



Displaced Workers Project Cover Report

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Submitted by:

Heather Deal
Director, Adult & Workplace Learning
hdeal@decoda.ca

Decoda
Literacy Solutions

Working together for literacy

☎ 604 681 4199 ✉ info@decoda.ca

📍 Suite 980-1125 Howe Street, Vancouver, BC V6Z 2K8

Contents

- Introduction 3
 - Setting the stage 3
 - Gathering information 4
 - Preliminary findings 5
 - COVID-19 impacts 5
 - Case Studies 5
 - Mid-project findings..... 6
- Beta testing 7
- Overall project findings..... 8
- Recommendations 9
 - Project wrap-up and next steps 9
- Conclusion..... 10

Introduction

In February of 2019, Decoda Literacy Solutions entered into a contract with the Government of Canada to deliver a three-year research project studying the gaps and needs of Canadian workers displaced from their jobs.

These workers had been displaced from their jobs through planned or unplanned circumstances such as mill closures, industry slow-downs, tourism decline or natural disasters. Their lives and those of their families were often thrown into crisis when their jobs disappeared. Finding new employment could seem like an impossible task.

The [Enhancing Displaced Workers' Literacy and Essential Skills Project](#) was designed to research and evaluate existing literacy and essential skills (LES) programs, increased knowledge of gaps in LES supports and training, and identify and test promising practices to fill those gaps. The project emphasized workers who are hard to reach or reluctant to access skills training or employment services.

The research was conducted with partners [Social Demonstration and Research Corporation](#) (SRDC) and [Learning Metrix](#).

This project overview is supported by numerous documents which contain details of each stage of the project. Those reports are linked in the body of the overview.

Setting the stage

The first job was identifying teams of experts and BC project delivery sites.

There were three project teams, a BC Outreach Team which gathered extensive information over the life of the project, beta testers who tested promising practices in four provinces in 2021, and a national advisory committee. Each of these teams met regularly via Zoom throughout their phases of the project.

The Decoda network of literacy outreach coordinators and stakeholders reflect local knowledge and experience in over 400 communities in BC. A questionnaire was sent out to this network asking if people had observed job loss in their community and were aware of workers who had been displaced and may have literacy challenges. "Literacy" can refer to traditional reading and writing skills as well as digital and other [Skills for Success](#). Recipients were not told there was a project attached to the questionnaire.

From the 106 replies reported on in the [Community Context survey Report](#) (some multiple responses from the same community), ten sites were chosen to proceed with the project. Factors that were considered in choosing the ten sites included a clearly identified need, local capacity, and a diversity of communities throughout the province.

As the BC Team was being assembled, a Canadian Network Advisory Committee (CNAC) was created and populated. Provincial literacy organization leaders, literacy content experts, academics and others were invited to join CNAC and a team of 11 members was confirmed. Their leadership

offered guidance on the project, helped to gather Canada-wide information, helped to choose the beta-test sites and shared best practices to support beta test project implementation.

A literature review was conducted by SRDC, and the resulting report was published in French and English:

[Literature Review \(FR\)](#)

[Literature Review \(ENG\)](#)

Gathering information

SRDC developed a [Project Evaluation Framework](#) for each of the project sites to use in gathering information.

There were many tools used to collect data. These included:

- interviews to gather detailed information from key individuals
- focus groups to gather conversational information in a group setting
- surveys, designed to get detailed information from people whose lives were directly affected by job loss

BC Team members were responsible for forming local task groups, identifying interview subjects, identifying potential research participants, conducting focus groups, and distributing and conducting surveys. Interview and focus group information was gathered in the [Interview and Focus Group Annual Report](#).

During this phase of the project, the project team delivered the following webinars for the BC Outreach Team, ensuring a common understanding of the work required to gather useful research data:

- Project Introduction
- Using the Community Forum
- Using the Adult Literacy Database
- Introduction to the Evaluation Framework
- Conducting Focus Groups
- Conducting Surveys (adapted for remote delivery)
- Conducting Interviews

In November 2019, Decoda held the biennial [Decoda Literacy Conference](#) in Vancouver. The Displaced Workers Project teams (BC Outreach Team, CNAC and project staff teams) met for the first time and spent a full day discussing project goals and methodology and sharing preliminary observations. It was an intense and informative day.

In March 2020 the first [Annual Report](#) reviewed accomplishments and information gathered to date.

