

**OLDER WORKERS AND LBS**

National Literacy Secretariat Project MTCU no. 22001

Partnership Project: Literacy Ontario Central South  
Literacy Council of Niagara West

**LITERACY AND THE 40+ WORKER**

**Research Project**

**Final Report**

**Literacy Council of Niagara West**

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# **LITERACY AND THE 40+ JOB SEEKER IN NIAGARA**

## **OVERVIEW**

The co-relationship between increasing age and lower level of literacy skill is well documented. For the mature worker of Niagara to become or remain employable in response to the changing demands of the labour market of the new millennium, it is essential to upgrade, maintain and continuously improve their literacy skills (communication, learning and adaptation skills). Employers are looking for those people who can communicate well, learn new things and adapt. In contrast, demand for the skills of a labour force with lower literacy levels will continue to decline until these people upgrade their literacy levels.

In Niagara many workers in this age group must make the transition from labour intensive, manufacturing and production work environments to the new service oriented and information age workplace with higher level skills expectations of employers. In this project we propose to research over a period of six months what literacy needs specific to the 40+ job seeker in Niagara have to be addressed to remove them as barriers to employability and employment. The project will also provide recommendations for a practical and realistic action plan to address these needs and bring down the barriers. We will include job seekers, employers and other community partners in the study.

This pilot project specifically addresses high priority issues as identified in the Niagara Training and Adjustment Board Local Area Action Plan June 2000 and Environmental Scan Update September 2000 as well as issues identified in the IALS research documents and recently published research document "Literacy Risk Index for the Niagara Region". These high priority issues are:

- A need to address the literacy issues of the older, unemployed workers in Niagara
- A need to address the low literacy rate among Niagara's population.
- A concern due to aging population and need for upgrading of basic skills and re-training.
- Replacement needs identified by employers are critical to the region.
- Communication skills, lifelong learning and adaptation skills necessary for employability as a basis for community economic development.

## **OBJECTIVES OF THE PROJECT**

1. Research what literacy needs specific to the 40+ job seeker in Niagara have to be addressed to remove them as a barrier to employability and employment.
2. Provide recommendations for a practical and realistic action plan to address these needs and bring down these barriers.

## **METHODOLOGY**

- a) Conduct secondary research
- b) Develop an appropriate survey for distribution
- c) Survey 40+ Job Seekers in the Niagara Region
- d) Compile data regarding the 40+ Job Seeker
- e) Draw conclusions from literature review and data collection
- f) Publish a Final Report

## **PARTNERS**

Literacy Ontario Central South collaborated with us on this project. Early in the project an AlphaCom Discussion Group (Literacy Barriers of the Mature (40+) Job Seeker) was set up to discuss the project with peers.

## **PUBLICIZING THE PROJECT**

Niagara Training and Adjustment Board's 40+ Research Project was asked to collaborate with this project. Information appeared in the Ontario Literacy Coalition's Newsletter and a Broadcast fax (poster format) was sent out through Information Niagara to all Niagara Region service providers. A Special Feature and articles were published in the COIN Magazine (Business Education Council of Niagara). A Poster was given to Career Planning Service. Announcements were made at Niagara's Interagency meeting, United Way Executive Directors meetings, Chambers of Commerce meetings and more. We participated in the 40+ Subcommittee of the Niagara Training and Adjustment Board and used it as a forum for discussion of our project.

# PROJECT RESULTS

## I. Literature Review/Secondary Research

There is a vast amount of literature about the "mature worker" AKA "the experienced worker", "the older worker", the "40+ worker", the "worker over 45". The media has been dominated in recent years by articles on the aging process. Some articles make reference to "those workers at the grey end of the scale". Still others refer to "older adults" and "seniors". Some articles refer to the "over-forty" population, others to the "over-fifty" population, still others to the "over-fifty- five" population, and then there is the "over-sixty" population. A few articles talk about keeping a job after 65 and the challenge to mandatory retirement.

Who are the Experienced Workers? Baby Boomers 37-58 years of age, Younger - Older Workers 45 - 55 years of age, Older Workers - 55 - 65 and more years of age. A large number of Baby Boomers are actively seeking employment or career changes in the current world of work. We are therefore experiencing larger numbers of un/underemployed middle agers than ever before.

