

# EMPLOYER INVESTMENT IN WORKPLACE LEARNING: REPORT ON THE YELLOWKNIFE ROUNDTABLE

## WORK AND LEARNING

Knowledge Centre

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# Employer Investment in Workplace Learning: Report on the Yellowknife Roundtable

## Introduction

The issue of employer investment in workplace learning has been the subject of recent discussions at the national level. However, since the nature of the labour market and the institutional structure of education and training systems vary across provinces and territories, it is important to gain an understanding of these differing provincial, territorial or regional perspectives. The Canadian Council on Learning's Work and Learning Knowledge Centre (WLKC) is partnering with Canadian Policy Research Networks (CPRN) to convene a series of roundtables on employer investment in workplace learning, involving senior government officials and senior representatives from business, labour, colleges/universities, Aboriginal organizations and NGOs from a particular province, territory or region. The goal of the roundtables is to identify practical steps to ensure that the quantity and quality of workplace learning in Canada matches the needs of the economy and maximizes the potential of Canadian workers.

The first of these roundtables was held in Toronto on December 6, 2007, the second in Halifax on February 18, 2008, and the third in Yellowknife on May 21, 2008. This report presents the highlights of the discussion at the Yellowknife roundtable.<sup>1</sup>

## Background

Investment in developing the skills and knowledge of Canadian workers is becoming increasingly important, for several reasons. One is the demographic imperative. The ageing of the baby boom cohorts will bring about a slowing of labour force growth. We can no longer rely on large youth cohorts to renew the skills of the workforce: most of the people who will be in the workforce in 2015 are in it today, so it's becoming more urgent to make the best use of the workers we have now. A second reason for the growing importance of workplace learning is the rapid pace of change in technology as well as the demands of the global knowledge economy, resulting in higher and frequently changing skill requirements on the job. In addition, changes in the labour market also point to the increased importance of workplace learning. On the one hand, skill shortages are being experienced in some sectors or regions, while other sectors or regions experience layoffs and/or sustained high levels of unemployment. For example, in the Northwest Territories, employment rates are above the Canadian average in Yellowknife, but below it in other communities.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, while the employment rate overall in the Northwest Territories is above the Canadian average, it is much higher

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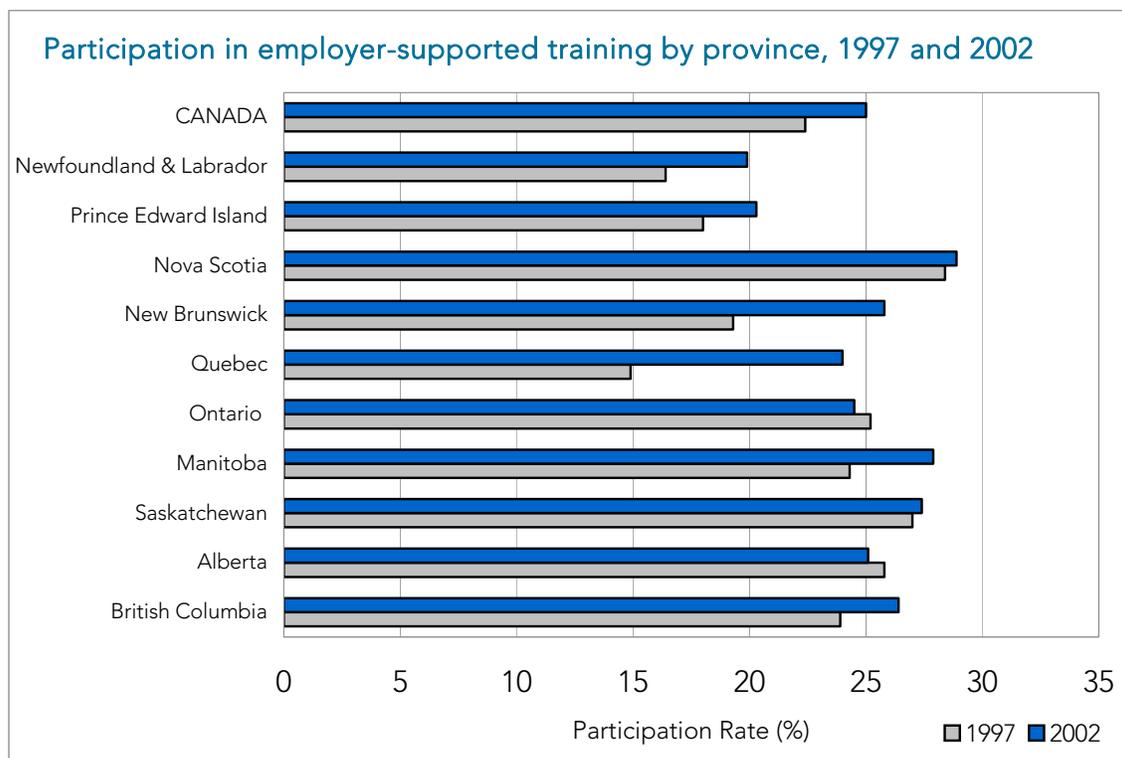
<sup>1</sup> The agenda for the day is provided in Appendix 1.

