

Workers in Transition

Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition



Final Report

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Connecting the Workforce to Learning
THE CENTRE FOR EDUCATION AND WORK

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Workplace PLAR: A New Definition of PLAR Based on the *PLAR: Workers in Transition Study*

Abstract

The PLAR: Workers in Transition project was a three-year study conducted by the Centre for Education and Work in Winnipeg, Manitoba and funded by Human Resources Social Development Canada. The study measured the long-term effects of prior learning assessment and recognition strategies as labour market tools to assist workers-in-transition.

Over 300 individuals across Canada took part in this study. Portfolio groups were conducted with individuals in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Manitoba, Saskatchewan and British Columbia. Individuals volunteered to participate in the study and were offered a small honorarium to cover their travel and participation costs.

The workshop curriculum helped participants assess and identify their occupational skills, their transferable skills, their Essential Skills and how these linked to the job market and to potential occupations.

The PLAR: Workers in Transition study has demonstrated a number of exciting possibilities about the benefits of PLAR strategies, especially the use of portfolio, for workers in employment transition. As a primary finding, this study has demonstrated that the portfolio process is an effective tool in preparing workers in employment transition for the job search process.

This study has found that many workers in transition do not know how to manage effectively the process of transitioning to employment. The study examines many of the assumptions that employers, employment counselors, and workers themselves make about the employment transition process. Some of these assumptions are: that individuals know how to conduct a job search; that they know how to interview to their best advantage; that they can identify their occupational, transferable and essential skills in a variety of work contexts; that they know whether they require additional training; that they are clear on their career directions. *The PLAR: Workers in Transition* study demonstrates that the process of developing a portfolio is an effective way to address these issues.

Workplace PLAR: A New Definition of PLAR Based on the PLAR: Workers in Transition Study

Project Summary

“When I signed up for your course I did not know what to expect from it. As the weeks went by with the course I really got into it, and it helped me understand myself and what I was really meant to do. I realized that I was not a book person and that I was a tactile learner. I also learned a lot more about myself that I did not realize. The course also taught me how to get ready for an interview and to come out of it without raising eyebrows. Since then it was only 3-4 days after the strike in August that I had a new job! I also had 2 more job offers after that. From the bottom of my heart I thank you for getting me on the right path to the future. Keep up the good work and I hope that you will or already have helped somebody else like you have helped me to move on.”

Seth, East Coast¹

The PLAR: Workers in Transition project was a three-year study conducted by the Centre for Education and Work (CEW) in Winnipeg, Manitoba. The study measured the long-term effects of prior learning assessment and recognition strategies as labour market tools to assist workers in employment transition. Human Resources and Social Development Canada provided project funding.

The research studied the effect of a six-week course in portfolio development for the workplace on workers in transition. The work-based portfolio is a collection of information organized to demonstrate job knowledge and skills through documentation that individuals can collect from work, home, education, community or other learning experiences. As a process, the creation of a portfolio requires that the individual review goals, values, work and life experiences and incorporate evidence of these to reflect prior learning.

Methodology

Over 300 individuals across Canada took part in this study. Portfolio groups were conducted with individuals in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Manitoba, Saskatchewan and British Columbia. Individuals volunteered to participate in the study and were offered a small honorarium to cover their travel and participation costs.

Participants were interviewed before and after taking the portfolio workshops. The workshop curriculum helped participants assess and identify their occupational skills, their transferable skills, their Essential Skills and how these linked to the job market and to potential occupations.

Research partners

The CEW collaborated with individual researchers and portfolio deliverers at several Canadian research site locations. The project received advice from the Halifax PLA Centre and the Saskatchewan Labour Force Development Board.

¹ Names of all study participants have been changed throughout this report.

Study Findings

1. The Effect of Portfolio on the Job Search Process

Introduction

Study participants were at various stages in the job search process. During the Pre-portfolio interview, most study participants who actively had been conducting a job search process without success in gaining employment reported becoming discouraged with the job search.

