



# CAREER LADDERS

Providing Opportunities for Ontario's Working Adults



For most people, the average work week can be routinely aggravating; but for Cathy – a single mother of two – the work week is an exhaustive struggle that doesn't end on Friday. She begins each day early, dropping off her children at their grandparents before going to her day job as a retail salesperson. The wages are okay - but not great - so a few nights a week and sometimes on weekends, she waitresses at a local restaurant to help make ends meet. Her spare time is spent with her children, doing housework and running errands. She would like to apply for a management position within the company; however the position requires that she have either a postsecondary diploma or degree – and Cathy struggled to obtain her high school diploma. She would like to go back to school to earn the additional credentials that would qualify her for the position and help her family move ahead – but she cannot afford to put her life on hold for the two years it would take her to get them. For Cathy, education and economic mobility is a distant dream.

Like most people working in entry-level jobs with families to support, Cathy would prefer to progress in her workplace, make a higher wage and reduce the hours she works in order to spend more time at home, yet she is finding it difficult. For most single parents, the possibility of taking time away from work to enter a longer-term education and training program is just not realistic. For many adults, skills training programs take too long to complete, do not accommodate their working lives and – most importantly – are not designed around their employment and career advancement needs. Ontario's education and training system is generating successful outcomes for educated Ontarians, but unfortunately the evidence indicates that low-wage earners and low-skilled individuals have few opportunities for gaining additional skills and economic mobility – the ability of an individual, family or group to improve their economic status - unless they move on to income support. This is a choice no worker should be asked to make.

And while there is no set formula for creating economic mobility, an approach known as 'Career Ladders' or 'Career Pathways' is showing promise across a number of jurisdictions. For communities, workers and employers, career ladders have systematically aligned career advancement and training opportunities to local economic and industry workforce needs. For adults, career ladders allow access to flexible training options that are usually accompanied by wrap-around supports, such as childcare and career counselling, enabling them to more smoothly move and progress with their career goals.

## THE WHAT & WHY OF CAREER LADDERS

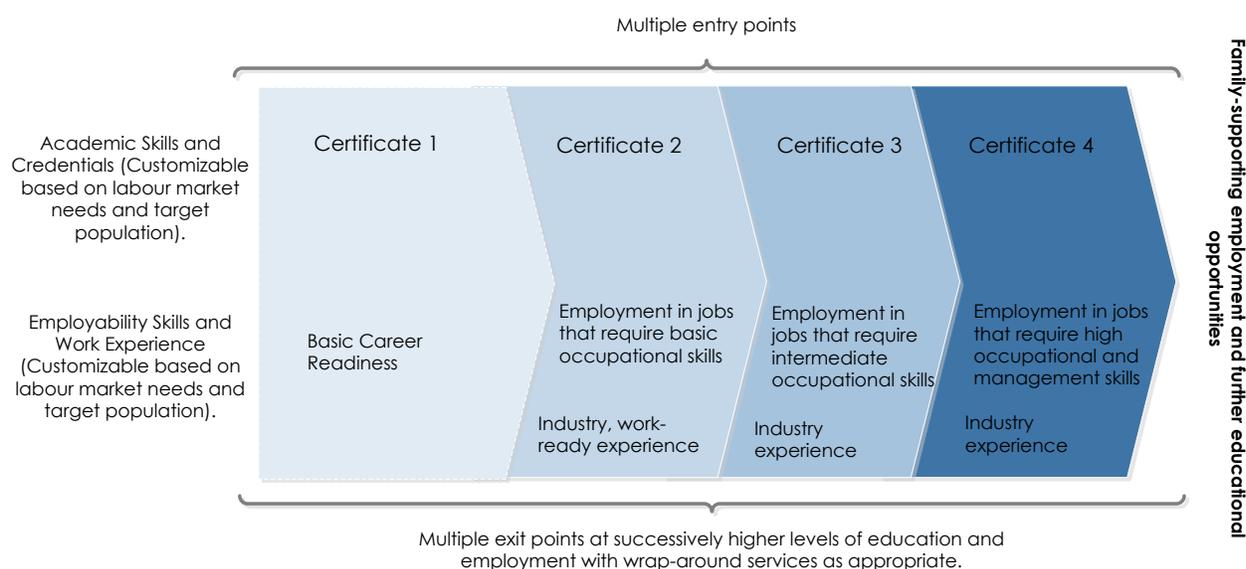
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Career ladders is an effort to enable low-skilled, low-income workers to enter and ascend up a career pathway in a given industry or occupation on their own time. The central premise of the approach is that training and educational delivery should be organized as a series of incremental and stackable certificates that are aligned to progressive occupational pathways. They provide numerous entry and exit points in order to address the scheduling challenges working adults often face. Through a series of accelerated skill development courses that are aligned to better paying jobs, career ladders allow low-income workers to connect to future

employment goals and provide them with the necessary motivation and support to complete training.

