

Building Bridges for the Future Workforce



Literacy and Basic Skills:
Connecting Multi-Barriered
Learners to Employment

2021



80 Bradford Street, Suite 508, Barrie, Ontario L4N 6S7

EMAIL info@communityliteracyofontario.ca

TEL 705-733-2312 | WEBSITE www.communityliteracyofontario.ca

TWITTER [@Love4Literacy](https://twitter.com/Love4Literacy) | FACEBOOK www.facebook.com/CommunityLiteracyOntario

Acknowledgements

Project Host & Publisher:	Community Literacy of Ontario www.communityliteracyofontario.ca
Project Manager:	Jette Cosburn, Community Literacy of Ontario
Research:	Jette Cosburn, Community Literacy of Ontario
Research & Writing:	Summer Burton, Literacy Link South Central
Graphic Design:	Summer Burton, Literacy Link South Central
Funder:	Ontario's Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development
Date of Publication:	March 2021

The Government of Ontario and its agencies are in no way bound by the recommendations contained in this report.



This Employment Ontario service is funded in part by the Government of Canada and the Government of Ontario through the Canada-Ontario Job Fund Agreement.

Introduction

Ontario's Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) programs play a critical role in helping job seekers build the skills they need to find and keep employment. Based on suitability criteria, LBS programs often work to support learners with multiple barriers who are disengaged or far from the labour market. The needs of these learners are unique, and LBS practitioners across the province work passionately to help these learners build their skills and overcome challenges to successfully achieve their goals.

In September 2020, Community Literacy of Ontario (CLO) conducted a provincial survey receiving responses from 24 LBS agencies, and an online focus group with representatives from seven LBS programs from across Ontario to discuss the challenges and successes that programs have encountered in bridging multi-barriered clients and employers. In this report, CLO will share the results of those discussions.

First, some of the complex challenges LBS programs have faced establishing connections between multi-barriered LBS learners and local employers will be outlined. Then, as we know that there are few barriers Ontario's talented LBS practitioners cannot overcome, we will review practical strategies and best practices that have been shared by LBS programs across the province.

CLO is grateful to the LBS practitioners who shared their stories of challenge and success for this report. We hope other LBS programs can use these approaches to help increase the connection between learners with multi-faceted barriers and local employers.

Barriers

Ontario's Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) programs work with adults that need to upgrade their communication, numeracy, interpersonal and digital skills to achieve their goals. Through the [LBS Service Provider Guidelines](#), programs are directed to focus on supporting people who face specific challenges and barriers to success, including those who:

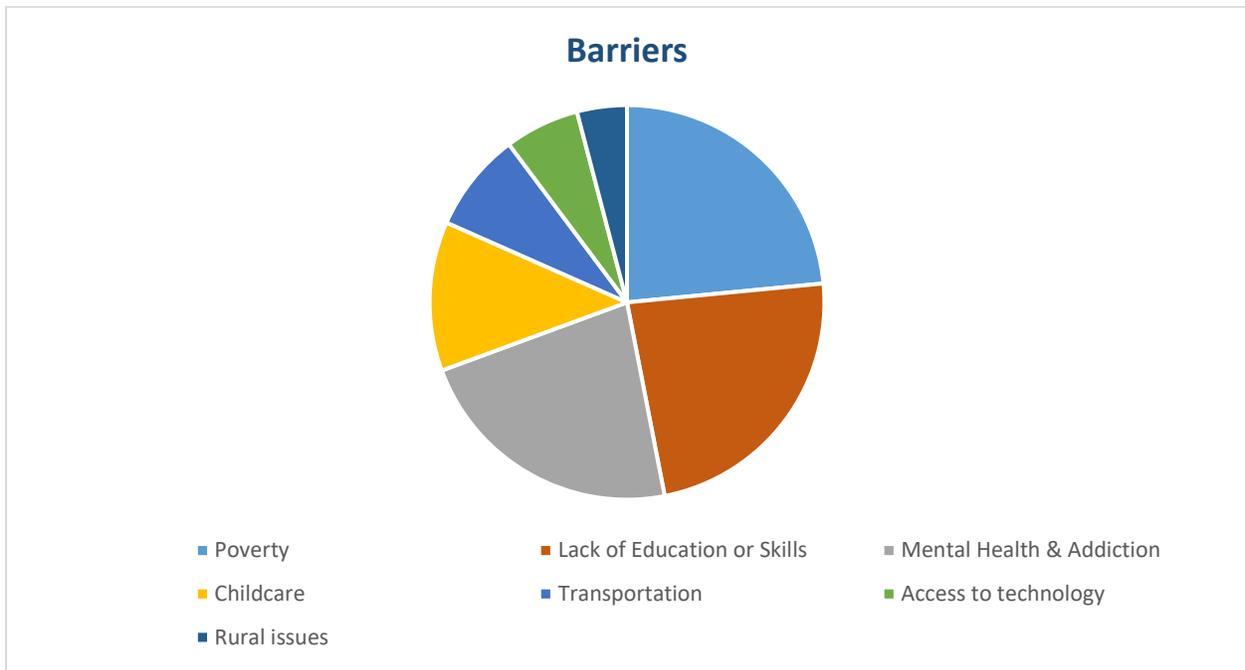
- Have a lower than grade 12 level of education
- Have a history of interrupted education
- Haven't participated in either education or training for 6 or more years
- Do not have a source of income, who are on Ontario Works (OW), the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) or who have been a Crown Ward
- Are between 45 and 64 years old
- Have a physical, developmental, learning or mental disability
- Are of indigenous ancestry
- Are deaf
- Speak primarily French

