

Supporting Mid-Career Workers in Retail and Meat Processing Project

Evaluation Report – May 2022

Table of Contents

Executive Summary	4
Introduction	6
1. About this Project	8
2. Evaluation Approach	10
3. Findings from the Outcomes Evaluation	12
4. Findings from the Process Evaluation	21
5. Conclusions	24
Appendix A: Our Approach	26

Acknowledgements

About the Future Skills Centre

[FSC](#) is a forward-thinking centre for research and collaboration dedicated to preparing Canadians for employment success. We believe Canadians should feel confident about the skills they have to succeed in a changing workforce.

As a pan-Canadian community, we are collaborating to rigorously identify, test, measure, and share innovative approaches to assessing and developing the skills Canadians need to thrive in the days and years ahead.

FSC was founded by a consortium whose members are Ryerson University, Blueprint and The Conference Board of Canada, and is funded by the [Government of Canada's Future Skills Program](#).

About Blueprint

[Blueprint](#) was founded on the simple idea that evidence is a powerful tool for change. We work with policymakers and practitioners to create and use evidence to solve complex policy and program challenges. Our vision is a social policy ecosystem where evidence is used to improve lives, build better systems and policies and drive social change.

Our team brings together a multidisciplinary group of professionals with diverse capabilities in policy research, data analysis, design, evaluation, implementation and knowledge mobilization.

As a consortium partner of the Future Skills Centre, Blueprint works with partners and stakeholders to collaboratively generate and use evidence to help solve pressing future skills challenges.

Executive Summary

The **Supporting Mid-Career Workers in Retail and Meat Processing Project** was a training program developed and delivered by United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW), one of Canada's largest private-sector unions. The program was offered to support upskilling and re-skilling needs of mid-career union members in the retail and meat processing industries, as these workers are at a particularly high risk of being replaced by automation.

The project was developed to deliver accessible online courses in (a) digital skills and related competencies that could help members keep their current jobs and potentially earn increased salaries; and (b) pre-apprenticeship knowledge and skills for in-demand trades, where jobs have a relatively lower risk of automation, to prepare members for new career opportunities. It was composed of two self-paced online training modules: a digital skills module and a pre-apprenticeship module. These modules were available to all UFCW members for free through its online learning platform, [webCampus](#).

In the spring of 2019, UFCW received a grant from the **Future Skills Centre (FSC)** as one of the 10 projects focused on supporting mid-career workers. UFCW used this grant to support the design and initial pilot of this project. From June 2020 to November 2021, 923 members took the digital skills module, and 275 took the pre-apprenticeship module (157 in Butcher, 68 in Professional Cook and 50 in Horticulturist). Members could take as many courses as they wanted across the two modules at their own pace.

Blueprint worked with UFCW to evaluate the program from 2019 to 2021. This report summarizes the findings from this evaluation to understand the outcomes achieved by participants and the experiences of participants and program staff in interacting with the program.

Key findings

The program was adapted in response to COVID-19 and local demand.

Due to the pandemic, there was a delay in program delivery, and the initially planned blended apprenticeship in Butcher was cancelled. A French version of the Butcher pre-apprenticeship course was added to meet the needs of Francophone members.

Well-designed pre-apprenticeship courses were attractive to UFCW members and other unions.

According to the program staff interviewees, the pre-apprenticeship courses were designed based on trade authorities' requirements and adapted to suit the educational level of the members. The course enrollment rates were high, and other unions showed interest in this module.

The pre-apprenticeship enrollment rate would have been even higher if more members recognized the importance of skills development and trade authorities recognized the curricula.

The program staff interviewees indicated that some members were not motivated to participate in the pre-apprenticeship module due to lack of awareness of the importance of upskilling and re-skilling. Members would have been more motivated if trade authorities recognized the curricula: something UFCW is currently working to obtain.

There were challenges with securing partnerships with employers to provide on-the-job training.

The program staff interviewees pointed out that it was challenging to get employers on board for the on-the-job training part of the proposed Butcher blended apprenticeship because of COVID-19 and the strict qualification requirements for mentors in grocery stores.

Implications

The key findings from the evaluation of this project point to some implications that could inform the design and delivery of this project and similar programs to help participants achieve desired learning and employment outcomes:

Increase the target population's awareness of the importance of skills development and their motivation to upskill.

To maximize program reach and boost program completion, organizations need to help the target population realize the risks they face in their current jobs and encourage them to be proactive and participate in training that could mitigate these risks. Organizations also need to build an organizational culture that promotes life-long learning.

Work with trade authorities to get the training curriculum accredited.

Trade authorities' recognition and accreditation of the training curriculum will motivate the target population to participate and take the next steps toward an apprenticeship in a skilled trade. Programs need to work with trade authorities to meet accreditation requirements and collaborate with post-secondary institutions to formalize the curriculum.