<sup>2</sup> NWT Bureau of Statistics (2008).

among the non-Aboriginal community than among Aboriginal people.<sup>3</sup> Skills training can help people from lower employment sectors or regions meet the needs of growing industries.

Canada’s performance in workplace learning has been mediocre. Less than 30% of adult workers in Canada participate in job-related education and training, compared to almost 35% in the United Kingdom and nearly 45% in the United States (Goldenberg, 2006). Moreover, as shown in Figure 1, there has been little increase in employer-sponsored training in Canada as a whole between 1997 and 2002, though there were sizeable gains in the provinces of Quebec and New Brunswick.

**Figure 1**  
Employer-sponsored training in Canada



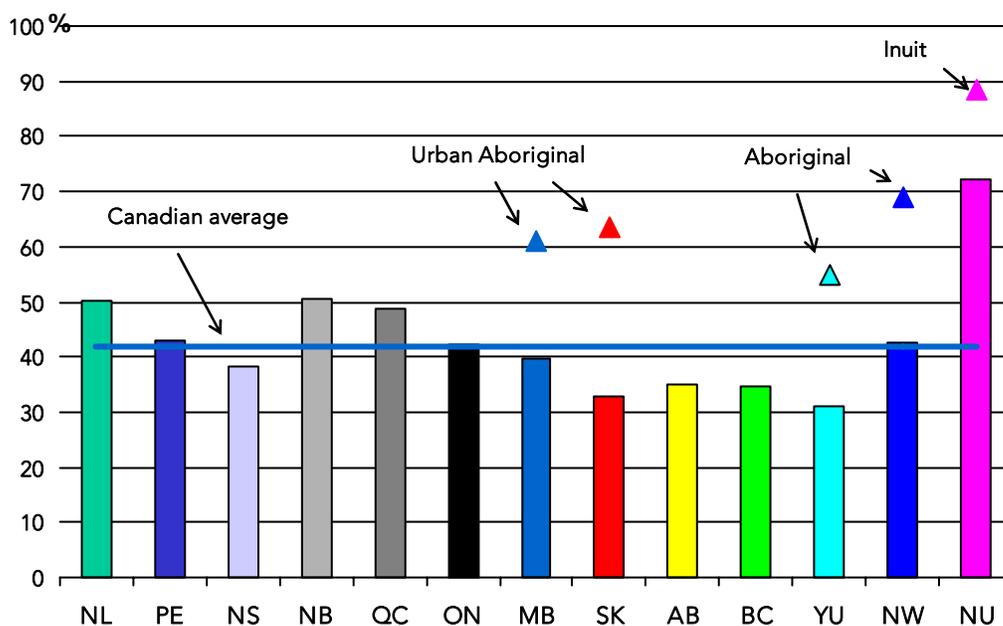
Source: Reproduced from Peters (2004). *Working and training: First results of the 2003 Adult Education and Training Survey*, Statistics Canada.

Evidence is emerging that employers who do invest heavily in learning programs for their employees usually experience a high rate of return on that investment (Bailey, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

Access to learning opportunities for less-educated adults, whether by returning to the formal education system through government-funded programs in the community or through employer-sponsored training, is generally poor in Canada (Myers and de Broucker, 2006). Yet approximately 40% of adult Canadians lack the literacy skills they need to live and work in today's society.<sup>4</sup> As shown in Figure 2, this percentage of adults at the lowest two levels of the international adult literacy scale is similar for the Northwest Territories (NWT) overall, but much higher among the Aboriginal population in the Territories (as it is in other parts of Canada).