When combined, these suitability indicators cause a ripple effect. For example, someone who experienced breaks in their primary and/or secondary education *and* left school before graduating grade 12 will often lack both the skills and credentials required for employment. If their situation is further complicated by a disability, generational reliance on OW or ODSP, and being away from education and training for a number of years, the picture becomes much more complex.

Many of these situations are either indicative of, or the cause of additional issues. In fact, barriers related to suitability are far from the only ones faced by participants in LBS programs. The results of the Community Literacy of Ontario (CLO) focus group and survey indicated that several other critical issues commonly intersect for LBS learners, many in combination.

Example: a young, single mother is escaping an abusive relationship. She is trying to obtain her OSSD while meeting the requirements to stay on OW.

What are the complex and multi-layered barriers that Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) clients face? (24 responses received from CLO's 2020 Environmental Scan)



Poverty

Example: An older single learner is living in poverty, facing hunger due to rooming in a multi-family home when food banks do not allow more than one "house" to register.

Poverty is the most commonly identified barrier that, when layered with other challenges, creates a significant obstacle when connecting learners to employers.

People living in poverty face limited access to critical necessities like housing and food, causing a conflict in priorities that often leads to abandoning education, and/or being unable to meet the expectations or demands of employers. Limited access to safety, security, resources, healthcare, transportation, childcare and social support compound these food and housing challenges to create a devastating reality for many LBS learners.

Lack of education or skills

Educational barriers are multifaceted and include not only the need for a Grade 12 education but gaps in essential skills, soft skills, digital literacy, and life skills.

Staff at Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) programs echo comments made by employers across the province – that a lack of soft skills is a growing challenge. Many multi-barriered learners struggle with arriving for work on time, calling in if they are unable to work, and the other social and life skills employers demand beyond commonly requested credentials like a Grade 12 diploma.

Example: A credential (Grade 12) is required as standards change in the workplace, even though the learner has been employed in that job for years. They will lose their job if they do not get their Grade 12 diploma quickly.

This skills and credential gap is tied with poverty as one of the most significant barriers preventing a strong bridge between LBS learners and employers.

Mental Health & Addiction

Example: Mental and physical health issues mean learners need accommodations. They are unable to do certain types of work or are unable to work full-time.

Mental health issues are on the rise across the province, a trend that is reflected in LBS programs. According to the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH), in 2019, reports of fair or poor mental health and frequent mental distress were increasing significantly, and thoughts about suicide almost doubled from the previous year.¹ These troubling statistics do not take into account the growing mental health crisis brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic that began in 2020.

LBS learners struggling with mental health issues, and with addictions that can be brought about in an effort to control those issues, need both flexibility and increased support. Without both in place, mental health becomes a particularly challenging barrier preventing LBS learners from connecting with employers.

¹ Centre for Addiction and Mental Health. (2019, January 22). *Ontario adults reporting increases in mental health problems*. <https://www.camh.ca/en/camh-news-and-stories/ontario-adults-reporting-increases-in-mental-health-problems>

Childcare

All parents face additional challenges as they work to care not only for themselves, but to also make a better future for their children. The responsibility of parenting can be not only a distraction but a significant stressor. The added challenges of managing distance learning for school-aged children during the COVID-19 pandemic threw an additional wrench in the works for many – single parents in particular.