Explore on-the-job training opportunities with employers.

Programs may consider offering on-the-job training or an apprenticeship opportunity in a skilled trade as the next step following participants' theoretical learning. Programs need to work closely with employers to get their buy-in and meet the requirements of trade authorities (such as the qualifications of mentors in the case of this project).

Introduction

The **Supporting Mid-Career Workers in Retail and Meat Processing Project** was a training program developed and delivered by United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW), one of Canada's largest private-sector unions. The program was offered to support upskilling and re-skilling needs of mid-career union members in the retail and meat processing industries.

This program was composed of two self-paced online training modules: a digital skills module and a pre-apprenticeship module. These modules were available to all UFCW members for free through its online learning platform, [webCampus](#).

This report summarizes the findings from an evaluation of this project to understand the outcomes achieved by participants and the experiences of participants and program staff in interacting with the program.

Context

In the spring of 2019, UFCW received a grant from the **Future Skills Centre (FSC)** as one of the 10 projects focused on supporting mid-career workers. UFCW used this grant to support the design and initial pilot of this project that aimed to upskill or re-skill mid-career workers in retail and meat processing.

As a consortium partner of the FSC, **Blueprint** works with partners and stakeholders to generate evidence to help solve pressing future skills challenges. Blueprint worked with UFCW to evaluate the program from 2019 to 2021. This report shares the results of that evaluation.

Report structure

This report is organized as follows:

1

About this Project:

Overview of the program

2

Evaluation Approach:

Description of our approach to the evaluation

3

Findings from the Outcomes Evaluation:

What employment and education outcomes were achieved by participants

4

Findings from the Process Evaluation:

How participants and program staff experienced the program and its implementation

5

Conclusions:

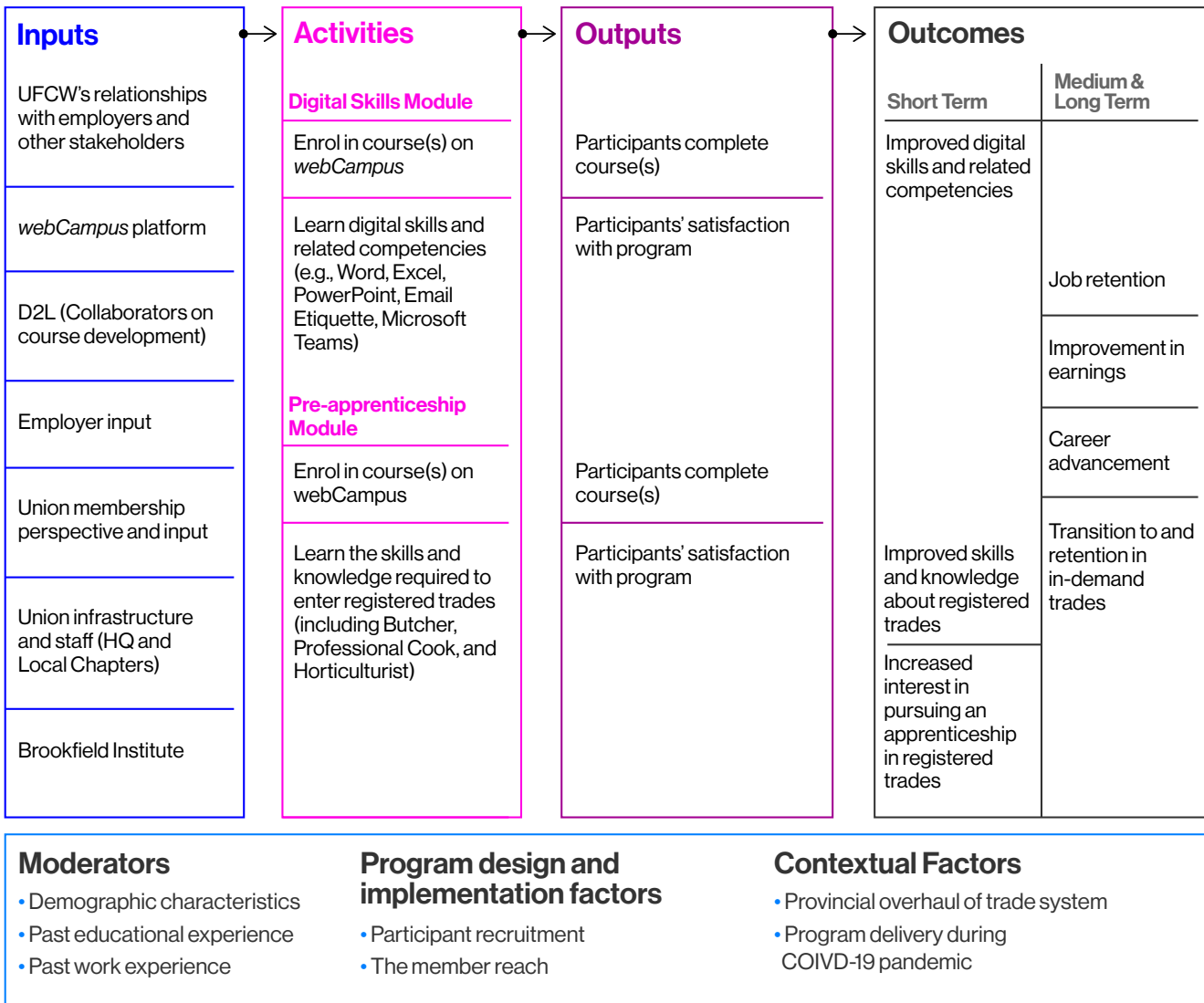
Summary of key findings and implications