While career ladders initiatives are designed to serve the needs of low-income workers, they are also market-driven and act as a dual-customer service that adds value to local industry. Essentially, each ladder acts as a local industry skills development channel – one that advances and grows new and current workforce talent. In effective career ladders initiatives, employers keep education and training providers focused and on task as they make sure that what is taught is relevant and in demand. Here exists the opportunity: if training sequencing is done right, local educational and training providers can work with local industry to provide solutions for employers and low-wage workers. To do this, training services need to be delivered where they are needed, when they are needed and with the specific skills that are in demand.

**DIAGRAM 1: Stackable Certification for Better Jobs and Higher Wages**



## CAREER LADDERS DEVELOPMENT

Developing a career ladder requires community stakeholders and training and service providers to come together and mobilize resources in a coherent and systematic manner that is more responsive to local community employment and labour market needs. Ordinarily developed and executed by a consortium of partners involved in education, training and support services, each stakeholder brings different assets, capacities and perspectives to the initiative, which allow for actions and solutions that ultimately strengthen the career ladder in a more dynamic and sustainable way:

- Training opportunities are ‘chunked’ into shorter unit sizes and are offered in a format that is both accessible and manageable for working adults.

- Credentials are broken into small and obtainable units that reflect competencies and skills associated with specific occupations that ascend up a Career Ladder - each stackable certificate has meaning and currency to both participants and employers.
- Local training providers are asked to customize the content of training materials so that they meet the needs of workers in specific job contexts.
- Employers are encouraged to make work learner-friendly by supporting training during working hours, providing space for instruction and by facilitating career advancement.
- Social agencies are enlisted to address other barriers outside of the workplace that may impede participants – from childcare challenges to the development of skills for managing time and finances.

Given the multiple barriers that low-skilled workers often face – any one of which is capable of derailing their career plans – career ladders approaches have proven particularly appropriate because they create a platform that allows partners to come together and create applicable and comprehensive interventions. Essentially, all career ladders programs act as gateways to better opportunities and assist low-income and low-skilled workers to re-enter education and training programs in a supportive and employment focused manner.

## **PROGRAM CHARACTERISTICS & GUIDING PRINCIPLES OF A CAREER LADDER**

As career ladders initiatives have taken shape in different jurisdictions, some common program characteristics have emerged as predictors of system success which could act as a guide for new community initiatives going forward.

The most successful career ladders get the first step right: they accelerate educational and career advancement of participants by combining occupational skills training with adult literacy and basic skills. Also, well-designed career ladders understand that education and training alone are not enough to meet the needs of low-income workers and place a high priority around a) wrap-around services; b) pre and post employment supports; and c) education and training assistance – all which provide the necessary additional supports to complete training and succeed on the job. What is more, in order for a career ladders program to actually move people into better jobs and higher wages, local employers have to be engaged and laddered occupations have to be in-demand. To achieve this, programs should adopt industry-driven strategies where employers are engaged throughout the development and execution of a career ladder.

More than just a reconfiguration or a realignment of programs and services, career ladders approaches are used to foster systematic change. They allow for education, training, employment and social service providers to come together and create community impacts. Successful career ladders initiatives often use common principles to guide and steer their work forward:

- Partners adopt and articulate a shared vision: this often involves a governance structure that clearly outlines each partner's roles and responsibilities.

- There is clear leadership and a commitment to getting the career ladder implemented and institutionalized (this is crucial for building, sustaining, and scaling of career ladders initiatives).
- Career ladders are demand-driven: employers are deeply engaged throughout the process to ensure programming is responsive to specific and dynamic regional labour market needs – they do not just develop partnerships, but partnerships of substance.
- Planners work with government and policy makers to create a robust career ladders environment so that funding, performance and accountability measures can be aligned to the ongoing development and long-term success of these initiatives.
- The ongoing use and promotion of data collection to improve the approach over time and, thus, outcomes for employers and workers.

All too often when workers want to advance in their careers, they have to remove themselves from their current jobs to participate in traditional educational and training opportunities. For many workers this is not a realistic option. They do not have the luxury to forgo wages or have the time to take part in traditional training programs. At the same time, we hear from employers that they are struggling to find skilled workers who can move up and grow with their businesses. As higher-level skills become increasingly necessary to building better careers, better wages and better businesses, we have to find ways to provide the right kinds of training where they are needed, when they are needed. In this context, career ladders approaches offer a promising strategy that can help working adults move into better jobs, provide industry with the skills they need and contribute to local community development.