Example: There is no shift work focused childcare centre recognized by Ontario Works in an area with a hospitality focus (requiring evening and weekend work).

Accessible childcare is not a reality for many – aside from the potential high cost, there may be no licensed centres nearby, no spots (subsidized or full fee) available, or no childcare options in the hours that match the learner’s potential employment opportunities.

Transportation

Example: Looking for work in a rural area limits your choices unless you have a vehicle for transportation. Distance and lack of mobility are barriers.

A lack of reliable public transportation is an issue affecting smaller towns and rural areas across the province. Even in cities where public transportation is available, their routes and schedules do not always meet the needs of shift workers. Transportation barriers create a labour force that may wish to work but cannot reliably or easily get to or from their potential workplace.

This issue is, of course, compounded by poverty. Without the resources to purchase a vehicle, pay for insurance and buy gas, many learners are limited to Ontario Works-funded or program-provided bus tickets when they are available. Providing transportation is not part of most employment offers, creating a significant barrier to connecting learners with local employers.

Access to technology

Many Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) learners, particularly those in rural areas, lack access to the technology and internet service required to upgrade their skills, access resources, and search for jobs. The lockdowns associated with the COVID-19 pandemic have exacerbated these challenges, as many people who would normally use in-person services and supports can no longer do so. Unfortunately, with libraries and resource centres closed to the public, access to free Wi-Fi and public computers where people could have accessed supports remotely are limited at best.

Example: There is exclusion due to the cycle of poverty. People can't afford / gain access to a computer or Wi-Fi to complete job applications. We see low computer skills due to little to no internet connectivity.

There is a deep and noticeable connection between those who lack access to digital technology and those with lower digital literacy skills, as those without access cannot learn to use technology comfortably.

Rural issues

Example: Ontario Works clients are often brought to rural communities from nearby cities because subsidised housing there is full. By moving OW clients to rural areas, they often feel isolated and their mental health declines.

Many of the issues outlined in this section provide excellent examples of how one barrier so often leads to others, creating an intricate web of challenges that can prevent LBS learners from successfully connecting with employment. These issues are particularly prevalent in rural areas, where transportation, the number of jobs available, and access to both support services and internet are harder to come by.

In rural areas, the additional challenge of “reputation” has been identified. Small towns are often close-knit communities where everyone knows everyone else. With this in mind, some LBS learners have faced the challenge of outgrowing past (negative) behaviours, or discrimination against them for their family name and history.

Summary: As outlined by LBS programs across the province, learners on the employment goal path frequently bring multiple barriers to the equation. As these barriers are compounded, so is

the challenge faced by practitioners attempting to successfully create a bridge between these learners and local employers.

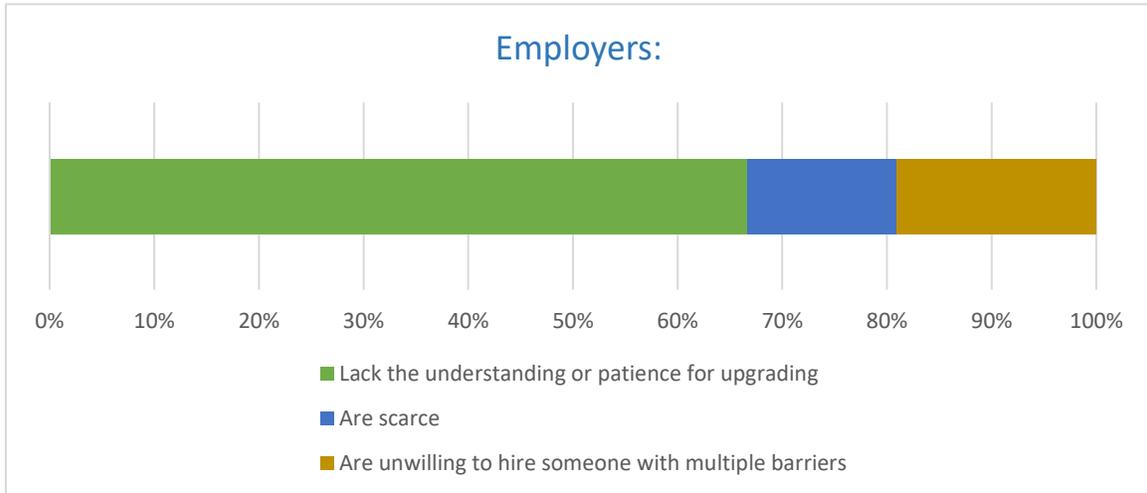
Building a Bridge: Challenges

We have established that Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) learners on the employment goal path may have multiple and complex barriers that complicate their journey to employment. Thankfully, they also have Ontario's adult literacy practitioners supporting them as they move towards their goals. Beyond supporting their skill development and providing employment-focused activities and milestones, many LBS practitioners work to build a bridge between their learners and local employers.