1. About this Project

As one of Canada’s largest private-sector unions, UFCW represents over 250,000 members at workplaces in more than 600 communities across Canada in various sectors. Among UFCW members, mid-career retail and meat processing workers were at a particularly high risk of being replaced by automation. To address this technological challenge and ensure that members had the skills needed to adapt to the future of work, UFCW developed the Supporting Mid-Career Workers in Retail and Meat Processing Project to deliver accessible online courses in (a) digital skills and related competencies that could help members keep their current jobs and potentially earn increased salaries; and (b) pre-apprenticeship knowledge and skills for in-demand trades, where jobs have a relatively lower risk of automation, to prepare members for new career opportunities.

Figure 1 illustrates the program logic model, including the key program activities and associated outcomes.

Figure 1: Program Logic Model



There were two types of online training modules UFCW delivered through this project:

- **The digital skills module** provided a selection of 30+ Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and related competencies courses to support members who wanted to keep their digital skills up to date. This module started with an introductory *Exploring Digital Skills* to help members select other specific courses, e.g., *Internet Safety, Microsoft Excel 2010, Online Facilitation*.
- **The pre-apprenticeship module** offered a series of pre-apprenticeship courses in skilled trades to introduce members to the fundamental skills and knowledge required to enter registered trades. These courses could also help members gauge their interest and fit for apprenticeships in a range of in-demand jobs in the sector. The skilled trades included in this module were Butcher, Professional Cook and Horticulturist. Each course covered topics such as industrial skills, applied sciences and safety standards.

From June 2020 to November 2021, 923 members took the digital skills module, and 275 took the pre-apprenticeship module (157 in Butcher, 68 in Professional Cook and 50 in Horticulturist). Members could take as many courses as they wanted across the two modules at their own pace.

2. Evaluation Approach

Overview of approach

In October 2019, Blueprint held a discovery workshop with the UFCW team to learn more about this project, understand UFCW's evidence needs and goals and collaboratively design the evaluation plan.

Based on our findings, we designed an evaluation plan that reflected the program's needs, the program model's maturity, and the capacity of the program team for data collection and evaluation. Since this program was being delivered for the first time, we decided to pursue a combination of outcomes and process evaluation to collect early data on the program's effectiveness and implementation with an eye toward improving the program model.

Our outcomes evaluation was guided by our **Common Outcomes Framework**, which is a set of outcomes and participant socio-demographics that can be used to generate consistent, comparable evidence across projects. We are also currently pursuing longitudinal data collection, working with Statistics Canada to use their Social Data Linkage Environment to measure long-term participant employment and education outcomes for FSC project participants using administrative data. We anticipate results from this long-term outcomes monitoring will be available in early 2023.

Evaluation questions

Our evaluation sought to answer the following questions:

Outcomes evaluation

- 1. Program reach:** Who did the program reach? Was the program successful in recruiting participants from the target population?
- 2. Program completion:** Did participants complete all aspects of the training?
- 3. Learning outcomes:** Did participants achieve the desired learning outcomes?
- 4. Employment and education outcomes:** What employment and education outcomes did participants achieve?

Process evaluation

- 5. Program experience of participants:** Were participants satisfied with the program?
- 6. Program experience of program staff:** Was the program implemented as intended and what adaptations were made relative to the original design? What did program staff see as program strengths and areas for improvement?

Data collection and analysis

We used a **mixed-methods approach** to evaluate this project, where we collected and analyzed both quantitative and qualitative data (see Table 1). The quantitative data includes program administrative data shared by UFCW and participant surveys administered by Blueprint. The qualitative data includes interviews with key UFCW program staff. More details about our approach and data sources can be found in Appendix A.