**Figure 2**  
Proportion of 16-65 year-olds with low level of literacy skills



Source: Building on Our Competencies, 2005 (IALSS).

In 2006, the Canadian Council on Learning commissioned CPRN to prepare the discussion paper, *Employer Investment in Workplace Learning in Canada*, which was authored by CPRN Research Associate Mark Goldenberg. This paper sets out data on Canada's performance, reviews what is done in Canada and elsewhere to foster investment in workplace learning, and reports on interviews with leaders in Canada from business, labour, government, and the education sector. Its key findings include the following:

<sup>4</sup> Statistics Canada (2005). Building on our Competencies: Canadian Results of the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey.

### *There are barriers to doing more*

- Employers (especially small- to medium-sized firms) are concerned about “poaching,” time off the job, and whether the returns to training justify the costs.
- Sometimes they lack information about how to find/organize training programs that would meet their needs.
- Workers question the commitment of government and employers to substantive initiatives in workplace training.

### *There are many ideas to overcome the barriers and there are promising practices here and in other countries*

#### Proposals/practices include:

- partnerships among firms, workers, unions, governments and educational institutions;
- active advocacy by business organizations to encourage a training culture;
- a tool box with a wide variety of supports and initiatives and the flexibility to tailor their application to specific needs and circumstances;
- awareness campaigns and the collection of evidence to convince employers about the benefits of investing in workplace learning; and
- enhanced government financial incentives to firms (e.g., tax credits, matching training funds, levy systems as in Quebec) and/or individuals (e.g. training leave, vouchers, learning accounts, use of Employment Insurance to provide benefits to workers on training leave), especially with regard to basic skills/literacy training.

Similar ideas were expressed at a national roundtable in the fall of 2006 and at the WLKC’s Second Annual Symposium on Workplace Learning held in June 2007.

These findings provide a backdrop to the discussion at the regional roundtables on employer investment in workplace learning.

## **Highlights of the Discussion in Yellowknife**

Thirty-six people participated in the Yellowknife roundtable. They came from a variety of backgrounds and perspectives: employers; labour; federal, territorial, and Aboriginal government; educators; and NGOs. A list of the participants is provided in Appendix 2.

The roundtable began with a welcome from Dan Daniels, the Deputy Minister of the Department of Education, Culture and Employment in the Northwest Territories. Mr. Daniels emphasized that investment in workplace learning is of increasing importance to employers in the NWT, for several reasons:

- meeting the need for skilled workers;
- responding to changes in the ways jobs are done as technology and/or the organization of work changes; and
- attracting and retaining workers, since workers value the opportunity to continue to learn.

Mr. Daniels noted that the government of the Northwest Territories is working to develop an integrated learning network in collaboration with various stakeholders.

## The 2007 NWT Training Forum

The NWT Training Forum took place in Yellowknife on May 2-3, 2007. Sherry Lovely, the Coordinator of Employment Development and Training for the Department of Education, Culture and Employment in the NWT, made a presentation to the roundtable on the purpose and outcomes of the Forum.

The Forum was organized by the Department in order to build partnerships and improve coordination and outcomes in education and training across the NWT. Participants included representatives of Aboriginal governments, industry, non-governmental organizations, educators, and federal and territorial governments.

The Forum identified nine priorities for training in the NWT:

1. **Equity and accessibility** (access to learning opportunities for all in the NWT)
2. **Creating a foundation for learning** (literacy and the skills needed to enter the workplace)
3. **Labour supply and demand** (creating training plans; removing barriers to employment)
4. **Funding** (adequate resources to implement the vision for education and training)
5. **Standards** (quality assessment and recognized certification)
6. **Community needs** (access to community-based training)
7. **Partnerships** (collaborative and cooperative relationships)
8. **Culture of learning/Changing mindsets** (designing programs to meet the needs of user groups)
9. **Social issues** (a focus on healthy people, families and communities)

Participants in the Forum also identified a series of actions, to be completed between 2008 and 2012, in order to move forward on these priorities. A Steering Committee has been established to oversee the process.

One of the early actions proposed by the Forum was the development of an inventory of organizations willing to partner on training initiatives. A draft of the inventory has been completed. Work is under way on a guide to available training programs and supports (such as funding and child care).

Plans are for the Forum to re-convene (possibly with expanded participation, such as from organized labour) in the fall of 2008.