It is an effort that can be challenging for many different reasons. Some issues arise as a result of employer beliefs or perspectives, while others are more deeply related to the learner. The next section of this report will look first at challenges related to employers, and then at challenges related to learners.

We must also recognize that LBS is a division of Employment Ontario (EO), and that Employment Services (ES) is the most employer-facing division of EO. This puts Ontario's LBS practitioners in a unique position and serves as a great reminder of the importance of strong relationships with our ES partners. While not every LBS program will choose to pursue the work of building a bridge to employers, it is critical that learners with employment-related goals are provided access to the wealth of expertise available throughout the Employment Ontario system. Referrals between ES and LBS lay the groundwork needed to provide a coordinated, systemic approach to supporting job seekers with the skill-building and support they need.

What challenges have Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) programs faced when trying to establish a bridge between multi-barriered clients and local employers? (23 responses received from CLO’s 2020 Environmental Scan)



Understanding or patience for upgrading

Ontario’s literacy practitioners are well aware of the critical importance of literacy and essential skills, recognizing that they offer a foundation necessary for employment success. This is an awareness built through a deep understanding of learning pedagogy combined with years of supporting adult learners as they work towards their goals.

Survey responses:

Employers don’t recognize training received while in LBS.

Employers don’t understand what we (LBS) do, the services we offer or that we can assist employees with their skills.

It is not a wealth of experience that is shared by all. Employers who are not immersed in the world of skills upgrading often do not recognize the correlation between employee performance and foundational literacy skills. Literacy practitioners report that the most significant challenge they face when trying to establish bridges is that employers often do not understand, support, or have patience for upgrading.

This challenge impacts not only potential new hires with multiple barriers, but also for current employees. When employees underperform or display attitudes or behaviours not appropriate for the workplace, they may be seen as “bad” employees rather than employees in need of literacy and essential skills upgrading.

Scarcity of suitable employers

Not every employment-bound literacy learner is a good fit for every job. In some areas, particularly across Ontario's rural communities, there simply are not a lot of local employers to connect with. In other areas, jobs requiring post-secondary education or specialized skills training are readily available but entry-level jobs requiring lower education levels are scarce.

In communities where entry-level positions are available, they may not be an appropriate fit for some multi-barriered clients. Unfortunately, many entry-level jobs, particularly manual labour positions, come with complicating factors. They may require physical resiliency, the ability to work many or irregular hours, or the ability to travel to locations not accessible by public transportation (if public transportation is even available in the area). Because these jobs often also offer limited opportunities for advancement and low levels of pay, the additional challenges a multi-barriered client needs to overcome to work may not seem worth the effort. It is a difficult balance.

Survey responses:

There are minimal job opportunities – especially in small communities and rural areas.

The lack of suitable employment opportunities is a challenge.

Willingness to hire someone with multiple barriers

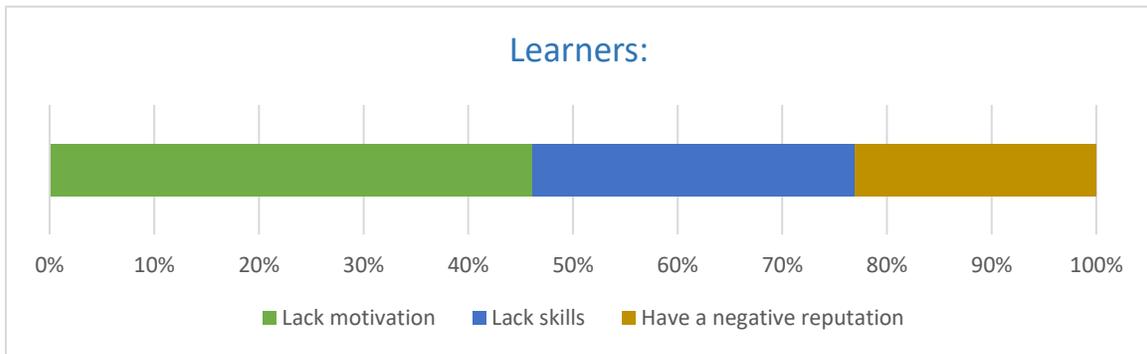
Survey responses:

The stigma of mental health issues or addictions is hard to overcome.