Finding 1:

Developing a portfolio is helpful in the job application and search process.

In a three-month follow-up survey of study participants, employed respondents were asked whether the portfolio workshops were helpful in the job application process. Most employed respondents (77.42%, n=24) said the portfolio workshops were Very Helpful or Somewhat Helpful. 73.33% (n=44) of all respondents said the portfolio workshops were an important part of the job search process.

The majority of respondents (57.84%, n=59) said that their own job search would not have been as effective without the portfolio course. A large number of respondents (26.47%, n= 27) were Not Sure or said the question was Not Applicable

Many study participants said they had felt isolated in the job search process. Participating in portfolio workshops helped them realize that there are many others in the same situation. This realization was reassuring and gave them encouragement in continuing the job search.

Defining Job Interests

"I feel more confident about interviewing and talking about what I do and how I could use those skills in different roles. I feel more excited about looking for different options, and I'm more motivated to do that. So I'm very happy with that." Chantal, Saskatchewan

In pre-portfolio interviews, some study participants expressed frustration with the job search process stating that they were not certain what types of job to apply for. The approaches to the job search process encompassed a range of strategies. Some study participants had applied to a very broad range of jobs, whether they believed themselves to be qualified for the job or not. Others had severely limited the type of job they were applying for, believing that their job skills were restricted to the vocational skills gained in their last job.

For many, the ongoing lack of success in finding employment was beginning to take a toll on their self-worth. The portfolio process was viewed as a potential solution to the problem of decreased self-esteem.

Finding 2:

Developing a portfolio helps clarify job interests and define an employment focus.

The portfolio process helped study participants clarify job interests by helping some to focus their job search and others to broaden their job search, as appropriate. In Post-portfolio interviews, many study participants reported that they were better able to define their employment focus and job interests.

- The portfolio process enabled those who had been frustrated by their lack of success in finding employment to match their vocational and transferable skills with appropriate jobs that required those skills.
- The portfolio process enabled those who had been applying for a narrow range of jobs to see that their range of skills was not limited to the vocational skills learned on their last job, but included transferable and other skills learned through volunteer work, hobbies, family activities and work history.
- The portfolio process led to an increased sense of self-worth for many discouraged job-seekers.

The Interview Process

“Employment ready, yes. But more so I feel more interview ready. Now I feel that if I can land an interview then I have a hand up on a lot of other people because of the portfolio.” Jeremy, Manitoba

In the pre-portfolio interviews, many study participants revealed their fears of having to interview for positions. Some study participants had never before had a job interview. Other study participants believed that they had done poorly in job interviews in the past and that this was reflected in their lack of success in obtaining employment.

Not all study participants had completed their individual portfolios by the end of the portfolio workshops. However, many of those who did complete the portfolio used it in an interview and reported effective results.

In a three-month follow-up survey, 43.33%, (n=13) of employed respondents said they had used their portfolio during the interview to demonstrate their skills to potential employers. Of those who used the portfolio in an interview, 84.62% (n=11) said it helped them.

Finding 3:

Developing a portfolio helps candidates prepare for and conduct job interviews.

- One of the most positive effects of the portfolio process in preparing candidates for interviews was the enhancement of their self-confidence in the interview.
- The Portfolio helped participants get ready for the interview by providing them with concise information about their vocational and transferable skills. This provided participants with confidence going in to an interview.
- The Portfolio helped participants during the interview. Some reported that they took the portfolio with them during the interview and knew they could refer to it if required. The skills information in the portfolio could be readily brought to mind in an interview, ensuring that participants would not falter when asked about their skills.

The majority of employed respondents (61.29%, n=19) Agreed or Strongly Agreed that the Portfolio workshops helped them get their job. 25.80% (n=8) Disagreed or Strongly Disagreed with that statement. The remainder of employed respondents were not sure or felt the statement was not applicable to them.

