

## COMMUNITY LITERACY OF ONTARIO LITERACY ORGANIZATIONS AND EMPLOYERS: WORKING TOGETHER SEPTEMBER 2013 E-COMMUNIQUE

What? Literacy organizations and employers work together? If you follow some recent media reports you may think this rarely happens. You may believe that employers and literacy organizations speak different languages and value different things. You may be wondering, what could they have in common and how could they possibly work together? In fact, there has been considerable talk recently suggesting that training organizations are not well-linked with employers. Community Literacy of Ontario begs to differ! We have written this e-communique to explore some of the positive ways in which community-based literacy agencies and Ontario's employers have been working together.

Community Literacy of Ontario (CLO) is a provincial network of 100 community-based Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) agencies located in communities large and small across Ontario. Here at CLO, we want to promote the great work that our agencies are doing and reinforce to our stakeholders and government funders that further investment in community-based literacy agencies is well worth it!

To take the pulse of interactions between literacy agencies and employers, Community Literacy of Ontario went to our members: Ontario's community-based literacy agencies. In a recent survey (to which we received responses from 40 literacy agencies from all across Ontario) we asked for information on how our members have linked effectively with employers. For additional information, we held a focus group with our Board of Directors – a 12-member board comprised of community-based literacy representatives from both urban and rural programs from all regions of Ontario.

These two rich sources of information shed light on a variety of ways in which community-based literacy agencies and employers assist each other in meeting their objectives. We'll explore each of these areas in greater depth in the following pages.

As a side note, this e-communique focuses on literacy and employers; however, community literacy agencies link with many other important and valued community stakeholders as well; for example, social service organizations, government agencies, employment services, service clubs and unions.

## LITERACY INSTRUCTION FOR FUTURE AND CURRENT EMPLOYEES

Literacy instruction is the heart of what community-based literacy agencies do, and the link between literacy instruction and employers can be demonstrated in a number of ways. This relationship between community-based agencies and employers often falls into two categories: *Preparing Future Employees* and *Assisting Current Employees*.



## PREPARING FUTURE EMPLOYEES

Ontario's literacy agencies have always assisted their clients in preparing for employment, but the linkage between literacy programs and employment has become far more contextualized and specific over the past decade. Many clients come to adult literacy programs because they have a goal of employment. Often, a literacy program assists clients in meeting this goal by generally improving the clients' literacy and numeracy levels so that they can proceed directly to employment or move on to get a credential such as a Grade 12 or a GED (General Educational Development) that will increase their chances of employment.

As well, Ontario's community-based literacy agencies also offer would-be employees other assistance. For example, several of our members report that they respond to requests to assist such clients in upgrading their skills to prepare for specific entrance tests they face, often when attempting to apply to larger employers who are using online entrance tests as way of screening potential applicants.

In addition, as Ontario's literacy community has moved to more of an outcomes-based model, many community-based literacy agencies have begun offering sector-specific training to clients. For example, if there is large retail employer that has just opened locally, a community-based literacy organization may reach out to the employer to provide literacy and skills upgrading to prepare clients to work in a retail environment (or other environments such as construction, landscaping, or forestry).

## ASSISTING CURRENT EMPLOYEES

While not a surprise to community-based literacy organizations, it is often surprising to others (the general public, funders, and other community organizations) that some clients who attend community-based literacy programs are already employed. Clients who are already employed come to community-based literacy programs because they can receive literacy upgrading in a flexible learning environment where the curriculum is tailored to their specific needs. Employees engage in literacy upgrading for a variety of reasons that might include the desire to upgrade their skills to keep their job, the desire to improve their employment prospects, or to gain credentials related to their job.

In terms of keeping employment, some employees came into their current positions with minimal credentials. Over time, these positions have come to demand more skills and some long-time employees find that they are required to upgrade their literacy skills and/or gain new credentials such as a Grade 12 or a GED.

Other adult students who are currently employed found that their places of employment have introduced new processes, often processes that are accompanied by new technology or a greater reliance on teamwork or problem-solving skills. In these cases, either the employer seeks out solutions to assist current employees in gaining these new skills or the employees, reluctant for their employers to discover that they are lacking in these skill areas, will approach community-based literacy agencies to seek upgrading assistance on their own time.