There's a lack of employer education around hiring persons with challenges.

Many multi-barriered learners have great potential for employment success but will require additional upgrading and support as they transition into the work environment. For employers, whose hiring is focused on "work ready" job seekers, the gradual on-ramp that may be required by someone with multiple barriers is not an investment they feel prepared to make.

Sometimes this is the result of negative experiences with previous employees dealing with similar barriers. Other times, there is a simple lack of information or access to resources on how to work with someone with multiple complex barriers while not negatively impacting the business. In fact, the unique perspectives and experiences that someone with challenges can bring to the workforce can inadvertently develop a stronger company culture, fostering empathy, understanding, and a support system that can benefit all employees struggling to overcome challenges.



Lack of motivation

The combination of barriers that employment-bound literacy learners may be facing can be challenging. It is not surprising that in the face of poverty, mental health concerns, food insecurity, family issues and lack of access to support, it may be difficult for someone to put themselves in a position to be judged and possibly rejected by a potential employer. This is particularly impactful if a history of rejection or disappointment has taught someone that is what the world has in store for them. How could this be anything but incredibly demotivating?

Survey responses:

Low confidence and anxiety about returning to work are a challenge for learners.

Sometimes our multi-barriered clients simply aren't willing to participate.

When daily life is a struggle, it can feel nearly impossible to muster the strength required to take on a new task or responsibility. This is amplified for learners for whom poor mental health, depression or anxiety are at play. A coordinated system of support to help motivate and provide resources for multi-barriered learners in this position is critical.

Lack of skills

Survey responses:

Skill requirements for many jobs are above what learners have.

Clients do not have the digital or other literacy skills needed for online job searching and applications.

As we discovered when looking at multiple barriers that are often experienced simultaneously, gaps in educational credentials, essential skills, soft skills, digital literacy, and life skills are a frequent issue. They are also complex, as someone may have strong interpersonal and essential skills without a high school education, while someone else has completed high school without learning the life, literacy, and soft skills they need to succeed. Literacy practitioners know that education level is not the same as skill level, and that many people who have achieved a grade 12 level of education or higher simply do not have the skills that correspond.

Some employers are looking primarily for educational credentials, while a limited number of others are looking for someone with the right employability skills whether the candidate has completed high school or not. Either way, the need for continued skills upgrading is critical, as is assistance understanding educational pathways and achieving credential-related goals.

Negative reputation

As social media has proven, nothing you post online is ever truly gone, even if you delete it. The same can be said for actions and behaviours exhibited in an offline environment. In smaller communities where everyone knows everyone else, negative behaviours can be particularly difficult to leave in the past. Many workforce sectors are themselves like small communities, making a transition from an employer with which someone has burned bridges to one in another area challenging.

This challenge is compounded because it can be based not just on the learners' behaviour, but also on the past reputation of their family as a whole.

Survey responses:

In rural communities, if you do poorly in your job and get fired, the whole town finds out and it is difficult to get that second chance.

A family or individual's negative reputation can be a barrier.

A challenge that presents an opportunity

Challenges related to employers or learners were most prominently identified by Ontario's Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) practitioners, but they also shared some noteworthy comments about the system in general.

Given that Employment Services (ES) is the front-line for employer contact within Employment Ontario (EO), it is no surprise that a general lack of contact between LBS and employers was mentioned by several practitioners. There are opportunities for a deepening of the relationship between these two EO "sister programs" so we can continue to work together to support job seekers in growing their skills and accessing employment.

For example, while incorporating workplace-related training like the Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System (WHMIS) or Safe Food Handling into LBS programs could also help support employment-bound learners, much of it is standardized and therefore it cannot be modified. While this training requires the demonstration of key essential skills like document use, math, reading and writing, as pointed out by one survey respondent, it cannot be revised to reflect the Ontario Adult Literacy Curriculum Framework (OALCF) that guides LBS program delivery. Certifications of this nature can be delivered through ES, providing an excellent opportunity for further partnership and referral.

