

Learning Brief for the Hecate Strait project: “WorkLabNorth”

**SRDC’s Learning
Support for Future
Skills Projects**



11 December 2023

This report was produced as part of a project funded by the Future Skills Centre (FSC), with financial support from the Government of Canada's Future Skills Program.

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INTRODUCTION

Through a number of thematic calls for proposals, the Future Skills Centre (FSC) has supported the development, refinement, or expansion of approaches to develop skills for workers from a variety of backgrounds and in a variety of sectors and regions. These projects identify emerging and in-demand skills, and test new methods of training delivery. The insights that come from these projects will help inform governments, the private sector, labour, educational training institutions, non-profits, and academics on the broader adoption of novel approaches to training and skills development. Furthermore, the projects are required to mobilize knowledge and evidence among key stakeholders, institutions, and decision-makers for the purposes of improving policies and practices in Canada. FSC has engaged SRDC to support this process by developing and then implementing a customized learning support plan for each of several projects, based on past activities and current status.

This document presents the learning brief for WorkLabNorth (previously called the North Coast Skills Hub), a project delivered by the Hecate Strait Employment Development Society, running from March 2021 to July 2023. Due to the preferred website domain name already being taken, the project was renamed from the North Coast Skills Hub to WorkLabNorth midway through. The Hecate Strait Employment Development Society (HSEDS) is a non-profit organization that delivers employment, training, and settlement services in Northwest BC, serving over 16 remote communities and 20,000 people. HSEDS runs WorkBC centres in Prince Rupert, Haida Gwaii, and Masset. The Hecate Strait Employment Development Society developed and implemented the project – one of many funded by the Future Skills Centre as part of a larger strategy to address the need for shock-proofing the future of work, with a particular focus on vulnerable populations in the Canadian workforce.

SRDC began its research on the project by reviewing all the available documentation related to the project, including the proposal, quarterly and annual reports, project information sheet prepared by FSC, work plan, learning reflection and final report. Using a standardized template, SRDC worked collaboratively with both FSC and HSEDS to develop learning questions related to each of the three learning stages of the project: designing, testing, and scaling (See Appendix A). We then worked through a process to answer each of the questions. Beyond analysis of these documents, SRDC completed an interview with the HSEDS lead in September 2023. Finally, SRDC shared and discussed with HSEDS the findings to ensure their accuracy and appropriateness.

This learning brief presents a synthesis of the answers to the questions posed in the learning support plan. For each of the three stages the project engaged in, this document presents what

the project has achieved, lessons learned, and recommendations with respect to future evidence generation that the FSC can utilize, filter, and distill for its ongoing dissemination projects.

OBJECTIVES

WorkLabNorth aims to minimize the digital divide by creating a virtual career development and training platform accessible to people in remote communities. More specifically, the project targeted people from remote, rural, and northern communities, people with essential skills gaps, and people without post-secondary education. Project objectives are as follows:

- Improve user experience of virtual career services and training;
- Improve navigation of the multitude of services and training;
- Creation of content that is relevant and accessible to northern people and communities;
- Increase user technical, soft, and career skills through use;
- Increase organizational ability to serve during disruptions such as COVID-19;
- Create virtual service that is sustainable and easy for small agencies to maintain;
- Increase knowledge team and agency to develop digital tools;
- Understand impact and scalability of the project.

DESIGNING PHASE

SUMMARY OF THE DESIGNING PHASE

The main component of this project was HSEDS's development of an online platform (WorkLabNorth) to provide virtual employment and training services to their clients. This section provides an overview of the details of designing this online platform.

HSEDS aimed to address the widening of the digital divide in small remote northern communities. In the Hecate Strait region of Northwest BC, communities often have uneven access to internet connections and devices, as well as lower digital literacy. The impact of COVID-19 exacerbated this divide, resulting in a 60% drop off of HSEDS's 280 clients due to

being unable to participate in virtual services. Therefore, HSEDS aimed to develop and design virtual services that were customized to local community needs.

First, HSEDS conducted an inventory of their internal programming in order to translate components for the virtual platform. This involved meetings with organizational staff and instructors to discuss both the best content and delivery for WorkLabNorth. HSEDS also consulted with community members (clients), and technology experts in designing the virtual platform.

WorkLabNorth was designed and developed to include the following components and features:

- A public job board with employer profiles, regional skills training opportunities, free mini-seminars and skills development activities;
- Employment curriculum including skills assessments, learning materials, and resources for skills development in both soft skills and computer/work skills;
- Interactive resume builder;
- Concise, simple, and engaging content avoiding technical jargon;
- Accessibility for mobile devices, low bandwidth, low access to data, or poor internet connection.

HSEDS staff saw the optimization for low bandwidth as a high priority feature for the project; internet access can often be very limited within the remote communities HSEDS serves. Therefore, WorkLabNorth was designed to offer compressed videos in smaller sizes, images optimized for web viewing, and lightweight interactive elements to improve accessibility in these areas. Some content is also available in downloadable formats for participants to use offline. There are also public computers available in HSEDS offices to both use the platform as well as save materials to use offline.