## Issues and Proposed Actions

In the first of the two dialogue sessions at the roundtable, participants were asked to identify the issues, challenges and opportunities regarding efforts to increase employer investment in workplace learning in the NWT. The dialogue was conducted in small groups with a mix of people from the different sectors at each table. The key issues that were identified in this dialogue were then grouped under eight themes, as shown below.

In the second of the small group dialogue sessions, roundtable participants were asked to identify specific steps that would be likely to increase employer investment in workplace learning in the NWT, taking into account the issues and challenges that had been identified earlier in the day. For purposes of this session, participants were grouped by sector at separate tables as follows: labour, business, government, and educators/ NGOs. **Each stakeholder group was asked to include in its proposals at least one that could be initiated on its own, without waiting for other sectors to act.** The proposed actions were grouped according to the eight themes that had emerged from the issues discussion. However, no actions were identified at the roundtable for the first of these themes—the issues set out there provide important context for actions under the other themes.

Each of the proposed actions includes a notation to indicate the sector that proposed it: G for government, E for employers, L for labour, and Ed/NGO for educators and non-governmental organizations.

### 1. Social, Cultural, and Gender Barriers

#### Issues, challenges, opportunities

- Aboriginal youth may be torn between participating in the wage economy and following a traditional lifestyle.
- Similarly, social issues may affect what kind of training is needed by the community (not just the individual) and which training methods are likely to be effective. Culturally-appropriate training is needed. “Southern” models may not be suitable.

- We need gender-friendly training environments to encourage women to consider non-traditional occupations.
- The “school” as an institution/place comes with baggage: many NWT residents associate “school” with failure.
- The shift work that is prevalent in some industries sometimes brings with it higher rates of problem behaviours such as drug addiction.

## 2. Geographic and Demographic Challenges

### Issues, challenges, opportunities

- People in rural communities have less access to learning (including training) and employment opportunities than those in Yellowknife. As noted in the background data for this roundtable, the employment rate in Yellowknife is much higher than in other parts of the NWT.
- This also means that those who are geographically mobile have more opportunity than those who are not. Moving to access opportunities can be costly (and raises cultural/community issues as noted above).
- Similarly, it is costly to offer services across the NWT because of the distance involved and the remoteness of NWT communities.
- There is also disparity between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal access to opportunities.
- Aboriginal people are underrepresented in more senior level positions in the workforce.
- Disabled persons are also underrepresented.

### Proposed action

- Promote diversity and accommodation in employment and training, for example:
  - adapting a job to hire person with a disability;
  - accommodation of cultural needs in training program. (Ed/NGO)

## 3. Pre-Employment Conditions

### Issues, challenges, opportunities

- Some participants—but there was disagreement on this—expressed a concern that the standards to obtain a high school diploma were not as high in the NWT as in other parts of Canada.
- Nevertheless, high school drop-out rates are high, limiting further opportunity.
- We may need more culturally-appropriate teaching in order to engage more youth in learning.

- Literacy/essential skills are low in much of the adult population, especially among Aboriginal people. Training programs should give priority to raising essential skills as a foundation for employment opportunities and further learning.
- The NWT needs stronger career development programming (for youth and adults) to help people identify where the opportunities are and what learning paths they need to follow to take advantage of them.

### Proposed actions

- Create and fund a career exploration program, to give people a chance to see what different jobs are like in practice. This could involve a tour of various workplaces. (Ed/NGO) (Note: Such a project would need to involve the Workers' Safety and Compensation Commission (WSCC) in order to ensure that all proper personal protective equipment is provided and health and safety regulations are followed.)
- Research, identify and apply a broader range of tools to document/recognize skill levels. (Ed/NGO)
- Develop a pre-employment training proposal to take forward to the Mine Training Society. (E)

## 4. Standards & Certification

### Issues, challenges, opportunities

- We need a way to certify people's essential skill levels that is widely recognized.
- Existing adult upgrading courses should be formally evaluated to determine their impact. This would require agreeing on what the key measures of effectiveness should be. Simply increasing participation in training is not enough unless that training generates marketable skills.
- We may need a multi- or base-employer model for apprenticeship, especially in smaller communities, to enable apprentices to accumulate enough work hours to complete their program.
- Some participants expressed a concern that regulations concerning apprentice/ journeyperson ratios are too stringent, but others cautioned against weakening standards in this regard.
- Many NWT residents with an aptitude for the trades have difficulty passing the trades entrance exam.

