

# **CAPACITY BUILDING THROUGH THE COVID-19 LENS:**

## **HARNESSING INNOVATION AND MOBILIZING BEST PRACTICES FROM THE PANDEMIC**

### **FOCUS AREA: EMPLOYMENT**

#### **IN BRIEF**

The COVID-19 pandemic has created unique challenges for settlement and integration agencies as they seek to deliver employment related services to the newcomers they serve. The transition from in-person to virtual service delivery has removed geographic barriers for connection. The power of networking through the virtual world has allowed newcomers to better connect with mentors, networks, and employment opportunities across the country, rather than being limited by the confinements of their spatial location. Newcomer serving agencies have utilized virtual programming to create more inclusive employment opportunities such as virtual networking fairs, personalized cross-Canadian mentorships, and asynchronous delivery of industry specific skill trainings.

The Capacity Building Through the COVID-19 Lens Project seeks to capture and mobilize these best practices through key focus areas. This brief seeks to summarize the key findings of this first employment focus group hosted in October 2021, as well as highlight points of further inquiry that will direct the discussion of the second focus group scheduled to commence in January 2022.

Please note that underlined terms throughout the brief can be found in the **Glossary**.

## KEY FINDINGS

### BEST PRACTICES

#### RELEVANT WORK EXPERIENCE

The best practices and approaches utilized to combat the barriers associated with **creating networking, mentorship, and bridging opportunities** include:

- Hosting **virtual networking events** and virtual job fairs
- **Personalized matching** between clients and employers for networking opportunities and mentorship. These mentorship opportunities have been focused on employment and career guidance and are facilitated outside of the workplace and delivered virtually
- **Intercultural mentorship** where immigrants mentor newcomers to discuss the similar challenges faced and leverage their lived experience to identify opportunities, develop soft skills of employment, as well as support navigation in the virtual environment.
- Digital literacy courses
- Offering hybrid and flexible employment programming

The best practices utilized to increase **on-the-job, Canadian work experience (e.g., job shadowing, internships, volunteer opportunities)** in the virtual world include:

- Providing **virtual volunteer opportunities** which are experiential, creating opportunity to develop practical skills and experience for an employment setting
- Settlement and integration agencies have **increased social capital by increasing outreach to new employers and strengthening existing relationships** through the utilization of virtual community outreach
- Providing **paid internship opportunities** to support digital and practical skill development without sacrificing the need for compensation

#### LABOUR MARKET INTEGRATION

The best practices utilized to identify and support **industry specific needs** whilst **tailoring programming to the virtual world** include:

- Utilizing **virtual networking events** as platforms to obtain up to date industry specific knowledge
- **Digital literacy courses** and workshops as orientation devices prior to engaging in virtual employment programming
- Rather than simply adapting existing in person courses to the virtual world, agencies have created **specialized courses designed to be delivered online and asynchronously**
- Providing **one-on-one counselling** both in person and virtually to address individual needs

- Job and **industry specific training** provided virtually, refining combining **both practical skills and digital literacy skills**

The best practices agencies have utilized to ensure that staff are stay on top of **emergent labour market trends** and ensuring that programming is **responsive to newcomer needs** includes:

- The formation of **advisory committees** that engage directly with employers
- Consultation referring to **formal labour reports publishing the emerging trends related to the labour market changes induced by the COVID-19 pandemic**

## **JOB READINESS**

The approaches agencies have been able to implement to **increase job readiness, job acquisition** and increase understandings of the **soft skills of employment (e.g., Canadian workplace norms)** include:

- Conducting **virtual mock interviews** where newcomers are able to practice digital literacy skills required for virtual interviews, and receive instant feedback on virtual interviewing techniques
- **Employment readiness virtual workshops** to increase understandings of Canadian workplace norms, intercultural understandings, and newcomer workers' rights
- Providing **continual skills training** to respond to emergent needs and workforce trends pertaining to the pandemic (e.g., digital literacy and industry specific skills)
- Personalized mentorship programs that provide newcomers the ability to connect with industry specific professionals who can provide newcomer specific insight