HSEDS also assessed its own staff's capacity to implement the project, including assessing their skills and abilities in implementing the online resources and offering training for any skills gaps. HSEDS also assessed client needs by talking to staff and community members, to ensure that online content was accessible and culturally relevant.

What worked, what didn't, and why?

The success of this phase largely relied on the ability to find an appropriate web developer to build the virtual platform based on HSEDS's vision. HSEDS met with multiple developers to find the best option for their needs. Initially, HSEDS advertised an opportunity using LinkedIn, but

was overwhelmed with the number of responses and could not limit applicants to local/Canadian web developers. They found that conversing with local business owners and obtaining recommendations for local developers to be a better strategy; they found a developer (Veris Solutions) suited to their needs from a recommendation.

HSEDS also noted that instead of paying monthly fees for premade material, they opted for a custom coded platform that they would have full control over for minimal ongoing fees and maintenance. Although this option was very time intensive and involved a lot of back and forth with the developer to work out bugs over the course of the project, HSEDS judged it to be more sustainable long term, since it was unclear if the organization had the budget to maintain a more expensive, pre-designed platform indefinitely.

However, opting for a custom coded platform extended the timeline of the project, with WorkLabNorth being rolled out through May and June of 2023. HSEDS found that having a designated IT staff member within the organization to liaise with the web developer was key, in order to communicate HSEDS's vision for the platform in a technical way.

TESTING PHASE

SUMMARY OF TESTING PHASE

HSEDS noted that there was no free, publicly-accessible alternative to WorkLabNorth for community members prior to this project. Due to the shifted timeline in rolling out WorkLabNorth, user data is limited. HSEDS suggested they may need additional support with promoting the platform to increase participants. Once engagement is increased, Google Analytics could be used learn more about participants, including the number of resumes completed on the resume builder, the number of jobs posted on the platform, and the number of content downloads. HSEDS also suggested that further metrics could be analyzed from data provided within user submitted resumes, such as education and work experience.

HSEDS said they did receive positive anecdotal feedback regarding the resume builder tool and overall website content, with users citing that it was simple and straightforward to use. Documentation provided by HSEDS indicated that they did carry out a client satisfaction survey at some point, however, data from this survey is unavailable.

What worked, what didn't, and why?

HSEDS shared that many clients have grown tired of virtual services and prefer in-person options. Therefore, they suggested that keeping content concise and engaging was key to communicate key points. Additionally, there were client requests for a live chat to assist with accessing services, however, currently HSEDS does not have the staffing resources to offer such a service. Improved digital literacy is also a goal of the project, as HSEDS noted that many clients have limited knowledge or interest in using computers.

SCALING PHASE

SUMMARY OF SCALING PHASE

WorkLabNorth was advertised on Facebook, through newsletters, and emails. As the platform has been released relatively recently, scaling initiatives (i.e., further marketing and promotion) are still in the preliminary stages.

What worked, what didn't, and why?

Currently, HSEDS does not have a budget for website maintenance, relying on current staff to develop and update content in conjunction with their normal duties. They hope to build their capacity to maintain and scale the WorkLabNorth platform in the future. HSEDS also noted that social media and marketing experts would also be helpful to build awareness and increase engagement on the platform in the future.

Further, HSEDS plans to develop a downloadable podcast to communicate employment curriculum, to make content accessible in an audio-only format.

SUMMARY OF PROJECT LEARNING

Meeting original objectives

This FSC-funded shock-proofing project was intended to be relevant to community members in remote, rural, and northern communities who have difficulty accessing virtual employment services.

As set out above, the key objective for the project was to **create a virtual career development and training platform accessible to people in remote communities.**

The project **met its key objective** through designing and launching its WorkLabNorth platform.

SRDC was unable to assess some of the project objectives due to unavailable website user data (namely, user feedback and site analytics) as a result of project delays in launching the site. Therefore, SRDC cannot draw conclusions at the present time with respect to the success of the following project objectives:

- To **improve user experience** of virtual career services and training;
- To **improve navigation** of the multitude of services and training;
- To **increase user technical, soft, and career skills** through use;
- To **understand the impact and scalability** of the project.

SRDC is not implying that the project was unsuccessful in meeting the above objectives. From assessments of project documentation, it is clear that HSEDS continued to keep the above objectives in mind when designing and implementing the project. As website engagement evolves and increases such that more user feedback and site analytics become available, these objectives could be assessed at a future date.

SRDC considered each of the remaining objectives in turn, making assessments solely on the basis of project implementation since data were not available to test success of outcomes:

- To **create content that is relevant and accessible** to northern people and communities;

HSEDS **was successful in this objective** through collaboration with staff and community members/clients from the project onset.