Table 1: Data Sources and Sample Sizes

Data Sources (Participants)	% of Digital Skills Participants	% of Pre-Apprenticeship Participants
Administrative Data (participants who agreed to have contact information shared with Blueprint)	6% (56/923)	16% (43/275)
Consenting Participants (participants who agreed to have contact information shared and agreed to take part in the evaluation)	34% (19/56)	49% (21/43)
Baseline Survey (when starting module)	n/a	100% (20/20 ¹)
Exit Survey (upon module completion, as of November 30, 2021)	n/a	73% (8/11)
Cross-Sectional Survey (June 2021)	100% (19/19) ²	n/a
Three Month Follow-Up Survey³ (Three months after module completion)	n/a	45% (5/11)
Nine Month Follow-Up Survey (Nine months after module completion)	n/a	0
Data Sources (Program Staff)	UFCW	
Interviews (at mid-program)	3	

Due to separate processes for course registration and participation in evaluation, our evaluation data only captured a small fraction (3.3%) of all UFCW members who took the program. As a result, the analysis presented in the following sections may not fully and accurately represent program participants' experiences and outcomes, and the associated findings should be treated with caution.

¹ One participant consented to evaluation upon module completion and completed the exit survey integrated with socio-demographic questions.

² A cross-sectional survey replaced the exit survey because there was no actual exit point for the digital skills participants.

³ This report may be updated in 2022 if needed, when more follow-up survey data are collected

3. Findings from the Outcomes Evaluation

This section presents findings from our outcomes evaluation of this project.

Our evaluation explored the following questions:

1. **Program reach:** Who did the program reach? Was the program successful in recruiting participants from the target population?
2. **Program completion:** Did participants complete all aspects of the training?
3. **Learning outcomes:** Did participants achieve the desired learning outcomes?
4. **Employment and education outcomes:** What employment and education outcomes did participants achieve?

We measured outcomes using participant surveys and program administrative data.

Program reach

Our survey data show that the program seemed to have reached UFCW members who were mid-career workers (see Table 2, Table 3, and Figure 2). Specifically, responses of digital skills respondents (N=19) to the socio-demographic questions in the cross-sectional survey administered in June 2021 reveal that:

- Most (**63%**) were female.
- The average age was **46**, with **95%** being 30 years of age or above.
- Almost half (**47%**) had an education degree below the Bachelor's level.

Table 2: Socio-demographics – Digital skills module

Socio-demographics		% of Respondents
Gender	Female	63% (12/19)
	Male	37% (7/19)
Age	Under 30	5% (1/19)
	30-49	58% (11/19)
	50+	37% (7/19)
Highest level of education	High school or less	21% (4/19)
	College level	26% (5/19)
	University below Bachelor's level	0% (0/19)
	Bachelor's level and above	53% (10/19)
Racialized		21% (4/19)
New Immigrant (landed in the last 5 years)		44% (4/9)
Person with Disabilities		11% (2/19)

Among the pre-apprenticeship respondents (N=21) to the socio-demographic questions in the baseline survey:

- Most (**76%**) were females.
- The average age was **40**, with **71%** being 30 years of age or above.
- Most (**76%**) had an education degree below the Bachelor’s level.
- The majority (**86%**) were employed, with 33% working in retail or meat processing.

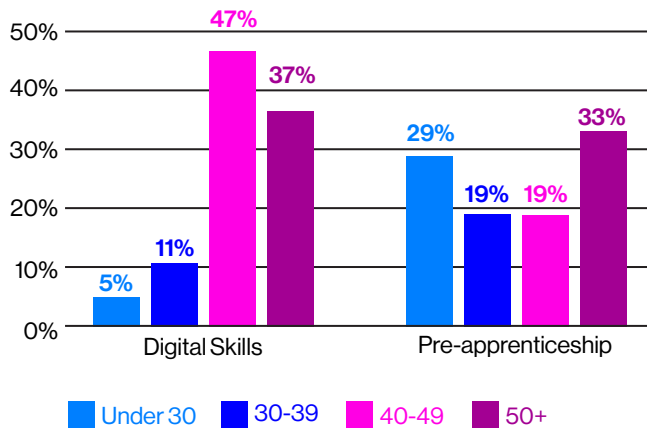
Table 3: Socio-demographics – Pre-apprenticeship module

Socio-demographics		% of Respondents
Gender	Female	76% (16/21)
	Male	24% (5/21)
Age	Under 30	29% (6/21)
	30-49	38% (8/21)
	50+	33% (7/21)
Highest level of education	High school or less	43% (9/21)
	College level	29% (6/21)
	University below Bachelor’s level	5% (1/21)
	Bachelor’s level and above	24% (5/21)
Racialized		38% (8/21)
New Immigrant (landed in the last 5 years)		22% (2/9)
Person with Disabilities		24% (5/21)
Employed		86% (18/21)
Industry of Current Employment	Retail and Meat processing	33% (6/18)

