

**SUPPORTING LAID OFF WORKERS IN HAMILTON:
THE VALUE OF EMPLOYMENT TRAINING AT THE HAMILTON JOBS ACTION CENTRE
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Recognizing the need to respond to the quickly growing numbers of unemployed workers in Hamilton, the United Way of Burlington and Greater Hamilton, the Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities, and the Social Planning and Research Council of Hamilton partnered to create the Hamilton Jobs Action Centre (HJAC) in 2009. Aimed at supporting smaller groups of laid off workers from the area as a complement to the existing system of employment services, HJAC opened its doors in Fall 2009.

The purposes of this research are to: determine the value of short-term employment related workshops accessed by dislocated workers at HJAC; explore options for maximizing these benefits to laid off workers and to the wider unemployed/underemployed population; and explore the best venues for providing this type of training. The recent economic downturn put many people out of work, driving Hamilton's Employment Insurance claims dramatically upward in early 2009. With a slow economic recovery across Canada likely to be slower still in Hamilton, the need for supports for often invisible small groups of dislocated workers in this community is not likely to decline in the near future. Assessing the value of short-term employment related workshops in helping workers reconnect with the labour market offers a fuller understanding of how best to support groups of dislocated workers. The evaluation of this form of training in Hamilton focuses on the HJAC as a site in which to explore this important issue. Data for this research was collected through a review of literature, 154 client surveys, 15 client interviews, 5 staff interviews, 3 employer interviews, and a focus group with local employment service providers. Key findings from each primary research method are summarized below.

Key Findings from Client Surveys

- There is diversity in the client population in terms of different levels of education. Half of clients are 'older workers' (45 years of age or more). This suggests a need for diversity of employment service approaches.
- Most clients (84%) took a maximum of 4 courses. This suggests that free training encourages people to engage in employment related activities.
- Of the 652 clients who came to HJAC for support, only 270 – or 41% - took training courses. This suggests that clients completed training to suit their employment goals, rather than simply taking advantage of free training.
- Completing more workshops was associated with better employment outcomes. Half (50%) of the 652 clients who have come to HJAC for support have found work since coming to the centre, while 61% of surveyed clients who completed training have found work. Further, most clients rated workshops as helpful in finding work both in terms of numbered scores and open-ended questions. This suggests that the short-term employment related workshops offered at HJAC improve client employment outcomes.
- One of HJAC's greatest strengths is its peer helper staff members, who were seen as helpful, supportive and motivating. This suggests that employment services and supports offered by people who are not necessarily from the same former workplace but have shared experiences of a layoff or shutdown provides a unique benefit to clients.

Key Findings from Client Interviews

- Respondents use a variety of sources to job search including the HJAC job board, Service Canada's job bank, newspapers, on-line employment related websites, personal networks and word-of-mouth.
- While most respondents described an abundance of jobs to apply for, many were not getting called for interviews. Respondents cited limited qualifications, experience and age (for many older workers) as possible reasons for not getting interviews.
- Overall, temporary positions seemed to be more common in the job market.
- Temporary work was valued by some respondents because of the flexibility it offers to workers and employers.

- Most respondents felt some degree of resentment about temporary work because of low pay, no benefits, and no job security. Temporary work also seen as impacting respondents' quality of life, feelings of fairness, health, and difficulties transitioning to full-time work.
- Most respondents felt that they had either learned new skills or recertified existing skills through workshops they completed at HJAC. Obtaining official certification of skills gained through work experience was viewed as important for gaining employment.
- Respondents with diverse training felt that it qualified them for a wider range of jobs and would help them find work.
- Respondents generally felt that the qualifications earned through HJAC either helped them secure their current job or that the qualifications would help them secure work in the future.
- All respondents appreciated the welcoming and relaxed nature of HJAC. Although many clients said they did not use the centre as a social support, an overwhelming majority of respondents valued the peer support model highly. Primarily, they felt that they could relate well to the peer helpers at the centre because "they know what you are going through."