Preliminary findings

Findings at this early stage of the project included:

- Local and place-based approaches are key
- Programs should take a holistic approach to supporting clients
- Individually tailored and flexible programs work best – meet learners where they are
- Lack of local awareness and visibility of programs are a barrier
- Programs must have clearly defined and concrete objectives
- Integration of LES with employment services increases chances of re-employment

COVID-19 impacts

Just as the BC focus groups were completed, COVID-19 hit. Resulting public health measures radically changed the project methods and outcomes. Funders agreed to extend the project by six months to allow for adapting to these changes.

Project participants had to be identified without many of the usual tools like job fairs and employment-service walk-ins. Interviews and surveys had to be conducted remotely. For learners untrained in technology or with limited access to devices, remote surveys were challenging. Many surveys were conducted by phone rather than online.

The introduction of the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) resulted in additional project challenges. While many people lost jobs due to COVID-19, job search patterns changed. Entire sectors such as the service industry were shut down overnight. Over time, communities reported a decreased focus on returning to traditional work.

The next steps of the project – additional surveys, case studies and beta testing – all were conducted under the new realities of life with COVID-19 and the resulting public health measures and workforce changes.

A visual representation of the [BC Displaced Workers Survey Data](#) was created by SRDC.

Case Studies

In 2020, BC Team members were given the option of writing a case study of their personal observations of the impact of job loss on individuals, their families, and their communities. A webinar on writing case studies was delivered to BC Team members. Nine case studies resulted. A webinar on case studies was presented to CNAC members in May of 2021, including presentations by two case study authors.

These compelling [Case Studies](#) are published on the Decoda website and have been very well received by funders, CNAC and others.

Mid-project findings

The [Second Annual Report](#) (June 2021) included preliminary findings based on surveys and interviews, while setting the stage for beta testing:

- **LES Needs:**
 - There was a difference between the skills that displaced workers needed to improve compared to the skills they wanted to improve.
 - Respondents tended to show the greatest interest in improving workplace associated skills, such as using technology, speaking up for on-the-job problem solving and reading workplace instruction manuals.
- **Digital Skills Needs:**
 - Displaced workers indicated that they were most interested in improving their technology skills, specifically their use of workplace-related software.
 - Interviewees explained that this interest primarily stems from their understanding that all jobs now require some form of these skills and people with technology skills are more likely to get hired.
- **Training:**
 - There was a high acknowledgement of the helpfulness of training, yet lower uptake on actual training and some disinterest in training overall.
 - There is difficulty engaging this population in training unless it is tailored specifically to their needs and/or addresses the barriers they face when accessing training.
 - Those who had been displaced and since re-employed were more likely to have taken training. The most common training taken was for certifications and tickets.
- **Barriers:**
 - Most displaced workers identified multiple barriers to accessing training. The most common barriers to training were associated with money, including cost of tuition, books or supplies, loss of income while training, and the availability of training.
 - This suggested that LES training delivered in the beta-test phase of the project that offered greater availability of free or affordable training could eliminate the top barriers identified by displaced workers in the survey.
- **Supports:**
 - Most displaced workers who responded to the survey identified the need for additional supports.

- Key supports identified extended beyond education to areas such as job search skills, financial skills, work experience, transportation, and mental health supports.
- This suggested that beta-test programming should consider additional supports that extend beyond the content of literacy and essential skills-based educational training.

Beta testing

As the BC Team continued to collect information, the project pivoted to beta testing promising practices. This allowed the project to identify promising practices that had the potential to become transferrable and scalable practices that could be used across Canada.

A beta-test site identification committee was formed, consisting of CNAC members and staff from Decoda and SRDC. Members of CNAC distributed a questionnaire to their literacy networks across Canada. This questionnaire was similar to the one distributed in BC at the beginning of the project and resulted in 80 responses from seven provinces and one territory, representing 68 communities or regions. Using similar criteria as that used to identify the BC Team (a clearly identified need, local capacity and diversity of communities), 11 sites were selected in four provinces (seven in BC, two in Ontario, and one each in Alberta and Saskatchewan).

The following webinars were delivered to beta-test site leaders:

- Introduction to Beta Testing
- Introduction to the Evaluation Framework
- Introduction to the Theory of Change
- Using the Adult Literacy Database
- Using Benchmarks to Demonstrate Progress

Throughout 2021 the 11 beta-test sites designed and delivered a wide variety of training programs. Some were very successful, reaching learners and resulting in increased employment opportunities, and some faced significant challenges from COVI-19 resurgences or other external factors.

All 11 projects offered a wealth of learning opportunities. The projects are described on the [Beta-Test Projects](#) page on the Decoda website.

During the beta testing, project leads were offered the opportunity to develop and refine curriculum for their training programs. Six curricula resulted, reflecting the diversity of training that was provided by these projects.

These [Beta-Test Curricula](#) were developed in BC, Alberta and Saskatchewan.