Figure 2: Socio-demographics

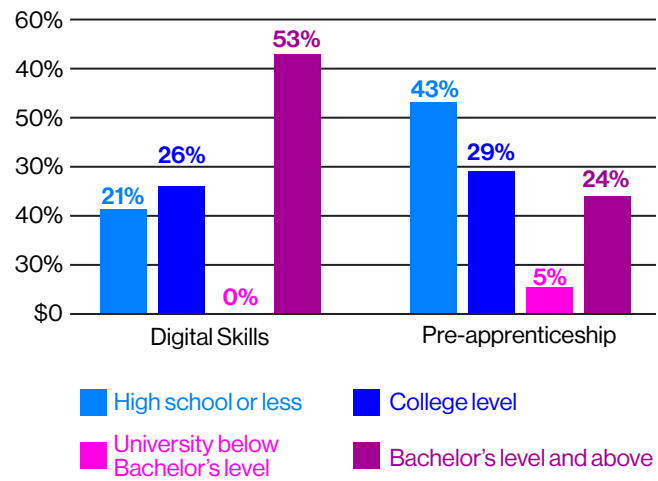
Age

Percent of Respondents



Educational Level

Percent of Respondents



Program completion

Digital skills respondents' completion rates of courses on the most basic ICT skills (e.g., Word, Excel) were higher than those of other courses (see Table 4). It should be noted that only 19 digital skills participants responded to the cross-sectional survey administered in June 2021.

Table 4: Program completion – digital skills module

Program Completion (As of June 2021)	% of Digital Skills Respondents
Microsoft Word (any version)	68% (13/19)
Microsoft Excel (any version)	58% (11/19)
Computer software and operating systems (e.g. Software General course, Windows 10, 7, 8, 8.1)	42% (8/19)
Microsoft PowerPoint (any version)	37% (7/19)
Online meeting software (e.g. GoToMeeting, Skype),	26% (5/19)
Cloud storage and document sharing services (e.g. Office 365, Sharepoint, Microsoft Team)	21% (4/19)
Organizing and cataloguing note software (e.g. OneNote, Evernote)	21% (4/19)
Google applications	16% (3/19)
Microsoft Access (any version)	16% (3/19)
Microsoft Outlook (any version)	16% (3/19)
Microsoft Project	11% (2/19)
Graphic design programs (e.g. Adobe Photoshop, Illustrator, Sketch)	5% (1/19)
Microsoft Publisher	5% (1/19)
Secure cloud-based software (e.g. DocuSign)	5% (1/19)

For the pre-apprenticeship module, we analyzed the administrative data UFCW shared with us on consenting participants' course completion status as of November 30, 2021, when this project ended (see Table 5). Given the self-directed nature of the courses and the differences in curricula and launching times, the completion rates of the courses are not comparable.

Table 5: Program completion – Pre-apprenticeship module

Program Completion (As of November 30, 2021)	% of Pre-Apprenticeship Consenting Participants
Butcher (Launched in July 2020)	60% (9/15)
Professional Cook (Launched in March 2021)	22% (2/9)
Horticulturist (Launched in September 2021)	0% (0/2)

Learning outcomes

Most (90%) of digital skills respondents were somewhat or very comfortable with the technologies or digital practices they learned. At least 60% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they improved their skills through the course(s) they took (see Table 6). It should be noted that only 19 digital skills participants responded to the cross-sectional survey administered in June 2021.

Table 6: Learning outcomes – digital skills module

Comfort level with the technologies or digital practices they learned	% of Digital Skills Respondents
Somewhat or very comfortable	90% (17/19)
Agree or strongly agree that they improved skills in using:	% of Digital Skills Respondents
Common desktop icons and menus to open programs and files (e.g., Internet browser, email).	67% (6/9)
Cloud storage services (e.g., Office 365, Sharepoint, Microsoft Team, Google drive) to upload documents, create documents, share and collaborate with multiple users.	100% (5/5)
Online meeting software (e.g., GotToMeeting, Skype) to conduct meetings, video conferencing and desktop sharing.	83% (5/6)
Applications such as DocuSign to securely share contracts and business documents, and collect digital signatures.	100% (2/2)
Word processing programs to produce simple documents and perform simple formatting of text (e.g., business letters or memos; font type and size, bold and underline text, bullets or numbered lists).	93% (13/14)
Spreadsheet software to prepare, edit, manipulate and analyze tables (e.g., create and modify budget reports, create various types of charts or graphs).	83% (10/12)
PowerPoint to produce presentations.	100% (6/6)
Email and calendar programs (e.g., Outlook, Gmail, Google Calendar) to organize work and create events.	60% (3/5)
Programs like Microsoft Access to create and use databases.	67% (2/3)
Microsoft Publisher to create brochures, newsletters, flyers and other communication material.	100% (1/1)
Microsoft Project to develop schedules, assign resources to tasks and track progress and manage budgets and analyze workloads.	100% (2/2)
Graphic design programs to edit, and produce photos, graphics and documents (e.g., Adobe Photoshop, Illustrator, Sketch).	100% (1/1)
Software (e.g., OneNote, Evernote) to organize and catalogue notes in different formats, e.g., pictures, audio, tables, drawings, text.	75% (3/4)

