

Building Data Capacity in Employment Services and Continuing Education

Case Study

In July 2021, the Saint John Learning Exchange (SJLE) joined the Practitioner Data Initiative (PDI). Their aim was to increase their capacity to leverage data for continuous improvements and better understand the broader impacts of their client-centered education and employment services for youth and adults in Saint John, New Brunswick.

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.

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. The Future Skills Centre was founded by a consortium whose members are Toronto Metropolitan University, Blueprint ADE, and The Conference Board of Canada

The opinions and interpretations in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of the Future Skills Centre or the Government of Canada.



About SJLE

For 35 years, SJLE has offered a range of continuing education and employment programs for the Saint John community. Each year they provide over 300 youth and adult learners with curriculum and coaching that reduce barriers to education and employment and motivates learners to set and reach goals for their life and careers.

300+

Annual Learners

35

Years of Service

26

Employees

300+

Employer Partners

4

Social Enterprises

SJLE helps youth and adults reach their goals with a tailored approach that combines empowerment, education, employment, social emotional skills, on-the-job training and personalized coaching.



SJLE combines programming with personalized coaching. This empowers learners to build better habits, overcome barriers and progress in their professional, educational and personal development plans. This multi-faceted approach enhances employment and education outcomes by improving learners' quality of life alongside job-related competencies.

Efficient and intentional use of data is key for a small organization like SJLE to improve services and track outcomes, while simultaneously sharing data back with learners about their progress toward their goals. This dual-purpose drives greater social impact by leveraging data to directly empower SJLE staff and learners to continuously improve.

What is the Practitioner Data Initiative (PDI)?

PDI is a pan-Canadian initiative that combines Blueprint's expert consultation and strategic support with a one-time financial investment of \$100-200K from the Future Skills Centre (FSC).

PDI responds to the challenges nonprofits face in harnessing the power of their own data to improve their services and impact. As part of PDI, Blueprint marries financial investment with trusted and technology-neutral advice grounded in deep expertise with program data, technology solutions and nonprofit service delivery.

Through a series of collaborative workshops and capacity-building activities, PDI:

- Articulates an organization's goals for data storytelling and how their data collection is tied to outcomes and impact
- Assesses an organization's current data capacity, with a review of processes, technologies and skills, and creates a roadmap for improving data capacity
- Provides ongoing coaching and support as the implementation of the roadmap begins

PDI engagements last 12-24 months with opportunities to participate in peer learning events with other PDI partners.

Challenges

When SLJE joined PDI, they were excited to elevate their data capabilities and address some common challenges facing organizations of their size and maturity:

- **Inefficient processes and data quality issues.**

Data collection and analysis involved manual and time-consuming processing. Staff often experienced data-related tasks as a burden, leading to inconsistent collection of data across programming.

- **Limited understanding of broader impact.**

While SJLE knew how many people they served, and the educational and employment outcomes following SJLE's services, they were keen to gain a better understanding of how their services impacted the overall quality of life for the people they serve.

“The expertise [of the PDI team] was so important, so that we can have the Learning Management System do what we want it to.”

“The PDI experience has been transformative for us as an organisation.”

“The PDI team have helped set us up for our next steps, so we really feel like we can go to the next level.”

– Erin MacKenney,
Program Director
& MEL Lead



“Blueprint helped us devise a system to keep us accountable and engaged in our ever-evolving goals around our data.”

– Jackie Wallace,
Coordinator



Impact of PDI

PDI combines flexible financial investment with responsive support from the PDI team. This enabled SJLE to tackle several projects related to data, where before they lacked the time or skillset to push ahead with confidence. Through their PDI engagement, SLJE has been able to:

- **Launch a Learning Management System (LMS)** that will improve the efficiency of SJLE's data processes, reducing burden of data-related work and improve learners' access to course content and data on their progress towards their goals.
- **Develop growing understanding of their broader impact** through the launch of a Quality-of-Life survey developed in partnership with learners. They are currently in their first phase of data collection.
- **Achieve greater integration of data into organizational processes** that help SJLE stay aligned on why data matters to them, what they want to collect and what they want to do with it:
 - By creating a Data Analysis Working Group (DAWG) with representatives from across the organization, any decision around tools or processes related to data is aligned with the interests and capacities of SJLE as a whole.
 - By creating and using a Learning Agenda, SJLE is focusing the development and implementation of new data-related tools and processes towards advancing their strategic priorities.

Building buy-in and culture around data

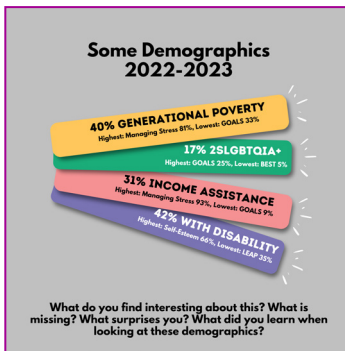
Two years after joining PDI, SJLE has improved data quality and staff engagement around data. This is the result of a dedicated effort from SJLE's PDI project team to involve their broader staff in data discussions. For example, SJLE has been:

- **Hosting regular data parties for all their staff.**

Each party, they delve into data around a specific program, service or topic, and discuss what they can learn from the data, where there might be gaps and how they can improve data collection.

- **Sending out “data tidbit” emails.**

At the end of every internal reporting period, SJLE shares one data point of interest with the entire staff, followed by an open question about the data that often leads to further discussion among staff.



“The guidance and collaboration throughout PDI has taught us the value of sharing tasks and becoming responsible stewards to realize our objectives.”

– Lisa Mapile,
Office Manager



What's Next?

Next steps include:

- Expanding use of their Learning Management System (LMS) to include more of their programs and services, while leveraging some of its automation features.
- Refreshing their Learning Agenda to ensure that it stays aligned with evolved organizational priorities.
- Refreshing how they measure their Social Return on Investment, based on a deeper understanding of their data, to better communicate the value of their work.
- Sharing experiences and insights beyond the community of PDI partner organizations to improve overall data capacity in the employment and education services sector.

Sustainability

SJLE is confident they have the skills for the next phase of work including setting direction and ensuring new technical solutions meet the organization's needs. They have already secured funding for the next phases of the launch of their Learning Management System and have a plan in place for the ongoing funding needs of their data work going forward.

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. To learn more about how Blueprint is helping to build data capacity among frontline nonprofits across Canada, visit: www.blueprint-ade.ca. To learn more about the Future Skills Centre, a forward-thinking centre for research and collaboration dedicated to driving innovation in skills development, visit www.fsc-ccf.ca.