

Integrating the Unemployed Through Customized Training

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Cet article explore le concept de formation sur mesure, les enjeux importants et leurs implications. Avec la formation sur mesure, une organisation désignée travaille avec les employeurs afin d'identifier les besoins de formation dans les emplois ciblés. A court terme, l'organisation désignée procure une formation intensive pour ces emplois. Plusieurs modèles de formation sur mesure sont décrits tels les *Opportunités pour l'Emploi* à Winnipeg, la *Fondation pour l'Enrichissement de l'Apprentissage* à Toronto et les *Partenaires pour l'Emploi* à Ottawa. La formation sur mesure n'est pas une solution magique au problème de chômage. Cette formation ne doit également pas être utilisée seule; elle est liée à d'autres interventions sur le marché du travail qui incluent l'éducation et la création d'emplois. Malgré le succès apparent de la formation sur mesure, plusieurs inquiétudes sont soulevées comme l'impact limité de la formation sur mesure ainsi que "l'écémage". En dernière partie, cet article discute de la pertinence de la formation sur mesure dans le marché du travail post-industriel. Il est particulièrement important de répondre aux besoins spécifiques des travailleurs, des employeurs ainsi qu'aux demandes, qui changent rapidement, provenant d'une économie fondée sur le savoir.

This paper explores the concept of customized training, key concerns and its broader application. Under customized training, a designated organization works with employers to identify training needs for targeted jobs. The designated organization provides short-term, intensive training for these jobs. Several models of customized training are described, including *Opportunities for Employment* in Winnipeg, the *Learning Enrichment Foundation* in Toronto and *Partners for Jobs* in Ottawa. Customized training is not a "magic bullet" solution to the problem of unemployment. Nor is it intended to stand alone; it is linked intrinsically to other labour market interventions that include education and job creation. Despite the apparent success of customized training, it raises several concerns, such as narrow scope and "creaming." Finally, the paper discusses the relevance of customized training to the postindustrial labour market. It is highly individualized to meet the needs of workers, employers, and the rapidly changing demands of a knowledge-based economy.

INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the concept of customized training, the key issues to which it gives rise and its potential for broader application to emerging fields.

Under customized training, a designated organization works with local employers to identify the

training needs for certain targeted jobs. The designated organization provides short-term, intensive training that prepares individuals for the target jobs. The partner companies, in turn, use the designated organization as a hiring "window" because it already has pre-screened and trained prospective workers.

Customized training has a limited track record in Canada for tackling the problem of structural

unemployment — that is, the mismatch between the skills demanded by employers and the skills of workers available to fill job vacancies. But customized training is of substantial interest. The projects that employ this approach have achieved considerable success in terms of placing social assistance recipients into paid work that lasts more than six months.

Despite its apparent success, customized training should not be seen as a “magic bullet” to the problem of unemployment. Nor is it intended to stand alone; it is linked intrinsically to other labour market interventions.

LABOUR MARKET INTERVENTIONS

The successful integration of the unemployed into the labour market requires a combination of interventions. Certain measures focus upon individual workers by ensuring that they have appropriate skills to bring to the labour market. Other interventions are concerned with removing barriers to work, such as the lack of affordable child care or accessible transportation. Still other approaches are directed toward job creation, through support for initiatives such as self-employment and small business development.

While a range of strategies is required to tackle high unemployment, the problem of structural unemployment requires a focus upon the readiness of prospective workers to enter or re-enter the labour market. But even within the more narrow stream of interventions that target the preparedness of the individual, there is still a wide spectrum of possible strategies. Workers are helped through interventions such as assessment, counselling, job search, and various forms of education and skills training.

The research on labour market integration emphasizes the importance, for all prospective workers, of a mix of job preparedness approaches. The interventions ultimately employed for any given individual depend upon several factors, including

current levels of knowledge and skill, job availability in the local area, skill demands by employers, and training programs provided in the region.

If there is one consistent theme that emerges from the literature on welfare reform, it is the following: there is no one consistent theme. There is no simple solution to labour market integration. Each approach must be understood as a node on a continuum of possible interventions. Each approach has its strengths and weaknesses and, ideally, should be used in unique combinations depending upon the demands of the labour market and the capacities and interests of the prospective worker.