## **VULNERABLE CLIENTS**

The approaches agencies have developed to **ensure effective employment service delivery to newcomers with complex needs or those who have traditionally been underserved** (e.g., women, seniors, newcomers with disabilities, newcomers with low English proficiency, Temporary Foreign Workers, newcomers in rural and small centres, etc.) include:

- Providing in person and virtual **one-on-one counselling sessions** to better assess and address individual newcomer needs in response to abrupt challenges that have arisen due to COVID-19 (e.g., wraparound and/or emergency services)
- The development of **tailored supports** that cater to the unique employment needs of vulnerable groups, especially in the context of the pandemic (e.g., creating a women's small group that has women centered resources)

## **PRECARIOUS WORK**

Agencies have **increased the safety and security of newcomers working in precarious industries** amidst the public health context through:

- Hosting **vaccination clinics**, often times collaborating with other agencies and government bodies to provide **free transportation** and **on-site translation and interpretation** to eliminate as many barriers as possible
- Providing **accurate public health and OHS (Occupational Health and Safety) information** to raise awareness and knowledge surrounding COVID-19, as well as increase newcomer understanding of their rights as workers

## NEXT STEPS

For the next employment service delivery focus group scheduled for January 2022, AAISA seeks to further refine the findings from the first focus group session and discuss the desired implementation of past learnings into organizational capacity building and professional development resources for the sector.

## POSITIVE FEEDBACK REFLECTING THE TRANSITION OF IN PERSON TO VIRTUAL PROGRAM DELIVERY

The positive feedback received from both newcomers and employment service providers include increased satisfaction with **flexibility in employment services and courses**, increased **intercultural understandings**, increased **digital literacy skillsets**, and an **increased demand for tailored programming**. Virtual programming has removed geographic barriers for newcomers, fostering cross-Canadian mentor relationships that have been more readily available and accessible through virtual coffee chats and Zoom meetings rather than in person gatherings. The transition to virtual programming has also created opportunities for newcomers to increase their digital literacy skills that are utilized not only to obtain employment but to transition to employment that takes place online as well. Increase in intercultural understandings are reflected within the soft skills of employment as well, as newcomers their knowledge of Canadian workplace norms as well as their rights as workers.

## KEY THEMES IDENTIFIED FOR FURTHER INQUIRY

### Relevant Work Experience

- Discussion on what virtual intercultural mentorships entails and whether there is a demand for a professional development pertaining to soft skill development (e.g. Canadian workplace norms, workers' rights) and intercultural understandings

### Labour Market Integration

- Discussion on virtual volunteer opportunities, guidelines to ensure volunteer opportunities are mutually beneficial to newcomers and employment agencies

## Job Readiness

- Discussion on the need for professional development opportunities for employment service delivery staff with the prominence of virtual services and employment
  - Topics of inquiry include data entry management, digital literacy, program planning online, increasing engagement, or measuring success in virtual program planning

## Vulnerable Clients

- Discussion on how agencies can connect with vulnerable client groups in a virtual environment, recognizing the intersectional nature of their challenges and how to utilize social capital within community organization partnerships to best meet the needs of these clients

## Precarious Work

- Discussion on how to create less precarious working conditions for newcomers
  - Ensuring that newcomers are aware of their rights as workers, and knowledge of how to access the resources that are available to them

# GLOSSARY

**Job readiness:** Involves an awareness of one's strengths and areas for growth. This can involve having a working language proficiency and an understanding of work culture to fully participate in employment.

**Precarious industries:** Precarious work refers to the industries and employment opportunities that have disproportionately high vulnerabilities for newcomers. These vulnerabilities can include increased exposure to contracting COVID-19 and unstable or inconsistent working hours. It is synonymous with the term precarious employment.

**Examples:** Front line service workers, positions that do not offer Work-From-Home opportunities or employment opportunities that do not allow for paid sick leave

**Specific industries observed during the COVID-19 Pandemic:** Healthcare, transportation, factory workers, meat packing, agricultural workers, cleaning services

**Virtual programming:** Virtual programming is a form of distanced learning that is conducted completely over the Internet. It refers to newcomer and direct service agencies participating in courses virtually, through the internet and without the need of attending in-person courses. It can be performed both asynchronously or synchronously, depending on the instructor and/or course. This term can be used synonymously with remote learning.