

Project Insights Report

AspireAtlantic



PARTNERS

Pier Labs
Blueprint ADE



LOCATIONS

New Brunswick
Newfoundland and
Labrador
Nova Scotia
Prince Edward Island



INVESTMENT

\$3,019,548



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CONTRIBUTORS

Blueprint

Executive Summary

Atlantic Canada faces persistent labour market challenges, with industries like manufacturing and construction experiencing record vacancies despite growing demand. While job seekers in Nova Scotia have access to generalized employment supports, there is a lack of focused post-employment services addressing retention and career advancement. This gap hinders both workers' ability to secure stable, meaningful careers and employers' capacity to find skilled talent.

Contrary to initial assumptions, the primary barrier to employment was not always a lack of technical skills. Many participants were highly educated and experienced but still struggled to find suitable work, indicating a need for better job matching, soft skills training and career navigation support.

To address this disconnect, the AspireAtlantic program tested out the WorkAdvance model— a proven US workforce development strategy that uses a sector-based approach that combines job training, placement and advancement support for low-income individuals. The program provided each participant with career readiness and occupational skills training in one of three sectors: 1) home-building; 2) industrial, commercial and institutional construction; and 3) manufacturing. Following training, participants were provided with job placement and post-employment support. The initiative aimed to connect job seekers with middle-skill careers in high-demand sectors, such as construction, clean tech and manufacturing, while helping employers fill critical roles.

The AspireAtlantic program was designed to improve career readiness for unemployed and low-wage workers in Nova Scotia, particularly those from underrepresented groups in manufacturing and construction. Through a combination of digital skills training, career navigation support and work-integrated learning opportunities, the program aimed to bridge employment gaps and provide participants with the tools needed to transition into meaningful employment or further education.

The WorkAdvance approach proved effective in creating career pathways by aligning training with industry needs. Participants were more engaged when pursuing jobs in sectors they were passionate about, leading to better retention. The program successfully engaged participants across multiple locations, with many reporting increased confidence in their career paths and improved professional skills. Despite some challenges in employer engagement and digital access, the program demonstrated strong outcomes and provided valuable lessons for future workforce development initiatives in the region.

KEY INSIGHTS

- 1** Employment rates increased from 33% at program intake to 68% nine months post-training, and the proportion of participants working in the manufacturing and construction sectors rose from 9% to 62%.
- 2** Participants valued the program's career navigation support, which helped them set actionable career goals, but many identified barriers, such as limited digital access and a need for more hands-on, work-based learning experiences.
- 3** While the program successfully engaged participants across Nova Scotia, sustaining employer partnerships and ensuring consistent regional participation remained challenges for long-term impact.

The Issue

Workforce shortages and employment barriers remain persistent in Atlantic Canada, particularly in sectors such as manufacturing and construction. The region faces high rates of unemployment and limited access to career services for underrepresented groups, contributing to employment instability and outmigration.

AspireAtlantic sought to address these challenges by providing sector-specific training and career support to improve workforce participation and job quality.

Sector-based employment training models, like AspireAtlantic, are highly complex to implement, requiring expertise in participant support, employer engagement, industry knowledge and multi-organizational coordination. Even experienced service providers face challenges in achieving full delivery maturity.

AspireAtlantic successfully launched its first cohort, allowing for real-time learning and refinement. However, it now faces two key challenges:

- 1. Implementation barriers.** The model must address operational issues that hinder participant success, including serving job seekers with complex needs and ensuring strong employer

partnerships.

2. **Economic climate.** Post-pandemic labour market shifts have reduced employer demand for the model, which means that program coordinators must adapt the program for it to remain relevant.

Evidence from similar programs (e.g., WorkAdvance) shows that sector-model success depends on strong industry relationships, in-house training capabilities, and efficient certification processes—factors that AspireAtlantic must optimize.

Despite challenges, sector-based models remain a critical tool for workforce development, particularly as Canada's economy demands frequent re-skilling.

To strengthen the model, Pier Labs is focused on refining employer engagement strategies to highlight the program's value; streamlining implementation to better support participants with complex needs; and aligning with broader workforce development systems to create scalable, sustainable solutions for Canada's evolving labour market.



What We Investigated

AspireAtlantic investigated the applicability of the WorkAdvance model in Atlantic Canada's labour market. The initiative aims to address barriers such as wage mismatches, negative industry perceptions and limited HR capacity, particularly in rural small and midsize enterprises (SMEs). Using implementation science, the project adapted WorkAdvance to enhance upward mobility for job seekers while supporting employer needs.

The project explored three research questions:

1. Does WorkAdvance address Atlantic Canada's labour market gaps?
2. Is the model feasible in Atlantic Canada's SME-dominated economy?
3. How must WorkAdvance be adapted?

The project tested for the following:

1. **Sector suitability:** Assessed key industries (fishing, agriculture, manufacturing, clean tech, construction, aerospace, trucking, bioscience) for alignment with WorkAdvance principles.
2. **Participant screening:** Piloted intensive candidate selection (only 20% of applicants met criteria) to ensure program readiness.
3. **Employer engagement:** Tested a two-pronged approach that combines participant advancement coaching with customized HR support for SMEs to improve retention.

The evaluation assessed AspireAtlantic's effectiveness in improving employment outcomes, increasing participant confidence and fostering employer engagement. Project coordinators collected data by administering surveys, reviewing administrative records, and interviewing staff/partners to track career progress, job placements and the impact of training interventions.

