

Case Studies on Adult Learning

Bridging the Gap: From Education to Employment

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Overview

The Bridging the Gap: From Education to Employment (BTG) Model is an innovative labour force concept developed and used in Newfoundland and Labrador to connect prospective employers with individuals who have employment barriers. The model is designed to provide a training program that is sensitive to the needs of adults with academic challenges, that is more individually based, and that is directly linked to a work placement. In effect, the program provides a customized workplace essential skills training program that meets the needs of local businesses partners and program participants.

In many rural communities, local residents acknowledge the importance of improving their education but they also state that finding sustainable employment is their top priority. However, the task of finding employment is often difficult; particularly when residents do not have the essential skills to move into an employment setting. Further, the time factor involved in completing an adult basic education program, participating in a training course and then finding sustainable employment can seem insurmountable. The BTG initiative attempts to navigate this challenging context by coupling employment and individual growth within the same program.

The initial concept was pioneered in 1995 by Random North Development Association (a non-profit organization) and the first phase of the project took place on the East Coast of Newfoundland. Since then, the second phase has expanded to include 6 other economic zones and 14 private business firms in Newfoundland and Labrador.

This is a community-based approach that aims to integrate human resource development with social and economic growth. The goal is to build the capacity of communities within Newfoundland and Labrador by improving local residents' essential skills and practical abilities and thus enhance their employability with local businesses.

Program focus and type

BTG assists new or growing businesses that are facing challenges in employing skilled and qualified workers. The program includes a combination of 40 weeks of classroom and practical learning for participants with all classroom learning linked to the workplace.

Specifically the BTG model seeks to¹:

- Identify businesses in rural areas that want to expand their operations but face challenges in hiring qualified staff;
- Select potential participants based upon their aptitudes and abilities;
- Work with local educational institutions (in this case the College of the North Atlantic) to develop and provide a program that meets the needs of the workplace and the participant;
- Create a learning environment (facilitated by the College) that combines an essential skills learning component with a practical on-site job training component;
- Facilitate the entire partnership process with the educational provider, the community, the business and the participant. This requires a local BTG facilitator to assist participants as they work through the program.

Target audience

Participants are chosen mainly from those who use federal and/or provincial income support programs. In addition, most participants expressed a desire to remain in their communities. For the initial pilot participants were assessed and selected based upon their limited academic skills (no high school completion certificate) and their employment status (unemployed/underemployed). However, as the program

¹ See *Bridging the Gap: From Education to Employment*. Shoal Harbour, NL: Random North Development Association. Retrieved May 27, 2009 from <http://www.bridginggaps.com/english/index.html>

progressed, individual participants were selected from the wider labour force as community and business requirements dictated and government programs permitted.

Evidence of effectiveness

The success of the BTG model is supported by quantitative and qualitative evaluations, cost/benefit analyses, and government policy directives.² The program offers specific benefits to participants, businesses, and the public sector.³

For participants the program offers a range of positive benefits and outcomes.

- Increased essential skills including numeracy, reading texts, teamwork and problem solving skills
- Enhanced opportunity to achieve personal and employment goals
- Increased knowledge of and participation in workplace activities
- Improved opportunities for promotion and cross-training
- Access to training previously unavailable or that they might otherwise not have received

For local businesses the program offers:

- Higher productivity
- Increased quality of work and work effort
- Greater and more competent use of technology
- Better awareness of health and safety
- Improved employee self-esteem which leads to better management and labour relations

For the public sector the program offers:

- More effective and efficient use of existing public programs and resources
- Less reliance on government social programs

² See Hollet & Sons (2003). *The social and economic landscape for Bridging the Gap: From education to employment – Pilot Phase II*. Shoal Harbour, NL: author. Retrieved May 28, 2009 from <http://www.nald.ca/fulltext/bgap2/bgapclar/clarenyi.pdf>

See also Hollet & Sons (2003). *Bridging the gap: Pilot project phase II – Formative evaluation*. Shoal Harbour, NL: author Retrieved May 29, 2009 from <http://www.nald.ca/library/research/bgap2/bgapeval/bgapeval.pdf>

³ Ibid and also Random North Development Association at <http://www.randomnorth1980.ca/projects.htm>

- Improved team-based approaches (cross departmental/jurisdictional) in working with citizens and communities
- Focused integration of economic and social programming and provincial services at the community level
- An innovative community development model that is supported by on-going evaluation and program follow-up

Indications of innovation

The program carries a number of innovative qualities. First, the program redefined the concept of long-term employment within the context of isolated rural communities. Long-term employment is no longer seen as 40 hours per week, 52 weeks a year. Rather, long-term employment is understood as having a job (likely seasonal) over several years with same employer. Such an understanding helps residents of struggling rural communities to feel more like citizens rather than clients.