- To **increase organizational ability** to serve during disruptions such as COVID-19;

HSEDS **was successful in this objective** by developing and launching a virtual platform which offered services and resources tailored to community needs and accessibility restrictions.

- To **create virtual service** that is sustainable and easy for small agencies to maintain;

HSEDS **was successful in this objective** by working with Veris Solutions to develop a custom coded virtual platform that could be fully managed in-house with minimal ongoing service expenses.

- To **increase knowledge team and agency** to develop digital tools.

HSEDS **was successful in this objective** through assessing its own staff's capacity to develop and maintain WorkLabNorth, and offering training to staff to address any skills gaps.

Practices that seemed effective

Firstly, HSEDS found that collaboration between staff and community members was important from the beginning of content development. This was helpful to best understand community needs in order to develop content that was culturally relevant and accessible.

Secondly, HSEDS found that a custom coded website that could be fully controlled and maintained in-house was the best option to deliver their services. Although this strategy took longer to develop and implement, it was more cost effective long term. Additionally, HSEDS noted that both finding the right web developer, as well as having an IT contact on staff who could act as a liaison between them, was also key.

Practices to revise

Firstly, HSEDS found that having a more clearly defined vision of platform structure and functionality was important to have before beginning communication with a web developer. They noted that doing so would save both time and money.

Secondly, HSEDS noted that having access to marketing expertise from a marketing/social media expert would be helpful in promoting the virtual platform to improve engagement.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THOSE WORKING IN THIS AREA IN THE FUTURE

- Custom coded platforms optimized for community needs can represent a preferred option for smaller organizations with time-limited/uncertain budgets. However, internal staff capacity for website testing and troubleshooting the resulting custom platform should be factored into the decision. This type of “in-kind” cost could ultimately consume resources that exceed the avoided direct costs;
- Finding the right web developer and establishing a good relationship with them is key;
- Keeping content concise, clear, and engaging is important to best communicate to those with limited knowledge or interest in online learning;

- Additional support may be needed with marketing and promoting the resources.

APPENDIX A: LEARNING SUPPORT PLAN

The Learning Support Plan structured questions according to the learning stages the project included. There could be up to five learning stages:

- **Discovery** with a focus on understanding the issues and/or needs (FSC Innovation Stage: Needs Assessment)

This includes approaches intended to gain real insights into the lived experiences of the target population and to build an understanding of the opportunity space prior to designing skills interventions.

- **Defining** with a focus on project rationale and/or how to address the issue (FSC Innovation Stage: Concept Generation)

This includes approaches intended to frame the opportunity(ies) identified (e.g., as a result of a prior discovery) for changing future outcomes, define target population and/or outcomes, and determine the most critical barriers and enablers to supporting change.

- **Designing** with a focus on program logic/design or "bringing the concept to life" (FSC Innovation Stage: Research/design/prototype)

This includes approaches intended to develop solutions: setting out how to prototype potential solutions and validate these with those in the target population.

- **Testing** with a focus on initial delivery (FSC Innovation Stage: Delivery and Iteration)

This includes approaches intended to be used to test solutions or otherwise support collective ability across the ecosystem to learn what works, adapt and refine.

- **Scaling** with a focus on scale and spread (FSC Innovation Stages: Scaling and Sustainable Scaling)

This includes approaches intended to increase the support for and/or adoption of known solutions or that would assist in identifying and persuading public and/or private funders and/or partners to dedicate their resources to increase the reach and/or impact of known interventions.

SRDC concluded that the North Coast Skills Hub project included three learning stages: designing, testing, and scaling.

Learning Stage	Learning and Gapfilling Questions	Is more information required?	Possible information sources				
			Documentation	Project Lead	Participants	Project Partners	Other Stakeholders
Design	What's been learned about developing online training materials content that is relevant to remote northern communities, including those with low bandwidth internet?	Yes, if there is anything new to add from the project partners.	Annual report, Learning reflection, Quarterly reports 1, 2, and 3	Interview			
Design	To what extent were stakeholders involved in developing the online resources? Which stakeholders were involved? (e.g., clients, employers, community agencies, etc.)	Yes, confirmation	Quarterly reports 1, 2, and 3	Interview			
Design	What's been learned about the capacity of	Adding an additional staff member was not	Learning reflection,				

Possible information sources							
Learning Stage	Learning and Gapfilling Questions	Is more information required?	Documentation	Project Lead	Participants	Project Partners	Other Stakeholders
	staff to implement the project?	actually mentioned in any documents from the organization, however it may be seen as a lesson learned should HSEDS be asked.	Annual Report, Reviewer assessment form				
Additional/Gapfilling Questions							
Design	Were any online training materials completed and used by clients?			Interview			
Testing	Did participants see an improvement in their technical, soft, and career skills as a result of the training?	How do results compare to in-person versions of the training? What explains any differences?		Interview			
Scaling	What has been learned about the sustainability of the offering both in terms of the tool and the content?	How to maintain financially, up-to-date content, technical capacity?		Interview			

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