

# Mount Waddington Family Literacy Society: "Connect4Work: Digital Literacy for Displaced Workers"

Enhancing Displaced Workers' Literacy and Essential Skills Project

Beta Test Report | January 2023

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Regional District of  
Mount Waddington, BC

## The DWLES Project

Mount Waddington Family Literacy Society's "Connect4Work: Digital Literacy for Displaced Workers" beta-test was part of the Enhancing Displaced Workers' Literacy and Essential Skills (DWLES) project, which was a collaborative project that was managed by Decoda Literacy Solutions (Decoda) and supported by the Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC) and Learning Metrix.

The overall goal of the DWLES project was to better understand how literacy organizations can support hard-to-reach remote and rural communities by integrating literacy and essential skills (LES) and employment services for a range of displaced workers, with a particular focus on equity-deserving groups such as women, Indigenous peoples, newcomers, people with disabilities, and others. The project began in 2019 and beta-testing was done in 2021 and 2022.

The project began with 10 literacy organizations in British Columbia (BC) being selected to be part of the data collection phase of the project. This included a literature review, interviews with the BC literacy organizations, focus groups with key stakeholders, and a survey and interviews with displaced workers in each of the 10 communities.

Following the completion of this background research, 11 literacy organizations across Canada—including 7 from the earlier phase—were selected for the beta-test phase of the project, which included implementing and evaluating projects that integrated LES and employment services targeted for displaced workers in their communities.

The purpose of the beta-test phase was to uncover and disseminate evidence-based LES support, training models, and promising practices to inform development of programs and models to improve the employability of displaced workers across Canada. The beta-test projects can be viewed as trial or experimental interventions, and thus were intended to be small in terms of the numbers of learners, with the potential to be scaled up to a full pilot study if deemed successful.

The following report provides an overview of the beta test "Connect4Work: Digital Literacy for Displaced Workers" that was implemented in Port Alice, Port McNeill, and Port Hardy, BC.

## Regional District of Mount Waddington, BC

Port Alice is a remote oceanside village on the northwest coast of Vancouver Island, British Columbia, in the Regional District of Mount Waddington which covers a land area of 20, 244 square kilometres. Known locally as 'The North Island', the region's population in 2016 was 11,035, with a First Nations population of approximately 27 per cent. As an example of its remoteness, Port Alice is approximately six hours from Victoria, almost three hours from Campbell River, and 45 minutes from its 'Tri-port' communities, Port Hardy to the northeast and Port McNeill to the southeast.

The 100-year-old Neucel pulp mill – historically employing Port Alice residents and also many North Island residents from Port Hardy and Port McNeill – closed in 2019 leaving more than 400 employees out of work. This remote area has very limited employment opportunities and the mill's ancient equipment and lack of technology left about two thirds of the union employees without job-related transferrable skills. Further, about 75 per cent of the affected workers are over the age of 40 and about two thirds have a significant digital literacy gap that hinders their ability to search for and apply for work. There



are currently no reliable, regular digital literacy programs in the region.

The Mount Waddington Family Literacy Society works with communities, schools and organizations to support literacy and learning on North Vancouver Island. Recognizing the challenges that workers face related to learning digital skills, the Mount Waddington Family Literacy Society established the Connect4Work beta test project.

### Connect4Work

The Connect4Work digital literacy beta-test project was intended for workers who have been displaced from their jobs and involved hands-on learning in a small class environment in the towns of Port Hardy, Port McNeill, and Port Alice. The project introduced workers to technology in order to support them to:

- Look for and apply for work;
- Access online services;
- Pursue continuing education;
- Connect to family and community.

Students started from the basics – turning on a device, using a mouse or mousepad, understanding technology vocabulary – and then built on their skills over the six weeks. The course covered Internet searches and safety,



creating basic documents, using email, using online learning platforms like Zoom, and an introduction to a variety of online resources from government and health services to banking and library services.