Labour market integration strategies include pre-employment preparation, short-term preparation and skills training, the reduction of personal barriers, job retention and worker adjustment, workplace adjustment, income enhancement, and career advancement (Roberts and Padden 1998, pp. 6-7). While all these elements are important, this paper explores only one component — short-term preparation and skills training — and within that category, the customized training model.

PRINCIPLES OF CUSTOMIZED TRAINING

There is no single approach to customized training but rather a range of different models. While the specifics vary, the general story goes like this. A designated organization assumes responsibility for identifying job opportunities in various sectors of the local economy and in specific workplaces. These include both current vacancies and impending job openings. While the designated organization tends to be non-profit groups, the “job identifier” need not be limited to this type of organization.

Typically, the identification of employment opportunities involves far more than a cursory review of ads in newspapers. It entails a systematic, methodical and in-depth exploration of the local labour market. In some programs, this process is referred

to as “job development.” Job developers meet with local employers and often find jobs that were not advertised. Sometimes they uncover work opportunities that employers themselves had not explicitly classified as a discrete “job” but nonetheless recognize as work that must be done.

But the task of the job developer is not simply to identify vacancies. Job developers are also responsible for determining the skill requirements associated with the vacancies and with local employment opportunities more generally. The designated organization assesses the skills, knowledge, and abilities of the individuals currently unemployed or underemployed. Participants in customized training programs tend overwhelmingly to be social assistance recipients, although the approach need not be limited to this population.

The designated organization then provides very short-term, intensive, and job-specific training that prepares prospective workers for the identified jobs. Training modules range from 16 to 160 hours and incorporate an introduction to the industry, work readiness, job-related computer literacy, customer service skills, and other job-specific skills (*ibid.*, p. 60). In some cases, the designated organization does not actually deliver the training but partners with a company or an educational institute, such as a local community college, to teach the requisite skills.

The designated organization also helps match the trained participants with the appropriate job opportunities. The local companies that have been engaged in this process generally use the designated organization as their “hiring window” because the program participants have been pre-screened for their suitability to the work. They have been trained explicitly to fill the *precise* job requirements identified by local employers. While there is no guarantee that the trainees will be hired by the firm, it is clearly in the interest of business to employ workers with job-ready skills.

Customized training differs from traditional training in several key ways. Because traditional training often takes (at least) several months, many unemployed workers cannot go without a source of income for so long. Ironically, some remain on social assistance because they cannot afford to leave. Even individuals eligible for a student loan may be daunted by the prospect of carrying a large debt with no job security at the end of the day.

Of course, the affordability issue is not insurmountable and could be addressed through a combination of loans, grants, and subsidies. The real issue has to do with the *appropriateness* of traditional training approaches. The latter typically provide general instruction but must be supplemented by job-specific training. The customized training approach, by contrast, designs the training *right from square one* to meet precise job requirements.

It should be noted that a form of flexible training already exists through the Transitional Skills Grants program coordinated by the federal Department of Human Resources Development. Under the program, a return-to-work action plan is developed by the prospective worker in conjunction with an employment counsellor. Grants are provided to cover the costs of training and skill development geared to identified needs and interests.

CURRENT MODELS OF CUSTOMIZED TRAINING

Several models of customized training are described in this section. While this is not an exhaustive description, it includes models considered to be exemplary in both Canada and the United States.

In Canada, one of the most advanced models of customized training has been developed by the Winnipeg-based *Opportunities for Employment*.¹ Under this program, job vacancies are sought by job developers who make extensive contact with local employers. The employers for which training

programs have been developed include furniture and building component manufacturers, hotels, insurance firms, call centres, food services, and food producers and manufacturers. Training in computer software also is offered to help participants fill administrative positions in a wide range of firms.

By the end of its first year of operation in 1996, Opportunities for Employment had helped 130 social assistance recipients find full-time, long-term employment, exceeding by 20 percent its placement target for year one. By the second year of operation, close to 375 social assistance recipients had been matched to full-time jobs — surpassing the initial goal of 250 placements in two years. In 1998, 491 participants found full-time employment. By April 1999, the program had passed the 1,000 mark for placements since its inception. Nearly 70 percent of all recruits placed in full-time jobs are still employed.²

The Learning Enrichment Foundation (LEF) in Toronto is another Canadian example of an organization that employs customized training. It serves an estimated 5,000 clients a year, about half of whom are involved in LEF training programs. LEF claims an 80 percent success rate — which means that participants remain in their jobs for a minimum six-month period.³