Second, the program also created long-term employment opportunities. For instance, many of the individuals who participated in the first phase of the program in 1999 and who found employment were still employed with the same company in 2006. In addition, most business partners indicated that they interviewed the participants because of the BTG program but stated that they would probably not have interviewed them based solely upon their work and educational profile.

Finally, most of the business partners indicated that they were very pleased with the blending of on-the-job experience and educational training as it helped improve the overall job performance of participants and fostered a positive educational outlook within communities.

Challenges and lessons learned

While strong educational and employment advances have been made as a result of the BTG initiative, challenges relating to lifelong learning and workforce development remain. The province's capacities for social and economic advance are

directly linked to its ability to motivate adults, young and old, across all sectors, to actively consider the benefits of workforce development and to recognize the importance of learning throughout one's lifespan. However, this motivation can be difficult to maintain in rural communities where employment opportunities are often limited.

There is increasing pressure to ensure that the people of Newfoundland and Labrador have the requisite skills to participate in economic and civic affairs for longer periods of their life spans. This pressure is felt more acutely by the people of the province given the aging demographic of the region, overall population decline and an outmigration reality that draws young people and families "down the road". Despite the Province's best efforts to adjust to demographic change through restructuring, there remain significant challenges associated with delivering accessible, quality programming to a population that is dispersed in a large number of small communities distributed across a vast geographic area. However, the BTG experience offers a unique insight into how these challenges can be met.

Several key lessons emerge from the BTG program.

- Involve all Community Learning Network Team Members during the planning stage and ensure that they understand their roles and responsibilities
- Remind the participants that a 40-week program will not address all of their educational and employment needs
- Recognize that participants may become anxious when moving from income support to other financial support arrangements (e.g. full-time employment). Counseling and support services are crucial during this transition.
- Ensure that business partners have solid business plans, strong leadership and management structures, and that they are not relying on government funding for financial stability or potential growth
- Conduct a thorough workplace needs assessment to help employers in identifying their human resource requirements. Also, ensure that consultations are held with existing company employees to mitigate any concerns of potential job losses as a result of BTG participants working in the workplace.
- Ensure that the educational partner is accredited and provides a program that is responsive to business requirements and participants' needs

- Conduct on-going evaluations and be prepared to change the program emphasis to meet emerging challenges and expressed concerns

Currently, the BTG steering committee in conjunction with the Random North Development Association (RNDA) is refining its application and selection process for businesses and participants with an aim to develop a more robust and transparent system. In addition, the RNDA and the BTG supporters are working to develop strategies for helping companies who want to participate in the program but are not quite ready to accept participants. Further, several other provinces have sent representatives to Newfoundland and Labrador to explore possible partnerships with the Bridging the Gap initiative.

Partnerships

At the community level, partnerships are formed with the private sector, labour groups, educational providers, non-government groups (NGOs) and provincial government ministries. These Community Learning Network (CLN) Teams ensure that the community is involved at the beginning of and throughout the BTG process. The partnership model is comprehensive, detailed and can be utilized in different communities, for varied business types and for a wide range of potential workers.

Other partners involved in the CLN include:

- Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC);
- Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency;
- College of the North Atlantic;
- Rural development agencies;
- Provincial and national rural secretariat;
- Employment counseling services.

Overall impact

The challenges faced by the province of Newfoundland and Labrador in creating a lifelong learning culture are not unique, but the demographic structure of the

province makes them somewhat more pronounced. In building a desirable future, this initiative demonstrates that program and policy directions must involve putting the structures and processes in place so that career service providers, employers, and participants can consistently and effectively address issues of common concern as well as acknowledge and support differences between organizations and between communities.

Canada faces labour and skills shortages that are hindering growth of industries both provincially and nationally. The province of Newfoundland and Labrador faces these same challenges but within a context of trying to sustain its rural communities. Bridging the Gap provides people with essential, practical, and personal development skills that they can use in local businesses and thus enables local communities to thrive.

This is a rural development model that started at the community level and continues to evolve based on the needs of a defined target client group and the local labour market.

Initiatives like BTG program help communities tap into under-represented and often under-utilized groups. The result is that people feel more like citizens than clients since they have the necessary skills to meet industry demands. Further, the seemingly intractable economic and social challenges facing rural communities become framed in the light of possibility rather than the shades of despair. Perhaps what emerges most strongly from the BTG experience is a new form of economic development currency - hope.