Summary: As with most challenges we need to overcome, the cause is rarely one single, simple thing. In this case, it involved perception, commitment, motivation, understanding and more. It is complex, and will require movement, change and strategies for employers, learners, and the system that serves both.

Building a Bridge: Promising Practices

The staff at Ontario's Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) programs are natural problem-solvers. When faced with challenges, they work with learners, other programs, their regional literacy networks, provincial support organizations and others to develop solutions. This creative problem solving was demonstrated by the wealth of not only successful strategies shared by LBS practitioners during our discussions, but by the remarkable real-life stories that exemplify these strategies.

From generating networking opportunities to developing employment-focused short-term training to creating experiential learning opportunities, they have shared a wealth of ideas. As expected, programs with a strong relationship with Employment Services (ES) had much to celebrate, as did the clients and learners they serve.

We are pleased to share these strategies and stories with you, and encourage programs working toward a stronger relationship with employers to support multi-barriered clients to utilize these ideas to help facilitate your success.

What strategies and promising practices have Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) programs used to connect multi-barriered learners with employers? (22 responses received from CLO's 2020 Environmental Scan)



Working with or referring to Employment Services

There is a valuable depth of employment knowledge within Employment Ontario (EO). Literacy practitioners have embraced opportunities to work with their partners at Employment Services (ES), and they have reaped ample rewards. Much like within the Literacy and Basic Skills program, some employment programs are specially equipped to support clients with diverse needs, including significant and complex barriers. Employment-bound learners are thoughtfully referred to the ES services that best reflect their goals and needs.

Some literacy programs also embed what might be traditionally thought of as “employment research” into their programs, providing access to online employment tools like job sites, and researching job descriptions and required skills with their learners. They also promote and help prepare learners for local job fairs where they may find the suitable, flexible employment that they need. This provides not only valuable information for the kinds of upgrading the literacy practitioner can facilitate, but also lays the groundwork for the learners’ success as they begin working with an Employment Services agency, or for an employer.

Offering short-term targeted training

Literacy program staff have demonstrated responsiveness to the needs of the local labour market by creating and offering work-related, short-term targeted training based on employer needs. As sectors and businesses within local communities grow, Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) programs respond by customizing their offerings to help support the development of the skills required to be successful at these jobs. With the heightened demands of employers across many sectors in mind, programs have begun offering training rooted in strengthening soft skills or preparing for workplace certifications like First Aid. As technology further impacts the way people research and apply for work, literacy programs developed, or updated curriculum aligned to the skills needed for online job searching.

Networking

Networking directly with employers and other community members has proven to be a powerful bridge for many literacy practitioners. Contacts have been made through memberships in Chambers of Commerce and by sitting at various planning tables. Through these channels and others, practitioners have been able to advocate for employers to hire job seekers without Grade 12 but who have demonstrated their drive and loyalty in their upgrading classes. Some practitioners have also set up interviews directly with employers to find out their needs and discuss how skills upgrading through LBS can help meet those needs. Sitting on local committees and this kind of direct outreach has also helped literacy practitioners connect with service providers outside the Employment Ontario network to share information about their programs and discuss how they can work together to support clients.

Promoting volunteer opportunities and job trials

When delivering workplace-specific curriculum, some literacy practitioners have integrated job shadowing or work placements, or actively seek out volunteer opportunities for their learners that are connected to their goals. This has proven to be an excellent way to ease some multi-barriered learners gradually into a workplace style environment without the immediate pressure of employment. LBS practitioners and learners with diverse complex needs also appreciate the opportunities provided by volunteer work, as the focus is less on quick production and more on accomplishing things for a good cause.

The uniqueness of the Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) program

What cannot be overlooked in terms of successful strategies is what could be called “doing what LBS does in the unique way they do it.” LBS program staff shared many examples of the excellent support they have provided multi-barriered learners. Recognizing the impact of the complex challenges they may be facing, literacy practitioners are able to work with learners slowly, helping them achieve small victories at first. Then, they use those successes to help encourage and motivate multi-barriered learners to achieve new and more significant milestones on their way to achieving their goals.

While the strategies shared are not suggesting LBS try something new, they are deeply relevant examples of the unique and powerful nature of Ontario’s LBS program. The ability to offer customized, individualized programming in the way learners need and on a schedule that they can follow is incredibly powerful.

Success Stories

Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) programs have a wealth of experience to draw on when it comes to supporting multi-barriered learners in reaching their goals, whether they involve further education, independence, or employment. These success stories are only a sampling of the thousands that literacy practitioners could share, and we applaud their ongoing commitment to learner success.