Overall project findings

The reports linked in this project overview outline the results. At a high level, the results include these **process-related findings**:

- There is a need to address the lack of access and availability of LES programming in communities.
- Partnerships between different organizations in communities, particularly between literacy organizations and employment and training organizations, are one key area which could benefit from further attention in future pilot projects.
- Small-scale beta-test projects were valuable for the beta-test organizations as they enabled the organizations to try new and innovative programming without significant risk.
- Small scale beta-test projects also limited the opportunity to innovate due to their limited resources, time, and organizational capacity.
- There was value for the beta-test organizations in delivering place-based programs while being part of a larger project that had common objectives and outcomes.
- Opportunities for beta-test organizations to learn and network with other organizations provincially and nationally helped to support them throughout the project.
- Having an evaluation partner embedded within the project design increased the research and evaluation capacity of the beta-test organizations.
- Despite limited numbers of participants, there was a high level of diversity among learners, adding value to the project.
- Perhaps most importantly, the beta-test organizations showed tremendous resilience, adapting and finding solutions to carry on through a very challenging time.

The **research outcomes** include:

- A learner-centred approach helps to engage learners in the training programs and help them achieve learning outcomes:
 - Most learners experienced gains in skills after completing their training.
 - Learners made substantial gains and developed confidence in using IT skills.
 - Learners demonstrated increased participation and communication skills both directly (e.g., such as their ability to give presentations) and indirectly (e.g., their increased engagement in group discussions).
- Social supports, through relationships with other learners and the facilitators, were critical for building learners' self-confidence and fostering their sense of belonging.
- Beta-test programs contributed to learners enhancing their labour market resiliency and potential for success, as well becoming more aware of, and confident in using resources and services in their communities that focus on skills development and employment.

Recommendations

The project findings which lead to the following recommendations are listed above. They are described in more detail in the linked reports.

Resulting recommendations include:

- Focus on place-based learning.
- Meet learners where they are – physically, mentally and socially.
- Design flexible and responsive programs.
- Be innovative – traditional approaches may not be appropriate or effective.
- Partner with other organizations.
- Reduce barriers, such as access to technology, especially in rural and remote communities.
- Provide supports, such as gas money and childcare, especially in rural and remote communities.

In addition, the following observations have been made:

- The perceived future of a new, full-time job may not exist. Learners may well find themselves in a position where their “side-hustle” becomes their main source of income.
- More women engaged in the training than expected. Childcare and other support systems make it more likely that women will participate.
- Rural and remote communities have a variety of challenges that current programming and funding do not reflect.

Project wrap-up and next steps

In May 2022, the biennial Decoda Literacy Conference was held in Vancouver. As in 2019, a separate day was set aside to discuss the Displaced Worker Project. It was invigorating to meet in person after two-and-a half years of conducting the project remotely. The day focused on beta-test results and next steps. In addition, the CNAC team members who are provincial literacy organization Executive Directors presented on a plenary panel to the conference at large. Their session was very well received. There was a commitment to seek resources to continue to work together as a Canada-wide network.

In the later months of the Displaced Worker project, Decoda staff worked with project funders to develop a project extension. Happily, that extension was granted, and five beta-test sites have been chosen to continue to the pilot project stage. The pilot projects will test the scalability and transferability of the most successful beta-test projects. These five are also the sites where curricula were developed.

The pilot test phase of the project will conclude December 31, 2023.

Conclusion

The Displaced Worker Project has been an immense opportunity to explore and test the needs of Canadian workers seeking new employment. Hundreds of people across the country were touched by this project. The findings are outlined above – few should be surprising.

There are lessons to be learned regarding funding of future projects:

- Rural and remote communities will not produce the metrics that funding opportunities often require.
- The return-to-work meme is rapidly becoming a myth in many parts of the country. No one is opening a new mill in many remote locations.
- Entrepreneurial training is increasingly important as people diversify their earning opportunities.
- Access to strong digital resources in remote locations is key to healthy economies and healthy communities.
- Training must address the needs of families and communities to be successful.
- Place-based and flexible programs go a long way in smaller communities.
- Partnerships are crucial, especially in small communities.

It is well documented that literacy is tied to poverty prevention and reduction. As Canada looks to build new economies, literacy training programs will become even more important. Supporting projects such as this Displaced Worker Project is part of a strong future for our country, and the funding must reflect the lived realities of the learners programs hope to reach.

Decoda Literacy Solutions is deeply grateful to the Government of Canada for the funding to do this work and looks forward to the next stage of the project and to future projects. Together we can help people and communities thrive throughout Canada.