Increased Confidence

“Well, I went to one interview and I brought my portfolio with me. Just looking at the woman who was flipping through it, she seemed impressed. It gave me a little more confidence that it was something a little more special, rather than just a two page resume handed over to her.” Rick, East Coast

The single most consistent effect of the portfolio workshops on study participants was an increase in their confidence. Most study participants reported in the post-portfolio interview that they had more confidence to continue the job search process and more confidence that their search would result in obtaining a job.

Finding 4:

Developing a portfolio increases confidence in work skills and experience levels.

- Increased confidence came from participants’ realization that their skills sets were much more extensive than they had originally realized.
- Confidence resulted from participants’ seeing themselves and their skills in new ways.
- For some study participants, the portfolio process enabled them to have the confidence to use their skills to try new things.

- For others, the portfolio process affirmed their skills and provided them with confidence in their skills when they had previously experienced rejection in the job market.
- The portfolio process was life affirming for some study participants. This was an especially important positive reinforcement at a time when many were feeling discouraged from the job search process.

“I feel more confident in sending it out to different places where I might not have sent it before.” Beverly, Manitoba

Greater Certainty about Employer Expectations

Many study participants at the pre-portfolio stage were unclear how to identify the skills required by employers and how to match their own skills to those the employers were looking for.

In particular, newcomers to Canada were uncertain about how to present their existing skills and previous work experience. Ensuring that their applications would reflect appropriate experience was important for immigrants to Canada entering the job market.

Finding 5:

Developing a portfolio helps create a stronger understanding of whether skills are matching employer expectations.

- The portfolio process helped participants focus on identifying and presenting the skills that employers were looking for.
- Study participants reported that they had a greater understanding of employer expectations as a result of the portfolio workshops

2. The Effects of Portfolio on Identifying Transferable & Occupational Skills

Identifying New Skills

“The group activity on recognizing experiential learning was fun. However, the real value of this session was in the transferable skills discussion and the production of the learning profiles. In this activity people had ah-ha types of events, as they saw their experiences both on the job and in other areas of their life in ways of greater value than previously.”

Ed, New Brunswick Portfolio Workshop Facilitator

The identification of transferable and occupational skills was an important exercise for study participants.

Finding 6:

Developing a portfolio helps identify new transferable and occupational skills.

- For some study participants, the Portfolio workshops enabled them to identify new transferable and occupational skills.

In a three-month follow-up survey of study participants, almost all respondents (95.93%, n=118) said that the portfolio workshops were Very Helpful or Somewhat Helpful in helping them identify their skills. A large number (74.80%, n=92) said that the portfolio workshops helped them identify skills they did not know they had.

Recognizing Existing Skills

"I'd say there are some skills there that I didn't even know they were skills. I had assets that I didn't know were skills or could be used or were employable." Gary, Manitoba

For most study participants, the portfolio process did not identify significant numbers of new skills within their existing skill set. Many participants indicated that they were aware of their transferable and occupational skills but had simply forgotten about the range of skills they had.

Finding 7:

Developing a portfolio helps identify, name and value a broader range of transferable and occupational skills.

Finding 8:

Developing a portfolio helps apply transferable and occupational skills to a wider range of jobs.

- The portfolio process prompted participants to recall skills they had forgotten about and to incorporate these skills into their individual portfolio under construction. Some participants discovered that they had many more skills than they originally thought they had.
- Recalling forgotten transferable and occupational skills enabled many participants to see their skill sets in a new and expanded way, and extended the range of their job search to a greater number of positions.
- The portfolio workshops enabled participants to properly name their transferable and occupational skills.
- Identifying transferable and occupational skills enabled study participants to understand the value of those skills and how the skills would help them succeed in new work environments.