### Proposed actions

- The NWT Government should conduct a legislative review of certification standards for consistency with other provinces/territories and to ensure that the certification system meets the needs of employers. (G)

- Employers should encourage/enable employees to seek certification of their skills. (E)

## 5. Program Development

### Issues, challenges, opportunities

- The devolution of federal training programs to the provinces and territories presents an opportunity to develop programs that better meet the needs of people in the NWT. There is an opportunity to raise the bar and deliver more than has been done in the past. More trainers may be needed to accomplish this.
- Training programs sometimes focus too narrowly on specific skills (e.g. use of spreadsheet software) when participants need broader, basic skills (e.g. on computer literacy) before they can use the more specific ones.
- Laddered training programs are needed, starting with literacy/essential skills and then moving on to higher-level skills. Individuals need a long-term training plan with clear goals, while recognizing that they may have multiple careers over a lifetime.
- New programs should target disadvantaged/under-represented populations, such as Aboriginal people and the disabled. They should also encourage women to train for non-traditional occupations (e.g. mining).
- Training programs are needed not just for those out of work or entering the labour force, but for employed workers in low-skill jobs.
- Training methods may need to be tailored to the participant group.
- Better access is needed to on-line training outside of Yellowknife. This requires better/wider access to the Internet and skilled facilitators of e-learning.

### Proposed actions

- Government should conduct a program review, in consultation with adult learners, so that the design of learning programs matches the need of learners. (G)
- Develop regulations for minimum compulsory training requirements for specific sectors/trades. (G)
- Develop training programs with delivery mechanisms (e.g. evening courses) and supports (e.g. child care) designed for employed workers. (Ed/NGO)
- Expand the internship program beyond students to include people experiencing career transitions and immigrants. (G)
- Train a pool of workplace educators to conduct workplace education programs on contract. (Ed/NGO)

## 6. Employer and Employee Attitudes to Training

### Issues, challenges, opportunities

- There are lots of training opportunities available. Often the main barrier is lack of motivation on the part of employers or employees. They may be unaware of the benefits, both to individuals and to the organization, of workplace training. We need to establish a culture of learning.
- Some employers are investing heavily in training, but many employers question whether training will be a good investment for them. Operational challenges often take priority over training.
- There is too much reliance on attracting workers from other parts of Canada or from other countries instead of raising the skill level of the current NWT population. In particular, labour groups are concerned about overuse of the Temporary Foreign Worker Program as well as protection of the rights of workers who are brought into the NWT under that program.
- Literacy programs are perceived as “not cool,” yet often they are what is most needed before other skill training is undertaken.
- There is still the false perception that the trades are only for those who are not intelligent enough to go to university or college.

### Proposed actions

- Develop and implement a communication strategy to promote lifelong learning and improve awareness of learning opportunities. This can occur in multiple ways: a campaign for the general public led by government as well as the promotion of a learning culture within organizations (private companies, NGOs). (G, Ed/NGO, L)
- Establish a pilot project, targeted at SMEs, that would evaluate the return on investment in training programs. (E) Government should invest in raising awareness of impact of learning on the bottom line. (G)
- Governments (federal and territorial) should jointly communicate the direction and rationale for the temporary foreign worker program. (G)
- Unions should work together to develop language for the promotion of workplace learning in collective agreements. (L)
- Educate both employers and employees on how to create a respectful workplace. (L)

## 7. Partnerships

### Issues, challenges, opportunities

- Many partnerships regarding training programs are in place and working well, but there are opportunities to do more.
- Government/industry/communities/labour could partner to offer pre-employment training opportunities.
- There is capacity for more delivery of training programs by the not-for-profit sector and for more partnerships between NGOs and Aboriginal organizations.
- Small and medium sized enterprises could provide more training if they collaborated and shared resources.
- In order to partner effectively, organizations need good information about available programs and resources.