To understand how pre-apprenticeship participants' interest in pursuing an apprenticeship and transitioning to a job in skilled trades might change, we analyzed participants' responses to the learning outcomes questions in the baseline and exit surveys. When starting the pre-apprenticeship module, respondents (N=21) were more likely to be interested in pursuing an apprenticeship in Cooking (71%) and Bakery (67%). However, upon completing the module, respondents (N=8) were more likely to be interested in transitioning to a job (75%) or pursuing an apprenticeship (88%) in skilled trades in general than in a specific program (see Table 7). Given the small sample size, respondents' interest levels across the two surveys are not comparable; therefore, their exact learning outcomes are unknown.

Table 7: Learning outcomes - Pre-apprenticeship module

Pre-Apprenticeship respondents who were extremely or very interested in:	Baseline Survey (when starting module)	Exit Survey (upon module completion, as of November 30, 2021)
Transitioning into a job in skilled trades (jobs in butchery, baking, horticulture)	57% (12/21)	75% (6/8)
Pursuing an apprenticeship program in one of the skilled trades	52% (11/21)	88% (7/8)
Apprenticeship programs in Butchery	33% (7/21)	50% (4/8)
Apprenticeship programs in Bakery	67% (14/21)	63% (5/8)
Apprenticeship programs in Horticulture	33% (7/21)	38% (3/8)
Apprenticeship programs in Cooking	71% (15/21)	50% (4/8)
Apprenticeship programs in Millwright	14% (3/21)	25% (2/8)

Employment and education outcomes

To understand whether participants were employed or enrolled in further education or training after they took the program, we analyzed data collected from (1) digital skills respondents to the cross-sectional survey administered in June 2021; and (2) pre-apprenticeship respondents to the exit survey when they completed the module as of November 30, 2021, and to the follow-up survey three months after module completion.

Employment outcomes

Among the digital skills respondents to the employment status question in the cross-sectional survey, 84% reported being employed (see Table 8). However, the employment status reported may not necessarily reflect program outcomes given the rolling enrollment of the program and the timing of the cross-sectional survey. It should also be noted that only 19 digital skills participants responded to this survey.

Among the pre-apprenticeship respondents to the employment status question in the exit and three-month follow-up surveys, 100% (N=8) reported being employed upon module completion, and all (N=5) reported being employed three months later (see Table 8). Due to the small sample size, we cannot draw any insights into the employment outcomes of pre-apprenticeship respondents.

Table 8: Employment outcomes

Employed	% of Digital Skills Respondents	% of Pre-Apprenticeship Respondents
Exit Survey (upon module completion, as of November 30, 2021)	n/a	100% (8/8)
Cross-Sectional Survey (June 2021)	84% (16/19)	n/a
Three Month Follow-Up Survey (three months after module completion)	n/a	100% (5/5)

Education outcomes

We did not collect data on digital skills participants' enrollment in education or training because we did not expect them to achieve measurable outcomes. Also, we cannot draw any insights into the education outcomes of pre-apprenticeship respondents due to the small sample size (see Table 9).

Table 9: Education outcomes – Pre-apprenticeship module

Enrolled in Education	% of Pre-Apprenticeship Respondents
Exit Survey (upon module completion, as of November 30, 2021)	25% (2/8)
Three Month Follow-Up Survey (three months after module completion)	40% (2/5)

4. Findings from the Process Evaluation

Our process evaluation of this project explored the following questions:

- **Program experience of participants:** Were participants satisfied with the program?
- **Program experience of program staff:** Was the program implemented as intended and what adaptations were made relative to the original design? What did the program staff see as program strengths and areas for improvement?

We explored these questions through participant survey data and interviews with program staff.

Program experience of participants

Program satisfaction

More than 80% of digital skills respondents (N=19) and pre-apprenticeship respondents (N=8) to the survey questions on different aspects of program satisfaction were generally satisfied with the program and perceived it to be useful (see Table 10). We included program satisfaction questions in (1) the cross-sectional survey administered to consenting digital skills participants in June 2021; and (2) the exit survey administered to consenting pre-apprenticeship participants upon their module completion as of November 30, 2021.