The Learning Enrichment Foundation provides an integrated package of services that includes job search; training; business incubation, which supports the development of small business; assistance with job placement; and work-related supports such as child care. Within this broad spectrum of programs, LEF offers customized training in four major streams: computer applications, industrial skills, child care, and language skills.⁴

The Social Services Department of the Regional Municipality of Ottawa-Carleton is engaged in customized training. It created a program in conjunction with the Ottawa Tourism and Convention Authority to train social assistance recipients for various po-

sitions in local hotels. It is currently working with the high-tech firm, Compaq, to train social assistance recipients to work in call centres.

There are several examples of successful American models of customized training. Winnipeg's Opportunities for Employment is modelled after a US program entitled *America Works* — a private, for-profit organization operating in New York City, Albany, Indianapolis, and Baltimore. The staff develops contacts with employers and matches prospective employees with these jobs.

A similar, but non-profit, organization in Cleveland, Ohio, trains and places recipients with an estimated 650 employers in full-time jobs, many of which provide health benefits. *Cleveland Works* offers four weeks of job-readiness training and basic education, followed by another four weeks of career assessment and occupational training for specific jobs. It sends only job-ready workers to prospective employers and typically declines to fill positions if suitable candidates are unavailable (Cleveland Works 1997).

In Tulsa, Oklahoma, a non-profit organization called IndEx Inc. combines on-site training with work experience in local industrial plants. On any given day, participants spend four hours in the classroom and four hours on the shop floor performing light manufacturing work. Training consists of a 30-day program that teaches basic skills and some educational upgrading, and a 60-day program specializing in electronics and telecommunications. The program has been found to be particularly effective for social assistance recipients with limited schooling and work skills (Buck 1997).

Another successful example is located in Philadelphia. When its Convention Center began development in the 1980s, the authority responsible for the project created a \$10 million, ten-year Education and Training Fund financed by bonds and hotel tax revenues. The fund was set up to support short-term, specialized training in the hospitality

industry to ensure sufficient numbers of skilled workers for the 4,500 permanent jobs that the Convention Center was slated to create (Center for Neighbourhood Technology 1993).

The Arizona Department of Economic Security has responsibility for human resource and job training. It established the Arizona Business Initiatives Partnership to help the department get more accurate and detailed information on the skills required in various industries and to develop closer ties with employers. Through the partnership, the department is able to identify the specific skills required for designated industries including electronic assembly, health care, restaurant, retail, and teleservices (Roberts and Padden 1998). Private sector employers are then engaged in assisting the department to develop pre-employment training programs targeted to their industry.

Increasingly in the United States, employer groups representing the banking, electronic assembly, hospitality, retail, and restaurant sectors are partnering with public agencies to support pre-employment training programs directed toward a designated industry sector. In addition to the activities of specific sectors, several individual employers have designed their own short-term training programs. A notable example is the Marriott Hotel which has developed a community training and employment program called *Pathways to Independence*. The job-placement component includes a toll-free 24-hour employee support line staffed by social workers. United Airlines, Burger King, and Borg-Warner Security Corp. are involved in similar initiatives.

KEY ISSUES

Despite the apparent success of customized training in helping unemployed workers move into or re-enter the labour market, the approach raises several issues that warrant further consideration. These include the “work first” solution, narrow scope, “creaming,” limited scale, and low pay.

“Work First” Solution

The roots of customized training can be traced to the United States. Since the 1960s, the US has tested numerous welfare reforms. While a range of programs has been developed over the past 40 years, experimentation has accelerated in response to a recent federal law.⁵ In 1995, the US government decided to block grant its welfare contribution to the states — much like Canada did when it dismantled the cost-shared Canada Assistance Plan and converted it to the block-funded Canada Health and Social Transfer.

The US legislation has encouraged the development of many welfare reform initiatives, including what has become known as the “work first” model. Work first programs seek to move people from welfare into unsubsidized jobs as quickly as possible and make job search a central focus of the program. What characterizes work first programs is their underlying philosophy: any job is a good job and that the best way to succeed in the labour market is by joining it, developing work habits and skills on the job rather than in a classroom (Brown 1998, p. 2).