- For some study participants, the portfolio process helped them think of their skills in new ways. This enabled them to assign greater value to existing skills.
- The portfolio curriculum used in this study introduced study participants to the term “Essential Skills”² as a means to identify, evaluate and document their transferable skills.
- The Essential Skills enabled participants to view their skills outside the definition of the most recent position description.
- The portfolio workshops facilitated a greater awareness of the applicability of skills across occupational areas by helping study participants see how they could use their transferable skills in a variety of occupational areas. This resulted in many study participants being able to think of a wider range of jobs for which they were eligible to apply.
- A new appreciation for skills previously considered irrelevant or unimportant helped some participants use their existing skills sets more appropriately in the job search process by placing a greater emphasis on the transferable skills valued by employers.
- Many participants began to see the value of transferable skills like reading and writing skills with greater appreciation. Prior to the portfolio process, some participants had viewed these skills as “a given” in their skills sets. Through the portfolio process, the importance of these transferable skills in the workplace took on new meaning for some participants.
- The portfolio process helped study participants evaluate the strengths of their transferable and occupational skills.

Identifying New Employment Opportunities

Many study participants had restricted their career options by focusing primarily on the specific skills (of job classifications) gained through their previous employment. The portfolio process enabled study participants to incorporate a broader skills range including transferable skills and skills gained through other life experience such as hobbies and volunteer work. This opened up the opportunity for other job possibilities.

“I found that when I categorized my Essential Skills, there were actually quite a lot, and I think it’s a powerful tool to use for applying for jobs.” Tabitha, Manitoba

² For more information about the HRSD Essential Skills see:
http://srv108.services.gc.ca/english/general/home_e.shtml

Finding 9:

Developing a portfolio can help overcome a lack of formal credentials for some types of jobs.

- Broadening their skills set through the portfolio process to include transferable skills and skills gained through hobbies and volunteer work helped many study participants to consider a wider range of employment opportunities and career options, as well as new approaches and attitudes toward entering the next phase of their work lives.
- Some study participants found that the portfolio process and the portfolio itself helped them overcome a lack of formal credentials by demonstrating they had the appropriate work experience to do the job.

Labour Mobility

An expanded range of identified skills would, in theory, promote opportunities for labour mobility. For some study participants, this was the case. For other participants, especially those with deep roots in their community, the ties to the community through family and friends meant that they would continue to explore all avenues for employment in their community and would not likely seek work that would require them to relocate.

Finding 10:

Developing a portfolio improves opportunities for labour mobility.

- Some study participants were able to identify employment opportunities outside their communities and take advantage of these.

The portfolio process helped other study participants identify their commitment to remaining in their home community. A three-month follow-up survey of study participants showed that the great majority (90.32%, n=28) of employed respondents were working in their own community. Many participants were unaware that volunteer work and other informal learning opportunities could contribute significantly to their bank of employment skills.

“Well, I’m currently employed gardening, and gardening previously was a hobby. I used the portfolio to identify that I was good with plants and with people, and so I combined those two to get a job.” Fiona, Saskatchewan

Finding 11:

Developing a portfolio helps individuals apply for a wider range of jobs by incorporating skills gained through hobbies, volunteer work and other life experiences.

- The portfolio process helped participants incorporate a wide range of formal and informal work skills from activities that were not paid employment, thus increasing their skills sets.
- Some participants found employment in areas they enjoyed as hobbies.
- Other study participants gained a greater realization of the transferability of skills gained from hobbies and volunteer work.
- Some study participants found new skills by incorporating hobbies and volunteer work into their portfolio.

3. The Effects of Portfolio on Personal Growth

Defining personal and career goals

The portfolio process became the means for some study participants to explore a variety of career options and examine the requirements for moving in new directions. Some participants used the portfolio process to address their uncertainty about what to do next in their personal and employment goals and directions.

“I think it [is] a creative way of looking at and honouring your life and your life experience. You know, even if this wasn’t about finding a job, just being able to look at my life and what I’ve been through as valid and valuable and real, growing, learning ... you know, very positive, really very positive, no matter what I’ve done. Because there’s always that judge sitting there on your right shoulder, or whatever, and saying, ‘You didn’t do this and you didn’t do that,’ but look at all the things that I have done and all the strengths that I really do have and the confidence that I do have already; and it’s just a matter of saying ‘yes’ to my life and to this process of radical change and transition. It’s a pretty wonderful thing.”
Marlene, Manitoba

Finding 12:

Developing a portfolio provides an occupational direction for individuals in different life situations.