Much of the literature infers that there are "myths" attached to older workers. Many of these myths promote the perception that the aging process is detrimental to the productivity and performance of workers. The "aging" stigma appears to take effect around the 40 age mark and may apply to all workers in the 50's and 60's bracket. The literature abounds with examples of perceived discrimination on the basis of age. There appears to be a generalization in terms of the way these myths are applied to all workers through the thirty year span from 40 to 70 regardless.

There are allegations of discrimination against older workers based upon their perceived inability to adapt to new technologies and a radically altered workplace. Ontario Human Rights Commission held community consultations on age discrimination in November of 2000 and recommendations to the Commission included pressuring the government to extend the protection of the Ontario Human Rights Code to include workers over 65 as well as to declare mandatory retirement illegal in Ontario.

According to Human Resources Development Canada, demographics indicate that we are an aging society. The number of older individuals relative to the population as a whole has been growing at a steady pace over the past 20 years in many industrialized countries. Recent statistics confirm that in 1999 22.75% of the Canadian population was between the ages of 45 and 64 and that over the next 4 decades it is estimated that the number of Ontario residents over age 65 will double. Coinciding with this aging trend has been large-scale economic and industrial restructuring. Many of the studies reviewed indicate that older workers face a number of systemic barriers to obtaining re-employment and training which younger individuals may not face, including skills that are no longer in demand, less education, lack of mobility, lack of job-search experience and negative stereotyping by employers.

Changes in the workplace such as corporate downsizing, the reduction of middle management, the introduction of contingency and part time workers have all had an impact on the older job seeker.



Widespread use of non-permanent and contract staff and the outsourcing of certain functions in the workplace has become a common practice. The older worker, however, can probably count on having many healthy active years ahead and will likely need to fund a longer life. This may mean exploring nontraditional jobs and different work patterns and arrangements.

Many of the myths and stereotyping related to the experienced worker are refuted in the literature and counteracted by positive perceptions and reality checks. Articles point to the reality that there will be fewer workers available in the coming years to fill the needs of the workplace and employers will have to consider the experienced worker. In reality the experienced worker has much to offer in terms of savvy, conscientiousness, and a stronger work ethic than their younger counterparts. Older workers offer multiple skills, an attribute prized by small to medium size employers who need workers who can wear more than one hat. Small to medium size employers are the fastest growing sector in the economy.

It is also quoted that at least a dozen studies conducted since the mid-1950's debunk commonly held myths about older workers. These myths according to the experts who have studied the issue are ingrained; they defy logic and hard data.

Surveys conducted at a 40+ conference in Niagara in March of 2000 showed that of the 500 persons who attended the conference and declared themselves unemployed, the highest levels achieved in education in both male and female were high school graduation. A large amount of persons who did not receive a high school diploma did have on the job training. Educational attainment is a concern for all in a workplace environment which demands more highly skilled workers and more technical skills.

Success stories are quoted by staffing services for older and disadvantaged individuals and by Older Worker Centres. They offer upgrading and training programs in state-of-the-art technology. Having the opportunity to learn new skills in information technology boosted self-esteem and employability.

A placement agency quotes that a number of people who leave their corporate careers while in their 50's still want to work and they have the skills to do so but they are not willing to continue with the same old routine. Some executive search firms say that those workers have more options than ever before, including supplementing their income through part time work or striking out on their own as entrepreneurs.

Some articles suggest that employers are having to woo older workers back to fill large gaps in experienced staff while others insist that older workers need to be given a fighting chance in the competitive business world.

Overall, according to the literature reviewed, age prejudice does exist in the workplace but it is not insurmountable. Older workers can become employed or re-employed but they may have to retrain for current jobs, upgrade their skills, refocus and market themselves in a positive light. They may need extra support to obtain meaningful work.

NTAB Research Results: Of the top 12 Employment Barriers that the 40+ un/underemployed worker faces, these three were mentioned: Lack of skills by the 40+ Worker; New technologies difficult to learn; Lack of education of the 40+ Worker .. .Inventory of the Training Requirements of the 40+ Worker (40+ Worker Prospective) - computers (overwhelming response), resume writing, identifying transferable skills sets, skills building, identification of skills, interview skills, mathematics, interpersonal skills, customer service. A need for "in house" training for employed 40+ is crucial to the retention of workers.