Some would argue that customized training is consistent with the work first approach. While customized training acknowledges the importance of helping participants move quickly into the labour market, this form of training is actually far more than a work first strategy. Customized training is essentially a *skills first* approach. Because the skills training happens to be short term, it can be confused with a work first approach. But the intent of customized training is not simply to find a work placement for the unemployed who then acquire skills on the job. Rather, the intent is to ensure that individuals are suitably qualified *prior to* going to work. Customized training is really a “work second” approach.

The value of this approach is reinforced by recent research on the connection between literacy and work (Kapsalis 1998). The results found a strong link between literacy and work: literacy is important for employability but employability is also important

in maintaining literacy. The research points to the possibility that increasing employment among social assistance recipients may have a positive effect on future employability through an improvement of literacy.

Narrow Scope

Customized training might be viewed as far too narrow in focus; a “true” investment in skills development may be considered broader and more generic than a tailor-made approach. It could be argued that a real investment in human resource development prepares prospective workers for the labour market more generally and for any number of job openings. A training program that is so highly geared to market can make recipients vulnerable to the fortunes of a particular firm or sector.

The counter-argument is that customized training helps open doors for prospective workers by enabling them to get a foothold in the labour market. It is true that some workers will stay in entry-level jobs forever. Others, however, will use these jobs as a means to advance in a company or industry, or simply as work experience on a résumé that they can then bring to other employers. Moreover, customized training is, by definition, a highly focused strategy. That targeted approach has contributed to its success. Its “narrow” scope is offset by the fact that it is intended as one methodology in a continuum of interventions.

“Creaming”

Customized training typically is not geared to meet the needs of workers considered “hard to employ” — that is, persons with serious language and learning difficulties and/or significant personal or family problems. To the extent that customized training builds on the strengths of those who already have reasonably good language and interpersonal skills, this method may be seen as inherently successful because it effectively “creams” the best candidates.

Customized training clearly is a method that best suits a certain segment of the unemployed and is not appropriate for all (Roberts and Padden 1998,

p. 68). It appears most suited to prospective workers who are considered “job ready.”⁶ Again, that conclusion reinforces the most important lesson of welfare reform initiatives more generally: there is no one-size-fits-all solution that meets all needs.

Limited Scale

Concerns have been expressed over the scale limitations of customized training. Programs that employ this approach to labour market integration typically have been able to serve only small numbers of people at a time. Scale — or the limited size of the operation — has been seen as a serious weakness of the approach. The programs generally accept only a few hundred participants a year (LEF serves several thousand), although there is great potential for replication of the model. *But it is important to recognize that many of these programs have been successful precisely because they are small and that making them larger actually could lead to failure rather than greater success.*

It also could be argued that it is not so much the approach that is limited but rather the way in which current programs, at least in Canada, have been funded. Customized training programs have not been supported by government or industry in any consistent or systematic way. These programs have had to operate on shoestring budgets.

Moreover, government training funds tend to be tied to individuals and there is no investment in the infrastructure of the actual programs trying to deliver the service. This lack of core support makes it difficult to serve the entire community. The limits in scale may be more a function of what we have not done to support these programs rather than their inherent weaknesses.

The Learning Enrichment Foundation, for example, receives funds in respect of clients on Employment Insurance and on behalf of participants in the *Ontario Works* program. But LEF’s purpose is to serve the entire community; it finds that there are many unemployed — young people, new

Canadians, those involved in the corrections system, and the underemployed — who do not come with training dollars “attached” to them from various income programs, especially Employment Insurance. This gap leaves the foundation struggling to make ends meet with respect to providing training for all, regardless of their background or work history.

Low Pay

Finally, there is the age-old issue that arises around any discussion of welfare reform. Welfare caseload reduction does not equal poverty reduction. Recipients who move off welfare into work often find that they are no better off in terms of disposable income — indeed, may be worse off — than when they received social assistance. Their typically low wages are reduced by income and payroll taxes, and they face employment-related expenses, such as clothing, transportation, and child care.

Some of the jobs for which customized training takes place pay minimum wage. Opportunities for Employment in Winnipeg sees these jobs as stepping stones to better employment. The program is based on the premise that it is easier for people to go from low-paying work into higher-paying work than it is to move to a good job from no job at all.

