



FIELD NOTES | A MODEL FOR WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

CONTEXT

Workforce Development is about economic prosperity, but what makes this approach unique is that it focuses on people rather than businesses. It can typically be classified as place-based whereby strategies address the needs of people living in a particular area, or sector-based with strategies focusing on skills and matching those to employment in the region.

Over the years, the labour market has changed due to globalization, industrialization and patterns of migration, as well as an aging population. Increases in precarious work, the changing nature of jobs and education requirements leading to good jobs, all are factors. There are also barriers and challenges that prevent full participation for employment-seeking individuals, and decent work is important for any thriving community. Thus, workforce development is relevant for municipalities and regions looking for progressive solutions to employment (unemployment, underemployment, living wages and decent work) and to engaging with the employer and business community, an important consideration for poverty reduction work.

Interest in this topic emerged as a priority area for participants on Tamarack's Community of Practice, primarily through wanting to learn about effective strategies in engaging with the business community. In our January 27, 2020 Community of Practice call for Municipal and Regional Government Representatives, we heard from Oxford County, a Cities Reducing Poverty member, about its model of workforce development. Oxford Workforce Development Partnership (OWDP) has been recognized as a best practice on the provincial level, with concepts being implemented across and beyond the economic region.

About Oxford Workforce Development Partnership

Oxford Workforce Development Partnership (OWDP) is a collaboration of 14 community partners including: Employment Ontario providers, Postsecondary institutions, Municipal leaders, business associations, Provincial representation from various ministries and employers who have been working together for the past 10 years.

OWDP makes improvements on both supply and demand sides, by tracking data and helping employers understand and be more responsive to the new labour market realities as well as helping to prepare and support transitions of non-participating individuals into the job market.

INSIGHTS

OWDP assumes a leadership role and works to identify local labour needs, issues, gaps, trends and opportunities to improve local market conditions. Three insights shared were: the collaborative nature of the work which also makes it more sustainable, the need for adaptability and having a comprehensive strategy.

Collaboration – A Strong Local Network

Developing a strong network of local stakeholders with decision-making capacity in the region helps to mobilize resources most effectively as well as identify gaps. Communication is ongoing and essential with clients, employers and all stakeholders.

- “A collaborative approach is the only way forward. It is organic, will constantly evolve and shift. Collaboration is the only way to have flexibility and adaptability to successes.”
- “All our initiatives are sustainable. We work with existing resources.”
- “Most importantly, we engage local partners in a community driven process to find solutions that contribute to the improvement of local labour market conditions for Oxford County and retain the economic vitality of Oxford.”

The Model is Adaptive and Interconnecting

The labour market is constantly evolving, the population and workforce participation is always changing. A structure which allows for being flexible and responsive to the data, technology, skills and the environment is necessary. Strategies in the region align to reach a “triple bottom line”: lift people out of poverty, drive economic development and ensure environmental sustainability.

- “We don’t operate under a governing board – this allows us to adapt in a dynamic environment.”

The Strategy is Comprehensive

The OWDP works with employment-seeking individuals and employers. Rather than a problem-focused approach of skill need, the approach taken is holistic in that it considers people’s barriers to employment and the overall needs of the region.

- “We are entrenched in both the supply and demand sides of the labour market as part of our comprehensive, holistic strategy.”

ADVICE FOR OTHERS

OWDP shared their learnings with others who are wanting to focus on employer and business engagement. Here are their top three pieces of advice for successful workforce development:

Apply an Equity Lens

Design services and access to services with equity in mind. Rather than focus on problems of lack of skills and lack of jobs, focus on the assets of people and the community. Use resources that already exist.

- “The remaining pool of labour and the non-participating individuals who are essential to address the labour shortage, has forced OWDP to explore the challenges facing these groups that prevent successful labour market integration.”

Employer Engagement and Will

A labour shortage impacts on economic growth and requires innovative solutions. Employers need to be included in the process of understanding and in creating solutions.

- “We engage with employers to educate them on the realities of the current labour market and have them help develop solutions.”
- “Our primary focus in labour force development has always been understanding the current needs and challenges facing the business community and then working with all key stakeholders to ensure the local labour pool has the required skills and attributes to actively participate. As the labour market continues to contract as boomers exit, unemployment rates have dropped significantly.”

Not a Simple Roadmap

Moving out of poverty is no longer a short process of following a simple roadmap to a good job. As collaborative and comprehensive efforts in the community are needed to find the solutions, consider organizing a hub or network that joins resources and connects people.

- “It has never been more important to find a way to break the cycle of poverty.”
- “Small changes now will make a big difference for people living in poverty.”



TOOLS

Here are some tools and resources to learn more about OWDP:

- “Over 300 employers and 80 Community Stakeholders contributed to the [Strategic Plan](#) and continue to do so as the plan evolves.”
- Report on [Economic Prosperity](#) in Oxford
- CASE STUDY on Oxford County: [Leveraging a Community Sustainability Plan](#) to tackle poverty

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