CRGI SNAPSHOT

Youth Workplace Mentorship Project: Phase 1
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Background
Individuals with developmental disabilities often have trouble finding sustained and meaningful employment. In particular, youth with developmental disabilities have a much harder time securing and sustaining employment after high school than their same-aged peers without disabilities. Many factors have been identified as contributing to this situation. Youth with developmental disabilities may have limited work experience, low literacy, or low self-esteem. They also have limited access to employment preparation and placement services (Certa et al, 2003; The Minister’s Council on Employment for Persons with Disabilities, 2003). Employers may also have prejudiced attitudes toward working with individuals with disabilities.

Addressing workplace skills is one way to help close the gap between individuals with and without disabilities in the workforce. However, this is only part of the solution. Employers themselves are often unaware of how to support an employee with a developmental disability in their workplace.

The Youth Workplace Mentorship project (YWMP) currently under development at Vecova will attempt to address some of these issues. The program will work directly with employers and young adults with complex services needs (those with a developmental disability and co-occurring mental illness). A strengths-based approach will be used to build confidence and work skills, before finally securing employment for these youths. Support and training will be provided to educate mentors and employers in the program about hiring and keeping young employees with disabilities.

Objectives
Overall objectives for the YWMP:
1. Increase the employability of youth with complex needs by helping them gain work skills and experience through the YWMP.
2. Increase community engagement by educating employers about individuals with developmental disabilities and the valuable contributions they can make to the workplace.

Phase 1 objective:
1. Conduct an environmental scan on best practices for developing mentorship programs for youth with developmental disabilities.

Method
Environmental scans were conducted to find relevant evidence-based best practices. Specifically, researchers searched for information on curriculum design, content, and delivery of strengths-based employment training programs, workplace mentorship programs, and programs for youth with complex needs. Researchers also searched for information on employment barriers faced by youth with complex needs.

An initial environmental scan identified employment supports available for youth with complex needs, best practices in mentorships and strengths-based programs, and the barriers youth with complex needs face from employers.
Informed by data collected in the initial environmental scan, a series of 28 consultations were conducted in the form of focus groups, interviews, and questionnaires with employers, youth with complex needs, disability community practitioners, and community experts. The consultations explored the following topics:

- Barriers faced by youth with complex needs trying to secure meaningful employment
- Employer concerns about hiring employees with disabilities
- Gaps in employment and life skills for youth with complex needs
- Desirable qualities of workplace mentors

The findings from the consultations directed the follow-up environmental scan to address the specific concerns and suggestions raised. For example, participants suggested there may be alternatives to mentorship that could be used to engage employers. As well, different teaching styles were investigated.

**Results**

The environmental scans and consultations with community members produced the following recommendations for a strengths-based workplace mentorship program for youth with complex needs:

- The youth would be assessed for:
  - Motivation level
  - Strengths
  - Goals
- Potential employers would be carefully screened to ensure:
  - Belief in the mentorship philosophy
  - Commitment to contribute the time and effort required to make the program a success
  - Understanding of the benefits to participating in a mentorship program, being knowledgeable about employees with disabilities, and having an inclusive workforce
- Program flexibility:
  - The YWMP would look different for each participant because program curriculum (training, support, employment matching) would be matched specifically to that individual’s strengths and needs

**Conclusions**

The YWMP has the potential to be an enormous benefit to both employers and youth with complex needs. Many employers felt that integrating and supporting an employee with disabilities would be a burden on their time, instead of viewing it as an untapped labour market. This type of mentorship program should be developed with motivated employers to ensure a good fit. This will help lead to future successes for both employers, and youths with complex needs in Calgary.

The background research conducted in this phase will be used to inform the next steps for the YWMP, and will be shared with community disability practitioners who work with youth with complex needs. Moving forward, a YWMP pilot program with only a few participants would ensure that the recommended high level of flexibility and personalization is met, and give the participants the best possible chance for success.

**Lessons Learned**

Any youth workplace mentorship program needs to focus on the skills, abilities, and interests of youth with disabilities to ensure a successful and engaging employment experience. For a youth workplace mentorship program to be successful, joint collaboration and education needs to occur between the community, employers, and disability services organizations to address the needs of both employers and youth with disabilities who are seeking employment. Strategies include clearly articulating the roles and responsibilities of everyone involved, having clear expectations for the youth, and providing well-structured feedback based on workplace performance.

The full report can be found at [www.mentalhealthresearch.ca](http://www.mentalhealthresearch.ca)
References


About the Author:
**Principal Applicant, Debi Lafaivre** has been working in the disability field for almost 40 years and has been with Vecova since 1981. She has worked in a variety of areas including Independent Living Services, Intake and Assessment, as well as in the capacities of Residential Resource Consultant and Service Coordinator. She became the Director of Services in 2008 and is currently focused on Living Support Services and Centralized Service Coordination.

**Principal Investigator, Michelle Stiphout** worked for Vecova Centre for Disability Services and Research for seven years. She began her career with Vecova on the Services team and later was hired by Research Services where she worked first as a research assistant and then a researcher. She has focused her research efforts on issues relating to youth with disabilities.