While one can debate this issue, the arguments would touch only the tip of the iceberg of a more profound problem. The labour market has been creating both high-wage, high-skill and low-wage, low-skill employment. The Economic Council of Canada pointed this out years ago in the landmark study *Good Jobs, Bad Jobs* (1990). Customized training, or any training for that matter, cannot resolve the problem of “bad jobs” that pay poorly and offer few, if any, benefits.

But customized training can play an important role in ensuring that we are able to get and keep the so-called “good jobs” — the well-paying, high-skill jobs that are crucial to the economic health of the country. Customized training has been identified as a means to develop skills, help workers move into

higher-paid employment and promote human resource development in high-skill areas of the labour force. This potential is discussed more fully below.

ARE WE EQUIPPED?

If customized training is an important weapon in the arsenal against structural unemployment, we then have to ask whether we are equipped to carry out this training on more than a scattered, haphazard basis. Customized training is so simple a concept. Yet our current systems are not geared for this form of training. There are several problems including the “culture” of current welfare programs, the availability of labour market information and funding issues.

Welfare Culture

One major problem is that welfare departments generally do not have close links with private employers. Neither do they typically engage the private sector in developing approaches to welfare reform.

To work with the private sector, welfare agencies must be able to act flexibly, responsively, and creatively. This is not the case with welfare agencies as we know them — weighed down by enormous caseloads and Byzantine rules (Torjman 1998*b*). Customized training calls for an entrepreneurial way of managing not just the welfare system but human resource development more generally.

Studies of various welfare reform initiatives make clear the fact that the labour market is the key dimension through which welfare-to-work programs achieve their success. Ironically, however, the weakest part of current welfare administration may be the poor understanding of the labour market. “Few, if any, resources are devoted to cultivating relationships with firms and industries, to developing jobs for particular individuals or to staying informed about occupation or technological changes that may dictate the skills required in the workplace” (Roberts and Padden 1998, p. 1).

Successful initiatives, while few in number, have sought to work with industry sectors and individual firms, to customize training for specific individuals and jobs, to use labour market data to influence educational efforts, and to encourage and subsidize increased private sector participation. Public agencies need to gain a greater understanding of the labour market needs of local industry. Moreover, welfare agencies must make an unprecedented commitment to understand and work directly with local employers (*ibid.*, p. 3).

But welfare systems themselves cannot build and maintain all the partnerships required to affect customized training on a larger scale. This work really should be part of a larger labour force development effort. There is an exemplary model of such an approach that is currently under way in Ottawa, known as *Partners for Jobs*.⁷

Labour Market Information

Solid and up-to-date information is the key to successful labour market integration. Herein lies a big gap. The federal Department of Human Resources Development conducts a wide range of national surveys. Its regional and local offices focus upon developing local labour market profiles. But there are many problems with the existing data.

The first is that the occupational classifications currently used must be updated. Many occupations have emerged since the development of the National Occupational Classification Coding System. Moreover, labour force information by individual occupational code is available only from the Census, which means that the information is somewhat dated by the time it is made available. There is typically a two-year time lag for analysis.

There are problems with current methods of data collection — such as inordinate reliance on printed “help-wanted” ads without taking into account electronic labour exchanges, and other types of postings. In Ottawa-Carleton, for example, the monthly survey of help-wanted ads in *The Ottawa Citizen*

accounts for only 30 percent of the actual vacancies. Neither do existing surveys include jobs, such as construction work, typically posted in union hiring halls.

Another difficulty arises from the fact that there is currently no reliable way of identifying *emerging* labour force needs at the local level; information tends to focus primarily upon what exists right now. Moreover, numbers of vacancies are counted but there is no precise information as to the specific skills required for those jobs, especially in emerging areas. Neither is there any consensus on the definition of “shortage.”

One of the positive spin-offs of the *Partners for Jobs* initiative in Ottawa-Carleton is that the federal, provincial, and regional governments are talking together about labour force information requirements. They are discussing possible ways to update existing surveys, create new instruments and employ diverse methodologies to gather relevant information.

The Strategic Human Resources Analysis Division of Human Resources Development Canada also has been actively involved in helping private industry identify specific human resource needs. The department has established partnerships involving management, labour, academics, governments, and other industry representatives to take coordinated action on human resource issues.