Success Story #1

A multi-barriered learner came to us and was very shy and quiet. She could barely meet for one hour, one-to-one because she was so anxious. We felt it was best to take our time and build a relationship of trust with this learner. We focused on basic math, reading, and writing that would be beneficial to her on a personal level. For example, writing letters to extended family, writing about her family history, writing funny stories that were exaggerated. Then we moved to math, and practiced money math. Finally, we suggested the “Let’s Get Real” program to see the types of work she may want to do.

In this program, we also meet with employers to ask them about their place of work and how they managed to get the job they have... what was their work history? Seeing that even employers have work history and have done quite a number of jobs, she realised that getting to her dream job is about taking steps to get there. Now she wanted to work! So, we connected her with Employment Services in order to get her a resume and networked connection by ES to a potential part-time job.

To date, this client now has 2 part-time jobs in retail. It was amazing to see her smile and her increased confidence in her abilities. She works 4 half-days which fits nicely with her barriers. I think it is important to see her as a success and reduce the stigma associated with not having a full-time well-paying job.

Key strategies used: working with ES, the uniqueness of LBS delivery

Success Story #2

T is a 24-year-old who had not completed high school and had little work experience. We supported him to acquire credits to complete high school in our LBS program, and when he was ready, he undertook a placement in a local brewery in the kitchen. To get to work, we helped him find funding to purchase a bicycle so he could ride to work – a few km out of town. He received co-op credits while working and getting paid, and completed his high school.

He continued to struggle with mental health, and we assisted his employer in connecting him with ongoing counselling. He is in year 2 of employment, working there through COVID, with the brewery and is a valued member of the team.

Key strategies used: the uniqueness of LBS delivery, volunteer opportunities and job trials, networking

Success Story #3

We had a gentleman referred in from Ontario Works - he was 33 and never worked a day and his goal was to be on ODSP. We worked with him and improved his reading, and math skills and we helped him obtain workplace certificates (WHMIS, Health and Safety Awareness, etc.) We helped him build his confidence until he realized he could actually hold down a job.

He applied online to three jobs and two volunteer positions and was hired at the second job. He now has been employed and off OW for a year.

Key strategies used: the uniqueness of LBS delivery, short-term targeted training

Success Story #4

Although we have not directly connected a learner with employers, we have had opportunities to work with employers to gather information about what they identify as barriers to their employees' success. We have also worked with many learners to provide them with LBS upgrading to address barriers to employment. The upgrading they completed has helped play a role in assisting them to acquire new employment, and in other cases, to sustain their current jobs as a result. Here are several examples:

“At work I have to read order sheets that have words and numbers. I have to count the boxes and multiply and add. My tutor taught me how to do that too. I learned the different math signs so I can do the calculations on my phone.” Learner testimonial - Adult Tutoring Program

“Since taking the ALC workplace communications course, I am now employed at home depot and am using the computer every day at work. I was also able to successfully complete an online test as part of the hiring process as well.” Learner testimonial - Computer Skills for Work Program

Key strategies used: [networking](#), [the uniqueness of LBS delivery](#), [short-term targeted training](#)

Success Story #5

A young single father with a history of addictive behaviour and housing insecurity struggled to find employment. Through the “I know a guy” process, we were able to link this person with a local employer during the duration of a one-week boutique course. This man worked in a warehouse for a week and was hired for a short contract afterwards. This created an employment history and an employer reference which enabled him to find other opportunities.

Key strategies used: [networking](#), [short-term targeted training](#), [volunteer opportunities and job trials](#)

Conclusion

Community Literacy of Ontario recognizes the complexity of the paths that multi-barriered literacy clients follow on the road to successful employment. Ontario's Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) programs are uniquely positioned to offer the flexible support critical to these learners.

The LBS community regularly shares good practices, resources, and information. Collaboratively, we have a wealth of information available to inform LBS programs in their support of employment-bound LBS learners with layered barriers. Some recent examples of these resources include:

- [The Pop Up PD for Literacy Educators series of webinars](#)
- [Community Literacy of Ontario's Employment Resources Guide](#)
- Literacy Northwest's Collection of Workforce and Workplace Literacy Resources (coming March 2021)

By continuing to share resources like these, working together with our Employment Services partners and local employers, and developing responsive targeted training based on labour market needs, the LBS system can successfully build a bridge to connect their learners to employers.