What We're Learning

The AspireAtlantic program has provided valuable insights into effective workforce development strategies, particularly in supporting individuals facing barriers to employment. Through participant surveys, interviews, staff journals and focus groups, key learnings were gathered on program design, implementation and participant outcomes.

Employment rates doubled within nine months of program completion, with 79% of employed respondents stating AspireAtlantic helped them secure their jobs. Participants reported strong gains in confidence, digital literacy and communication skills, though some noted challenges in securing stable employment without greater employer involvement in placements. Job satisfaction increased from 38% to 80%, with a significant reduction in casual, seasonal and temporary jobs among employed graduates.

Adapting program structure based on recruitment challenges helped coordinators adapt plans from a two-stream model to a single-stream approach due to low applicant numbers and limited sector-specific qualifications among candidates. All participants received both occupational skills training and career readiness training, ensuring a well-rounded skill set for workforce entry.

Balancing soft skills and technical training helped participants transition more effectively into employment. Career readiness training focused on essential workplace competencies (e.g., interpersonal skills, digital literacy, job search strategies), while occupational skills training provided sector-specific technical training (e.g., construction, health care, manufacturing).

Staff and organizational commitment drives success when employer buy-in is critical. Implementing the model with fidelity took service providers over a year. Advancement coaches and case managers played pivotal roles in curriculum design, employer engagement and participant support. Sector professionals contributed to training content and hiring opportunities.

The importance of financial and wraparound supports was demonstrated when participant stipends (\$175/week) helped mitigate barriers like lack of transportation or childcare but may need reassessment given rising living costs. Flexible programming and additional financial support could enhance accessibility for priority populations. These lessons will inform ongoing discussions with provincial stakeholders to refine employment service models and expand opportunities for underserved job seekers.

Integrating post-employment services can be challenging, especially because the organizational ecosystem has historically focused on pre-employment services. It requires a significant change in mindset. Case managers reported workload pressures due to overlapping responsibilities (recruitment, training, case management). Delays in hiring advancement coaches and scheduling constraints (e.g., holidays, COVID-19 disruptions) impacted timely program delivery.

AspireAtlantic demonstrated WorkAdvance’s potential in Atlantic Canada but highlights the need for adaptation to local employer and job seeker realities. Social Purpose Organizations (SPO) lacked dedicated staff, and the model’s selective nature excluded high-barrier job seekers. Future phases will refine implementation strategies to improve scalability and impact.

★ Why It Matters

Programs like AspireAtlantic are crucial for addressing employment barriers and workforce shortages in Atlantic Canada. By equipping underrepresented workers with job-ready skills, the program contributes to higher employment rates, better job quality and stronger regional labour markets. Its focus on underserved groups—particularly newcomers, women and racialized individuals—ensures that economic opportunities are more equitably distributed, fostering long-term workforce resilience.

Policymakers considering sector-based workforce development models—like AspireAtlantic—for small and medium-sized towns and cities in Canada should take note of several key implications to ensure effective implementation and long-term success.



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Targeted sector alignment with local economic priorities

Specific labour market information is needed to identify high-growth industries and ensure training programs meet employer needs. Workforce programs must align with the dominant or emerging sectors in a region (e.g., advanced manufacturing, clean energy, health care or tech). Smaller regions often rely on a few key industries. A sector-based approach can stabilize employment by creating a pipeline of skilled workers for local employers, reducing outmigration and attracting investment.

To build a resilient workforce that is able to respond to and adapt to changing labour markets, whether due to unpredictable disruptions or longer-term transitions, we need a range of training and upskilling pathways that equip people with the skills they need to enter, advance, transition and return to dynamic labour markets.

[Read Thematic Report](#)

Equity-centred design for underserved groups

Programs targeting underrepresented groups (newcomers, women, racialized individuals, Indigenous Peoples and youth) must address systemic barriers (e.g., childcare, credential recognition, transportation, or biases in hiring). Many smaller cities struggle with aging and stagnant populations; these regions can offset demographic declines by fostering inclusive growth through tailored community programs that are responsive to the needs of underrepresented groups that are new to the region.

Employer engagement and work-integrated learning

Strong partnerships with local employers are critical. Policymakers should incentivize businesses to connect with community organizations so that they can access the appropriate wage subsidies, tax credits or grants for on-the-job training. In tight labour markets, employers may hesitate to invest in training. Structured apprenticeships or co-op placements can bridge gaps, ensuring workers gain relevant experience while employers secure a loyal workforce.

Retention strategies beyond training

Training alone is insufficient—policymakers must support retention through mentorship, career advancement pathways and affordable housing initiatives. Smaller towns often lose talent to larger urban centres. Retention strategies (e.g., subsidized housing for skilled workers, rural immigration pilots) can make these regions more attractive for long-term settlement.

Flexible and adaptive program delivery

Remote and hybrid learning options, modular credentials and accelerated pathways can improve accessibility, especially for rural participants. Geographic isolation can limit access to training. Digital upskilling initiatives and mobile training units can expand reach.

Measuring long-term outcomes

Programs should track not just job placement but also wage growth, career progression and employer satisfaction. Data-driven adjustments ensure programs remain responsive to shifting labour demands, preventing skills mismatches.

Funding stability and multi-level collaboration

Sustainable funding (federal-provincial-municipal partnerships, private sector contributions) is essential to avoid having programs become discontinued. Smaller municipalities often lack resources. Long-term funding commitments enable continuity and scalability.

Have questions about our work? Do you need access to a report in English or French? Please contact communications@fsc-ccf.ca.

How to Cite This Report

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