As a first step, an extensive analysis of individual sectors is undertaken. Each sector study is national in scope and examines how various factors, such as changes in technology and the domestic and global business environment, affect the labour force of a particular industrial sector. The follow-up to several of these studies has been the formation of joint business-labour organizations, or sector councils, whose purpose is to identify and act on the human resource needs most relevant to their constituents. Sector councils formulate comprehensive human resource plans, coordinate the development of

national standards and help forge links among educators, employers, and employees (Gunderson and Sharpe 1998).

Funding Issues

A major unresolved question to which customized training gives rise is who should pay for this form of training. Hum and Simpson (1999) point out that training can be classified within two streams: general and specific. Language training, for example, is viewed as general education since linguistic skills can be used in any firm or occupation. By contrast, specific training, such as knowing how to operate specialized equipment, is of value mainly to the firm that requires the skill.

The distinction is made between general and specific training primarily to determine who should pay. General training typically is considered to be a public expenditure because it is an essential investment in human capital that is required to compete effectively in a high-skill, knowledge-based economy. Specific training that is relevant to individual firms usually is paid privately by the firms that need the investment.

Customized training, by definition, *is* specific training; it is a short-term, highly specialized form of skill development geared explicitly to labour market needs. One could argue that such a targeted training approach should be paid for by the employers who benefit from the pool of job-ready labour.

But this “neat division” has not been the case — at least with respect to welfare programs to date. The few programs in Canada that employ customized training are primarily publicly funded. The public basically is picking up the tab for the specialized training for which private firms, in theory, should be paying. Customized training, at least in its current incarnation in Canada, collectivizes or transfers to the public purse an area (job-specific training) that benefits private employers.

One could argue that this reality is not really a problem. The public pays to support households on welfare. When the options are weighed, it makes more sense to spend these dollars on an approach that provides some marketable skills and real opportunities for employment. To the extent that customized training is considered to be a social program which fits more within the OECD’s idea of “active” labour market initiatives, then the public cost could be deemed quite appropriate and a mixed public/private approach is justified. It also could be argued that employers effectively have paid for these training costs through their Employment Insurance contributions.

It should be noted that the Learning Enrichment Foundation is trying to address this problem by establishing a community skill-development fund to which private employers would contribute. Because the money would be directed into a pool of funds, the respective contribution of individual employers, especially that of very small business, would be relatively modest.

DEMANDS OF THE POST-INDUSTRIAL LABOUR MARKET

It is important to explore the implications of customized training within its broader context — that of the postindustrial labour market. One of the features which distinguishes the postindustrial economy from the industrial era is the fact that employer-employee relationships have changed dramatically, especially with respect to investment in human capital or the knowledge and skills of individuals. The shift appears to have downloaded the responsibility onto individuals to ensure that they invest in themselves. A major dimension of the post-industrial labour market is the pressure for more flexibility in the delivery of training (Betcherman, McMullen and Davidman 1998, p. 5).

Another feature of the postindustrial labour market is that training is no longer a one-shot deal.

A technology-driven world means that workers must continually upgrade their knowledge and skills. Information and skills acquisition must be far more responsive to the rapidity of these changes. The training mechanisms have not yet been designed — at least on a broad scale — to match the learning pace that the new economy demands.

Customized training responds to both dimensions of the new labour market. It is an example of self-investment using a highly flexible delivery method. As such, it has a broader application than simply helping social assistance recipients or the underemployed find a job. Customized training also can be used to upgrade employee skills on an ongoing basis. It is one way of giving life to the concept of lifelong learning — which, in the new labour market, means lots of short learning all the time.

One could argue that this kind of upgrading is already happening, that there is no need for a special focus on this approach. This is true, but effectively only for larger firms that can afford to do in-house and highly specialized training suited to their requirements. Larger firms engage in both on-the-job training and formal education in on-site classroom and training facilities (Hum and Simpson 1999). There also tends to be more training in larger establishments and in firms in which technology changes quickly.

Yet many medium and small firms cannot afford to do in-house training. They have neither the staff for that purpose nor the “economy of scale” to warrant such an approach. Take, for instance, the forklift training carried out by the Learning Enrichment Foundation. It is virtually impossible for most small businesses to offer this form of training independently, let alone upgrade their workers when provincial guidelines change. Customized training provides a way of creating the appropriate scale for a segment of the economy, small and medium business, that is growing rapidly but does not do sufficient training because of cost or the numbers involved.