As well, there are quite a few clients who seek out community-based literacy programs because while they have suitable skills for the job they currently have, they wish to upgrade their skills in order to be eligible for workplace promotions. In many cases, such people have been approached several times by their employers but have declined promotions for fear of the more advanced literacy skills that will be associated with moving up within the company.



Community-based literacy programs offer these clients the flexibility they need to participate in further upgrading, and they tailor the learning to the types of activities that the client will be expected to perform in his or her new position.

In some cases, employers contract directly with literacy agencies to provide training services in the workplace on topics such as literacy and upgrading, report writing or communications skills.

Apprenticeship – one of Literacy and Basic Skills sister programs under Employment Ontario – has registered apprentices who need the support of literacy agencies because they struggle to either pass their in-school training or they require help to upgrade their skills to successfully complete their Certificate of Qualifications and earn the title of Journey person. We hear a lot about the need for skilled trade workers and it's important to remember that Ontario's community-based literacy agencies are assisting many Ontarians in moving through the different stages of apprenticeship.

## ACCESS

We chose the word *access* to describe another way that community-based literacy agencies and employers support one another. Some employers provide access to on-the-job learning opportunities (volunteer and paid work experience placements as well as jobs) for literacy learners. This hands-on learning experience is often fundamental to transitioning to employment for literacy learners with multiple barriers to the workplace.

Some community-based literacy agencies provide clear writing services on a fee-for-service basis to local employers, making workforce materials more accessible to employees. Other literacy agencies have reported revising employer health and safety manuals as well as personnel policies and procedures on a fee-for-service basis so that these important workplace documents are written in plain language and therefore are clearer to employees.

## LEARNING FROM ONE ANOTHER

The reality is that community-based literacy agencies and employers have a lot that they can and should learn from each other. Employers, through their participation on the Boards of Directors of literacy agencies, Chambers of Commerce or other community groups assist community-based literacy agencies in understanding the employer perspective, employer needs and business best practices. In some communities, literacy agencies and employers participate in networking groups, alongside their colleagues in Employment Services and social services. Several corporate employers have taken on education or support roles related to literacy. TD Canada Trust, for example, is a corporate leader in providing education about literacy needs and issues. And, to use a service club example, Rotary Clubs often support local and international literacy organizations.

Community-based literacy agencies return the favour by reaching out to assist employers in understanding how literacy relates to – is the foundation, in fact, of – skills development, and how skills development contributes to competitiveness and businesses' ability to keep pace with rapid change and with technology (problem-solving in technology rich environments is the new way of talking about literacy in the workplace). Literacy agencies as well often reach out to employers by offering presentations to local business groups, service clubs and foundations that typically include strong representation from the



business community. As well, staff from some literacy organizations serve on the Boards of Directors or committees of their local Chamber of Commerce, Business Improvement Association, Local Training Board, etc. And, literacy agencies are often members of their local Chamber of Commerce.

In most communities, providers of literacy, social and employment services collaborate to learn about and share information on local needs, including employer needs. For example, literacy agencies meet regularly as part of literacy community planning under the auspices of their Regional Literacy Network. At such meetings information on local labour market data, community and employer needs are often shared. Many literacy agencies link with their Local Training Boards, which helps to provide them with helpful information on employer needs. As well, in some communities, employers and training and employment service providers have set up networking committees to discuss needs and services. Some literacy agencies noted that they partner with employment services to deliver training workshops for employers or that they attend community job fairs to learn about employer needs. Literacy agencies maintain strong linkages with local employment service providers and a broad array of social service organizations and these linkages enhance agencies' connections with employers.

## RECIPROCAL GIVING

We live in an era where many employers believe that they should give back to their communities to enhance social good. There are many examples of local employers providing donations to Ontario's community-based literacy agencies. Some employers donate books for students, others donate office supplies and equipment, some donate food items so that students don't have to learn on empty stomachs, and some donate awards or prizes for students or volunteers and others donate prizes and other items to be used for fundraising or community events held by literacy agencies. Still other employers donate funds or expertise to literacy agencies (i.e., they help with marketing or IT).