Table 10: Program Satisfaction

Program Satisfaction	% of Digital Skills Respondents	% of Pre-Apprenticeship Respondents
Somewhat or very satisfied with program in general	90% (17/19)	88% (7/8)
Likely or very likely to recommend or have already recommended the program to someone	58% (11/19)	75% (6/8)
Perceived program to be somewhat or very useful in improving the technical skills needed for future work	84% (16/19)	n/a
Perceived program to be somewhat or very useful in providing with information about in-demand skilled trades	n/a	88% (7/8)

Program experience of program staff

This sub-section summarizes three interviews we conducted with the key UFCW program staff. We asked about their experiences with the overall program, including their adaptations to the original program design to meet emerging needs and perceived program strengths and areas for improvement.

Program adaptations

The program staff interviews indicate that the program was delivered mainly as per the original design. However, the following program adaptations and adjustments were made in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and local demand.

- **Butcher blended apprenticeship cancelled.** Initially, UFCW planned a blended apprenticeship in Butcher to deliver a combination of in-person on-the-job training and online theoretical learning to develop participants' trade competencies. Participants were supposed to take it after they finished the pre-apprenticeship course. However, UFCW cancelled it due to a lack of support from employers for on-the-job training. As a result, the on-the-job training was removed, and the online theoretical learning was merged with the pre-apprenticeship course.
- **Delay in program launch.** When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, UFCW prioritized taking measures to protect frontline members from the pandemic and designing policies to help unemployed members cope with this difficult time. Therefore, UFCW delayed the launch of this project.
- **Delivery of Butcher pre-apprenticeship course in French.** Upon the request of a training partner in Montreal, QC, UFCW designed and delivered a French version of the Butcher pre-apprenticeship course to its Francophone members.⁵

Program strengths

- **Well-designed pre-apprenticeship courses.** The program staff interviewees indicated that UFCW designed the pre-apprenticeship courses based on program outlines required by provincial trade authorities to make the courses credible. They also designed the courses based on members' educational levels to maximize the reach and effectiveness of the program.
- **High enrollment rate of pre-apprenticeship module.** According to the program staff interviewees, the annual enrollment rate of the pre-apprenticeship module was even higher than those of similar college programs.
- **Attention from other unions.** The program staff interviewees mentioned that the successful delivery of the pre-apprenticeship module through *webCampus* had drawn interest from other unions, including some in the United States, where there was a labour shortage in some sectors.

“Get the support from employers, get members enrolled in programs to accomplish theory hours on webCampus, and work with someone on the store level to execute on practical hours, those discussions broke down due to COVID”

- Program staff

“It [cancelling blended apprenticeship] didn't quite affect the way we designed the curriculum... They [participants] don't have to have the practical piece to just get exposure to the trade ... [or to] start to move to that direction”

- Program staff

⁵ We did not include this course in our evaluation because of the expected low evaluation participation rate and the added cost for translating data collection tools.

Areas for program improvement

- **Members' lack of motivation to take courses**

despite the high enrollment rate. The program staff interviewees believed the program enrollment rate could have been even higher if more members had recognized the importance of skills development and proactively taken advantage of their time off during COVID-19 lockdowns to build their skills. However, these interviewees did acknowledge that the pandemic might have made it challenging to focus on upskilling. They also suggested there was room for UFCW to build a life-long learning culture. Additionally, if trade authorities had recognized the pre-apprenticeship courses, members would have been more motivated to participate (see the next point).

- **Lack of recognition by trade authorities.** A training curriculum that meets all skills requirements for workers in the retail and meat processing sector must be recognized by trade authorities to get accreditation and be counted toward completing apprenticeship requirements. However, the program staff interviewees indicated that UFCW had challenges securing trade authorities' endorsement of webCampus as a training partner, which adversely affected members' perceived value of the pre-apprenticeship module. Besides working with trade authorities to reach a unified agreement, these interviewees suggested leveraging connections with universities and colleges to make the pre-apprenticeship module more formal and structured.

- **Challenges with securing partnerships with employers to provide on-the-job training.**

According to the program staff interviewees, UFCW could not get employers on board for the on-the-job training part of the proposed blended apprenticeship in Butcher due to shifting priorities of employers during COVID-19 and trade authorities' requirements for mentor qualifications. Specifically, trade authorities required that mentors of apprentices in grocery stores be trainers certified through a college program of one to two years of full-time training, which excluded the majority of experienced butchers who did not have the necessary qualifications.

"We work on accessible, interactive curriculum ...developing materials in line with program outlines in BC industry trades authority and Ontario college of trades ... [to make sure] it is a credible program [and] meets theoretical and pedological outcomes that provinces established"

-
Program staff

"[During COVID] People are scared and under stress and may not actually be keen to do online courses".