But the relevance of customized training is far more broad than current labour market skills. The emerging field of life sciences, for example, has immediate and projected enormous human resource requirements. “Life sciences,” sometimes referred to collectively as biotechnology, is a generic term that includes medical and genetics research, nuclear medicine and cancer treatments, health information technologies, medical devices and diagnostics, plant and agricultural biotechnologies, and pharmaceuticals (Ottawa Life Sciences Council 1998). Biotechnology is considered to be a burgeoning industry worldwide. In Canada alone, 11,000 individuals are employed in 224 broadly defined biotechnology companies. Employment in the sector is expected to grow to 15,800 persons by 2001 (BIOTECANADA 1999).

Customized training has clear application to this emerging field. For one thing, the knowledge and skills base of the field is changing rapidly. There is a need for flexible learning. People with marketing backgrounds could move fairly readily into this sector with some sector-relevant and job-specific training. Administrators may require a general orientation to the field followed by more job-specific training.

There is plenty of scope for customized training at traditional educational institutions. More multidisciplinary programs could be developed. The University of Saskatchewan, for example, is creating a “virtual” program that emphasizes the multidisciplinary expertise required by the biotechnology industry. Another option is for the industry itself to carry out its own training through sectoral bodies like the local Ottawa Life Sciences Council or the national Biotechnology Human Resources Council. Employers would be the driving force for identifying the training needs and ensuring that the sectoral council offers the required training with the appropriate quality controls.

CONCLUSION

Customized training has achieved a promising degree of success in the programs in which it has been tried. There are some clear lessons that appear to contribute to positive outcomes. The successful programs involve a clear job development function in which the needs of local employers are systematically identified. Training programs are designed precisely around the skills required by local employers. Participants are matched carefully with prospective training programs and placed selectively into available jobs; there is a strategic brokerage process in place. Ongoing monitoring and post-placement support are provided to deal with barriers or conflicts that might arise on the job. The approach is highly individualized to meet the needs of the individual, the employer and the rapidly changing demands of a knowledge-based economy.

NOTES

¹*Opportunities for Employment* is a non-profit organization created in 1996 by the Mennonite Central Committee, Mennonite Economic Development Associates and Eden Health Care Services. The program works primarily with recipients of social assistance and Employment Insurance. The majority of participants are women (59 percent) between the ages of 35 and 50. Most (58 percent) are married or single with children. Opportunities for Employment operates under an agreement with the Manitoba government and Human Resources Development Canada. The organization receives payment from the province when job-seekers actually have found work and remain employed full-time for a minimum of six months. Full-time work is defined as 30 hours or more per week. The total can be reached by adding up the hours from several different jobs. The work may consist of a combination of up to three jobs that last a total of six months cumulatively, but the time between jobs must be less than two months and participants must be at their current job at least two months before payment is received.

²The program has a number of phases. It begins with a group orientation to explain the overall approach and specific components of the program. Applicants are then assessed to determine readiness for the program as well

as areas of interest, expertise, knowledge, and skills. The next step is a job readiness component that focuses upon preparedness for work. It includes discussions of self-concept, attitudes toward work (e.g., punctuality, reliability), preparation of personal résumés and the interview process. Participants subsequently are directed to job-specific training courses. These courses typically are very short term, ranging from three days to a maximum of six weeks. They are geared to designated jobs identified by “partner companies” in the community.

³Clients vary in age and background. Of the 500 participants in a recent training initiative, 63 percent were male and 37 percent were female. Twenty-seven percent were between the ages of 25 and 34 and 36 percent were between 35 and 44. Forty-seven percent had been unemployed for two years or less and 18 percent between six and nine years. The majority were high-school graduates, although a good percentage (19 percent) had university training.

⁴The computer applications field includes a five-week basic training course. Three weeks are spent on basic hardware; keyboarding skills; use of *Windows*, the Internet and email; and basic *Word* skills. Two weeks of the course involve résumé writing, interview skills, and eliminating employment barriers. Participants then target their market and make employer contacts through LEF’s Action Centre for Employment. Another computer course teaches accounting skills. It is a seven-week program that involves five weeks of computer skills, including general ledger, accounts payable, and accounts receivable. A 17-week course focuses upon building, “troubleshooting” and repairing computer hardware; once again, the last two weeks are spent in the Action Centre for Employment. All LEF courses are Microsoft-authorized.