### Proposed actions

- Mining employers could partner with the Workers' Safety and Compensation Commission to share with employers from other sectors their experience regarding the impact of occupational health and safety training on safety, productivity, and costs. (E)
- Employers and unions could develop joint learning programs. (L)
- Develop sustained partnerships between Aurora college and NGOs to develop/deliver workplace based training. (Ed/NGO)
- Celebrate and share "Best Practices." May need champions in each region to encourage this. Government could convene forums on a regular basis to share information on best practices and ideas to improve training programs. (L, E, G)
- The Training Forum Steering Committee, with expanded membership, could be a vehicle for continuing engagement among governments (including Aboriginal governments), business, labour, educators, and NGOs to identify and promote ways to improve workplace training. (G)

## 8. Funding Challenges and Financial Incentives

### Issues, challenges, opportunities

- Some sort of incentive, either regulatory or financial, is needed from government to help foster more investment in workplace learning. For some employers, the perceived benefits of training may not match the direct (outlays for training programs) and indirect (loss of work time) costs of investing in workplace learning.
- In particular, more government funding may be needed for literacy initiatives.

- The infrastructure to provide training needs to be strengthened: facilities, instructors, expertise.

### Proposed actions

- Introduce tax incentives for employers to invest in workplace learning. (G, E). (A variation put forward by government officials was to consider employee/ employer/government shared funding for training with government participating through tax incentives.)
- Consider zero-based budgeting as a means to re-evaluate/re-align government programs in support of training. (G)
- Government should invest in workplace training in not-for-profit organizations, Aboriginal organizations, municipal organizations and SMEs (from plenary discussion).
- Government should ensure that workplace learning programs are funded in a way that supports the sustainability of delivery agencies (from plenary discussion).
- Lobby for the raising of student financial assistance and training allowances to liveable levels. (Ed/NGO)
- Lobby for a national, publicly-funded workplace training program. (L)
- The Northwest Territories Federation of Labour will ask all Federations of Labour to encourage the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) to restore the CLC's investment in workplace literacy programs (despite the cancellation of government funding for this). (L)<sup>5</sup>

## Conclusion

Participants at the Yellowknife Roundtable on Employer Investment in Workplace Learning came from a variety of backgrounds, but all recognized the importance of workplace learning. They were passionate about the opportunities to raise skill levels and improve outcomes for individual workers, their employers, and their communities.

Among the many issues and ideas for action that emerged from the dialogue, there were some recurrent areas of emphasis, namely the need to:

- raise literacy/foundation skills in the NWT,
- improve access to learning opportunities for those living in remote communities,
- promote awareness of learning opportunities in the general population and within organizations,

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<sup>5</sup> The issue of workplace literacy programs has been added to the agenda of the next regular meeting of the Presidents of Federations of Labour.

- provide culturally-sensitive curriculum,
- consider tax incentives to support greater investment by employers and workers, and
- focus on helping disadvantaged groups (Aboriginal people, persons with disabilities, women considering occupations in which they have been under represented) and small- and medium-sized employers.

Each stakeholder group represented at the roundtable – government, business, labour, education/training institutions, and non-governmental organizations – indicated that there were steps they could take to address these challenges.

Plans are under way for the next NWT Training Forum to be held in Yellowknife in the fall of 2008. That will present an opportunity to reflect on both past work of the Forum and the ideas put forward at this Roundtable and to identify how best to move forward to improve the quantity and quality of employment investment in workplace learning in the Northwest Territories. Roundtable participants noted that it would be desirable to expand participation in the Forum, particularly to include representatives of organized labour.

The Yellowknife Roundtable on Employer Investment in Workplace Learning was the third of a series of such dialogues being held in different parts of the country. WLKC and CPRN shall report on each of them, and there will also be a synthesis report that will reflect on this series of conversations and identify common themes as well as differences in regional context and approaches to the issue.

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## Appendix 1

*Roundtable: Employer Investment in Workplace Learning  
Explorer Hotel, Yellowknife, NT  
May 21, 2008*

### Agenda

- 8:15 Continental breakfast and registration
- 9:00 Welcoming remarks and introductions
- 9:30 Presentation on the 2007 NWT Training Forum
- 9:50 Presentation on key research findings
- 10:20 Break
- 10:45 Table dialogue: Employer Investment in Workplace Learning in the Northwest Territories – Key Issues
- 12:00 Reports back to plenary on the key issues
- 12:30 Lunch
- 1:30 Table dialogue: actions to address the key issues
- 2:45 Break
- 3:15 Closing plenary
- 4:15 Concluding comments
- 4:30 Adjourn

## Appendix 2

**Roundtable: Employer Investment in Workplace Learning**  
*Explorer Hotel, Yellowknife, NT*  
*May 21, 2008*

### List of Participants

**Mandie Abrams**  
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