- The goals setting component of the portfolio workshops, while challenging, proved instrumental in helping many study participants clarify their personal and employment goals.

- For some study participants, the portfolio workshops provided them with the personal and career direction they required at this point in their lives.
- For other study participants, the portfolio process was a tool in the transitional process. The portfolio workshops helped many study participants understand that the answers would take some time to become clear.
- Some study participants began to explore their futures with more confidence, looking at their job search as a way to find a position that was personally and professionally satisfying.

Transition at Mid-Career

Study participants considering mid-life career changes faced the challenge of incorporating into their portfolio such factors as length of time before retirement, pension plans, loss of income if training for a new career was required, and family obligations including caring for children and elderly parents.

Finding 13:

Developing a portfolio helps participants contemplating mid-life career changes to evaluate the many factors that impact upon making a career decision.

- Study participants considering mid-life career changes found value and goal setting a difficult exercise often requiring additional reflection time before moving forward in the portfolio process.

Transition for Immigrants

Recent immigrants to Canada faced challenges in the goals and values exercise. For some immigrants, their goal was to find any sort of employment that would bring an income into the family. For others, their goal was to re-enter the profession they had in their home country. Another group of immigrants was interested in exploring career changes in Canada.

“My long-term career goals would ultimately be to be a teacher. . . . I know I can contribute more to Canada than to stay as a production worker.” Olivia, Manitoba

Finding 14:

Developing a portfolio helps immigrants better prepare for employment in Canada.

- Immigrants who were interested in exploring a new career option required the greatest degree of reflection in the goals and values segment of the portfolio workshops.

- Those immigrants who wanted to re-enter their professions required a variety of supports ranging from English language improvement, to credential recognition, to learning how best to present their knowledge and skills in a Canadian context.
- Those immigrants who needed to find employment quickly required support to present their previous employment skills and experience in a Canadian context.

Transition for Persons with Acquired Disabilities

Persons with acquired disabilities often face the task of redefining their job skills, sometime in radically different ways from their previous work. In Pre-portfolio interviews, study participants with acquired disabilities identified the difficulties of having their careers cut short, often unexpectedly. The process of redefining themselves and identifying new career goals could be a daunting task.

“I’m on disability, and I was kind of settled to the fact that, you know, this is where I’m at. Now it looks like I’m going to be able to go back to work for a minimum of five more years.” Ethan, British Columbia

Finding 15:

Developing a portfolio helps persons with acquired disabilities focus on redefining their employment skills in terms of what they can do, and not in terms of what they can no longer do.

- For many study participants with acquired disabilities, setting new personal and career goals was an important part of moving forward in their lives.
- Post-portfolio interviews show that the portfolio workshops helped persons with acquired disabilities focus on what they can do in their lives and careers, rather than on what they can no longer do.

Transitions Related to Age

Some study participants thought their age was a detriment in the job search process. Older study participants often believed that their age played a factor in their difficulty getting a job. Some of the youngest participants in the study worried that their age might equate with lack of experience and direction.

“It sort of gave me the sense that I’m not old. I had thought that I was just way too old to start over. So it gave me a sense that, you know, ‘You’re never really too old to stand up and try something new.’” Hazel, Manitoba

Finding 16:

Developing a portfolio helps individuals focus on skills and experience rather than on age.

- The portfolio process helped older participants identify their strengths based on their years of experience in the workforce.
- The portfolio process helped younger participants clarify their values, goals and directions and use their transferable and Essential Skills to their advantage.

Educational and Training Directions

Many study participants thought they would require additional education or training in order to find employment or to change careers. The portfolio workshops for many study participants clarified whether or not they needed more education and training, and in which areas the training was required in order to move forward in their job search.