Industrial training focuses on the logistics, warehousing, and maintenance fields. A seven-week course in forklift training offers theory and 28 hours of practical experience in forklift operation. LEF has set up an area in its warehouse facility in which forklift driving and operation are taught. The forklift training course includes first aid and WHMIS (Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System) certification as well as computer training. Both the skills and certification give participants an “edge” in job interviews. The final two weeks are spent in job search. A more extensive three-month program builds on the shorter course by adding building maintenance skills which include basic electrical wiring,

basic construction, and renovation skills. A welding component is included if employers require that specific skill. This program allows more time for those who are unemployed on a longer-term basis to adjust and prepare for work.

LEF recognized that many prospective participants would not be able to partake in its programs — be it language, skills training or job search — unless they had access to affordable, high-quality child care. In response to this need, LEF set up its own network of child-care centres and currently operates 13 licensed centres throughout the city for about 650 children. The program also trains participants as early childhood assistants. The course combines practical experience with “classroom” work in the areas of child development, curriculum planning, and safety and nutrition. Graduates receive a certificate as an early childhood assistant as well as certification in emergency first aid and childhood CPR. Graduates are helped to find employment in child-care centres, family resource programs, drop-in centres, and in private families as nannies.

Language training includes business English, family literacy, and basic and advanced computer literacy. Five levels of English training are offered and weekend courses are scheduled to accommodate the needs of those already working or who have child-care responsibilities.

Participants are coached in making calls to local employers in their respective areas of interest. The purpose of this coaching is to identify the recruitment needs of local employers and secondarily to ascertain training needs. About 80 participants make an estimated 20 calls a day for a total of 1,600 calls daily. These calls result not only in a listing of skills that local employers are seeking but also uncover 25-100 new jobs a day which then are posted for all LEF participants.

LEF does more than identify the skill requirements of the local labour market. It is also developing new ways of assessing employees’ skill pool. The purpose of this assessment is to determine possible areas for further training, self-employment and areas around which existing skills can “cross over” to related areas in demand. LEF is building on the work developed by the Lassoo Communications Life Learning System. This is a computerized profile of individual knowledge and skills. It documents the learning maps for individual positions within the network of employers that hire LEF graduates, and links those learning maps to relevant skills training programs. It acts as a portfolio of life experience and can be used to determine current skills and future training needs, depend-

ing on employee and client interests as well as local labour market requirements.

⁵The United States passed the *Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act* of 1996 which replaced the Assistance for Families with Dependent Children program (AFDC) with Temporary Assistance for Needy Families. By 2002, 50 percent of a state’s welfare caseload must be involved in work activities for 20 or more hours a week. Failure to meet this target means that a state faces possible funding reductions.

⁶The effective integration of unemployed workers in the labour market calls for different approaches for varying levels and types of needs. The US-based Aspen Institute has identified several discrete categories of economically disadvantaged groups that could benefit from training and job creation strategies: the working poor, the unemployed, the persistently unemployed, the dependent poor and the indigent (O’Regan and Conway 1993, pp. 6-9). The working poor and unemployed can benefit from certain strategies, such as small business creation and the provision of capital for self-employment. The persistently unemployed and dependent poor, by contrast, would benefit more from competency-based training and supports, such as child care and workplace accommodation. Those deemed indigent, such as homeless persons, require assistance with basic needs, provision of shelter and, possibly, mental health or substance abuse services prior to considering paid employment (Torjman 1998a).

⁷In August 1998, the chairman of the Regional Municipality of Ottawa-Carleton approached the Caledon Institute of Social Policy to write a labour force development strategy for the region (Torjman 1999). The strategy was to be modelled on the multi-sectoral approach employed by *Opportunities 2000*, a community-based poverty reduction initiative spearheaded by the Lutherwood Community Opportunities Development Association in Waterloo Region (Hodgson 1998). Based on the recommendations in the report, the chairman announced *Partners for Jobs*. As part of this initiative, a Task Force on Employment was created that includes representatives from business, labour, anti-poverty groups, the educational sector, the social sector, and the federal and provincial governments. The goal of the task force is to create an employment strategy for Ottawa-Carleton that identifies short-term and long-term initiatives targeted toward the unemployed and underemployed. Several projects involving customized training programs have

been designed in the high-tech, financial services and hospitality sectors.

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