## **II. Survey - Development of Literacy Council of Niagara West's Survey**

Copy of the survey is in Section 7, Appendix B.

The survey was developed with input from the field/colleagues and also incorporated suggestion from LBS Learners from the Niagara Region. The survey was developed in clear language. It is concise since the objective was to get at the facts without intimidating. It was then reformatted to be added to our website. The website survey was made for easy access by colleagues with 40+ clients, and for database entry. Database of results from the survey resides on the website.

### **Survey Distribution**

Various publicity strategies were used. Please refer to Section 7, Appendix A.

A Broadcast Fax was sent to all service providers in Niagara Region. Survey was made available on the Adult Learning and Resource Centre for Niagara West's Website, to the Business Education Council of Niagara's Job Finding Club members, Adult Learning and Resource Centre for Niagara West's Job Finding Club members, Job Seeking clients, Lifetime Learning Centre, YMCA, YWCA Employment Services, Niagara Region Sexual Assault Centre. The survey was widely distributed by Ontario Works through their Case Managers. We participated in the 40+ Subcommittee of NTAB, collaborating with their Researcher.

## **Survey Participation**

Participation in the Survey was as follows: Clients of the YWCA, JFC members, Job Seeking clients, YMCA Employment Services clients, Niagara College LBS program clients, other LBS clients. Focus Groups were conducted at HRDC Job Finding Clubs. The reasons for holding Focus Groups there were that these groups contained many of the target group subjects and were easily accessed, as opposed to school boards classes which require several levels of red tape.

As with the NTAB research, we received a limited number of responses compared to the number distributed. Follow-up to survey distribution resulted in minimal increase in respondents. All survey results were entered into a database. Total number of completed surveys collected was 40 throughout the Niagara Region.

**SURVEY RESULTS:** The lack of participation in both the NTAB Survey and our survey might indicate that practitioners are both bound by protocol that prevents them from participating in surveys or that they are so taxed with their day to day job responsibilities that it seems impossible to find the time to participate in survey administration.

**Completed Responses to our Survey are as follows:**

**Age and Gender of Respondents:** 14 Males 40+, 11 Females 40+, 2 Gender Unspecified 40+, 14 Males and 3 Females 50+, 1 Male 60+ (refer to Table #1, overleaf).

**Area:** City = 19; Small Town = 17; Rural = 4

**Education:** University = 13; College = 6; Grade 12 = 7; Less than Grade 12 = 14

**Skills:** A broad scope of skills was reported from secretarial/clerical to heavy equipment operation, from retail to mechanical, from fundraising/public relations to self-employment, from janitorial to photography.

**Difficulty With:** Computers=17; Math=4; Speak=3; None=3; Write=3; Read=8; Listen=1

**Skills Wishing to Upgrade:** Respondents indicated a variety of areas they wished to upgrade. These areas included: Reading, Writing, Listening, Workplace Specific Skills, Speaking, Math, Soft Skills (self-esteem), with Computer Skills as the most frequent response.

**Why Having Difficulty:** Please refer to Table #2, overleaf

**Willing to Upgrade:** 37 said *yes*, while 3 indicated *no*.

**Expected Results from Upgrading:** Of the 40 surveyed, the response was either "to become employed" or "to get a better job".

**Assistance:** Only 2 respondents needed assistance with completing the questionnaire. This indicates that we were successful in developing a clear language survey that was accessible to all.

