contract-work relationship with HRSDC and the fee-for-service required electronic performance management indicators.

Rather than providing citizen-centric employment services, the Department of Human Resources and Social Development in conjunction with Services Canada has produced technology-centric workfare services that deepens and extends the digital divide to contingent labour and to the skills and training delivering these services.

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