In return, as not-for-profit organizations, some community-based literacy agencies provide recognition for employers – through public ceremonies, newspaper announcements, social media, awards at their Annual General Meetings, and nominations for local philanthropic awards. In other words, literacy agencies are very appreciative of the support provided by local employers and are able to enhance the public perception of businesses that link themselves publicly to the literacy cause.

## CHALLENGES

In fact, many community-based literacy agencies indicated that they would like to link more closely with employers but that various barriers stood in their way. The biggest barrier identified was the limited budgets of most literacy organizations which meant that they lacked the financial and human resources to develop and offer specialized curriculum and instruction tailored to individualized employer needs. Another major barrier identified related to the lack of financial resources needed to develop further connections with employers.

Other barriers identified included a disinterest from some employers in acknowledging the need for employee upgrading and training; an expectation from some employers that employees should upgrade and gain new skills outside of the workplace; an unwillingness (or inability) from some employers to pay for release time for their employees to receive training; and a lack of awareness from some employees that upgrading was needed and would support their current and future employment goals.



## CONCLUSION

While there is no doubt that community-based literacy agencies do a great job of working with literacy clients who have multiple needs and who may be working at the lower levels of literacy, it's critical to remember that these same agencies also have strong histories of working with employers.

Not only do community-based literacy agencies provide service to employers, but as the above examples suggest, the agencies do so with creativity and flexibility and often demonstrate nimbleness in responding to employer requests. Community-based literacy agencies show considerable diligence, creativity and commitment in responding to a variety of community needs, including the needs of local employers. And, they do all this on limited budgets.

Community Literacy of Ontario is proud of the work of Ontario's community-based literacy agencies. We recognize the important contribution that our member agencies make in helping Ontarians to develop the skills they need for home, work and life and CLO will continue to promote the mutually beneficial relationship between community-based literacy programs, employers and other valued community partners.

## ABOUT LITERACY IN ONTARIO

**Literacy matters in Ontario!** Literacy skills are needed every day – at work, at home, at school, and in the community. However, 42% of Ontarians do not have the literacy skills they need for home, work and life.

The Ontario government, through Employment Ontario, funds the Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) program. The program serves adults who want to improve their literacy and numeracy skills to achieve their goals of post-secondary education and training, employment, apprenticeship, secondary school credit or independence.

Ontario's Literacy and Basic Skills programs are also funded in part by the Federal Government under the Canada-Ontario Labour Market Agreement (LMA). Federal LMA funds are used to provide increased opportunities for vulnerable groups in the labour market, such as people with low literacy skills. The LMA is a vital source of funding to support the literacy skills for those Ontarians most in need and continued LMA funding from the Federal Government is crucial.

You can learn more about literacy in Ontario at:

- Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities' "*Literacy in Ontario: The Rewards are for Life*": [www.tcu.gov.on.ca/eng/training/literacy/ontliteracy/ont\\_lit.html](http://www.tcu.gov.on.ca/eng/training/literacy/ontliteracy/ont_lit.html)
- Community Literacy of Ontario's "*Literacy: Why it Matters*": [www.communityliteracyofontario.ca/resource/literacy\\_why\\_it\\_matters.pdf](http://www.communityliteracyofontario.ca/resource/literacy_why_it_matters.pdf)
- ABC Life Literacy Canada's "*Literacy Facts and Myths*": <http://abclifeliteracy.ca/literacy-facts-statistics-and-myths>

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Would you like to know more about Community Literacy of Ontario? Then please visit our website at [www.communityliteracyofontario.ca](http://www.communityliteracyofontario.ca) or follow us on Twitter @Love4Literacy.

CLO's "*Literacy and Employers: Working Together*" E-Communique is also available on our website at: [www.communityliteracyofontario.ca/communique.htm](http://www.communityliteracyofontario.ca/communique.htm)

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CLO receives core funding from the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities. We are a proud part of the Employment Ontario network.