Key Findings from Staff Interviews

- HJAC staff members see the four main challenges faced by their clients as being a lack of computer skills, age, education, and transportation. Computer skills in particular are likely to be increasingly important for workers in the job market as workplaces rely more and more on technology.
- HJAC should support clients in obtaining their high school equivalency credentials in order to improve employment outcomes.
- Bus tickets could be made available to support clients in job searching in order to overcome some barriers to transportation.
- Job opportunities posted at HJAC over the past year commonly involved forklift, manufacturing, general labour, and cleaning.
- Temporary and contract jobs seem to be growing. Contract work may develop into full-time employment if the employer is willing to commit.
- Most employment opportunities at HJAC are of poor quality in terms of wages and benefits.
- Some clients take a small number of courses in order to fill specific job requirements, while others take a diverse range of courses. Staff noted that this makes clients more marketable and widens their scope of opportunities.
- Many clients tell staff that they want the centre to connect them with employers. This essentially amounts to the role of a temp agency, except that the centre would not be the employer or receive payment from employers.

Key Findings from Employer Interviews

- The recent recession led to a slowdown in hiring, and recovery was characterized by an increase in temporary work.
- While there is a mix of positions available locally, temporary work seems to dominate the job market.
- One respondent felt that workers were "happy" and "grateful" to have temporary work, while others felt that temp workers faced feelings of isolation and unfair treatment.
- Wages and lack of benefits were further sources of frustration for workers, particularly in contrast with previous working conditions.
- Workers' progress from temporary work to full-time, permanent employment often takes between 6 months and 2 years, and is fairly rare.
- Most employers require employees to have a high school diploma either for initial hiring or to transition to full-time positions.
- Workers require a balance of credentials and experience.
- Clients' completion of high school equivalency should be supported in the community in order to improve employment outcomes.
- Services in the community should work with clients to identify current skills, employment goals, gaps between the two and support actions to fill those gaps.

- Organizations working with the unemployed/underemployed population, including employment services and action centres, should develop relationships directly with employers or strengthen relationships with each other in order to better connect clients to employers.

Key Findings from Service Provider Focus Group

- Because of their short-term nature and specific skills focus, workshops offered at HJAC were seen as particularly valuable.
- Training should be targeted to each individual's work related goals.
- The Skills Development Flagship could better mobilize as a network in order to be more responsive to the diverse employment support needs in the community.
- Confusion and changing eligibility requirements to receive training at HJAC lead to frustration for clients and service providers referring clients to HJAC.
- Some service provider participants felt that funding for training could be distributed to established employment service providers to allow them to provide some of the workshops currently offered through HJAC.
- HJAC has the potential to fill the gap of serving dislocated workers in groups too small to have their own action centre. The culture of the centre offers an environment that some clients find more comfortable. In this way HJAC was seen as being able to augment what is offered in the community from the six major employment service providers.
- Peer helpers offer valuable emotional support after job loss, although HJAC's peer helpers are not always from the same companies as clients.
- Much of what employment counsellors do is motivating and helping clients through personal issues. Accordingly, peer support is not the only way to support dislocated workers through emotional challenges.

Based on these findings, the report makes the following recommendations.

Recommendations

1. These short-term employment related workshops should be available in the community.
2. Employment services in Hamilton should include opportunities for peer support.
3. Employment services for smaller groups of dislocated workers should be made available in the community. The employment service community, including community agencies and government, should strengthen networks to identify and outreach to smaller groups of laid off workers.
4. All levels of government should consider the impacts of temp work in general - and temp agencies in specific - on workers in Hamilton. Governments should consider looking to other models of casual or labour force coordination, such as that used in the former Canada Manpower Office.
5. A diverse range of employment services should be available in the community in order to effectively reach groups with different needs and preferences.
6. Local agencies and the community more broadly should support adults seeking employment in obtaining their high school diplomas or equivalency certificates.
7. Action centres and employment service agencies should work more closely together to connect clients with employers, possibly through job developers. This could involve developing better referral mechanisms for clients in order to tap into existing relationships between employment service providers and employers.
8. Community partners, possibly including the Hamilton Street Railway, the City of Hamilton, and other agencies, should collaborate to improve access to affordable transportation for job seekers. This could entail increased funding for bus tickets or changes to eligibility requirements for the Affordable Transit Pass.

The full report is available on our website: www.sprc.hamilton.on.ca/reports