**TABLE #1**

**RESPONDENTS BY GENDER AND AGE**

	<b>40</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Male</b>	14	9	1	24
<b>Female</b>	11	3		14
<b>Unknown</b>	2			2
<b>Total</b>	27	12	1	40

**TABLE #2**

**“WHY DIFFICULT?”**

<b>Hard to read</b>	<b>Hard to write</b>	<b>Hard to do math</b>	<b>Hard to listen</b>	<b>Hard to speak</b>	<b>Possible Learning Disability (self-identified)</b>	<b>Lack of formal education</b>	<b>Limited access to computers</b>	<b>Physical limitation (e.g. wrist injury)</b>
1	10	7	1	6	1	16		1

## CONCLUSIONS AND OUTCOMES

As indicated earlier, the objectives of the project were: Research what literacy needs specific to the 40+ job seeker in Niagara have to be addressed to remove them as a barrier to employability and employment and also to provide recommendations for a practical and realistic action plan to address these needs and bring down these barriers. The methodology used was to: conduct secondary research, develop an appropriate survey for distribution, survey 40+ Job Seekers in the Niagara Region, compile data regarding the 40+ Job Seeker, draw conclusions from literature review and data collection, and publish a Final Report.

As with the NTAB survey, there was a low number of respondents to the survey developed by our project, although it was widely publicized and circulated. The District School Board of Niagara was unable to administer the survey even after formal letters and other documentation was sent to them, since they require Board approval for all surveys. The compiled results of the survey indicated an overwhelming response concerning the need to keep up to date with computer applications, followed by a need to upgrade both reading and math. The feedback from the focus groups corroborated the findings from the other methods of data collection.

There was also no significant activity on the AlphaCom Discussion Group which was set up for practitioners to exchange information. This might indicate that this sector of the population has been neglected and has not been the focus of funded programs.

Requests have been received from other practitioners from various parts of Ontario for materials specific to 40+ clients. These requests were received as a direct outcome from our workshop facilitation at two conferences. A resource library of 40+ materials/articles is being developed for the mature client. The materials are self-marketing information for 40+ job seekers and information about our current transitional program.

As an outcome of the continuing research, materials specific to 40+ clients, including post-conference materials (OneStep's Opportunities 2002 and Job Finding Club Forum 2002), need to be developed. As these materials concerning Best Practices and Marketing Maturity are being developed, they will be distributed to various 40+ clients and practitioners in the field. Workshops have been developed and presented at various venues concerning the 40+ Job Seeker and the 40+ client pursuing upgrading. We have been invited to facilitate a workshop on the transitions that 40+ clients face at the upcoming National Consultation on Career Development (NATCON) in January 2003. NATCON may provide another forum to observe identified needs of the 40+ worker which may corroborate the findings of this current research.

People with literacy barriers have no hope of accessing apprenticeship programs unless they upgrade. The project resulted in increased exposure of the issues that 40+ clients face. Several articles were submitted to a regional magazine published by the Business Education Council of Niagara. The project also resulted in a strengthening of an already existing partnership between our organization and another service agency in the Niagara Region, resulting in the development of a joint project designed for the mature worker.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

The three recommendations from this project are:

I. A transitional program specifically design for the 40+ worker needs to be widely implemented. This program would honour the life experiences of the mature worker and value what they have learned along their life path. Designed for the mature adult who requires academic upgrading, is unsure of goals, doesn't know where to start, and/or has barriers returning to school or work. It would include computer preparedness and self-marketing skills.

The goals of the 40+ transitional program would be to:

1. Assist 40+ adults in academic and vocational assessment, goal setting, career exploration, and action planning
2. assist 40+ adults in understanding expectations and routines of returning to school/work
3. assist 40+ adult participants in best possible referral
4. determine barriers and solutions for 40+ adults (i.e. transportation needs)

The outcomes of the 40+ transitional program would be to:

Realistic goals and actions plans

Summary of: Skills I Have  
Skills I Need  
How and Where I will obtain Skills  
How I learn Best

Referral to appropriate agency

Opportunity to find solutions to overcome barriers

Improved self confidence

Realistic expectation of commitment to returning to school to work

Some of the elements of the 40+ transitional program would be:

Academic Assessment - student profile, initial reading, writing, and numeracy assessment, learning styles assessment

Skills inventory

Interest inventory

Career/academic aptitude and exploration, needs assessment

Small group, large group and computer assisted learning

Information Assessment including appropriate guest speakers

Personal Assessment

Résumé (set 5 years in the future)

Job search/exploration

Study skills - time management, note taking, motivation, success factors etc.

**II.** Development of appropriate materials to address the unique needs of the 40+ Worker.

**III.** Further research in order to replicate findings.

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