Finding 17:

Developing a portfolio helps determine the need for additional education or training in order to find employment.

- The portfolio process clarified for many study participants whether or not they needed education or training, and how to best suit education to their personal life and learning styles.
- Some study participants who thought they needed to attend an educational or training program in order to find a job determined through the portfolio process that they did not require additional education or training at this time.
- Others hoped to use their portfolio to attempt to receive academic credit for their prior learning.

In a three-month follow-up survey of study participants, most employed respondents (83.87%, n=26) said they did not have to attend an educational or training program to get their job. However, the majority (65.22%, n=75) planned to enroll in an educational or training course in the future.

Observations and Recommendations

In addition to the findings that emerged from the qualitative and quantitative research conducted for this study, the research team observed many other interesting dynamics related to the portfolio workshops. These reflections are listed here in the form of Observations.

Observation 1:

The Portfolio process works in all geographic regions. The project delivered portfolio workshops in many different types of geographic locations across Canada – from small towns to large cities. The workshops met with success regardless of location.

Observation 2:

The portfolio process works for all different types of people, regardless of age, education, ability, occupational background. However, it became clear that portfolio curricula should be customized to address the needs of certain groups, for example, immigrants, persons with acquired disabilities, persons in mid-life transition, youth. One generic curriculum does not fit all needs.

Observation 3:

For many people, the portfolio process is more important than the creation of a portfolio product. In other words, the opportunity to identify and reflect upon one's skills in a guided way and put them into a context of a job search is very important to workers in transition.

Observation 4:

The portfolio process helps participants gain skills in reflection and analysis. The process helps participants better understand their skills, rather than simply knowing what occupational tasks they are able to perform. The portfolio process is based on demonstrating competence.

Observation 5:

The portfolio process teaches individuals to articulate goals, skills and make decisions about their lives. Clearer goals, a better sense of skills and the ability to know what direction to go in helps people in the employment transition process. A clear understanding of the type of workplace environment that best suits themselves helps people make good decisions in applying for jobs. When individuals understand what motivates them through identifying their values and goals, they make better decisions about types of work and work environments that will satisfy them.

Observation 6:

The positive effects of the portfolio workshops remain over time. People continue to be positive about the impact of the workshops at 3 and 6 month intervals. It is a good investment.

Observation 7:

Portfolio workshops are best delivered to small groups. The group provides effective support, networking opportunities and creative examples and suggestions to individuals in similar circumstances. The group process allows individuals to take a leadership role within the group.

Recommendations

In addition to Observations, there are several recommendations emerging from this project.

Recommendation 1:

Portfolio curricula should include an emphasis on transitional process as well as a goal of completing a portfolio product.

Recommendation 2:

Employment counselors should be trained to facilitate portfolio workshops using techniques for working with adult learners. Currently, much of the PLAR work occurs in educational institutions and is directed toward academic credit. Portfolio for the workplace is an important use of PLAR strategies.

Recommendation 3:

Further research is required into the types of employment choices people make when they are in employment transition.

Recommendation 4:

Portfolio workshops that emphasize the development of work-based portfolios are an important focus for workers in transition. Work-based portfolio should be offered on a regular basis to individuals seeking employment, in the same way that academic portfolio course are offered to individuals seeking credit in educational institutions.

Conclusion

The PLAR: Workers in Transition study has demonstrated a number of exciting possibilities about the benefits of PLAR strategies, especially portfolio, for workers in employment transition. For over three years, the study has examined many of the assumptions that employers, employment counselors, and workers themselves make about the employment transition process. Some of these assumptions are that individuals know how to conduct a job search; that they know how to interview to their best advantage; that they can identify their occupational, transferable and essential skills in a variety of work contexts; that they know whether they require additional training; that they are clear on their career directions. Many workers in transition do not know how to effectively manage the process of transitioning to employment. *The PLAR: Workers in Transition* study demonstrates that developing a portfolio is an effective way to address these issues.