Connect4Work was delivered to three cohorts of learners between May and December 2021. The training was delivered in-person over a six-week period. Learners were in class for three hours, two days per week. Across the three cohorts, 14 learners completed Connect4Work.

## Highlights from Connect4Work

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There were several highlights that were identified by learners and staff about Connect4Work:

\* Some learners started the training with little to no experience using a computer. Connect4Work helped learners increase their basic digital skills, such as how to operate a computer, navigate basic computer applications (e.g., Microsoft Word), send emails, use a web browser, and communicate with others virtually. Most learners described how, in addition to building their digital skills, the most valuable aspect of Connect4Work was that it helped to **reduce their fear and build their confidence in using a computer.**

\* Learners described how much they **appreciated the comprehensive course materials** that staff at Mount Waddington had developed. They explained how everything covered in the course was well-documented in the course "binder" that each learner received and how material in the binder provided clear instructions to refer back to following the training.

\* Learners identified that particularly important components of the training were the **guest speaker from Vancouver Island Regional Library** (many learners signed up for a library card or started using their card again after participating in this class) and the **How to Buy a Laptop class.**

\* For Mount Waddington Family Literacy Society, their beta-test project involved **developing an entirely new digital skills training program.** After each of the cohorts of learners, the facilitator updated the curriculum based on learner feedback, what had worked well, and what could be improved. The curriculum is now at the point where it has been developed into a guidebook for other facilitators to use.

## Promising practices from Connect4Work

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There were several promising practices that emerged from Connect4Work that strengthened learner recruitment and engagement while supporting learners in their personal growth and building their LES and job search skills.

 **Learners applied their IT/digital skills while developing employment skills.**

Learners in the program developed their basic digital skills, such as computer operation and online navigation, and then used these skills to learn how to search for jobs and develop job applications online.



## **Empowering learners to be able to make informed decisions about their technology needs.**

Learners developed their basic computer operation skills, but also learned how to identify what type of computer would best fit their needs. They learned about what computer specifications mean in terms of performance, storage, etc. and how to use this information to purchase a computer.



## **Connecting with learners individually prior to the start of training.**

While this can be time and resource-intensive, one-on-one discussions between the facilitator and each learner in advance of the training was important for building learner trust and confidence. It also helped the facilitator to build a deeper understanding of each learner's unique needs and interests, and to tailor the course for each cohort of learners.

## **What we learned from Connect4Work**

### **1 Understanding the context and needs of communities is critical for developing LES and employment skills training that is relevant and creates potential opportunities for learners.**

The idea for the Mount Waddington beta test was based on the lead's understanding of

socioeconomic changes in the community and the impacts this has had on workers. This included an understanding of who was affected by the mill closure, the types of skills that workers may need to find new employment, and the importance of workers understanding how their skills are transferable to other jobs. The beta test was developed with this knowledge in mind, including plans to leverage local assets such as various community organizations that offer services and resources.

### **2 It is important to understand the socio-demographic context of target groups to identify effective, and potentially ineffective, recruitment strategies.**

Many community-based organizations, like Mount Waddington, use social media, such as Facebook, Instagram, to promote their programs. The target group for Connect4Work was mainly men over 40 years old that were unemployed due to layoffs at the former mill. Staff at Mount Waddington realized that advertising a basic digital skills program on social media was not going to be the most effective approach for promoting the program to this target group. Therefore, in addition to social media, staff used multiple promotion strategies that were paper and phone-based, such as newspaper ads and articles, printed flyers at the grocery store and post office, phone calls to learners from previous programs, and promoting to local organizations, especially the library which had strong connections to community members who needed to build their digital skills.

### **Additional project information**

This report is part of a series of 11 individual beta test reports developed for the DWLES project. To learn more about the DWLES project and to access project reports, please visit: [decoda.ca/our-work/displaced-workers-landing](https://decoda.ca/our-work/displaced-workers-landing).