-
Program staff

"UFCW doesn't want to scare their members into worrying that they will lose their jobs in the next 10 years... but folks don't pursue training until it's necessary ... and that there is still a reactive rather than proactive culture ... [or] a life-long learning culture"

-
Program staff

"The approach is new and that's both good and bad ... [It is] innovative and ambitious, but hard to get people [e.g., trade authorities, employers] on board fully"

-
Program staff

"Employers [were] not focusing on adding more people to the workplace, but on meeting the needs of the public during COVID. We stopped getting buy in from employers for the apprenticeship piece"

-
Program staff

5. Conclusions

This section summarizes the key findings of our evaluation and the implications for the design and delivery of this project and similar programs that upskill or re-skill mid-career workers who are at risk of being replaced by automation.

Key findings

The evaluation findings show that UFCW successfully delivered this project to its members despite delays and adaptations due to COVID-19. Below are the key results from this evaluation. Due to the limited evaluation data collected from participants, our findings may not fully reflect their program outcomes and experiences.

The program was adapted in response to COVID-19 and local demand.

Due to the pandemic, there was a delay in program delivery, and the initially planned blended apprenticeship in Butcher was cancelled. A French version of the Butcher pre-apprenticeship course was added to the program to meet the needs of UFCW Francophone members.

Well-designed pre-apprenticeship courses were attractive to UFCW members and other unions.

According to the program staff interviewees, the pre-apprenticeship courses were designed based on trade authorities' requirements and adapted to suit the educational level of the members. The course enrollment rates were high, and other unions showed interest in this module.

The pre-apprenticeship enrollment rate would have been even higher if more members could have recognized the importance of skills development and trade authorities could have recognized the curricula.

The program staff interviewees indicated that some members were not motivated to participate in the pre-apprenticeship module due to their lack of awareness of the importance of upskilling and re-skilling. Also, members would have been more motivated if trade authorities could have recognized the curricula, which UFCW is currently working to obtain.

There were challenges with securing partnerships with employers to provide on-the-job training.

The program staff interviewees pointed out that it was challenging to get employers on board for the on-the-job training part of the proposed Butcher blended apprenticeship because of COVID-19 and the strict qualification requirements for mentors in grocery stores.

Implications

This project was a skills training program targeted to support the upskilling and re-skilling needs of mid-career workers in retail and meat processing. The key findings from the evaluation of this project presented in the previous section point to some implications that could inform the design and delivery of this project and similar programs to help participants achieve desired learning and employment outcomes.

Increase the target population's awareness of the importance of skills development and their motivation to upskill or re-skill

To maximize program reach and boost program completion, organizations need to help the target population realize the risks they face in their current jobs and encourage them to be proactive and participate in training that could mitigate these risks. Organizations also need to build an organizational culture that promotes life-long learning.

Work with trade authorities to get the training curriculum accredited

Trade authorities' recognition and accreditation of the training curriculum will motivate the target population to participate and take the next steps toward an apprenticeship in a skilled trade. Programs need to work with trade authorities to meet accreditation requirements and collaborate with post-secondary institutions to formalize the curriculum.

Explore on-the-job training opportunities with employers

Programs may consider offering on-the-job training or an apprenticeship opportunity in a skilled trade as the next step following participants' theoretical learning. Programs need to work closely with employers to get their buy-in and meet the requirements of trade authorities (such as the qualifications of mentors in the case of this project).

Appendix A

Our Approach

Quantitative data

Participant administrative data

On a bi-weekly basis, UFCW program staff shared the administrative data collected from webCampus. The administrative data included: (a) contact information of participants of both modules who agreed to have their contact information shared with us, which we used to send them the evaluation consent form and surveys; and (b) course completion status of pre-apprenticeship participants who consented to our evaluation.

Participant surveys

We also collected and analyzed quantitative data from (a) the cross-sectional survey administered to consenting digital skills participants in June 2021; and (b) the baseline, exit and follow-up surveys administered to consenting pre-apprenticeship participants when they started the module, upon completing the module, and three and nine months after their module completion, respectively. These surveys included questions that measured the participant outcomes common to all FSC projects to support aggregate analysis in the future.

Qualitative data

Program staff interviews

In October and December 2020, we invited three UFCW program staff members to interview as part of the process evaluation. These staff members had played a key role in program design, implementation and delivery. All of them agreed to participate in the interviews.

Two or three of our team members conducted each interview on Zoom. Each interview lasted for approximately 45–60 minutes. We audio-recorded the discussions and took notes of the interviewees' responses, either paraphrased or verbatim. Guided by the interview protocol, we coded the interview notes and conducted a qualitative thematic analysis to identify patterns and recurring themes.

